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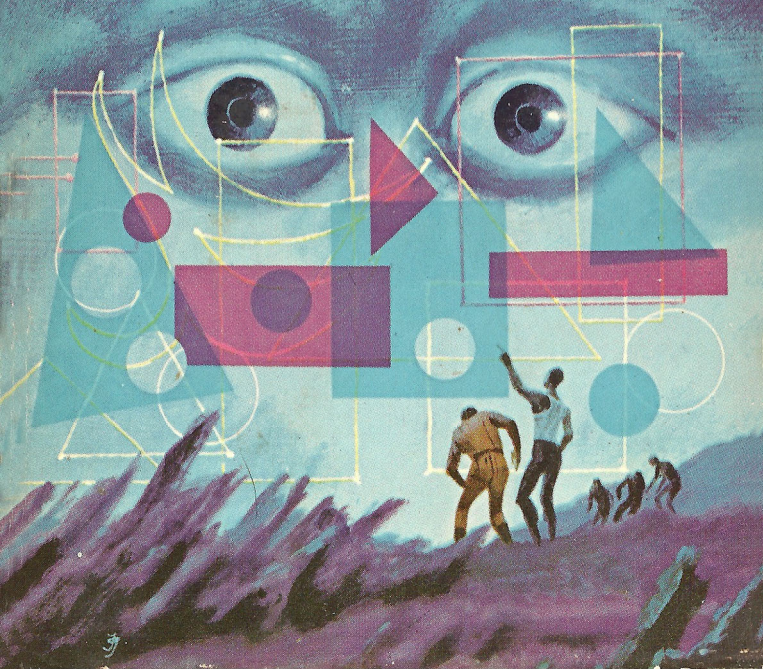
MESSAGE from THE EOCENE

Margaret St. Clair



LEGACY OF A LOST RACE

His name was Tharg, but he was not of any life form we know today. He lived so long ago that the planet Earth had not yet shaped itself. Lava seas roiled and churned, volcanoes spouted and grew, and heavy clouds hung in the hydrogen atmosphere, leaving the planet's surface dark and dangerous.

On that world Tharg met his death, or something very much like it. He became a disembodied, totally nonphysical intelligence, cut off from all contact with the life he had known. He "slept" for hundreds of millions of years, unconnected with the world, unthinking, hardly existing.

But then he began to awake—for there was new life on Earth, creatures called "human," and Tharg, knowing an ancient promise from the stars, had to tell them of it. But . . . how?

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MARGARET ST. CLAIR has had her stories published in such leading magazines as *Galaxy, Fantasy & Science Fiction, Esquire,* etc., and a good many of them have found their way into anthologies here and abroad. As often as not, she is likely to be using the pseudonym of Idris Seabright for a by-line.

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MESSAGE from THE EOCENE

Margaret St. Clair

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MESSAGE FROM THE EOCENE

FOR ERIC

. . . drawn from ageless springs
Breaking through rocks in worlds before our earth.

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I

It was an honor, he supposed. When the administrators had wanted to be sure the mysteriously-arrived volume would get through safe from Synon to Gwynor, the strongest of the allied cities, where it would be studied, they had selected a diver, one of the hardy, resourceful breed of surface-visitors, to carry it. But as Tharg listened to the rapid triple beat of his heart—thug thug thug, thug thug thug—he felt it was an honor he might have done without.

The truth of it was, he was frightened. It wasn't only the exertion of the long slugging trek over the ridges that was making his heart beat so. From the start he had feared an attack might be made on him. But so soon? Here? He was hardly well over the ridges from Synon. He would have to climb considerably higher than this before he was done.

There came another lightning flash. The faint green line he had been following, his guide to a route where the radioactivity would be mild enough to allow his blood to be oxygenated, was for a moment obliterated in the blinding light. Then the detonation of thunder, a long, long roll.

The flash had struck through the billowy surface of the clouds below him. First there had been his exceptional

difficulty in picking up the guiding green line, and now these incessant flashes of light. If this was an attack—but how could lightning come from clear sky naturally?—it was certainly a very odd one. He had expected to be attacked by the Vedimi, with whom his city was currently at war. But *they* would never have been able to strike at him like this.

It was not that lightning was unfamiliar to him. In his brief professional dives down to the dank earth surface for the oxides his city's technology had to have, he had seen plenty of it. But on the sunny peaks above the clouds?

Another flash, a tremendous one. It was intimidatingly close; they were all close. Tharg bit his lip. He could feel his body hair stand up. The crash followed almost immediately.

Oh, he was being hunted. He had little doubt of it now. It was almost as if he were being herded, pushed away from the green line that meant safety. But by whom?

If the Vedimi weren't attacking him, then who was? No wonder his heart was beating so fast.

Oh, there were stories. Tharg had heard plenty of them in his first years. If Tharg's people had not originated on this raw young world, the third planet out from its young hot sun (and there were good anatomical reasons for thinking that they had not), they must have come here from somewhere else. And that would mean they must have been brought here, since they were only now learning how to overcome this planet's gravitational field. They could never have come here by themselves.

In other words, the Vaeaa, the half-mythical overlords under whose ambiguous aegis the culture of Tharg's people was said to have grown up. The absentee landlords of this crude young Earth! Tharg, like other skeptically-minded members of his race, had never quite believed in their existence. He didn't know how his people had managed to get to this planet, but he thought it was unnecessary to lug in the Vaeaa to account for it. Believing in them was about like believing in thought reading, or moving objects at a distance without physical contact, or predicting the future. The Vaeaa seemed a part of the veiled, sniggering

world of occultism, a world that was partly taboo and partly merely silly. Such things sickened him.

Besides, why would the Vaeaa be hunting *him*? Tharg didn't know the exact nature of what he was carrying, but he hardly thought it would be of interest to beings powerful enough to have transplanted a whole people from the surface of one planet to another. It had arrived mysteriously; but he could scarcely think that the Vaeaa, who were most plausibly explained as being personified solar myths, would want to get their hands on it.

No, it must be the Vedimi who were attacking him, after all. The controlled lightning flashes must be a new weapon of theirs. If that was the case, the war with them would shortly be getting hot.

Another bolt of lightning, so close that Tharg could smell a tiny sting of ozone in the nearly oxygenless air. The long roaring boom followed immediately.

Tharg had jumped back. His eyeballs felt seared. When he could see again, he found that the green line in the rock, the line he had been following from Synon, was quite gone. He couldn't pick it up again anywhere within eyeshot. And a big snow-covered rock to his right had been riven in two by the flash.

Tharg felt his chest muscles grow tight. He wasn't in any immediate danger of asphyxiation; he had an emergency supply of thoracic flora in his knapsack, though he didn't know what he'd do if he couldn't pick up the green line eventually. But it must be the Vedimi, after all. The directed lightning flashes had seemed to have the green line as their target, and it was exactly like the Vedimi's nasty tricks to try to choke a fellow to death, in flat defiance of the inter-city covenant about the sanctity of the green line.

Tharg managed a grin. Now that he had positively identified his attackers, he felt a little better. And after all, he was not unarmed. When the administrators had sent him out on his mission, they had equipped him with a new and very well-recommended weapon. He felt in the fleshy pouch between his shoulder muscles. Yes, the little flat box was still there.

The only trouble was, he had no idea where his attackers

were. The Vedimi who were going boom-boom at him obviously had him under visual observation, but they might be in a plane so high as to be invisible from the ground (also forbidden by the inter-city covenant, but what of that?). Or they might be watching him via a scanning device in Krax, their capital, or in Dannor, or in any of their cities in between. His weapon was pretty good, but it wasn't miraculous.

For a moment he thought of doing an "earth-dive"—of plunging through the layer of clouds to the dank, dark surface below. The Vedimi would never be able to follow him, and because of his special training he could stand almost a day's deprivation of radiant energy without serious discomfort. The danger of blundering into a pocket of intense radioactivity wouldn't be any more severe than it was up here without the green line to guide him.

But nothing would really be accomplished by doing a dive. He'd have to come up sometime, and the Vedimi could just wait, scanning for him, until he reappeared. Up on the ridges, he had at least the possibility of getting through to Gwynor. Under the clouds, where magnetism and radioactivity made any sort of direction-detection impossible, he could only flounder about. His job, after all, was to get the book to Gwynor. He'd stay up.

Tharg did not breathe in any ordinary human sense. His blood was oxygenated by thoracic flora that broke down metallic oxides to release free oxygen. But now he made a motion with his shoulders that, for an air-breather, was the equivalent of a sigh. He'd have to try to pick up the green line.

When he'd left Synon this morning, he'd thought fleetingly of taking some sort of radiation-burst counter with him. Even now he didn't regret having decided against it. The compact counters became unreliable in a few hours of exposure, when they were worse than useless, and the sturdy ones were so bulky it took a couple of people to carry them. It was the radioactive background of this raw young world, more than any other single thing, that made it so hard for Tharg's people to get along in it.

The line shouldn't be too difficult to pick up, if only the

Vedimi would lay off the lightning for a little while. It was about time for another flash.

Tharg closed his eyes. What he was about to do always made him feel a little squeamish, though he knew most divers did it and, he supposed, a good many people who weren't divers at all. Nonvisual perception was conventionally considered slightly indecent and more than slightly silly. Yet it worked. He'd proved it many times. Better get on with it.

Eyes tightly shut, he spent an instant pulling his consciousness inside his skull. It took him a little longer than usual, because he was afraid of being interrupted by another of those damnable lightning bolts. Then, when Tharg's mind was tucked neatly inside his cerebellum, he made an act of will and began to look with his deeply buried inner eye.

Farther, and up. He ranged. The viewscape he saw was done in dull red, except where potassium salts stood out in pale blue. Back and forth, as if he were walking over the snow hunting the vanished green line.

Another lightning flash. Tharg was too busy to pay much attention to it; he noted with a part of his brain that it was less intense, to judge by the thunder, than the last had been. Back and forth, farther and farther. Wasn't he ever going to pick up the blasted thing? He wouldn't be able to keep this up much longer; third-eye seeing was a very fatiguing thing.

At last, much lower down the rock ridge than he would have expected, he caught sight of it. He turned his head toward it, and opened his eyes. It was far beyond his normal visual range, but ten minutes' walk should get him there. The Vedimi had certainly done a good job of wiping it out.

The lightning, oddly enough, held off. About halfway to the line, Tharg began to feel faint. He fumbled in his pouch for a capsule—a fresh dose of thoracic flora—and swallowed it. Ah. He felt better now.

He gained the comparative safety of the green line at last. From the time he had stood with his eyes shut, trying to pick up the line nonvisually, there had been no more crashes of lightning, and this forebearance on the part of his attackers struck Tharg as ominous. Or were the lightning

flashes, after all, a perfectly natural phenomenon—natural, but infrequent—which nobody had noticed until now?

Tharg couldn't be sure, but he decided that if more bolts of lightning came, he would try something he ought to have thought of before: he would flop around a little and then collapse on the snow, in as realistic an imitation as he could give of a person who had been struck by lightning. If his attackers saw him lying unconscious, probably dead, they ought to come in close to get the book away from him. And that would give him a chance to find out whether the little ochloa-bolt gun the administrators had given him really was any good.

The going was rougher here than it had been when the faint green line was higher. Patches of slushy methane snow alternated with big drifts, also soft, of frozen water vapor. But no more lightning flashes came, and the painful thug thug thug of his heart slowed to a more normal beat. In this vacation from alarm he realized how intimidated he had been.

The green line began to ascend the ridge. As Tharg climbed, the drifts grew more sparse and he made better time. At last he was walking right along the ridge, with a panorama of lesser peaks outspread below him. Off to the left he saw a thread of ascending smoke that marked a volcano. If he could keep up his present rate of progress he ought to reach Gwynor well before night.

The green line dipped for a few hundred feet and then ascended again. Tharg realized he was hungry. He fumbled in his pouch for a handful of food pellets, and crunched them as he walked along. There had been no lightning for so long that he felt quite reassured. He began to speculate about the book he was carrying.

In the first place, why was he so sure it was a book? Somebody had told him so, but he couldn't remember who; it certainly hadn't been the administrators. He himself had had no opportunity to examine it. When he had put it in his pouch he had seen that the book, or whatever, was encased in a hard smooth dark-brown outer covering, ellipsoidal in shape, about five inches big on its long axis and three on its shorter one. He hadn't noticed any way of opening

it. That was all he knew from personal observation. If it was a book, it couldn't be a very big one.

In the second place, what about the object's mysterious origin? Tharg had heard—again, not from the administrators—that a citizen of Synon had been quietly standing on his roof one morning, imbibing radiant energy for the day, when the book had come floating gently down through the air and landed placidly at his feet. Tharg didn't know whether the thing had been just as it was now—a three by five ellipsoid—or whether it had had a further protective shell.

At any rate the citizen—variously identified as a scientist, an engineer, or a psychologist—had examined the thing. He had become convinced it was valuable and had taken it to the administrators. And they had thought it was important enough to dispatch Tharg to carry it, on foot and armed with the latest weapon, from Synon to Gwynor.

(Why had they chosen to send the book by foot messenger rather than by plane? Tharg supposed it was because a plane was so conspicuous, in the present state of hostilities, that it was almost certain to be attacked. But a solitary traveller, slugging his way on foot over the rock ridges, might hope to get through unobserved.)

By now it was at least an hour and a half since the last flash of lightning. Tharg felt so safe he allowed himself the luxury of regretting that he hadn't had the opportunity to try out his plan of faking being thunder-struck. He was thinking that he'd certainly get to Gwynor by mid-afternoon when, without any warning at all, there came an enormous lightning burst.

It was the great grand-daddy of all lightning flashes. There was no need for Tharg to fake being stunned; it knocked him silly. For a considerable time he lay on the rock semiconscious, and when he began to come back to himself his thoughts were odd and erratic.

Abruptly Tharg realized where he was. He had sense enough not to sit up.

This lightning flash had been directed at *him*. That meant the Vedimi would be putting in an appearance shortly. Slowly, trying to avoid any visible movement, Tharg felt in his pouch. He drew out the flat little box and waited.

He was far too shaken to try to pick up the Vedimi by

nonvisual means. He lay with his eyelids open a slit, listening intently, trying to look as if he were still unconscious.

The first intimation he had that anybody had arrived was neither visual nor auditory. He felt a soundless jarring in the rock under him, quite unlike anything in his experience. It seemed to pierce through his skull and make his bones vibrate like a tuning fork. Surprised, he opened his eyes.

Still well up in the air, but descending slowly, was an extraordinary craft. A central globe hung rapidly rotating between two motionless horizontal wings, and like a star the heart shot out corruscations of colored light. The craft itself seemed to be a dull neutral color. Tharg couldn't imagine why the Vedimi had picked such an unconventional design. It must have something to do with the lightning flashes they had thrown at him.

He hesitated. In order to aim the ochloa-bolt weapon accurately, he'd have to sit up, and as soon as he got upright the people in the craft would realize that he wasn't unconscious. If they threw another flash at him, he'd be electrocuted. At this distance, they couldn't miss.

It might be better to wait until the craft was just landing. The crew's attention would be distracted then. But in order to keep the craft in sight as it came down, he'd have to move, and that would give the show away anyhow. Besides, he was too anxious to lie quiet that long. He'd have to try it while he could still move.

He was lying with his ochloa-box arm stretched out behind his head. He tensed his muscles. Then he snapped his torso upright, while his arm came down like a whip. At the proper moment, he fired.

He knew he had made a clean hit. He had been dead on center of the Vedimi ship, and by now everybody in it should be unconscious or dead. He felt the transient giddiness the administrators had warned him to expect.

The craft continued to float slowly down. Well, that was reasonable. Leisurely, now that he had nothing to fear, Tharg got to his feet and waited. He didn't know what would happen when the craft touched the surface. It would depend on whether it had an automatic pilot or not.

He waited. The ship touched the earth as gently as a feather and settled down. The central member, now revealed

as a regular polyhedron, ceased to rotate. Three of its facets opened out.

Tharg licked his lips. Would an automatic pilot—? He waited, hand ready on the ochloa-bolt. People were coming out.

They had high domed heads, bulging at the back of the skull, thin lips, long faces. They were tall, a good two feet taller than Tharg. They—they—

It couldn't be. The Vedimi in that ship were all dead. The Vedimi—the—

The Vaeaa. The semi-mythical overlords of his race. The Vaeaa. The absentee landlords had come home.

Tharg stood for a moment transfixed. Then he threw down the useless ochloa-bolt gun and ran down the slope toward the layer of mist. He plunged into it.

II

HE HAD FLED on impulse, in blind revulsion at his helplessness toward a myth made suddenly actual. They had not tried to stop him, and that was odd.

Now, not yet halfway through the cloud layer toward the surface, he was wondering whether he hadn't, after all, jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. Would it have been wiser simply to have surrendered to them? For the surface was dangerous—only a diver who had visited it frequently could quite realize how dangerous it was.

The seas of boiling mud, the geysers, the landslides of the foci of radioactive metals were enveloped in perpetual darkness. The features of vulcanism changed so constantly that mapping them, even if possible, would have been useless. The most stable thing about the surface was its incessant flux. And, finally, the combination of darkness, danger and augmented atmospheric pressure was apt to produce hallucinations in divers if they stayed down for more than an hour. Tharg had once seen a fellow diver rip off his asbestos suit and plunge into a sink hole of boiling, sulphurous mud, while he babbled something about needing a bath.

There were prophylactic measures against these dangers, of course—protective suits against the geysers and the mud,

helmet lamps against the darkness, and constant caution against unforeseeable natural entrapment. As for the hallucinations, the only recognized way of dealing with them was to be strict in limiting one's stay on the surface.

Tharg had neither helmet light nor protective suit, and if he had any serious hope of foiling the Vaeaa, he might have to stay down considerably longer than an hour.

Yes, it might have been wiser simply to have surrendered. He knew so little about the Vaeaa that any assumption he made about their goals or motives stood a good chance of being wrong. He seemed to be temporarily safe in the cloud layer, but he thought that if they really wanted to capture him, they could probably do it. Beings who could toss lightning bolts at one wouldn't be permanently baffled by darkness or a cloud layer. But for the present he was still free. He had a little time. It seemed important to make good use of it.

He looked about him. The cloud layer was excessively damp—water dripped from his face, his arms, his shoulders, his belly, his back—and though some light was still to be found at this depth, the cloud was so dense that if he wanted to see his hand he had to bring it up close before his eyes.

For a moment his brain revolved impractical expedients. He might try to contact Synon (how?) . . . or set a radioactive trap for the Vaeaa . . . or destroy the book before they could get hold of it. . . . No, the ideas were all silly, particularly the last. If the book were destroyed, no one would ever know what it had contained.

The thing to do—the thing to do was to try to find some safe place to hide the book before he was picked up. In its impervious case it could probably stand a good deal, even an immersion in boiling mud. And later, after he got loose, he could try to retrieve it again.

He licked his lips. He couldn't see the ground he was standing on, but from the feel of it beneath his feet, it was solid rock. No place here to hide a book. His best bet, he thought, would be at the edge of the cloud layer, where there might still be a little light, a possible hiding place.

But wouldn't the Vaeaa look for the book in just such spots? They probably would. It was the best he could think

of, though. It was difficult to make good decisions when one had little knowledge and few choices.

He began to descend again, gripping blindly with his toes. It felt odd to be going down without his usual gear. The light fell off with each step he took.

He had not gone more than a few feet when he saw, below him and a little to the left, a patch of the most intense kingfisher blue.

Tharg did not call it that, of course. He had never seen a kingfisher, or any other bird. He had seen a color something like this one on pieces of metallic copper, or in the lower part of the sky at sunset. But those colors had been less intense; this blue was so beautiful that he stood looking at it with his mouth open.

He blinked, and it was still there. Without thinking at all, he started toward it. It looked soft, like velvet. He wanted to touch it, to stroke it with his fingers, to—

A pebble, turning and tinkling under his careless foot, saved him. He stopped abruptly, beginning to tremble. Why, what was the matter with him? There was nothing there; it had been a hallucination. But so soon, and at this shallow depth? He had never had a hallucination of color before, nor heard of anyone who had.

What would the Vaeaa try next? No wonder they had not tried to stop him when he had fled from them. If they could command enticements like this—

He must find a hiding place for the book. He must not tell them where he had hidden it, no matter what they did.

Once more he began to descend. He kept seeing patches of the kingfisher blue. What made it so desirable? It was only a color, and an illusory one at that. But it drew him like a magnet. He had to fight the temptation to run to it.

At the back of his mind was the fear that the Vaeaa, above the cloud layer, were coldly and objectively watching his every movement, while they skillfully played out their bait of lovely color for him. It might be so. He had no way of knowing. His people couldn't penetrate the cloud layer for more than a few yards with their infrared detectors, but the Vaeaa might be different. He'd have to risk it; there was nothing else he could do.

The light was getting very bad. He must be almost at the

edge of the cloud layer. He was already beginning to feel the depression of spirit that the lightless surface inspired in him. The ground under his feet had a spongy feel. He'd better start looking for a hiding place.

He bent over—he could see his hands now, except when a trailing wisp of cloud hid them—and began to feel his way. What he was hunting was a warm spot, a gradient that might lead to a hot spring or a sulphur pot. He was still bent over, groping along, when he felt something touch his back.

His heart missed one of its triple beats. He straightened up, peering anxiously around in the gloom. And another light touch brushed his face.

What could it be? There was nothing alive anywhere on this raw young world except Tharg's race; their cities were an incredible achievement, soapbubbles blown out over a hostile abyss. Another hallucination? He had never had a hallucination of touch; it must be the Vaeaa again. But this was not like the beautiful patches. What were they trying to do?

He moved to the right, and the touch on his face came again. It was like being brushed by the finest of threads.

Back to the left, and again the touch. No matter how he moved, a touch on the face, or sometimes several, followed the movement. He groped with his hands, and could feel nothing. But always there came the touch, as if he had blundered into an ambush of hanging gossamer threads.

At last he stood still. He thought he understood what it meant; the Vaeaa were pinpointing his movements, and no matter where he went they could follow him.

He knew an instant of despair: he had failed, they knew where he was, they would take the book. Then as he stood there in the wretched light, he had his first endogenous hallucination.

He saw himself sitting on the ground, his knees at the level of his ears, bending over something. He couldn't see what it was, and this vexed him. He was curious as to what the phantasm of Tharg was doing. It seemed important to find out.

His mind cleared; the phantasm vanished abruptly. But

now Tharg knew what he had seen himself doing: he had been reading the book.

He moved a little and felt the light touch once more on his face. Very well. He walked up the slope a little, trying for the best possible combination of light and freedom from cloud. When he was satisfied he had it as good as it could be got, he felt in his shoulder pouch and pulled out the hard little dark-brown ellipse. He hoped he could get it open. Otherwise . . .

He ran his hands questingly over the covering for a moment or two. It was perfectly smooth, perfectly solid, with no hint of a suture anywhere. He tried combinations of pressure. Nothing worked. At last he stopped trying and looked with hopeless longing at it. Would banging it on the ground or stepping on it help? He didn't think it would. His hands were tired from gripping and pressing. Was he just going to stand here with the ellipsoid in his hands until the Vaeaa caught up with him? He imagined so. And *they* would find ways of opening it.

Rage swelled in him. Once more he pressed his thumbs down hard on the enclosing case. And this time, whether because his anger had been required or because he had at last touched the proper spot, the shell split silently down its long axis and folded back like the valves of a door.

The book was inside.

Tharg's first thought was how *pretty* it was, his second that the book, freed of its case, seemed bigger than he would have expected. It was bound in some glowing rosy-purple stuff, very soft and agreeable to the fingers, with the title—Tharg supposed it was the title—embossed diagonally across the cover in metallic tyrian purple characters. Tharg couldn't possibly read them, and yet, as he looked at them, he was sure he knew what they meant: *Guidebook to the—the Planes* was what the characters said. (Not quite *Planes; Spaces*, or even *World*, might have been a better translation.)

The title fired his anticipation. He felt like laughing. He didn't sit down on the ground, as he had seen his phantasm doing, but he opened the book eagerly at what seemed to be the first page.

It was embossed in glowing golden ink on a silky tawny surface. The characters were beautifully placed on the page,

and beautifully proportioned; they were quite unlike those of Tharg's language and yet, as he looked at them, he felt that it was like the title: he could read them well enough. These flower-like bosses, these complex, beautiful arabesques —he had seen them before, he could read them, it was no harder than deciphering some half-forgotten language. It was something he knew, had always known, was learning, dear and beautiful.

He felt a marvellous sense of expansion. Sometimes he did not understand a word and had to look back for it, but then it seemed to be glossed for him, in a series of transparencies.

He reached the bottom of the page. For a moment he wondered whether this might not be another hallucination, for by now he was realizing that the book was being written as he read. Meaning and character came into being under his eyes. No, this was not like the books one read in dreams, where sense evaporated from the page. And only the book seemed marvellous; he was well aware that he was standing on a darkling slope with wisps of mist coming before his eyes, while his body was clammy and cold.

By the time he had finished the second page, he was shivering with delight. He knew who he was, and he knew what he was reading. *The Vaeaa must not get this book.*

III

THEY HAD prodded him up to the ridges and chased him for a long time in the light of the tremendous, sky-filling moon. It had been an indolent, almost laughing chase that had ended only when, tired of the sport, they had thrown a net ignominously over his head. Now Tharg stood before them in the early dawn, bound too tightly even to shiver, and the tallest of the Vaeaa held the book disdainfully in his long hands.

Tharg had tried to hide the book. He had hidden it in a place that ought to have been safe, a radioactive hot spot. He had hoped they would never find it, but they had gone to it directly and surely. He knew now why they had let him enter the cloud layer in the first place. All his movements, from the first moment, had been visible to them, but it had been more sport to let him run.

The tall one rifled over the pages. When they had taken the book from its hiding place, Tharg had had a faint hope that they would not be able to read it. But it was plain, from the tall one's manner, that he could read it nearly as easily as Tharg had. The book had no discrimination; it would write itself for anyone who chose to read.

Yes, they could read it. But how different their response to it was from what Tharg's had been! They touched the book with the tips of their fingers, turning the pages with dislike, with contemptuous distaste. Now and again one of them would look at him coolly with pale turquoise eyes.

Tharg turned his head and looked about him. They were standing on the open deck of some sort of small aircraft, the craft from which they had hunted him last night. It was hovering almost motionless a few feet above the surface of a wide, very gradually sloping plateau dotted with small scoria-cones. The cones were of various sizes, from mere babies to one, at Tharg's left, which could properly be called a crater. It was a hundred feet across. A dense shaft of vapor rose languidly from it.

The tall Vaeaa pointed out a passage in the book to one of his subordinates. They held a murmured consultation. Tharg felt light-headed. He supposed that his thoracic flora were not in very good shape, and then there had been the long stresses of last night's chase.

They had begun by prodding him up to the ridges with long lines of sparks, corded fire that had run through the cloud layer to touch him with a tingle and burn. The lines had been white and brilliant, beautiful knotted explosions of light against the darkness, the filmy, thread-like lashes of a many-lashed whip.

He could have stood the pain, but every touch of the white whip of light left him feeling that a giant was squeezing the blood out of his resisting heart. Two or three touches of the lash, and he was stifling in his own metabolic wastes. In the end, he could stay below and die, or let them prod him up to the ridges and run for it.

How intimately the Vaeaa had understood his physiology! And if he had had any temptation to stay below and be a hero, it had disappeared when he'd reflected that the closer he stayed to where he had hidden the book, the more likely

they were to find it. So he had come up and run, run for hours, stopping now and then to make a pretense of scrabbling at the rock with his fingers as if in search of a hiding place for the book. It hadn't done any good. They had gone straight to the book when they'd wanted to.

How much he resented that they had the book! It didn't make any difference what use they might make of it—the fact was that they didn't deserve it. It had been sent to Tharg's people, not to them. They had no right to it. Absentee landlords, indeed, who appeared only when their tenants had something covetable.

Covetable, but why? Tharg couldn't understand why they should go to so much trouble to obtain possession of something they obviously disliked. He would probably find out what the reason was in due course, if they let him live long enough.

If they let him live. . . . It occurred to Tharg that he had been so concerned about what was going to happen to the guidebook that he had done very little worrying about his own fate. The folk tales he had heard about the Vaeaa when he was a boy had stressed that meeting one of them was usually unfortunate, though sometimes they could be generous. But after what they had already put him through, it was hardly reasonable to think they would let him go.

The murmured conference between the two Vaeaa was growing a little louder. They seemed to be disagreeing over something in the book. The sun rose higher. At last the tall one gave what appeared to be an order. The other touched his forehead, apparently in submission, then turned and went into the aircraft's small cabin.

He came back carrying a metallic tray. On the surface of the tray were arranged three or four transparent saucers, each holding a handful of capsules of a particular color, and a handled knife with a very slender blade. He stopped in front of the tall Vaeaa, who appeared to think for a moment, then selected a pale green capsule.

Tharg watched these actions with detachment, since he could see no immediate application to himself in them. But now the tall Vaeaa, carrying the capsule daintily between thumb and forefinger, came over to Tharg. "Swallow this,"

he said in Tharg's language. They were the first comprehensible words the earthdiver had heard him use.

Tharg blinked. "No," he said.

The tall Vaeaa wasted no time on argument. He reached around behind Tharg and hit him a sharp blow on the back of the neck. Tharg's mouth opened involuntarily, and the Vaeaa leader dropped the pill down his throat.

Time passed. Tharg would have liked to try to vomit the capsule up, but he was tied so tightly he could not even retch. The Vaeaa stood about in relaxed attitudes, watching him with remote eyes.

Tharg could feel the capsule hot in his belly. They might be trying to kill him, but it was unlikely: poison was a complicated way of disposing of anybody. No, they must be trying to drug him, but he couldn't think why.

More time passed. The sun was well up now. Tharg felt impatient. Whatever was going to happen, he wished it would get under way. They couldn't have given him a sugar pill, a mere placebo. But the effect was certainly taking a long time to show itself.

Abruptly, without any warning at all, he pitched headlong up from his bound body and into a spin. No, that wasn't it, he was still inside his body, but—how dizzy he felt! He had fallen into a colored vortex, he was going around like a wheel, he felt that sunrise had begun all over again. It was brighter and more beautiful than it had been the first time. But it was upside down.

At the height of his rotation, the world steadied. Order came back into it. But it was a different world.

The cone-dotted landscape, with the smoke lazily curling up from the largest of the cones, had not quite ceased to exist, but it had become transparent, and through it Tharg saw . . .

His new range of perceptions must have been apparent in his bodily attitude. The Vaeaa leader said, in his high-pitched voice, "Tell us what you see."

He didn't want to speak, but his mouth opened obediently, and he heard himself say, "There is a fountain and a gate. Beside them are two dark trees." (Tharg had never seen a tree. He knew the word only as a literary curiosity. But now he used it unhesitatingly.)

"Go through the gate," the high voice told him authoritatively.

How could he? It was not really a gate—that was only a word—and besides, what had a moment earlier been a gate was now a hill with bright flowers. The colors were intensely vivid.

"I can't," he said. His body was far away. "It isn't there."

"Go through," said the voice.

The gate reappeared, vanished, settled into a grotto cool with water and edged with ferny greenery. It drew him hauntingly. Eagerly he entered it.

"What do you see?" came the voice.

"It is another snare," Tharg said. He wished he could bite off his tongue to keep from speaking. "The light is bright. It is rebirth."

"Of what color?"

"Let me back! There is too much light."

"Of what color?" The high voice was inexorable.

"None that we know."

"Ah!" The leader made a noise of satisfaction. He said something to the subordinate. "Go on from the fountain," he told Tharg.

But by now Tharg had reached the end of his tether. He was in too many places at once. The light that beat on him seemed ineffably horrible. "I can't go farther," his thick tongue said. "It doesn't exist yet. Beyond here it isn't created."

There was a silence. Tharg was trying to get back into his body again.

"He hasn't created it yet," the tall one said at last. Tharg didn't know what language he was speaking, but he could understand him perfectly. The words seemed to make small vivid pictures in his brain.

"No," agreed the subordinate. "Shall I give him another dose? Or would it be better to stimulate his inner eye with the knife?"

Tharg made a choking noise. They looked at him without compassion. "I think he understands," said the leader. "Give him the psylocybate. We must send him further."

This time a blue bolus was dropped down Tharg's throat.

It tasted bitter. The results were quicker than they had been with the green capsule.

There was no sense of the visible world becoming transparent, of another world or worlds beginning to be seen. What happened this time was that his second body began to come out through the bones of his skull.

His first body gave a groan and collapsed, still tightly bound, on the deck of the little aircraft. Tharg was pulling loose from his first body gradually, but it was a slow process, like trying to get off tight, painful boots. Since what was happening was not a normal process, but one coerced by the ingestion of a drug, it caused him an unnatural amount of distress and badly frightened him.

Slowly he got his head and one of his arms free. He wanted to get out, and yet he didn't. Tharg lying there on the deck was his house, and he was not yet ready to leave.

"Untie him," said the tall leader. "This isn't what that drug was supposed to do. It may be that we've interfered with his circulation by having the cords too tight."

The order was obeyed. Tharg felt the prickling of a thousand invisible needles in his arms as his blood began to move again. But the order had come too late: his second body kept on coming out.

"He's still unconscious," said the leader. He seemed to ponder, his long eyelids almost closed over his pale eyes. "Try stimulating his inner eye," he said at last.

By now, only Tharg's feet were still inside the body of Tharg One. He could only look on, in a paralysis of horror, while the subordinate picked up the slender knife, located the point of it accurately above Tharg's nose, and struck.

Tharg's body gave no cry, but it half rose from the deck, as if it were trying to sit up, and then dropped back limply. Tharg in his second body was not conscious of pain, but his hand had gone involuntarily to his head.

"I think he's dead," said the subordinate after a minute.

"It looks like it," the leader answered. "Remind me, when we go back up, to tell the chemists their psylocybate didn't do quite what they said it would." He riffled through the pages of the book, the beautiful book that had been sent to Tharg's people. The book's outer case, the dark-brown ellip-

soid in which it had arrived, lay unnoticed beside his narrow sandaled feet.

"Well," he said finally, "I suppose we know enough now to be positive that this . . . *thing* . . . must be destroyed. The descriptions he gave correspond closely enough with the text. It's a pity, in a way, for the book is a handsome thing. But we can't take any chances on this poisonous supernatural nonsense contaminating anybody. Yes, we'll have to destroy it."

So, Tharg thought, that's why they wanted it. The Vaeaa disapprove of the book—our book—because it's a guidebook to the world of psychic phenomena. The Vaeaa are rigid materialists, and they think there's something indecent in the nonmaterial. They're censors, and like censors they know a good deal about what they disapprove of.

He felt a certain gratification at having at last fathomed their motives. But his gratification was overpowered by anxiety about the book and about what was going to happen to the body of Tharg One. He was out of that body entirely now, but a long, elastic ropy ligature still bound him to it.

"What shall I do with the book?" the subordinate asked.

"Throw it in the ship's matter converter. As for him"—he indicated Tharg One, lying on the deck—"dump him over the side. He's too big for the converter, and I don't want any craft I command cluttered up with carrion."

The leader handed the book to his subordinate. "Perhaps you'd like to look at it before you destroy it," he said kindly. "There are some interesting passages. If only it weren't such vicious stuff!"

Tharg had listened with growing rage and despair. The beautiful book would be destroyed, and Tharg himself would be technically dead once his first body was gone. Wasn't there anything he could do to stop them? He'd read a fair amount of the book.

The subordinate was turning over the pages, smiling a thin-lipped smile like a man reading a funny but disgusting joke. Tharg knew that his second body was powerless to affect material things. But—his first body—

It would hurt. He didn't know whether it could be done. But he couldn't let them destroy his people's book.

He began to enter his first body again.

He had to do it carefully, without any betraying movements, and the pain in his head was agonizing. *He must not groan.* Woefully, unnaturally, like a child reentering the womb, he forced himself back into the house, the prison, of flesh.

Now. He had to be quick, while the subordinate was still reading. He gathered his force.

His head! His head!

He snatched the book from the long hands of the Vaeaa, dropped it into the ellipsoidal case, and ran across the deck with it.

It was only a short toss to the mouth of the biggest scoria cone. The impervious case would protect the book, and sometime somebody might get it out of the volcano again. Anyhow, the Vaeaa shouldn't have the satisfaction of destroying it.

He threw the book into the crater's mouth.

The subordinate, who had seen a man rise from the dead, was looking at him with an open mouth. Would the Vaeaa be able to fish for the book and dredge it up out of the lava? Tharg didn't think so. Even the Vaeaa had their limits. Anyhow, he'd done the best he could. Now it was time for him to be getting out of his first body, before they punished it.

Once more he began to extricate himself. His first body was in better shape than he had thought, and the effects of the psylocybate were wearing off. But he wanted to get out, and break the cord between his two bodies, before the torture began. It would be an unheard-of sort of suicide.

Now. Except for the ligature, he was free. The subordinate and two or three other Vaeaa had grabbed his first body again; somebody was twisting his arm violently. Tharg wrenched at the ligature.

It was impossible to break it by force. He had no force. If his will . . . Only the force of will.

Violence. He willed his second body's death.

Abruptly Tharg one slumped down in the cruel circling arms. The link was severed; his first body was dead. Tharg had won.

But he felt no triumph. What had happened to his second

body? It wasn't dead, and yet it wasn't here. The link had been severed the wrong way, unilaterally.

Tharg knew he wasn't a ghost. But he didn't know what he was.

IV

WHAT KEPT him bound to earth? He was dead, or at any rate his first body had perished; he ought to have been elsewhere. But Tharg remained, ambient and perceptive, a spectator of earthly events who, lacking the usual privileges of the dead, was anchored somewhere in space unable either to leave Earth or to affect what went on there.

At first he had felt anguish when the wars grew more fierce. Men he had known fought and suffered, the allied cities turned on each other, Synon was wiped out and then Gwynor. The Vedimi, always opportunists, attacked whichever of the allies might be weaker at the time. Tharg could only look on helplessly at destruction, while the centuries passed like blinking and the wars went on.

By degrees his emotion grew more remote. Unconcern invaded him. Sunk in a glacial ataraxia, he watched the deaths of men and cities. His people grew fewer, the wars increased in bitterness. At last there was not a man of his stock left alive.

The Vaeaa followed them into oblivion. Those enigmatic people, who had possessed almost the powers of gods, proved mortal. Tharg was never to know why the Vaeaa had brought his people to Earth or what their link with them had been. Perhaps they had depended in some way on their underlings for psychological sustenance.

Whatever the cause, their number diminished. Their stock grew tired. The ships that had circled Earth grew fewer and fewer. But while there was still half a handful of their ships left, they undertook a great work.

Perhaps because they were dying out, their incomprehensible animus against the non-physical had strengthened. It drove them to an endeavor that for a long time Tharg did not understand. It was not until the last of their ships had vanished that he realized the projector they had set

up on Pluto was designed to keep another guidebook from space from ever getting through to Earth.

Tharg did not witness the construction on Pluto directly, of course. His consciousness remained restricted to Earth and its ambient seas of atmosphere. He inferred the nature of the construction from the preparations for it that he saw and the many mental references to it he picked up. In ordinary terms, though not in Tharg's, it took them a long time, almost a hundred Earth years.

After the projector was built, the Vaeaa decreased rapidly. If Tharg had been capable of astonishment, he would have felt it at seeing how quickly they died out. In no time at all, the last one was gone. Earth was rid of the burden of its alien and anachronistic life.

With the death of the last Vaeaa, the roaring in Tharg's ears died away. It had been with him constantly since his first body died, a never-ceasing background to all his perceptions. Now it was gone. It had been the roaring of the wind of volitional thought.

He floated in a perfect silent emptiness. Events on Earth went on occuring but now, since the alien life had perished and no native life had yet arisen, they were purely geologic. Tharg saw mountains crumble into dust and new mountains arise, continents move over the surface as giddily as dancers, and felt the planet's axis of rotation change. The moon receded and its silver surface grew pocked. Like someone who sleeps with open eyes, Tharg beheld the meaningless panorama of change with his perception uninvolved. Ten thousand years to him meant less than a day. It was not that time had no meaning; it was that *he* had not. Yet he remained bound to Earth.

Bound, like an embryo in its amniotic bath. But an embryo grows and changes, and Tharg did not. The millennia passed like the pattering of rain, and Tharg was no nearer to birth.

Sometimes it occurred to him—if one can say "times" about non-experiences that last billions of years—that if he had been able to learn more from the guidebook before the Vaeaa took it away from him, he might have been able to rescue himself. Such thoughts did not distress him; they were as meaningless as he himself was. Though he was alone as

nobody, alive or dead, was ever alone, he did not suffer from his isolation. To suffer would have been to admit his own meaning.

The geologic events on Earth's surface continued, and at last, because in a long enough time the highly improbable becomes the possible, a series of unique events occurred. Neither Tharg nor anybody else anywhere was aware of it then, but life had come into being on Earth.

How many millions of years before the one-celled became the two-celled? How many more millions before chlorophyll was evolved and the green plants crept out timidly over the land? The atmosphere changed as the plants took up their vital task of releasing free oxygen. Primitive animals evolved. The raw young planet was becoming an abode of life.

Tharg perceived the qualitative changes without involvement. He felt no impatience at their extreme slowness. After all, he was not waiting for anything.

An evolutionary plateau was reached: Earth's creatures developed the backbone. Fish thronged the sea, amphibia crawled out on the land. The huge saurians ruled for a day and then vanished. And with astonishing rapidity—the plateau became an inclined plane—the higher mammals began to evolve.

Herbivora. Carnivora. And some small, unprepossessing eat-anything proto-monkeys. Some of these last took the great step of balancing the soap-bubble skull on the end of an upright spine.

These were true children of the third planet, shaped by her sun and her seas, her own autochthonous life. They struck stone upon stone for tools, and bellowed signals to each other in the chase. Tharg began to hear in his ears once more, like a freshening breeze, the noise of volitional thought.

It was weak and confused at first, concerned solely with survival. But it grew from generation to generation, augmenting torrentially. It was a great roaring. And Tharg perceived, almost with resentment, that these tool-making new beings might be the source of help.

Help? A rescue from prolonged no-meaning? He was no body, nowhere, a consciousness without dimension or vehicle. No ghost was ever so powerless as he. Whether he

existed at all was a question for philosophers. Yet the prospect of release filled him with a longing that was almost painful. Was there nothing he could do to help himself?

For the first time in several billion years, he tried to think.

Now, if he was still bound to Earth, there must be some link with it. An immaterial link, perhaps, but it was to a material thing. Even if his second body was gone, something held him. He had some real existence, he was something more than a percipient thought.

And even if he were only a thought, could he not re-think himself?

Tharg—who was Tharg? He fell into a state of consciousness that was not quite meditation. It was something new for him, utterly unlike the glacial ataraxia that had held him for so long. Speculation on personal identity is a well-known way of attaining the condition that is known as nirvana; some teachers have considered it a valuable mystic experience. Tharg was already in a state outside the experience of any mystic, so the results of his speculating about his identity were different from those a mystic might get.

He had been right when he had thought, so long ago, that he might have been able to help himself if he could have learned more from the guidebook. Now, though he did not know it, he was working out for himself, under adverse circumstances, what he might have learned from the guidebook. In short, he was discovering the psi function the hard way.

Who was Tharg? He thought about this point for a long time, by human standards; time had begun again for him, and he was once more conscious of its passage.

At last, softly, but coming nearer, he heard a voice—the word is inexact, but there is none that fits it better—he heard a voice say, "Tharg has beome e."

Who was speaking? Was it he himself? This was not the sound of rational thought, coming from without, but a voice from himself. As to e, he remembered that it was a transcendental, a number that popped up in mathematical statements where one wouldn't have expected it. "Tharg has become e. . . ." How could that be it?

Perhaps because he had rejected its information, the voice seemed to withdraw. Tharg realized that he had not let his

speculations range wide enough. He must manage to be quite passive, and at the same time deeply concerned. And he must not be afraid.

This time the voice from himself told him, "The lumniferous ether . . . is Tharg."

No. That wasn't right. He might be a mere percipient consciousness, without dimension or vehicle, but he knew he wasn't the ether, lumniferous or otherwise. He began to realize that what was being communicated to him was not a statement but a process.

Once more he looked inward. He had risen to a great height; he would drop away in a moment. The . . . voice . . . said, quite loudly, "Tharg is the square root of minus one."

That did it. Now he knew. That was enough.

The square root of minus one is an imaginary quantity, usually represented by a lower case letter I. For all it is conventionally called "imaginary," it can be written down on paper, manipulated, worked with, divided, multiplied.

It vanishes and reappears in equations. When it is squared, it becomes minus one. When it is cubed, it becomes minus i. When it is raised to the fourth power it becomes, simply, one. When it is raised to the fifth power, it reverts to being bare i. And then the cycle starts over again.

Tharg knew these elementary mathematical facts. The process had been disclosed to him now: i was "imaginary," but it existed. *It could be multiplied.*

It was himself the voice had meant.

What should he do with his new knowledge? A point of light reflected from a thousand mirrors, so that it is reduplicated a thousand times, is a thousand points of light. A thought a thousand times augmented . . .

If he expected the new inhabitants of Earth to help him, they would first have to know that he existed. He would try to manifest himself.

V

THE JARGONELLE pear trees bloomed up to the third story windows. In spring they were tall clouds of white blossom and silvery green leaves. The old thorn tree had masses of

red flowers in May, and in the yard there were two big beds of spring flowers, one of purple and blue irises and one of fragrant, velvety auriculas. The young Proctors called these last "recklesses".

The Proctors were not the first tenants of the house. It had been built about 1800, and when Mary Unthank and her husband—the Unthanks were cousins of the Proctors—had moved into it, the house had already had a faintly unpleasant reputation. But twenty-five years of blameless occupancy had caused the stories concerning it to die away. When the Proctors moved in, late in 1834, they had no apprehensions at all.

The Proctors were a quiet young Quaker couple, strongly attached to each other, with one young child and the prospect of more to come. Joseph Proctor, like his wife Elizabeth, was a birthright member of the Society of Friends. He was fond of reading: *George Fox's Journal* was one of his favorite books, and he took in several periodicals. He was active in peace and antislavery societies.

Elizabeth Proctor was too occupied with her household duties to read as much as her husband, but from the time of Margaret Fell women have played a large part in the Society of Friends. At the end of 1834, however, she was less active then usual, since she was expecting shortly to be confined with her second child.

The house itself lay in a deep hollow. The spot was a lonely one: there were no houses near, and, except for the mill which was across the lane from the house, no buildings. Willington Mill, as it was called, was owned jointly by Joseph Proctor and his cousin Unthank. It was a large steam flour mill, efficient for its day, and the Proctors owed a certain modest prosperity to it.

On the other side of the house a large field stretched away upward for a long distance. The river Tyne was not too far away to be reached on foot, and from its banks one could watch the shipping sailing upriver, or gliding lazily down to the North Sea. The field and yard were fine places for children to play, and in later years the Proctors remembered this part of their residence here with pleasure. They were to feel other emotions about the house.

What led Tharg to fix on this house and these people

for his attempts at manifestation? Actually, there was little volition in it. This youthful couple, with their Quaker honesty, might have been selected deliberately, if he had had the freedom of choosing, but he had not. The Proctors, plus the house with its aura of the uncanny, attracted him. Yet he willed to be attracted. He let himself be drawn, like an iron filing consenting to be magnetized, toward the Proctors and Willington Mill.

Since he had no second body, he had not the possibilities the dead usually have. He had no physical power. He could not make vibrations in the atmosphere to produce sound, or occupy space, or reflect back impinging light. The impressions he made must be made upon the inner eye, upon the inner ear; and to make even them, he must draw energy from the person of some present human being.

On top of this, though he could hear the thoughts of people indistinctly, like the sound of a rushing wind, the content was often beyond him. And his attempts at manifestation from the very first had the effect of seriously blurring his reception of thought. Finally, since Tharg was after all not a human being himself, his expectations for the conduct of humans were often exceedingly faulty. Tharg found that the difficulties in the way of communication were very considerable.

The third story of the house at Willington Mill was unoccupied. It did not even contain any furniture. The two lower stories were ample for the Proctors' modest wants, and the abandonment of the top floor saved the servants a great deal of running up and down stairs.

On the second floor at the front of the house was the nursery, at present awaiting another occupant. Here Nurse Pollard held forth. Tharg decided that the empty room above the nursery was a good spot to begin his attempts to communicate. So Nurse Pollard heard him first.

He could not for a long time be sure that she had any perception of him. Sometimes, in her attentions to the little Proctor boy, she would pause and seem to listen intently. Tharg could not be sure what she heard, and her thoughts were to him indistinct and confused.

He could follow her thinking considerably better when she put it into spoken words. Tharg did not precisely "under-

stand" English, but he could get the gist of verbal communications accurately enough. He understood, therefore, when after several months Nurse Pollard told the kitchenmaid, "There's somebody walking about in that empty room over the nursery. He walks back and forth, and when he gets over the window comes down so heavy that he makes the nursery window rattle in its frame."

"Walking about?" answered the kitchenmaid, looking serious. "Why, I can't think who it could be. Master never goes above the second floor. When do you hear it?"

"In the evenings, when I'm putting little Joe to bed. It goes on for ten minutes at a time. And then there's the thump, and the window rattles."

"Maybe you'd best tell Mistress," the kitchenmaid suggested.

"I think I will. It's quite overset me, Elsie. I'm all of a tremble when the walking starts."

Walking? Tharg thought. Was that what she heard? He had meant her to have an impression of somebody seeking help, not of random movement. And she was frightened. He didn't like that at all. He wanted help, or at least he wanted to communicate that he wanted to communicate. But if the members of the household were frightened, their fear would twist his message out of shape.

Yet, after all, he felt encouraged. He *had* succeeded in making a sensory impression on somebody. He would keep on trying. The Proctors were quiet, sensible people; he might be able to impress them differently.

The nursemaid went to Elizabeth Proctor with her story. The third floor of the house was searched, and when nothing at all that would account for the noises she described was found, she was ridiculed gently. But within a few days Mrs. Proctor herself, being in the nursery, heard the heavy walking, then Joseph Proctor heard it, and soon all the other members of the household.

Nurse Pollard, meantime, had given Mrs. Proctor her notice. She hated to leave such a kind lady, she said, and just before her little one was to be born, but she couldn't stand it no longer, not to oblige no one. A new nursemaid was hired; on the third day after her arrival, she too heard the walking.

Tharg realized that he had driven Nurse Pollard away.

He could sense the increasing fear of the others in the house. It affected him like a faint, sickening sweetish smell. He was sorry, both for himself and for them. But he hoped that if he kept on they would stop being frightened, and realize that somebody wanted to communicate.

Besides, was there not something of the pleasurable in their fear? A certain delicious terror in their contact with the inexplicable? These quiet Quakers with their quiet Quaker lives, these servants who had never been farther from their birthplaces than forty miles—they might well welcome the frightening, if only because it was so interesting. Nurse Pollard, at any rate, would have a story to tell all the rest of her life.

All the same, Tharg thought he had better try to find some other way of manifesting himself. Willington Mill was only across the lane from the house; he would see what he could do there.

Here he had the same paradoxical success that he had had in the house. Thomas Mann, the foreman of the mill, heard inexplicable creakings from the millyard, and both he and Joseph Proctor heard footsteps going along the gravel path in front of them. Mrs. Mann, going outdoors one night for coal for her kitchen, looked across at the Proctor house and saw, in the upper window, a floating whitish figure, luminous and transparent, like a priest in a surplice. She called the other members of her family to look, and they saw it too. But none of this was much use to Tharg.

Meanwhile, the date of Mrs. Proctor's confinement had come. After a brief and uneventful labor, she was delivered of a healthy, normal child, a little girl who was given the name of Jane.

Mrs. Proctor's pregnancy had been one of the factors that had attracted Tharg in the first place. A pregnant woman, both in folklore and actuality, is the focus of much energy. Tharg had drawn on this energy minutely—he really did not need very much, and he was sure he had done her no harm—so that he might try to manifest himself. With the normal termination of her pregnancy, this energy was no longer available. It seemed to Tharg that it was a good time for him to withdraw himself. He was not at all satisfied with the success he had had. If he ceased his efforts at

communication, he might be able to think of some means that might be better.

Tharg had felt, when in contact with these personalities, a sense of pressure. To be perceived at all, he had had to fit himself to *them*. It was a continuous process of accommodation. Their thoughts were not his thoughts, their meanings were not his meanings, and yet he had had to let himself be permeated by alien patterns and wills. It was with considerable relief that he prepared to withdraw himself.

And now he had an unpleasant surprise. When he tried to go away he found that he was held.

It was not inextricable. He could pull himself loose. But something—perhaps the house itself, perhaps the structure of fear its inhabitants had built up around the knockings, the footsteps, the assortment of uncanny noises they had listened to tremblingly—resisted him. He was like a fly with one foot caught in glue. The focus of attachment seemed to be the room just over the nursery on the third floor.

He was surprised and perturbed. He had thought that he was free, at least, to come and go. He tried hard, with what in the fly would have been a lot of angry buzzing and wing motion, and at last pulled himself loose.

Tharg felt a strong, if short-lived, emotion of relief. His months of trying to communicate with the inhabitants of the house at Willington Mill had given him a disagreeable sense of never being alone. Now he had opportunity to ask himself what he should perhaps have asked sooner: what kind of help had he expected them to give?

The fact of it was, he had had no clear expectation. He had striven blindly toward them, but he had not known what he wanted from them. The sick man consults a physician. He does not know what the doctor can do for him, or what he will prescribe.

Yes, but were the people at Willington Mill fitted to be his physicians? Did they have any help to give him? Their minds, for all their intelligence, were oddly limited. All Tharg's months of attempts had accomplished was to convince them they were living in a haunted house. Perhaps it would be better to abandon the idea entirely.

No. He couldn't give up his hope. He would keep on

trying. It would be too painful to go back to meaninglessness.

The biggest obstacle to effective communication with them was their fear. It distorted all their impressions of him. If he had another opportunity, he must try to teach them not to be afraid. He would be specific. He would try to make them hear the words, "Don't be afraid." And if that were gained, he would try to ask them for help.

Meanwhile, the household at Willington Mill drew a collective sigh of relief. Spring came. Little Jane Proctor was thriving. Her brother Joseph, an affectionate child, would run out into the garden between showers to pluck a violet or a primrose that he might show it to the baby as she lay smiling in her crib. As cook said, it didn't hardly seem like the same house.

In the summer, Elizabeth Proctor and her two young children went to visit her sister, Jane Carr of Carlisle. Autumn found the baby fretful, since she was teething. But she was a sturdy child, and soon her first teeth were poking through her rosy gums. By November she had been weaned from the breast. And in early March Mrs. Proctor found herself pregnant again.

"Don't tell the mistress or the others," the cook said to the kitchenmaid one evening toward the end of April. "But I'm afraid Old Jeff is back with us again."

"Old Jeff? Why, who's he?" asked the kitchenmaid, staring.

"He's the one that made such a roo-raw on the third floor before. Bumping, thumping, whistling, clucking—oh, we're in for a fine time if *he's* back."

"I only heard it once," said the kitchenmaid. "But who is he, anyhow, Cook?"

"That's not for me to say. The master quoted out some poetry about 'spiritual creatures walking the earth unseen.' "

"Then you think he's a spirit?" Janet asked.

"Some wicked spirit. Mind, now, don't go telling the mistress. She's not in her usual health."

"Is she sickening with a fever, do you think, Cook?"

"A fever!" The cook laughed and prodded the potatoes with an inquiring fork. "Nay, she's got the swelling sickness, Janet. Her'll be giving master another little one."

"When?" asked Janet, round-eyed. She was learning a lot of things.

"In November. Mind you don't go upsetting her. Promise, now."

Janet promised, but it was no long while until Elizabeth Proctor, in the nursery with Jane and Joseph, heard the noises overhead herself. To the usual repertory of footsteps, whirrings, cluckings and heavy objects being dropped had been added several new items: a gobbling noise, the ringing of a handbell, and the sound of a clock being wound. Tharg was really trying very hard. He knew that if he did not succeed in getting through to them with words very soon, he would never do it at all.

It was Joseph Jr. who first heard the sound of articulate speech.

The little boy had gone running up to the nursery after a yarn ball he wanted for playing catch with his little sister. He came running back in a moment, without the ball, and calling "Mama, Mama!" in a shrill, trembling voice.

"Why, what's the matter, child?" asked Mrs. Proctor, looking up from the baby's sock she was knitting.

"Mama . . . Old Jeff spoke to me."

"Old Jeff? Who does thee mean?"

"That old man that walks around on the third floor. He walks around even in the daytime now."

Elizabeth Proctor gave a shuddering sigh. "Come and sit by me on the sofa, Joseph," she said. She stroked his hair back from his forehead and patted his hand. "Don't be afraid, child. God will take care of thee. . . . Did thee hear words?"

"Yes, mama. He made a gobbling noise, and then he said, right at my ear, 'Never mind.' Like this, Mama: 'Never . . . mind.' "

"Was that all thee heard, Joseph?"

"I think he said, 'Come . . . and get.' "

"Was that all?"

"Yes, Mama. But he said, 'Never . . . mind' twice."

"It can't hurt thee, Joseph. It means naught. How thy little heart is beating! Thee mustn't be afraid."

"Yes, Mama."

Tharg had listened to this interchange in what was almost despair. He had hoped that the little boy, at least, might be able to apprehend his message. He had only frightened an already frightened child.

"It means naught," Mrs. Proctor had told her son. If Tharg could make her hear him, he had no doubt that she, too, would hear his desperately repeated, "Don't be afraid!" as "Never . . . mind," "Come . . . and get," or similar gibberish.

They had misinterpreted all his attempts at communication. Would they always misunderstand?

VI

He no longer cared how long it took. Tharg had become resigned to spending years to make his communication effective. Perhaps he had been overoptimistic in thinking that he, a consciousness so abstract that he might be compared to a sentence without either subject or verb, would be able to tell his wishes to human beings in any very short time.

Besides, it seemed to him that he was doing better now. True, the Proctors were still frightened, probably more frightened than they had been at first. But the nauseous smell of their fear no longer bothered him. He was beginning to command a repertory of devices, some of which he was sure would eventually break through their preconceptions about him.

He still had little control over the content of what they heard or felt or saw. But he could control which sense was affected. The Proctors saw things fairly frequently now—an old woman with her head in grave bands, a boy in a drab hat, a priest in a luminous surplice, an ugly old man. They heard inexplicable noises almost constantly, though rarely articulate words. Occasionally they even felt things: little Joe had called out one night that there had been a blow on his pillow, and Mrs. Proctor had felt the bed in which she was sleeping move up and down as if a man underneath were raising it up on his back. Tharg hoped eventually to be able to produce effects on all three senses at once.

Furthermore, he no longer needed to draw on Mrs. Proctor for energy. Since her last child had been born, he had learned to take the minute amount he needed from anyone in the house. In short, if Tharg had made no progress in his basic aim of communication, he had made a

great deal in techniques for affecting the human sensory apparatus.

About this time, too, an event occurred that sent his hopes sky-high. The house at Willington Mill was acquiring a more than local fame. Visitors to Tyneside asked to see it, or had it pointed out to them, and this interest appeared natural enough to the Proctors.

Early in 1840 Joseph Proctor received a letter from a Dr. Drury, a young physician in practice at Sutherland, asking for permission to spend the night in the "haunted room". He proposed, he said, to bring a trustworthy companion with him, as well as firearms and a dog.

Mrs. Proctor and the children were currently visiting one of her sisters. Joseph Proctor, after some meditation, agreed to Dr. Drury's proposal, though he objected to the firearms. He did not want them in the house. But he was ready to allow the presence of the dog.

Tharg had heard discussions on the subject of the proposed visit between Joseph Proctor and his father. He felt greatly encouraged. The Proctors, for all their intelligence and many amiable qualities, were people of a strong religious conviction and hence predisposed to view Tharg's activities as those of a "spirit," albeit of a wicked one.

Dr. Drury, on the other hand, was a man of scientific training, accustomed to dealing effectively with the physical; his wanting to bring firearms and dog with him showed that. Was it too much to hope that Tharg would be able to communicate something of his nature and his needs to him? Particularly as he wouldn't be handicapped by the distorting fear that all the inhabitants of the house felt now? Yes, Tharg thought, he could allow himself to hope.

The night of the vigil came. Dr. Drury and his companion, a blond young man a little older than he, arrived punctually. "We brought neither firearms nor a dog," Dr. Drury said after he had greeted his host. "Nobody in Sutherland had a dog he wanted to risk in the house at Willington Mill." He laughed. "But we brought sandwishes, a lantern and a flask of brandy. We are prepared to spend a comfortable night."

"I am glad to hear it," Joseph Proctor replied politely. "I have had a fire made for thee, John Drury, in the third floor chamber. Shall I show thee and thy companion up?"

"By all means," Dr. Drury said. He looked around the room with interest when they got there. A cheerful fire was burning in the grate, and two chairs had been brought in so that the watchers might be comfortable. "This doesn't look like a haunted chamber," he said.

"No," Joseph Proctor replied briefly. He excused himself after a moment, and retired.

Tharg had been assessing the two men. The companion struck him as a nervous type, prone to look into corners uneasily and jump whenever the fire crackled. Dr. Drury, on the other hand, seemed calm, cheerful, alert and self-contained. He would try to communicate with *him*.

The watchers made themselves comfortable in the chairs before the fire. They talked desultorily. The doctor related some anecdotes from his practice, and the companion mentioned an unusual short story, by an American writer, that had recently come into his hands. The story dealt with two murders that had turned out to be committed by a gigantic ape. It had been well written though. The companion thought the author must have an unusually logical mind.

About midnight the men decided to eat their sandwiches. The companion thought he would like a little water in his brandy. He would go down to the kitchen after it.

Dr. Drury was left alone. He seemed relaxed and at ease. His feet were stretched out toward the fire, and he was whistling softly under his breath.

This was the moment Tharg had been waiting for. He had decided to try to convey, first of all, the idea of un-alarm. If Dr. Drury could perceive Tharg's efforts without fear, the battle would be half won. After that, he would try to tell him who he was, and ask for help. But one step at a time. The needlessness of fear was the first thing he must communicate.

Tharg exerted himself. Everything he had learned in his years of trying to communicate with the Proctors was brought into play. He had a sensation of outgoing, outrushing, as if he were trying to direct the eruption of a volcano or control the movement of an avalanche.

Dr. Drury had certainly perceived something. He abruptly sat bolt-upright in his chair. Slowly he got to his feet and looked sharply toward the left-hand corner of the room.

Tharg couldn't tell what he was perceiving, but he didn't look frightened. Surely—it must be—Tharg's passionate injunction was reaching him.

Was it time yet to try to tell him who he was and ask for help? No, not yet. Tharg must be quite sure that his primary message had got through. He made a final effort, a rushing of will and intellect.

Drury drew in his breath. He took a step forward. Then he shrank back. His knees buckled. He fell sideways, his head almost in the fire, in a dead faint.

He was still lying there when the companion came back with his jug of water. Joseph Proctor and the servants were called, there was a great running to and fro, and at last Dr. Drury sat up weakly on the floor.

He kept yawning and shivering and rubbing his hands over his face. He could hardly talk coherently; the first words he succeeded in getting out were a plea to his companion not to leave him alone again. It was almost dawn before he was sufficiently recovered to tell what he had seen.

From the standpoint of what was usual in the house, it was little enough. He had felt a cold wind across his back, he had heard uncouth mutterings—"like a beast trying to talk"—coming from one corner of the room. When he had stood up to see what it might be, a whitish figure had moved out of the corner toward him. It had struck him as so horribly menacing that he had, he supposed, fainted—at any rate, he could remember nothing more until they had revived him. He hoped somebody would stay with him until the sun came up.

The failure with Dr. Drury marked a watershed for Tharg. From then on he had little real hope of being able to communicate with anybody who might be at Willington Mill. Though he kept on with his attempts at communication, it was partly because he did not want to admit to himself how hopeless it was, and partly because, perhaps as a compensation for his hopelessness, a not quite conscious corruption of his motives had occurred.

He did not recognize this for several years. By now his attempts had become almost routine—the footsteps, the blows on the floor, the clucking and gobbling. When he

made special efforts, they were apt to result in something new, like the animal shapes.

One evening young Joseph was sitting on top of a chest of drawers, making an imaginary speech to a congregation consisting of the three younger Proctor children. Suddenly, in the middle of a word, he stopped.

"Something pulled at my bootlace," he said wonderingly.

The younger children, whose attention had been fixed on Joseph, looked down, and Jane shouted, "Look at the funny cat!"

"It's not a cat, silly," said Joseph, jumping down from his perch. "Cats don't have such long tails. It's a monkey. Let's catch it!"

Under the leadership of Joseph, the children gave chase. The funny cat was pursued under a bed. There it disappeared.

The young Proctors, not recognizing the funny cat as related to the house's noises and muttering, were more disappointed at not being able to catch it than they were frightened. Tharg was glad of this. He was uneasily proud of his ability to impress human senses so completely but he rather disliked the idea of frightening children.

The animal shapes continued. A white creature, "like a cat, but with a longer snout," was seen on the path near the mill. It ran into the engine room, where it disappeared into the fire. And then there was the night when Joseph Proctor, sleeping alone without any night light (members of the household usually slept with a light burning), at last directly addressed Tharg.

Mrs. Proctor and the children were away visiting. The increasing disturbances in the house made her eager to get away from it when possible. Joseph had composed himself for slumber by some meditation upon his anti-slavery concern and was now quietly drifting into sleep when he heard, close beside his bed, a noise which he later described as "like a wooden crate being wrenched open with great force." The screech of nails, the creak of wood, the scrape of a crowbar—all were there.

Joseph Proctor was a brave man. He had been through a great deal. He sat up in bed and shouted commandingly into the darkness, "Begone, thou wicked spirit!"

Tharg heard the words with a lively astonishment. He wicked? A spirit he might possibly be considered to be, but wicked? It was a judgment he must protest.

He made the protest. He could not, of course, hear the sounds his victims heard, since they were subjective; he could only try to pick up their thoughts about their experiences. So he could not know that Mr. Proctor had heard another noise, even louder and more intimidating than the first, immediately following his injunction to Tharg. Tharg's protest had got through to him as another appalling crash.

Joseph Proctor got out of bed and made a light. He spent the rest of the night in a shallow, uneasy doze. But Tharg made no more trouble. He had been given something to think about.

Mr. Proctor had called him a "wicked spirit". Wicked? No, no, never. And yet—what had he become?

He was only trying to communicate. Yes, but he had been trying for ten years. He had terrified children, driven away servants, set the household by the ears. A fine way to communicate!

He *had* tried to communicate at first. He stuck to that. But when his attempts had failed, his motives had turned bad. He had learned to batten on the dark taste of their fear, and relish it. He had become proud of his ability to make them afraid.

Had it been entirely his fault? No, their fear had corrupted him. The greater their fear the more unpleasant his manifestations had become. Their fear had doomed him to be misunderstood. But he ought to have realized this a little earlier.

In the end, Joseph Proctor's judgment had to stand—"wicked" was what he had become.

Well, it was not too late. He would leave the Proctors in peace. He would go elsewhere, withdraw himself.

And now he found what he might have foreseen: he couldn't leave. The Proctors' fear and the house itself had interlocked to make a combination that held him helplessly.

If before he had been like a fly with one foot caught in glue, now he was like the same insect embedded in amber. His utmost efforts accomplished nothing at all.

He would never be able to leave Willington Mill. He was trapped.

VII

Now THARG himself grew afraid. The house became horrible to him. At first Tharg had been corrupted by the Proctors' fear, had learned a perverse relish for its taste. Now he was infected by it. Fear was a disease he had contracted from them.

He could not get rid of it. Their fear increased his fear, and in turn his fear increased theirs. By now he and the Proctors were locked together in a downward spiral, a horrid mutual embrace.

When he had first realized that he was trapped at Willington Mill, he had resolved to make the manifestations cease. He had reasoned that if they stopped, the Proctors' fear would diminish, and finally die away altogether. Half of the trap that was holding Tharg would be sprung. He might be able to extricate himself.

It had not happened so. Though Tharg was no longer willing any kind of contact with the Proctors, the manifestations went on happening.

Tharg the disembodied had ended by acquiring a sort of body—the house at Willington Mill. Now it twitched and jumped and muttered with no volition of his. His attempts to make the manifestations stop decreased them very slightly, at best. He had no more control over them than a man has over an attack of hiccoughs.

Tharg often wondered why the Proctors did not simply move away. The house was pleasant enough in itself, but the manifestations were making it almost uninhabitable. But the Proctors were members of the Society of Friends. They were possessed of an invincible mildness, a remarkable patience and fortitude. As Quakers, whose forebears had opposed to Oliver Cromwell and Charles II alike the same passive resistance (and had won, in the end, complete judicial toleration for all their scruples of conscience), the Proctors were hardly to be expelled from their home by the mere malice of a wicked spirit.

Yet there must, Tharg thought, be limits even to their powers of resistance. Sick with loathing, he set out to find what they were. The Proctors must be driven away, so that the house could revert to being merely a house. Then Tharg would have a chance to extricate himself.

It took him more than a year to drive them to the point of moving out. Twice during that time, before he actually managed it, he thought they were on the edge of leaving: once after Jane Carr, sleeping under the "haunted room", heard footsteps going around her bed, saw the light of her candle obscured, and felt the bed curtain pressed in upon her arm; and once when Elizabeth Proctor, in bed beside Joseph, heard a footstep and felt a hard icy pressure on her forehead over her left eye. For some reason, this distressed her more than anything else that happened to her in that house. But both Elizabeth and her sister Jane were calm, cheerful women, with great tenacity: the Proctors stayed on.

Tharg's emotions during this period were increasingly unpleasant. If he had been alive, he would certainly have killed himself to escape from so painful a situation. As it was, he could only harden himself to inflict yet more distress on the wretched Proctors—a distress which he invariably experienced later himself, and in augmented form. Their fear was faithfully reflected back to him, magnified in transmission.

What finally undermined the Proctors' fortitude was anxiety about their oldest child. One night Joseph Jr. begged his parents piteously to be allowed to sleep in their room. The footsteps going around his bed and the breathing, he said, frightened him and kept him awake most of the night.

The Proctors consulted each other and decided, not without some qualms, that young Joseph had better sleep in his own bed. Next morning he was feverish and listless. He complained of headache, and showed much unwillingness to let his mother out of sight.

When bedtime came that evening, he departed for his room without protest. But Elizabeth Proctor, stooping over to kiss him goodnight, was startled to find tears silently flowing down his face.

Elizabeth Proctor asked him why he was crying. Was he afraid of the footsteps he had mentioned? No, he seemed not

afraid of the footsteps now. But somebody had stood by the head of his bed all night, muttering.

The Proctors were tender and affectionate parents in an era when severity to children was the rule. A bed was made up for Joseph in his parents' chamber. And next day Mr. Proctor set about looking for another house.

With inexpressible joy Tharg saw them prepare to move. Their china was packed in barrels, their household goods corded baled, small breakables wrapped in cotton wool. He did not dare to relax his harrassment of them. If the house appeared to be quieting even a little, their Quaker stubbornness might make them change their decision even now. So the haunting had to continue, and even increase in intensity.

The night came when Elizabeth and Joseph Proctor were alone in the house. The children and servants had gone on ahead to the new dwelling; tomorrow the carters would come for the few pieces of heavy furniture that were left. Tonight was the last night the Proctors meant to spend in the house at Willington Mill.

"Joseph," said Elizabeth, "does thee hear the noises?" They were sitting side by side on the sofa in her lodging room. It was not quite bed time, and in any case there seemed little use in going to bed when the house was so noisy. Tharg, in fear that the Proctors might change their minds at the last moment, was outdoing himself.

"Yes, dear heart. The spirit was never more noisy."

"Joseph, what—what does thee think they sound like?"

The Proctors looked at each other for a moment. Then Joseph said, "It sounds as if box after box were being packed with goods, nailed or tied shut, and then dragged across the floor. It sounds . . . as if the spirit were packing up its goods."

Elizabeth Proctor nodded. For a moment her face puckered up and tears stood in her eyes. "Joseph! Does thee think the wicked spirit is preparing to move out with us?"

Tharg felt a sudden stab of alarm. If the Proctors thought the "wicked spirit" would follow them to their new house, they would probably abandon the idea of moving. There would be no point in their jumping from one frying pan into another, especially since the house at Willington Mill was theirs rent-free. Had he overreached himself?

Joseph Proctor laid his hand over his wife's. "We must try

it, dear heart. I cannot believe that God would allow so much power to wickedness. We must try it and see."

Elizabeth Proctor nodded, a little reassured. Next morning the carters came for the rest of the goods.

At last they were gone. Tharg was in possession of the empty house.

He could not withdraw himself yet, of course. He was still caught in a sort of psychic bear trap. An odd confusion of subjectivity and objectivity had taken place. Tharg was the haunter of the house, but to him the house was horrifyingly haunted. Too much had been built up in his years of attempted communication to be dissipated easily. Still, he felt better than he had when the Proctors had been physically present. Their fear had continually held up a mirror to him in which he had seen, not himself, but an alien, terrifying face.

The house stood vacant for several months. Tharg thought his entrapment in it was becoming a little less tight, but he couldn't be sure. Then Thomas Mann, the foreman at the flour mill, moved in with his family.

They heard and saw things. But the Manns were altogether coarser-grained and less sensitive than the Proctors had been. Also, Tharg was refraining rigorously from any attempts at communication. As the Manns went on living in the house, the disturbances gradually quieted.

After five or six years, Joseph Proctor sold the mill. The house stood vacant for a month. Then two young German engineers, who were to supervise the operation of the mill, moved their goods into the house.

Almost as soon as they stepped over the threshold, the disturbances began. Tharg did not will them, of course; it was the new tenants' characters. They were hyper-sensitive, rather hysterical people—better educated than the Proctors, but much less amiable.

As the sun rose after their first night in the house—a night of footsteps, cluckings, bell ringing and inarticulate mumbling—Tharg felt a sickening apprehension. Was what he had experienced with the Proctors to be repeated? And repeated even more distressingly? The downward spiral, the mutual embrace of horror, would be even more loathesome with these men.

For once Tharg had a bit of luck. After the second night, a night on which neither of the engineers went to bed at all, they decided to quit their employment rather than remain in the house. The building, they told their employer, was a plague spot and ought to be burned down.

This was something Tharg had never contemplated. It did not happen. After standing vacant for several months more, the house was divided into four flats, and several working class families moved in. They had more than a dozen children among them, as busy and quarrelsome as sparrows. The house rang all day long to the shouts of children and the sounds of their running feet.

The new tenants had been attracted to the house which still had a bad reputation, because the rent was cheap. They were all people to whom tuppence saved on the bacon mattered more than a universe of "spiritual creatures". The men worked hard all week and tended to get drunk on Saturday night. The women gossiped, spatted, and assisted each other in emergencies. They all disliked the jargonelle pear trees because, as they said, the trees made the rooms dark in the daytime. The trees were cut down. The children's pounding feet had already made short work of the flower beds.

There was nothing here for the house's uncanny faculties to attach themselves to. Time passed. Gradually rather than abruptly, Tharg realized that he was free.

Free? To go where, do what? To return to what he had been before he embroiled himself with the Proctors? It was better, certainly, to be a cold, uninvolved intelligence than it was to suffer as he had suffered at the height of the disturbances. But his former ataraxia was something he could not easily resign himself to again. He still had hopes for help from human beings. He would try again.

His mistake had been to attempt communication before human beings were advanced enough to be able to understand him. It was partly a matter of technological development—the Proctors lived in a culture where the steam engine was just coming into general use—and, more importantly, one of general intellectual enlightenment.

The Proctors and most of their contemporaries believed that the world had been created from scratch in 4004 B.C.

To deal with the idea of an intelligence surviving for billions of years, an intelligence that had originated billions of years before the beginnings of earthly life, a certain amount of mental sophistication was required. In their early Victorian naïveté, the Proctors could only assume him to be an evil spirit.

Tharg would have to wait until human beings were more advanced. But he was resolved to try again.

VIII

SPRING HAD BEGUN. The beach at Anse Vata was dotted with bathers. Not that winter, here in the South Pacific, meant much: July was only a little cooler than January, the height of summer. But the difference tended to keep people away from the beaches. The mid-July wind in New Caledonia could be uncomfortably cool.

Denise raised herself on one elbow and looked out across the water. How beautiful it was!—far out, the wonderful deep royal blue of the Pacific, and closer in a whole peacock's tail palette of turquoise, emerald, sea green, acquamarine, apple green and cobalt blue. The color lightened as the water shoaled. One could always tell where the rocks were from the color of the water over them.

She sat up, dusted a few grains of sand from her hands, and rubbed sun tan lotion carefully into her back and shoulders. Pierre was always complimenting her on how smooth and brown her shoulders were. Then she rolled over on her stomach and spread out her arms. This was the best time of day for sun bathing. The warmth along her body was like a caress.

The heat made her feel sleepy, and yet she couldn't relax. She had been feeling tense all morning. She had slept badly the night before, with one vivid nightmarish dream just before dawn. Would the effect of a dream last for so many hours?

Oh, it might. She had dreamed that she was running, running, endlessly running, over a rough terrain under the light of an enormous, an incredibly large, moon. The moon had filled a quarter of the sky. In the end, "they" had caught

her; she had awakened bathed in sweat, with her heart pounding horridly, while Pierre breathed quietly beside her. —When had the moon ever been that size?

Yes, her tenseness could be the lingering effect of the dream. But it could, on the other hand, be just another example of what Pierre had christened her PES—perception extra-sensorielle.

Oh, her PES! Colette, in one of her semi-autobiographical stories, had complained that her long hair, "like a well rope" was the bane of her life. Denise's bane had been her PES. It would not have been so bad if her faculty had been consistent, but it was not. It was chancy, erratic, unreliable, an exasperating in-and-outer. Sometimes Denise could tell what a letter that had not yet been received would say, or could quote, verbatim, a conversation that Pierre and his boss had had in one of the gangways five hundred meters under the ground. At other times, Denise seemed to lack even ordinary perception, and couldn't tell whether the people around her were angry or pleased.

Her PES had embittered her schooldays. It hadn't taken the other girls long to discover that Denise could often tell what questions would be asked in a forthcoming examination, or predict how much pocket money a parent or guardian would give. Then, when Denise had been unable to perform to order, they had refused to believe it was because she couldn't. One girl, Odile something from Lorraine, had wanted Denise to make her a love charm. When Denise had refused, Odile had gone about muttering that Denise was a dirty, stingy witch.

A witch? Was that what Pierre thought she was? No, but she wasn't quite certain just how he did feel. He had teased her unmercifully during their engagement, seven or eight years ago, when the Soviet experiments on telepathy had seemed to show that the best telepaths were the mentally ill. On the other hand, he had asked her advice more than once.

Last month, for example, he had called her in to say where the richest part of the gangue the miners were following was. The reports of the mining company's geologists were so full of qualifications as to be useless. She had told him what she thought, and he had taken her advice. It had

worked out well. Within five or six days the workers had found a wonderfully rich lode.

Ah, a useful wife! When the company had sent him here, to Noumea in Nouvelle Caledonie, Denise had resolved that the reputation of her schooldays should not follow her. Precognition, telepathy, cryptaesthesia—she had meant to keep her uncanny faculties strictly to herself. But something, perhaps from the time Pierre had asked her to predict the course of the lode, had leaked out. It was more than her fancy to think that the mine workers, when she met them, regarded her peculiarly.

Denise rolled over on her back and sat up. She was feeling more tense and anxious than ever. Something had gone wrong at the mine, she was almost sure of it now, though she didn't think it was a physical disaster or anything in which Pierre was personally involved.

She shook her head to clear it. Were the Soviets right in their suspicions of the mental balance of people with these wild gifts? Outside of her PES she wasn't a particularly remarkable person. But lately she had been feeling odd most of the time. Two weeks ago, for example, she had awakened from troubled dreams to find herself standing, barefooted and in her nightgown, in front of the entrance to the mine.

She had been badly frightened at first, unable to realize where she was or how she had got there. The full moon, riding high overhead, bathed everything in a flat white light. She had felt that there was something strange about the moon.

Then it had come to her that she was standing by the mine, and must have walked in her sleep to get there. She had made her way painfully back down the gravelled drive and along the sidewalk to the house. She didn't think anyone had seen her. She hoped not. She had slipped into bed beside Pierre without waking him.

But normal people didn't walk in their sleep. Suddenly Denise felt a desire to see her own face. She hunted in her beach bag for a mirror and looked into it.

In the little glass she saw a dark-haired green-eyed young woman, pale-skinned except where the sun had touched her. The face was comely enough if one didn't object to high Tartar cheekbones (Pierre had told her once that he thought girls who didn't have high cheekbones were sissies, adding that if

there was one thing he couldn't stand, it was a Sainte Nitouche).

Was that the way she looked? Denise wondered. A calm, rather restrained young woman with dark hair? The face in the mirror didn't seem to belong to a woman who would walk in her sleep or be intermittently given to PES. She put the mirror down with a sigh.

She looked at her watch. Heavens! It was later than she had thought. She must hurry. Pierre always came home for lunch and Marie, the Melanesian maid, was no sort of cook unless one stood over her.

Denise jumped to her feet. She pulled a beach dress of red and white pareu cloth on over her bathing suit, still a little damp, and gathered up her beach bag and miscellaneous equipment. She ran up the path to the bus stop.

The bright blue bus got her home a little before Pierre. She bathed, changed her dress, and was in the kitchen with Marie, explaining the mysteries of a court bouillon, when she heard his step in the hall.

"Hello," she said. And then—she was quite sure now—"There's trouble in the mine."

Pierre frowned. "I wish you wouldn't do that."

"Do what?"

"Know what I'm thinking about before I tell you."

Denise was silent. "Yes, there has been trouble," her husband went on after a moment. "Get me a drink, cherié, and I'll tell you about it—unless, of course, you know all about it already."

She laughed. She poured sherry from the decanter—Pierre had a most un-French fondness for sherry as an aperitif—and handed him the glass. "It's nothing serious, is it?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Not yet, but it's disturbing. This morning about nine Goubu—you remember Goubu, he's one of the shop stewards—came into the office, quite agitated, to say that the men in his gang couldn't work because the whole stope was full of 'shapes'.

"He doesn't speak French very well, and for quite a while I couldn't tell what he was talking about. I thought it was something about the spirits of the dead. These people

are superstitious, you know, and they never liked that part of the level after they found some bones in it."

"Is that where I told you to try drilling?" Denise put in.

"Yes. As I say, I thought it might be something about ghosts. But it wasn't that. When I used the word 'spectres,' Goubu shook his head. He kept saying it was 'shapes'. So finally I went down in the lift with him.

"Denise, it was the damnedest thing. It wasn't just the stope by then, it was the whole level. The place was full of them."

"Them?" Denise asked.

"The shapes. They—it's hard to describe them. They were flat, interpenetrating shapes of black or dark gray, two or two and a half meters big if one looked at them full on, and they were in motion constantly. The nearest I can get to it is to say that it was like watching sheets of silhouette paper slipping in and out and around and through each other without ever a pause or stop."

"Were they any particular shape?" Denise said. "I mean, were they silhouettes *of* anything?"

Pierre frowned thoughtfully. "I'm not sure. They seemed to change as I watched. Geometric shapes, possibly—squares and triangles and ellipses and so on. But some of them were much more complex.

"The miners were all standing at one end of the gallery, huddled together. Goubu said, 'Voila, M'sieu Pierre—the shapes!' "

"I couldn't think of anything to say. Goubu was watching me. Finally I said, 'It must be the lights.'

"Goubu just laughed. I don't blame him, really. But I had a crew of electricians come down and check the lighting. They couldn't find anything to account for the shapes.

"Then I put in a call for more blowers. I thought it might possibly be the ventilation. We got the level so airy you couldn't keep a match going in it. But the shapes kept on moving in and out of each other monotonously.

"I couldn't think what to do. Finally I had everybody called out and sent the explosives people in to lay a string of small charges, two or three meters apart, the length of the gallery. I guess I had some idea of blasting the shapes out of it.

"We set off the charges, but when we went back, after the dust settled, the shapes were still sliding in and out of themselves. A couple of light globes were broken, that's all."

"Then what did you do?" Denise asked.

"Then I came home to lunch."

He finished his sherry in a gulp. Marie came in from the kitchen to say, "Madame est servie," and the couple followed her into the dining room.

The room was a pleasant one, with pale green walls and a long mirror above the sideboard. Denise decided that the conversation, in the interests of good digestion, had better be kept away from the disturbance in the mine, and over the entree, an excellent poached sole with sauce Mornay, she and Pierre discussed plans for a picnic on the coming Sunday. It was not until dessert had been reached that she ventured to ask, "What are you going to do next, Pierre?"

"I don't know, ma petite," he said. He lit a cigarette. "You see, the shapes in themselves don't do any harm. You can walk straight through one and feel nothing at all. But the men object to them violently, and I don't blame them. You can't imagine how disconcerting it is to see those things moving in and out endlessly, with nothing at all to account for them.

"Goubu says the men are convinced the shapes are meant as a warning that that part of the mine is unsafe. If I insist on their working anyhow, I may have a wildcat strike on my hands.

"If I put them somewhere else to work, it means abandoning a rich lode, at least temporarily. And it's going to look darned funny in my reports."

He sighed. Denise, who had now finished her compote, accepted a cigarette from him. "Would—would you like me to go look at it?" she asked hesitantly.

Pierre snuffed out his cigarette. "You really are a sorceress, Denise," he observed. "You read my mind. Yes, I *would* like you to look at it. Sapristi! When something uncanny is going on, one calls in a witch to deal with it. But you'd better change your shoes. The walking in a mine is always rough."

Marie brought in coffee. Then Denise changed her shoes, and they walked leisurely over to the mine.

The parking lot before the entrance was crowded, as usual, with Peugeots and Citroens. Denise wondered again whether she and Pierre ought to get a car, as a status symbol, or whether they were better off saving their money for a vacation in France. (How odd, that Nouméa was only two hours from Paris by air! It seemed centuries distant psychologically. Denise was always conscious of the Chaine Centrale, with its ridge of rugged mountain peaks, and the arid inhospitable back country. Even now, parts of the island were imperfectly explored.)

They crossed the lot, went past the administration building, and walked along a timbered passage to the lift. As they went down, Denise kept swallowing to equalize the pressure in her ears.

The lift stopped and Pierre helped her out. The first thing she was conscious of was how quiet the level was. When she had been in the mine before, there had been the thunder of pneumatic drills, the rumble of the little railway, the thud of hand power tools, plus a good deal of shouting as members of the gang communicated with each other. Now it was almost silent. A group of workers near the lift were not talking at all. She fancied with a little listening she could have heard the beating of her own heart.

They walked forward a few meters and turned a corner. "Behold," said Pierre with a gesture, "the shapes!"

They were very much as Pierre had described them, with the difference that the quality he had called "disconcerting" Denise herself would have labelled "depressing". To look at the dark shapes sliding in and out of each other made her feel downcast and overborne.

One peculiarity Pierre had not mentioned was that when she looked at the silhouettes broadside they seemed to go back a very long way, though viewed edgewise they were thinner than the blade of a knife.

Pierre was looking at her. She said, "You didn't tell me it was so sad."

He shrugged. "Do you pick up anything?" he asked.

"I'll try." She closed her eyes and tried to relax her muscles. Usually, she could pick up things best when her mind was open and passive.

This time, nothing happened. She was about to open her

eyes and tell Pierre, regretfully, that she couldn't get anything, when she felt a roaring in her ears and a sharp pain in the back of her head.

Her hands went involuntarily to cover the nape of her neck. The pain was followed by a moment of wild giddiness, when she seemed to be whirling about as unsteadily as a leaf caught in a driving wind. Then things steadied and she opened her eyes.

Pierre was looking at her anxiously. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right. Pierre—" She licked her lips, uncertain of what she was going to say.

"Yes? You don't look all right." He put his arm around her to steady her, as if he feared she was going to faint.

The words came to her. "Pierre," she said rapidly, "the trouble is not here. These shapes—the things in this part of the mine—are nothing but a symptom. Somebody wants . . ."

"Somebody? Who? What does he want?"

She shook her head. "I don't know who. He wants, wants us to help him. But I don't know how."

Pierre looked closely at her and then released her, though he still kept his hand on her arm. "What do you mean by 'the trouble is not here'?" he asked.

"That what he wants is not here. The shapes are no more a sign of something wrong in the mine than the reflection of a wounded man in a mirror is a sign of something wrong with the glass."

"Then there's no danger?"

"I think not, no."

"But you can't tell what the—ah—person who's causing the shapes wants?"

"Not now. But there's no harm in the shapes. —I'm not sure they're caused by a 'person' in the sense you mean, Pierre. The shapes would stop if he got what he wanted."

"Would it help you to find out what it is if you stayed here longer?" Pierre's tone was almost wistful.

"I don't think so. I'm sorry."

Her husband sighed. His hand still under her elbow, they turned and walked slowly back to the lift.

The group of workers made way for them. Denise was conscious of narrowed eyes and hostile glances directed toward

her. Was it possible—but really, she did seem to pick up thoughts of this kind—was it possible that they blamed the appearance of the shapes on *her*? The advice she had given Pierre was responsible for their having followed the gangue in the direction they had. Melanesians, despite their man-eating past, were usually so polite and friendly that when they were uncivil it was highly noticeable.

Pierre accompanied his wife through the parking lot. "What are you going to do now?" she asked as they parted.

He shrugged. "Send the men back to work. Since you say there's no danger . . . If I have a wildcat strike, I have a wildcat strike. I can always send them to work somewhere else."

"Au 'voir, mon ami."

"Au 'voir, ma belle."

Back at the house, Denise busied herself with calling up Mme. Du Plessis and completing plans for next Sunday's picnic. She felt anxious and depressed. When Pierre telephoned her about four, asking her if she could come over to the mine, she was not at all surprised.

He met her by the entrance gate. "It's got much worse since you were here," he said as they walked along. "The shapes are so thick now that the men say they can't see where to use their drills in the stope."

"Can they?"

"I don't think so. It's like trying to work underwater, or in a thick fog. Denise, I want you to try once more to see if you can't tell what this . . . somebody wants us to do."

"I'll see if I can."

They went down in the lift again. The workers were standing about in bored and resentful attitudes—they were paid a flat rate, plus an incentive bonus for the amount and value of the ore they mined—and when Denise appeared they did not seem to notice her at all. One or two of them nodded to Pierre.

The shapes were far thicker than they had been. "How depressing it is!" the girl said, watching the endless murky sliding. "Doesn't it bother you, Pierre?"

"Not much. I suppose it would if I let it. But—nom d'un nom, Denise!—see if you can't tell me what to do to get

rid of—of these mobile geometry lessons. The workers on the other levels are getting upset too."

Denise bit her lip. "I'll walk out in the thick of them," she said. "Perhaps if I'm physically among the shapes, I'll be able to find . . ." Her voice trailed away.

"Shall I come with you?" Pierre asked. He was obviously a little anxious about her. "When you were down here before, I thought you were going to faint."

"No, there's no danger. The worst that could happen is that I might trip over something. The shapes make the visibility poor."

She gave Pierre's hand a reassuring squeeze. Slowly, pausing every few steps to close her eyes and try to make her mind receptive and blank, she moved out among the intersliding shapes.

She had thought it would feel like trying to push her way through water, but she had no bodily sensation at all. It was disconcerting to see the knife edge of a shape moving straight at her, but though she blinked involuntarily the first few times, she soon got used to it. The dizziness and pain of her first attempt were absent entirely.

Denise spent nearly half an hour walking about slowly among the perpetually slipping shapes. In the end, she was forced to go back to Pierre and tell him she could pick up nothing whatever. "My PES was always unreliable," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Never mind." He put his arm around her and drew her to him. "I'm glad you're all right. I could only see you part of the time when you were walking about among them."

"I'll let this part of the mine rest temporarily," he said as they started back toward the lift. "After all, the shapes may disappear spontaneously. That's the way they came."

Goubu detached himself from the group around the lift entrance and came toward Denise and Pierre. The girl identified him by the badge he was wearing on his blue T-shirt. "Madame could do nothing?" he asked respectfully.

"No, M'sieu Goubu. I had no success."

"That is to be regretted," the burly man said in his heavy French. "The ore is rich here. Now the men's wages will be less. For myself, my wife and I had planned to buy . . .

Excuse me, Madame. I did not mean to trouble you with my affairs. Bon jour, M'sieu, Madame."

Next day at lunch Pierre reported that the "mobile geometry" had gone up the lift shaft and was invading the level above. "Nobody knows what to do," he said. He pushed his plate away from him, the food almost untouched. "The big chief had Paris on the phone this morning. They gave him a bad quarter of an hour. A haunted mine! It's ridiculous."

Denise tried to think of something encouraging to say. "I think it will be over by next week," she brought out at last.

"Over? How do you mean that?"

"I don't know. It's just a hunch."

"You and your PES!" He got up and kissed her. "I'd better be getting back to the office. Jacques likes to have me around to listen while he's cursing and tearing his hair."

Denise went shopping in the afternoon. She did not get done until late and then decided, though it would make dinner even later, to pick up Pierre at the office rather than going on home.

The workers were going off shift when she got there, but they were not leaving. They were standing about in groups, talking in low voices. She did not see Goubu among them. Nobody seemed to notice her.

Pierre was not free until after six. "What a day!" he said. "They're getting into the third level now. The shapes, I mean. I'm going to have a whiskey—yes, chérie, a double whiskey —when we get home."

The house was dark when they approached. Denise went into the kitchen while Pierre poured himself a drink. She came back in a moment, startled and disturbed. "Marie's not in the kitchen," she said. "And look, Pierre. I found this lying on the sink."

She held out to him a collection of objects tied together with a length of bright pink yarn. There was a sea shell with a hole in it, a long black feather, a wisp of dried grass and what looked like a piece of lizard skin. "What do you suppose it is?" she asked.

"It looks like some sort of charm," Pierre said slowly. "You say Marie isn't here?"

"She's not in the kitchen. And her aprons are gone. I'll look for her upstairs."

"I'll go," he said.

He was back shortly. "No, she's not there. I even looked in the closets."

"In the closets? Why, what would she be doing there?"

"I don't know. But nothing's normal any more. Put on that green dress, Denise, and we'll go out to dinner. I hear they have a new chef at La Pontinière."

The dinner was good, and they both felt better after they had finished the entrecôte of beef and a bottle of burgundy. They sat late over their coffee, and it was almost nine when they got off the bus near their house.

They sauntered slowly uphill, hand in hand. The night was dark. "Do you remember that vacation we spent in Lyons, chérie?" Pierre asked. "The pension had the widest double be—" Abruptly his voice stopped.

"Pierre! What's the matter?" Denise clutched at her husband's hand. Then something dark and thick, heavy and soft like cobwebs, fell over her face. She breathed in a vapor sickeningly heavy and sweet. She tried to get her hands up to tear away the eroding softness. Then she seemed to pitch forward into a bottomless gulf.

When Denise came to, she was lying in the dark on a surface that bounced and bumped. Her hands and feet were tied.

At first she thought she was lying in her own bed, and wondered foggily why it shook so much. Then, as she grew more awake, she realized that she was somewhere else. Her heart began to pound.

Where was she? What had happened? She had been walking along the path with Pierre, and—

A groan came from the darkness beside her. She turned her head and licked her lips. She had not been gagged, but her lips and throat were so swollen she could hardly speak.

"Pierre?" she managed to whisper at last. "Is that you?"

There was no answer for a long time. Then she heard a low croaking, "Oui."

"What has happened? Where do you think we are?" She had to pause between words to swallow and lick her lips.

"In . . . a truck . . . I think. We've been . . . kidnapped, Denise."

IX

THE TRUCK stopped. Denise heard the driver get out and walk around to the back. The tailgate was let down and the light of a hand torch shone in on them.

"Bon soir, M'sieu and Madame Houdan," said a voice. "I will help you out."

Pierre found his tongue. "Goubu," he said thickly, "you'll get into trouble for this."

Goubu laughed. "I think not, M'sieu Pierre." He sounded pleased with himself. "I have brought M'sieu and Madame here to accomplish something in which we are all interested—getting rid of the gray shapes in the mine."

"Do you expect to accomplish that by kidnapping us?" Pierre said.

Goubu nodded. They could see his head dimly silhouetted against the sky. "Bien sûr. Consider, M'sieu! There might not have been trouble at your house tonight or the next night. Sooner or later, yes.

"Some of my people, you see, are ignorant and superstitious. They think Madame is a witch, and they are angry at her. M'sieu does not know all the talk and threats I have listened to.

"For myself, I know better. I have had a good education. I realize that Madame is a witch, but a benevolent and well-disposed one. I know she is not responsible for the difficulties in the mine.

"Now I will help you out of the car."

He put his arms under Denise and half-lifted, half-carried her out of the truck. He put her down on the ground with her back leaning against a paperbark tree. "Would Madame like to relieve herself?" he asked, lingering. "I cannot untie her yet, but my wife is here, and would be glad to help if . . ."

"Thank you, no," said Denise with some hauteur.

"Bien. And now you, M'sieu Pierre." He reached in the body of the truck and brought Pierre out with, as far as Denise could see, no more difficulty than he had carried her. He put him down carefully beside the girl.

"What are you going to do with us?" demanded Pierre.

Goubu squatted down beside him on his hunkers and cleared his throat. "It is perfectly simple," he declared. "Madame is a witch, but her power is not great enough to tell us what to do to get rid of the moving shapes in the mine. I am going to help her increase her power."

"H'um," said Pierre with considerable restraint. "How are you planning to do that?"

"Again it is perfectly simple." He called, in the direction of a dimly-seen beehive-shaped hut, "Mandouél—She is my wife."

A woman came toward them. Denise could see the faint glimmer of her white dress. She seemed to be carrying something in her hands.

She gave it to Goubu, who had risen to his feet. "In this gourd," he said, standing in front of Denise, "is a tisane infused by my wife. If I untie Madame's hands, will she have the kindness to drink?—It does not have a disagreeable taste."

"What is it?" Denise asked.

Goubu hesitated. "You would not know the name of the plant. But if you drink, you will be able to tell us what is wrong in the mine."

"Don't drink it, Denise," Pierre said sharply. "The natives have many unknown plants. It may be poisonous."

"It will do Madame no harm," Goubu said. "My wife will drink of it to show her, if she likes."

"What if I refuse to drink, Goubu?" Denise asked.

"Then—I regret this, Madame—then we will force you to drink."

Denise heard Pierre draw in his breath. She felt a prickle of rage spreading over her. "You may be able to make me drink, but you can't force me to tell you anything," she pointed out.

Goubu sighed. "If Madame would only drink!" he said plaintively. "It is to all of our benefits. We will return her tomorrow morning, safe and sound."

Denise leaned her head back against the scaling trunk of the paperbark tree. She was trying to probe Goubu's mind. What she could pick up reassured her. He did not seem to be "shielding". Besides, it was reasonable to think he was

sincere in promising to return her unharmed. The death or disappearance of a mine official and his wife would not go unnoticed. As Pierre had said, there would be trouble for it. And finally, she was more than a little curious about the new experience Goubu's infusion might provide.

"Very well," she said at last. "Untie my hands, Goubu, and I will drink."

"This is nonsense!" Pierre said furiously. "Denise, you are making a serious mistake."

"No . . . I don't think so. Have confidence in me, Pierre."

"Madame is right," Goubu commented. "M'sieu will see." He bent toward her, as if to untie her hands, and then hesitated. "Perhaps it would be better to leave Madame bound. I will hold the gourd to her lips. I do not wish to risk the tisane getting spilled."

"Don't you trust me, Goubu?" Denise asked. "Do you think I would spill the infusion purposely?"

"One never knows," the Melanesian said practically. "We hunted a long time to find the proper herbs. Here."

He knelt before Denise and touched the gourd gently to her lips. "Mandoué, would you hold the torch so I can see if Madame is drinking? Thank you." He tilted the gourd.

The liquid lapped at her lips. "Gently," Goubu advised. "Let it trickle down your throat."

Denise parted her lips and let the fluid in. It was cool but not cold, and its basic taste was a pungent bitterness. Sugar had been added to counteract the bitter taste, and—whether as flavoring or as a part of the infusion's medicinal content Denise did not know—something lemony and aromatic. Altogether, while it was not a brew she would have drunk for pleasure, its flavor was, as Goubu had said, "not disagreeable."

She swallowed slowly for two or three minutes. At last Goubu took the electric torch from his wife and shone its light into the gourd. "That is enough for now," he said. "Later, if Madame needs it, she may have more."

"What happens now?" Denise asked.

"For a while, nothing. Then Madame will experience a transient dizziness. Then everything will become flat. And finally, Madame should be able to tell us what is wrong in the mine."

He squatted down beside Denise. "Madame should try to relax," he said. "I know this waiting is tedious. I am sorry it cannot be helped."

Denise tried to take his advice. She was conscious of how odd the situation was—she and Pierre, bound and helpless, sitting side by side in the warm quiet New Caledonian night, while she waited patiently for a drink of unknown potentialities to take effect. Since she had asked him to have confidence in her, Pierre had not spoken at all. Now and then she could hear him draw a long, quivering sigh. This waiting, she thought, must be harder on him than on her.

She was getting a little dizzy. The ground on which she was sitting seemed to be tilting a bit. She was getting *quite* dizzy. The ground, the paperbark tree, the sky—they were all turning around madly, like a Catharine wheel.

The movement stopped. She was no longer dizzy; it seemed impossible that she had ever been giddy at all, so thoroughly had the brakes been applied to the moving world. But she felt she was no longer bound. She seemed to be standing upright, long-legged and tall. Tall? Her head must be brushing against the topmost branches of the paperbark tree. A little more and she would be breathing in the prickly air around the stars. Two steps would take her off the island and across the Coral Sea.

Then she got flat. Was this what Goubu had meant? The air had been let out of everything. The world came down with a grinding thud on its four flat tires. The sky rushed down. The trees collapsed. Denise felt like a comic strip character who had been run over by a steam roller. She had been ironed out flat, she was reduced to a single dimension. She could have been pasted up on a wall.

"The sky," she said plaintively, wondering how her compressed chest could find breath to get out the words. "It's crushing me."

"Oh, dear," Goubu said solicitously. "I am sorry, Madam. Mandoué, please to help me." He pulled a knife from his belt and sawed hastily at the ropes around Denise's arms and legs. He and his wife began to chafe her limbs hurriedly, rubbing toward her heart. "There, is that better?" he asked after they had been working some little time.

"Yes. Thank you . . . My God!"

For an instant Denise had had a transcendent vision, a moment like a lightning flash, the illumination of insight and glory vouchsafed to the newly dead. Then it was gone, and she was back in herself.

Back in herself, but not in quite her old self. For the first time her PES felt integrated with the rest of her personality. From being exasperatingly chancy and unpredictable, it had become a faculty she could use at will and calculate in advance on using. It was as reliable as the small, accurate muscles of her hands.

She began to talk, rapidly and confidently. "The shapes in the mine are caused by a person who wants us to recover a lost object for him. Very long ago, when he was in the power of his enemies, he managed to hide it. The Earth has changed since then, great ages have passed. Now he knows the location of what he wants, but he has no strength to recover it.

"He wants us to get it for him. He considers it of the utmost value to himself, and he believes it may be of great value to us."

"What is the object?" Pierre asked in a flat tone.

". . . Something like a book."

There was a brief silence. "Bien," said Pierre. "Where is it? If he wants us to get it for him, he must tell us where it is."

Denise's mouth opened, but no words came out. "I—it's gone," she said. She looked about her bewilderedly. "I thought I had my PES forever. Now it's gone. I can't speak surely any more."

"That happens, Madame," said Goubu soothingly. "The best way out of it is to get somebody to help you. I am no sorcerer, but I am willing to try. As M'sieu says, we must know where his lost object is before we can recover it."

He picked up the half-empty drinking gourd and looked into it. "Yes, I think there is enough," he said. He began to swallow the insipid beverage. "Madame had better finish it up," he said at last.

He put the gourd into Denise's hand and she finished the tisane down to the sugary dregs.

They waited. "Let your mind go free, Madame," Goubu said. "I am dizzy—now I am flat like grass—Madame, Madame! Now!"

Denise was aware that her mind was no longer in isolation. Another mentality nudged hers. She felt a brief impulse of fastidious withdrawal. Then she merged herself with it.

There hovered unsubstantially beneath her, like a view seen from an airplane, a map drawn in contours of white light. She had never seen—wait, she knew it. It was Mt. Dore, not too far from a spot where she had once been with Pierre.

The map faded out. But she had seen it, she did not think she would forget. "Did you see it?" she asked Goubu excitedly.

"Yes, Madame. A spot on Mt. Dore. My wife saw it with us. I think M'sieu Pierre saw it also. Isn't that so, M'sieu Pierre? It was very strong."

"Yes, I saw it. A map of a certain spot on the mountain, done in lines of blue light. I think I could find it without much trouble. How does he want us to get the book for him?"

"We will have to blast for it," Denise answered. "It's down —oh, a hundred meters in the rock."

Pierre cleared his throat. "Who is it who is asking us to blast for a book—a book that has been lost for ages—in a hundred meters of rock?"

Then there happened what Denise afterwards considered the strangest of the events of that strange night. Her lips opened, and a voice that was not her own spoke through them.

"I lived on Earth . . . before Earth had her own life. My name . . . was Tharg."

X

THEY WERE NOT ready to blast for several days. There were supplies to be arranged for, a crew of workers to be selected, the acquiescence of Miron, Pierre's superior, to be obtained. A permit to blast on public property had to be wangled from the Bureau of Mines. All this involved a good deal of running around. Finally, the mere logistics of getting a couple of truckloads of men and equipment up to a rugged, lofty site were considerable.

There was no trouble getting a crew. The mine had closed down, officially to "make repairs necessitated by unsafe

conditions," actually because of the shapes. Pierre had selected a crew of Viets and Tonkinese, thinking they would be less prone to superstitious fear than Melanesian workers, like Goubu. This, as it later turned out, was a mistake.

"You don't seem very happy about this, Pierre," Denise observed on the morning of the fourth day. She was sitting in the cab of one of the trucks, watching Pierre direct the men in their final preparations for the first shot. "I never saw you so glum."

"I'm not happy about it," her husband replied grimly. "Do you realize, Denise, that I'm staking my whole professional future on this? If this fails to stop the shapes, I'll be in the position of a sea captain who's lost his ship. Nobody will want to hire an engineer who is so demented he goes around blowing holes in the landscape for no especial reason.

"The trouble I had with Miron! He kept looking at me and tapping his fingers on the desk. If I'd been able to think of a plausible lie to tell him, I'd have done so, but I couldn't think of a thing. Finally I told him that if the 'operations' I was undertaking on Mt. Dore didn't get rid of the shapes in the mine, I'd pay for the men and equipment out of my own pocket. Seven men, and all the stuff one needs to make a hole three hundred feet deep! It makes me feel cold to think of it.

"Also, I don't much like being blackmailed. We're being blackmailed into helping what's-his-name get his precious book back from the side of Mt. Dore. Why doesn't he get his book back himself, if he wants it so much?"

Denise refrained from saying that somebody who had been dead an unknown number of years could hardly be expected to undertake mining operations. She had an unreasonable sense of guilt for what was happening, as if the shapes in the mine, and the communication from Tharg, had somehow been her fault.

"Did you tell Miron what you're blasting for?" she asked after a moment.

"No. I didn't dare. It's too implausible."

". . . Perhaps the book will turn out to be valuable," she offered feebly.

"It's possible, I suppose," he admitted. "I'm no biblio-

phile. But I shouldn't think there'd be much left of a book after we got through blasting for it.

"—Goubu, I think that charge is a little too heavy. All set? Now!"

He pressed the switch. Clods of earth and pieces of vegetable debris began to rain down on the roof of the cab. Denise wondered how many shots they would have to make before they got down to the book. Her PES had not remained at the point of harmonious integration with the rest of her personality that it had reached when she had first drunk Goubu's tisane, but it was considerably more reliable than it had formerly been. She had an impression of a book, or something like a book, clearly enough. But she could not tell what it looked like or in what sort of rock it was.

The day progressed. At noon she and Pierre had sandwiches and a glass of wine. By four thirty, when Pierre sent the men home (he had a prudent dislike of paying overtime), they were about fifteen meters down.

Goubu came up to the couple as they were leaving. "M'sieu and Madame Houdan," he said, "could my wife and I sleep in your house tonight? We do not need a bed, only a flat place where we can lay our sleeping mats."

"Why—I suppose so," Pierre replied. He was frowning a little. "But why do you want to sleep in our house?"

"We do not think it is safe in the village," the burly man replied. "There are all sorts of bizarre stories going about—for example that M'sieu and Madame mean to blow up the whole island. The people in my village were friendly to me when they thought I could make Madame stop the shapes in the mine. Most of us work in the mine. But they do not understand this blasting in the side of a hill."

"And you think it's not safe for you in the village tonight?"

"We fear not. Mandoué went to her own village today to be safe. But she does not want to stay even there at night."

Pierre opened the door of the cab. "Get in," he said. "Where's your wife?"

"At her village. M'sieu goes through it on his way home. He can pick her up then. We will not be any trouble at all, M'sieu. You will not even know we are there."

The Melanesian couple were as unobtrusive as Goubu

had said they would be. Denise woke once in the night, thinking she heard voices outside the bedroom window, but the noise was not repeated, and she fell asleep quickly again.

The blasting at the mountain started early next day. About nine o'clock Pierre told his wife he thought they were getting into a layer of granite. "Miserable stuff," he said sourly. "On the other hand, we probably won't have to case the sides, so I suppose it comes out about the same in the end.—Dieu! What was that?"

The customary boom of the blast had been followed by a long, roaring rush. It sounded as if the mountain were falling down on them, but when Denise looked around her, startled, the superficial outline was undisturbed. Goubu came running up, breathless and pleased.

"Come quick and look!" he panted. "You will be surprised, M'sieu Pierre!"

Denise scrambled out of the truck and she and her husband went running toward the excavation, now grown pretty wide. "The bottom has fallen out!" Goubu said. "Be careful, Madame!"

Denise leaned over and looked down. As Goubu said, the bottom had fallen out of the funnel-shaped hole, and tons of rock and loose stuff had gone thundering down to an unknown depth below. There was only blackness. Denise could see no limiting floor at all.

"Was anybody in the hole?" she asked.

"No," Pierre answered. "I would never have allowed it in this sort of blasting."

"But what is it?"

"I don't know. I'm going down to see. Goubu, bring the longest of the rope ladders."

Goubu fetched the ladder from one of the trucks, and Pierre anchored it solidly with two steel spikes driven into the undisturbed rock. He stuck a geologist's hammer in his belt, pinned a miner's lamp to his cap, and prepared to descend.

"Be careful, mon ami," Denise said.

"Bien sûr. Goubu, keep an eye on the ladder. If we're lucky, this may save us quite a lot of work." He started down.

Denise watched his body dwindle. The lamp on his cap made a receding spot of light. He must have reached bottom,

for she saw the tiny light stay motionless for an instant, and them move off to the right. Then it disappeared.

She waited. The workers were gathered in a knot near the ladder, watching too. Goubu would not let anyone near the edge of the excavation, for fear of starting a slide. There was no sound from below.

At last Denise thought she saw the tiny light bobbing about in the blackness. She strained her eyes. Was she imagining it? But in a moment it began unmistakably to ascend. Pierre was coming up.

It seemed to take him a long time. He stopped once to rest. When he got near enough for her to see the expression on his face, she perceived that it was a smile.

Goubu held out a hand to help him over the edge. "Well, M'sieu?" he said.

"It's a cavern," Pierre announced. "Huge thing—goes off I don't know how far under the mountain, and has a roof like a cathedral. But it seems to be solid enough except in the one spot where our blasts have weakened it. I chipped around a good bit, and I don't think there's any need to do any timbering."

"Now, Denise, do your stuff. See if you can tell us where the book we're hunting is. Is it in the cavern, or do we have to go blasting for it on below?"

Denise opened her mouth to say weakly that she was sorry, she really didn't know exactly, she really couldn't be quite sure. What she said was, "It's in a sort of sink hole in the floor of the cavern, under a layer of, of bones and artifacts."

"You're positive?"

"Yes. I can see it. But it isn't shaped like a book."

"Will we have to blast to get it out?"

"No, it's down less than a couple of meters. You'll need a pick and shovel, that's all."

"Good. Can you tell me from here where the sink hole is?"

"Oui. I mean, non. I can see it all right, but I can't tell you the directions. I think I'll have to go down."

Pierre frowned. "It's quite a climb, chérie," he said.

"I know. I hate the idea. But I don't think I can tell you from here."

"Very well. I'll go down first to steady the ladder for you. I'd like to rest a moment, though." He sank down on

the ground, pulled a package of Gaulois from his shirt pocket, and got out a mangy cigarette from it. "Denise?"

"No, thank you.—Here comes Goubu."

The big man's face was serious. "I think M'sieu and Madame should hurry," he said. "The Viets are getting restless. They say . . ."

"What do they say, M'sieu Goubu?" Denise asked.

"That Madame is hunting a sorcerer's book, a book of death spells to kill men. I told them to be quiet, but . . . They might try to do harm."

"I didn't realize they were so superstitious," Pierre commented, blowing out the acrid smoke from his Gaulois.

"It is not altogether superstition, M'sieu," Goubu said shrewdly. "They distrust Madame partly because she is French and partly because she is a manager's wife.

"Madame is a witch. Could she not call up a spirit for us, perhaps the spirit who wants us to find a book for him? That would frighten the Viets."

"I'm not that kind of a witch," Denise said, laughing. "Besides, if we frighten them, it will only increase their determination to put us hors de combat."

"Madame may be right. But is there nothing to be done? The tone of their talk alarms me."

"I'll get rid of them," Pierre said. He got up, stamped out his cigarette, and walked to the knot of men.

"Dinh, take the camionette and drive back to the mine," he told one of the Viets who was leaning against the side of the truck. "Have the men give their cards to the timekeeper in the gatehouse. I won't be needing any of you any more today."

"All the men?" answered Dinh, without moving.

"Yes, all. The timekeeper will give them their checks." And then, when Dinh still did not move, Pierre said sharply, "This is an order. Get going. Do you want me to have you fired for cause?"

"Ok," Dinh said. Slowly the truck was backed around, while Pierre looked on. The men got in. Slowly it started down the makeshift track.

Pierre watched until the truck was hidden by underbrush. When he came back to his wife, he said, "Well, they seem to have gone. We'll wait a little while. They might turn back."

Pierre filled in the interval by throwing a pick and shovel down into the cavern (they landed with a faint, distant crash), and putting a miner's hat, complete with lamp, on Denise's head. "Can your PES pick up the camionette?" he asked the girl when he had finished these preparations.

". . . I think it's still going down hill. It's about two-thirds of the way down."

"Good. We'd better be getting started. I'll go down first so that my weight will steady the ladder for you. Goubu, please stay near where I've got the ladder anchored."

He let himself down on the first rung of the ladder. When he was down a couple of meters, he told Denise to start after him, and she, after locating the first rung with one foot, cautiously began the descent.

She did not enjoy it. The tubular metal rungs of the ladder gave little purchase to her feet, and she found she was holding the sides of the ladder so tightly that she had to will each time to make her hands unclasp. Pierre, below her, was descending quietly and gently to avoid making the ladder shake; she found that if they alternated steps it was better than if they moved at the same time. Still, the bottom seemed a long way down. Ninety-eight odd meters—yes, it was a long way.

Pierre, stepping off the ladder onto the heap of debris, held out his arms for her and lifted her down. "Here we are. What do you think of it?" he said.

"I can't see much," she answered. Both their voices had an echoing, hollow sound. "I didn't realize it would be so big."

"Yes, a river used to run through here once. See the crystals on the walls?" He tilted the lamp in his cap, and a corruscating glint on a remote wall answered him. "Well. Where do you think our book is?"

"I'll have to walk around a bit. It's not under this loose stuff that fell in with the last blast, anyway."

She began to move about. Pierre picked up the tools he had thrown down, and at a discreet distance followed her.

She came to the edge of the debris that had fallen in from above, hesitated, and then jumped down onto the cavern floor. It was level enough, except for occasional big rocks. She went to the right, left, right again. At last she said, "It's not here. I think it's on the other side of the loose heap."

Pierre gave her his hand and she clambered up, walked across the heap, and scrambled down on the other side. She paused. Pierre, trailing her, thought she almost seemed to be sniffing the air. Then she walked straight ahead for almost fifty meters, turned left at an obtuse angle, and stopped. "It's here," she said. She indicated a spot in front of her feet.

"It doesn't look like a sink hole," he said slowly.

"It is, though. Try the pick."

"Very well." He swung the pick a couple of times. "Why, it's loose," he said in surprise.

"It gets harder a little farther down."

Pierre adjusted the lamp in his cap and began to work steadily with the pick. After three or four minutes he reached for the shovel and tossed the material he had loosened to one side. "I think I see bones," he said after a little while. "Do they belong to your friend, the one that wants the book?"

"No, he was much earlier."

Pierre swung the pick with a steady thunk, thunk. He was getting down about three-quarters of a meter now. The material in the sink hole was hardening. "Seems to be mainly bones," he remarked, shoveling them out of the way, "petrified and concreted into a sort of cake." Pierre, no paleontologist, had no idea of the value and interest of the osseous bits he was handling so unceremoniously.

The hole was getting too deep for him to work in it from above. He had to get down in it, and this slowed his rate of progress. "Is it much farther, Denise?" he asked as he stopped for a moment to rest.

"Not much. About half a meter. Pierre, I'm getting excited."

"So am I." He grinned at her, and once more began to work. "What does the book look like?" he asked between thuds of the pick.

"Like a small Rugby football, but less pointed on the ends. You needn't worry about hurting it. It's in an impervious case."

"All right." He was working more and more rapidly.

Denise was trembling violently, partly with nervous excitement, partly because the air of the cavern, now that she was no longer moving about, was noticeably cold. The light on her hat made a gyrating shaft against the darkness. Without looking up from his work, her husband said, "Take it

easy, ma belle. If it's here, we'll find it. If it's not, we won't."

"Oh, it's there, all right. I think—"

"Ah!" Pierre let out his breath with an explosive sound. "Denise, is this it?" He held the shovel up over the edge to her.

Denise bent over to look. There, incongruously presented among a shovelful of petrified bone fragments, like a pearl in a singularly unprepossessing oyster, was the dark brown ellipsoid Tharg had carried in his pouch so long ago.

"Yes, that's it," she said in a soft voice.

Pierre grinned up at her. He dumped the contents of the shovel at her feet, and prepared to jump out of the hole. "I don't mind telling you, chérie, that there were times when I doubted its existence. But here it is. A triumph for you PES."

Denise's lips parted. She looked past him toward the opening in the roof of the cavern through which a column of light fell from the outside world. "Duck!" she cried.

She fell on her face as she spoke. She had seen describing a long curve against the light, a small round object fly through the opening. "It's a bomb!"

Then there was a flash and a roar, and a stunning blast which threw her to the ground. The sound filled the cavern for long seconds, echoing and re-echoing, seeming to feed upon itself. Denise was vaguely aware of falling rocks, and the thick smell of dust in the air.

When she was able to sit up a few minutes later, she felt completely disoriented. Neither she nor Pierre had been damaged physically; the home-made bomb had shaken a portion of the cavern roof loose, so there was now a barrier between them and the rope ladder leading up. But the shock of the explosion had jarred her psychologically; her PES had come unstuck from the rest of her personality and was flapping about aimlessly. She was in several places and times at once, and none of them were particularly agreeable.

Pierre had his arms around her and was talking to her anxiously. She could not, however, rouse herself from her stupor until a voice on the other side of the rock-fall made itself heard. "M'sieu! Madame! Are you badly hurt?"

XI

GOUBU HAD shoveled a space clear at the top of the rock fall and was calling softly down to them.

"I'm all right," Pierre answered in the same cautious tone. "I don't know about Denise."

Denise tried to lick her lips. Her mouth and tongue felt paralyzed. "Safe and sound," she got out at last.

"Bien. Goubu, is the hole big enough for us to get through?"

"No, but I can try to enlarge it. But be very careful, M'sieu Pierre. I think the roof is on the point of coming down."

"Yes." He put his arm around Denise and started to lead her toward the rock slide. She hung back. "The book," she said softly, "don't forget the book."

Pierre drew in his breath. He picked up the ellipsoid from the cavern floor. Denise took it from him and put it in the bosom of her blouse, where it made an incongruous single-breasted bulge. Then they started cautiously up the loose slope of the rock fall.

Pierre, as he afterward admitted, was sweating with anxiety, but Denise herself felt detached and safe. She heard the faint scrape of Goubu's shovel as he worked at enlarging the hole, and then the smaller noises as he resorted to his bare hands for greater delicacy. Now and then a rock would roll past her down the slope.

"You first, chérie," Pierre whispered when they reached the top.

"No, you. You and Goubu are stronger, and could pull me through if I got stuck. I'll pass the book to you after you're on the other side."

Pierre nodded. He lay down carefully on the uneven surface, his arms above his head, and began to wriggle gently through the opening Goubu had made. Denise was still in an abnormal state of detachment, and she watched his slow progress without anxiety.

His feet disappeared. After a moment she heard him whisper, "Pass the book through to me."

Denise obeyed. She felt the ellipsoid taken from her grasp. "Arms above your head, chérie," he whispered. "Wriggle, don't wrench."

"All right."

She got well into the hole before her composure deserted her. She had always had a horror of close places, and now, as she felt the sagging roof of the cavern scraping the small of her back, she had a wild desire to cry out.

She bit down hard on her lower lip. Pierre was saying something, she couldn't tell what. Was it he, or somebody else, who was saying, "Your right shoulder . . . now . . . press down with your thighs. . . ."?

Dimly she wondered why she was having so much more trouble than Pierre in getting through. Her hips were the great obstacle. Pierre and Goubu were pulling on her arms. "Press down with your thighs," the unlocated voice came again. "Just a little more. You're almost through. Your left hip . . . There!"

She was through. He slacks and blouse were torn, her skin was scraped in a dozen places. Pierre and Goubu would not let her have a moment to pant and recover herself. With an arm on either side of her, they half carried her down the uncertain surface of the slope to the foot of the rope ladder.

"Up with you!" Pierre whispered. "It's not so far to the top as it was before, anyway!"

This was true. The rock fall, covering the floor of the cavern some ten meters deep at that spot, had radically shortened the climb to the top.

Denise nodded. She saw that Pierre had buttoned the book inside his shirt; it was probably safer there than within her own badly torn blouse. She put her hands on the sides of the ladder and began to climb.

Since the bottom of the ladder was firmly held by the rock fall, it was considerably more stable than it had been. But Denise heard from time to time a rock rolling from its place, and then an ominous settling noise. She climbed. She did not dare to pause to rest or get her breath. She climbed.

The top at last. There was no support for her arms, and she was too spent to trust her sense of balance. She reached forward, clutched at a low shrub, and dragged herself on to solid ground. Goubu—it was like Pierre to have made

him precede him—was close behind. Still on her knees, Denise held out her hand to him.

Then came Pierre. Just as his head emerged the rim of the pit quivered and began to sag downward. Goubu grabbed the hand Pierre held out to him and, Denise still holding Goubu, the two of them hauled him up over the slowly descending edge. Then all three ran.

"This way!" Pierre panted. "The whole cavern's falling in!"

At what seemed a safe distance, they paused to watch. The sight of itself was not particularly impressive, but the noise that accompanied it certainly was. There was a grating sound, oddly high-pitched, and then a series of thunderous rumbles. And finally, lasting for several seconds, there came a long, long deafening roar.

"Whew," said Pierre when the noise had finally ceased, "that was a close shave. Two seconds more, and— Goubu, mon vieux, you're a hero. If you hadn't helped us, we'd be under all that."

Goubu smiled and looked down modestly. Pierre went on, "What happened, anyhow? Who threw the bomb?"

"One of the Viets, M'sieu."

"Dinh?"

"No, the thin one they call Ho. He came up behind me. We had a fight on the edge of the hole. He got one arm loose and threw the bomb. Then I knocked him out."

"Where is he now?"

"I tied him up and put him in the back of the truck before I came down to M'sieu and Madame."

"Let's go take a look at him."

The thin young Viet was lying in the bed of the truck in an uncomfortable position. Goubu had tied his hands behind him, and further immobilized him with a tie from his feet to an eye-bolt in the truck. It was a hurried but effective job.

The Viet had been lying with his eyes closed, but he opened them when he heard the noise of footsteps. He said nothing, but his face grew angry and afraid.

Pierre chewed his lip. "I ought to turn you over to the flics," he said. "You're a miner yourself. You know it's not exactly pleasant to be buried alive."

Ho swallowed, but still said nothing.

"You've had some provocation," Pierre continued. "I'll skip it. But if there's any more trouble, I'll see that you get the maximum."

Ho's face relaxed. "Merci," he said with a faint smile.

"What did you mean about 'provocation,' M'sieu?" Goubu asked as the three of them got in the cab of the truck. "You've never done any harm to Ho."

"No, but the Viets have had a rough time," Pierre replied. "They were brought here as indentured laborers, and they worked under wretched conditions for years. They were French nationals, but there was no nonsense about 'traditional French democracy' where they were concerned.

"Now their lot has improved a bit, and the resentment of years of mistreatment is coming out. It was rough on Denise and me. But I don't blame the Viets too much."

He started to back the truck around. Denise touched his elbow. "The book, please, Pierre."

"Oh." He got it out of his shirt and gave it to her. "Do you think you'll be able to open the case? I don't see any sign of an opening."

"I think so. When I'm not so tired. Tharg—the person it used to belong to—will try to help me open it."

"Bien. I'd like to find what the damned book is all about, and why he wants it so much."

"It's a sort of guidebook," Denise answered faintly, leaning her head against the back of the seat. "He wants it so he can . . . change. Not be what he is."

"You can explain this to me later," Pierre said with a frown. "Are you all right, chérie? You look awfully pale."

"I'm just tired. It seems a long time since morning. I can hardly believe all this happened in the same day."

The truck began to lurch down the caricature of a road. Most of the time at least one of its wheels was in the air. "Ho must be getting rather bruised," Pierre said, between jolts. "Well, I'm afraid I don't feel very sorry for him."

The truck bumped around a bend. Momentarily the road improved. Pierre speeded up a bit. Denise said, "Pierre, there's an ambush ahead."

"What?" He threw on the brakes. "An ambush? Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's the Viets. They've been waiting for Ho. They've

heard the noise of our truck, and they're frightened. They know he wouldn't be coming back in the truck."

Pierre got out and went around to the back of the truck. "Ho," Denise heard him say, "I'm going to untie you. Some of your friends are waiting on down the road for us. I want you to tell them that they can't possibly get away with murdering three people. All of them, including you, will get the guillotine.

"Tell them to drive on back to the mine, like good boys. I will see to it that the worst that happens to them is that they get docked half a day's pay. They can hardly expect to be paid union wages for conspiring to murder us."

Denise heard the sound of Ho clambering out of the truck. "Bien," he said. "I will tell them. M'sieu is a highly intelligent and amiable man." He started off down the track.

Pierre got back in the cab. They waited. Denise was too tired to be nervous. She sat with her eyes closed, the smooth ellipsoid of the book lying on her lap. Goubu kept clearing his throat.

At last Ho came trudging back. "They say they are sorry, M'sieu," he reported. "They will take his advice and drive on back to the mine."

"Bien. You're a good ambassador, Ho. Get back in the truck."

Ho grinned and obeyed. They heard a car somewhere ahead of them being started, and then the noise of its passage on down the sketchy road. Pierre waited ten or twelve seconds, and then started after it. It was getting dark. He turned on the truck's headlights.

Finally they were off the mountain, and on a legitimate, though narrow, road. Goubu said, "If M'sieu will stop at the village for Mandoué . . . She can sit on my lap."

"You still anticipate trouble?"

"Yes, M'sieu, as long as things are not normal in the mine."

Mandoué must have been watching for them, for she came running out of one of the thatched beehive huts before Pierre had come to a full stop. She opened the cab door, sat down on Goubu's lap, and began to talk rapidly to him.

Goubu looked disturbed. "She thinks you had better not go to your house, M'sieu Pierre," he said. "She thinks there will be trouble tonight."

"Mon Dieu! I'm getting tired of menaces. What if I call the police?"

Goubu shook his head disapprovingly. "A bad idea, M'sieu. People would be sure to be hurt. I assure M'sieu that as soon as things are normal again in the mine, there will be no more danger. But there is danger now."

"Oh, all right. Where shall we go?"

Denise spoke up. "Drive to the mine, Pierre. There are guards there and a high fence. I can rest on the couch in your office a little while, and then try to get the book out of the case."

"All right."

The guard at the gate knew them. "Bon soir, M'sieu Houdan," he said. "Your men checked in with the other truck just a little while ago."

"Good. How's our infestation?"

The guard made a face. He was a Frenchman, a descendant of one of the political prisoners who had been exiled to New Caledonia several generations ago. "Worse than ever, M'sieu. M. Miron has been sending reporters and photographers away all day. He doesn't want any stories about our little trouble to get into the Paris papers. He's afraid it would depress the price of our stock on the Paris Bourse."

"It probably would," Pierre agreed. "Is the commissary closed?"

"Yes, M'sieu Houdan, but I think I could get you some sandwiches."

"That would be a good idea. Ham, if you can. And a bottle of that Anjou rosé they used to have. Mme. Houdan likes that."

Pierre opened the door of the cab, and the four of them got out. Ho jumped out of the back and joined them.

"Shall I stay with you, M'sieu Houdan?" he asked.

Pierre looked at him calculatingly. "No, you can go on home. But remember what I told you—I won't be lenient next time."

Ho grinned. "I'll remember. Bon soir M'sieu et Madame."

Pierre led the way to his office, Goubu and Mandoué following. Mandoué looked about herself uncertainly. It was obvious she had never been inside the mine gate before.

Denise sat down on the couch, and the two Melanesians,

after a little hesitation, squatted down on the floor. "Shall we stay, Madame?" Goubu asked her.

"Yes, please. I'd like you to be here when I get the book out of the case."

The guard brought a plate of sandwiches and a bottle of wine. Pierre passed the sandwiches around and poured the wine into four paper cups. Everyone was hungry; they ate with good appetite. The ellipsoid, meanwhile, lay quietly on the polished top of Pierre's desk.

Pierre kept pouring wine into Denise's paper cup. "Now, Denise," he said when the sandwiches were gone and the bottle was empty, "do you want to—Yes, what is it?" There had been a knock at the door.

"M. Miron would like to speak to you, M. Houdan," the messenger at the door said.

"All right. —Don't open it until I get back, chérie! I don't want to miss the great moment. I'll try to get back quickly." He went out.

Denise yawned. "Madame should lie down on the couch and sleep a little," Goubu suggested. "My wife and I will not disturb her rest."

Denise lay back obediently. She was tired, and she had drunk a good deal of wine. She soon drifted into a calm and agreeable sleep.

She woke about half an hour later. Pierre was looking down at her. "What's the matter?" she asked. "A noise woke me up."

"There are . . . a few people outside. Don't worry, chérie. The guards and the mine police can take care of any trouble there might be."

"Oh." She sat up on the couch and listened. "It sounds like a mob," she said after a moment. "But there won't be any trouble. I know how to open the case of the book."

She got up, walked over to the desk, and picked up the ellipsoid. While the others clustered around her, she began to run her hands thoughtfully over it.

At last she paused and pressed down hard. There was no sound, but the brown shell split down its long axis and folded back like the valves of a door.

For a moment they all four saw the book. It was a handsome thing—glowing rosy purple, with a title running

diagonally across the cover in characters of metallic tyrian purple. Then the cover began to buckle and turn black. It burst abruptly into a hot, brilliant flame.

The hot white flame lasted only a moment. Denise had jerked her head back to avoid singeing her eyebrows. "What happened?" she asked dazedly. She looked into the case. "It's gone. There aren't even any ashes left. What made it flare up like that?"

Denise had hardly ceased speaking when the office door opened and one of the guards came hurrying in. "M'sieu Houdan! M'sieu Houdan! The shapes are gone! They went all at once, like a candle being blown out!"

Pierre let out his breath. "You're positive?" he asked the guard.

"Yes, sir. They've gone."

"Good. Make an announcement to the crowd. Tell them the mine will resume regular operations tomorrow, beginning at the usual time for the day shift." And then, to Denise, "You were right, ma belle. The shapes came because he wanted the book."

Denise was not listening. She had sunk down in the chair by Pierre's desk and was holding the empty ellipsoid disconsolately in her hands. "Poor Tharg!" she said. "Oh, poor Tharg! This will break his heart!"

XII

OUR GALAXY turns on a hub in the constellation Sagittarius. The great wheel of light—shaped like a grindstone, as Herschel put it—turns slowly in an awesome circuit that takes some two hundred million years. Toward the center the stars thicken, the gaseous nebulae abound.

Sagittarius is the center of our galaxy, too, in another and somewhat less obvious way.

It would be a mistake to think there is some*body* there. If in the center the lofty architecture of vision, the grandeur perennially seen by the mystic or the drugged, is made actual and functional, it is not because those who shaped it are present. It was made as it is to serve its purpose better.

The kind of consciousness that is found there does not have the limitations of flesh, nor its opportunity to transcend its limitations. If man is a thinking reed, the center in Sagittarius is a star that thinks. But it is immortal only in the way that something which has once existed may be said to go on existing forever. So it serves a more genuine immortality than its own.

Some of the machines in the center are actuated by thought, no matter how distant. They pass no moral judgments. They are as passionless as mythical Rhadamanthus. They do not condemn those who knowingly keep on doing what they know to be wrong. They have no punitive function. But they weigh accurately what is professed against what is achieved.

This is not the first universe that has ever existed. If time must have a stop, it must also have a beginning. And now and then, in the center in Sagittarius, a decision is reached.

He could withdraw himself. He could go back to being indifferent and unmoved, while the eons passed and mountains rose from the plain and were ground again into dust. Tharg had no heart to be broken, at least in the sense that Denise had meant, but he was poignantly aware that he had failed. His former glacial ataraxia presented itself to him like an obliterating black wave into which he could plunge at will. Why did he not so will?

To bring the guidebook back to the light of day had taken a series of miracles. At any point Tharg might have failed: he might have been unable to produce the "mobile geometry" of the mine, he might not have been able to establish communication with Denise, he might have been unable to coerce Pierre into the excavation on Mt. Dore. He had succeeded; and when he had seen the brownish capsule of the guidebook open under Denise's fingers, he had felt an extraordinary triumph, like a man who wars victoriously with a star.

But the book, which had been shut away for hundreds of millions of years in a reducing atmosphere, rich in hydrogen and with almost no free oxygen, had acquired in its imprisonment an extreme readiness to oxidize itself. When oxygen had been available, it had burst into flame at once.

Incredulously he had seen it consume itself, remove itself

from him forever, be lost irretrievably. His loss had dazed him at first, and then made him wild. Yes, the temptation to withdraw into his cold remoteness was a strong one. And yet—it seemed odd to him—he resisted it.

It took him a while to realize what had happened. He had no particular illusions about human beings. In some respects they were baser than Tharg's own people could ever have been. They were more capable of treachery, and more constantly physically cruel.

But if they were capable of more baseness, they were also capable of more nobility. Tharg was not a human being; he would never understand them very well. (What, for example, was he to make of a human personality that could throw a rock in a fit of partisan rage at a little child, and then write a line like, "the love that moves the sun and the other stars"?) But they kept on trying, and they were capable of insight into their weaknesses and mistakes. No, he would never understand them very well. But somehow he had got interested in them.

With Tharg's new interest came a certain compunction about the way he had behaved. In his attempts to communicate he had driven the wretched Proctors nearly mad, and Pierre had characterized the shadowy invasion of the mine as "blackmail". Both the Proctors and the Houdans might have benefited if Tharg had been successful? Yes, they might. But Tharg had not been thinking of others' benefit; he had been thinking of himself.

It was natural enough. A human being would probably have done the same in his place. But it was hardly admirable.

The guidebook was gone. Tharg supposed he must resign himself to being a dimensionless thought throughout all eternity. He might go back to his ataraxic uninvolvement later. Currently he felt a slight but definite wish to help the human beings in whom he had grown interested. Wasn't there something beneficial he could do for them?

No, it wasn't very likely that there was. Unquestionably, thinking of himself as a sort of super-human savior would be good for his self esteem, and an attempt to benefit these remarkable human beings would serve to pass a lot of time. But there were two reasons why he thought he'd better not try it.

In the first place, he really didn't have much power. He had been able, with a considerable assist from the Proctors, to flood the house at Willington Mills with poltergeist phenomena, and he had been able to fill the mine at Nouméa with the sliding interpenetrating flat shapes that had so upset everybody. Both these phenomena had been purely subjective, affections of the senses for which he had drawn the energy from the human beings whose senses were affected. Given proper conditions, and a lot of effort on his part, he could cause mass hallucinations; but he couldn't move the pointer on a dial a tenth of a division from zero, or affect the drift of a dandelion seed. In short, he had no physical power at all. An ordinary "ghost" had much more power than he.

In the second place, he didn't know enough. Who was he to decide what was, or was not, to the benefit of humanity? His ideas of good and evil ran roughly parallel to theirs; but if he had had the power of a demi-god, he would still have felt that he did not have the wisdom of one. Humanity would have to make its own saviors. He was an alien, and if he tried to intervene in their affairs, he would be an interloper. He wasn't wise enough to decide on their proper path.

Wasn't that sort of intervention what had ailed his own people? The Vaeaa had possessed great power relative to Tharg's race, and they had been selfconfident enough not to hesitate to use their power. Self-righteous, rather. Perhaps they had thought they were acting for the best when they had intervened to prevent Tharg's people from benefiting from the guidebook that had so mysteriously reached them; but the intervention, Tharg considered, had been wholly disastrous. It was the lack of the guidebook that had doomed his people to their protracted, and ultimately fatal, series of wars. The history of that race would have been very different if they had been allowed to have what legitimately belonged to them.

Self-righteousness—what a lot of it the Vaeaa had had! They had been so sure of their rightness that their last act, as a race, had been to set up the projector on Pluto so that no other guidebook, in all the future history of the third planet from the sun, should ever get through to it.

They had prejudged Earth's future in perpetuity. . . .

That meant . . . that they had thought it possible . . . that another guidebook . . . might some day come.

Another guidebook? Tharg felt his horizons expanding enormously. But only one guidebook had ever been sent to Tharg's people. And the last of them had been dead when the Vaeaa had undertaken their great restrictive work. So the Vaeaa had thought it possible that another race might come into being on Earth—another race, to whom another guidebook might be sent.

Sent? Sent from where? Tharg speculated fruitlessly on this point for a long time. In the end he had to admit that he had no clue as to where the guidebook might have been sent from, or who the senders were. Perhaps even the Vaeaa had not known.

But they had thought it possible that another guidebook might some day be sent to earth. They might have been mistaken; they might have been acting out of excessive caution and dislike of the idea. But it was possible—wasn't it possible?—that when the inhabitants of a planet reached a certain level of technological or psychological development, the guidebook was sent.

It might not necessarily be the same guidebook. Perhaps what was sent differed according to the nature of the recipients. But when the population of a planet reached an appropriate point, it got its appropriate chance.

When the guidebook had come to Tharg's people, they had been at about the same level of technological development as the autochthonous inhabitants of earth currently were. The older population had had a good deal more innate talent in extrasensory ways. But mutatis mutandi, they had been at about the same level of development.

In that case, wasn't it possible—wasn't it possible that before too long another guidebook would be sent out?

XIII

"This is an unusual experiment," said the teaching assistant. "Its whole point is that it never works."

The class, a captive audience if there ever was one, laughed dutifully. Some of the dumber ones, who knew they

weren't doing very well in the course, managed to gaffaw. The assistant—his name was Warner—smiled an acknowledging smile.

"The experiment I am about to perform," Warner continued, "ought to demonstrate the existence of magnetic monopoles. It has been performed hundreds, perhaps thousands of times, since Ford first tried it twelve years ago, in 1962. Invariably, the monopoles fail to show up.

"Yet, monopoles ought to exist. Dirac, more than forty years ago, predicted their existence. Both quantum theory and classical electromagnetic theory have room for them. I'll write the relevant equations for you on the blackboard."

He wrote, occasionally consulting a piece of paper he held in his left hand. "You see how neatly it would work out," he said when he had finished. "If the partial derivative B is . . . And C, of course, represents the speed of light.

"Now, one of the best places to look for magnetic monopoles is in iron meteorites. Actually, I am not playing quite fair in using this particular meteorite for my demonstration, since it was used in this class last semester, and with the usual negative results.

"I am going to subject five square centimeters of the surface of this meteorite to a magnetic field of 120,000 gauss. That is quite an intense field; if any monopoles are present, they ought to be jarred loose from their strong attachment to the metoritic iron.

"Once jarred loose, they will be accelerated to an energy of more than a billion electron volts. In this accelerated state, the putative monopoles will go pinging through a pair of nuclear emulsion plates, and finally be trapped again in an iron backstop.

"On their trip through the emulsion plates, the magnetic monopoles should leave their characteristic traces: tracks which, initially, are so heavy that they cannot be confused with those of any other elementary particle and which, as the magnetic monopoles lose energy and interact less strongly with the atoms of the emulsion, taper from heavy to light in a unique manner.

"The interest of this experiment, as I said before lies in the fact that it never works. Magnetic monopoles *can* exist, therefore should exist, and yet never do.

"Now I will actuate the electromagnet. I am going to give the target three bursts, at about a minute apart."

Warner pressed a switch. Nothing visible happened. He looked at his watch, while the second hand moved. He pressed the switch again, waited, and pressed it once more.

"Now I am going to put the nuclear emulsion plates under the microscope and look for magnetic monopole tracks. The microscopic image will be projected on the screen"—Warner indicated a square white screen on the wall behind him—"so the class can see exactly what I am seeing."

He sat down at the microscope. A round spot of light duly appeared on the screen. While the class watched and fidgeted, he moved the plates slowly about under the objective of the microscope. The spot of light on the screen did not change.

"You see," said Warner, his voice a little muffled by his sitting position, "there are no monopole traces. The experiment has failed to—what! Why—my God!"

The spot of light on the screen had been abruptly crisscrossed by a whole barnyard of tracks. They were broad and heavy at one end, they faded and narrowed rapidly, they ran across the screen in all directions. There must have been at least thirty of them.

Warner got up from his chair. He was visibly trembling. "M-m-magnetic m-m-monopoles," he explained, somewhat unnecessarily. "I can't b-b-believe it. I'm g-g-going to get Dr. Donaldson." He looked sternly at the class. "Wait in your places. This is a h-historic moment."

He hurried away. The class exchanged glances. Warner returned with Donaldson, who looked first at the image on the screen and then sat down at the microscope.

"It's certainly so," Donaldson said after a moment. "Mr. Warner, please put in fresh nuclear emulsion plates and try the experiment again."

Warner did as he was requested. The electromagnet delivered its three bursts. The new emulsion plates were put under the microscope.

The end of the class period had come, but nobody moved. Even the slower students had the feeling that, as Warner had put it, they were present at a historic moment.

Donaldson moved the plates around, hunting for more

monopole tracks. It was not long before he hit on a rich spot. Once more the screen was covered with the tapering tracks.

Donaldson began to count. "One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . ." He got up to twenty-seven, and may have missed some. At last he stood up.

"Class dismissed," he said mildly to the students, and then, to the teaching assistant, who was flapping around him excitedly, "Mr. Warner, something very unusual must be happening."

It was a moonless night. The sky was lightly overcast. Captain Bergson, regarding the barometer, thought the ship must be heading into an area of rain.

Though the sky was dark, the water through which the *Odin* moved was dimly phosphorescent. Where the ship's bow cut the water, the furrow broke into creamy light on both sides. A pretty sight; Captain Bergson hoped that those of the passengers who were still awake were enjoying it.

He retied the knot of his pareu. He had worn the pareu at the party he had given for the passengers earlier in the evening, and had seen no reason for changing into his tropical whites before going up on the bridge to receive the first officer's report. The *Odin* was a smallish Norwegian freighter that plied between the California coast and the South Pacific islands, and the captain's pareu was one of the Polynesian touches that the passengers enjoyed so much. Besides, Captain Bergson had personal reasons for liking to wear a pareu: it was a comfortable garment for a man who feared he was getting a little too thick around the middle.

Captain Bergson sighed. The trouble was, he was a compulsive eater. He reacted to stress and worry—and the captain of a ship always has his worries—by eating more and at more frequent intervals. The *Odin* had an excellent cuisine.

Still, he considered himself a fortunate man. The *Odin* was a lovely little ship, he liked his job, the owners were well pleased with him. Sea traffic between the islands and the mainland was increasing rather than lessening. Humanly speaking, he was sure of a good job for as long as he would want one. And then there was Cecile.

Cecile lived in Papeete. She had long glossy black hair, a smooth brown skin, and there wasn't a coy bone in her body. She was, in short, a typical Tahitian *vahine*. . . . The *Odin* would reach Tahiti in three days.

Oh, boy. True, she had said something last time to the effect that her captain was getting a pretty big *opu*. Bergson had gained about four kilos since then, and the belly had got bigger. But that was the beauty of Tahiti. If Cecile cold-shouldered him on the ground that he was getting too fat for her taste, there was sure to be some other girl probably just as young and good looking, who would think he was "bien gentil".

Rain had begun to fall. Bergson could hear its patter on the deckhouse roof. Far ahead, off to the right, he saw a vivid lightning flash.

Should he order a change of course? Probably not—changing course would use extra fuel oil, and hence cost money, and while a sensible captain would detour almost any distance to avoid contact with a hurricane, what was ahead seemed to be nothing but an ordinary thunderstorm. True, the *Odin* was carrying a huge drum of bottled gas, destined for Pago Pago, on her lower foredeck. The drum would be a terrific fire hazard if the *Odin* should be directly struck. But that was so unlikely that there was really no point in worrying about it.

The patter of rain had deepened to a steady, droning roar. Bergson yawned. He really ought to go to bed, but he had drunk a lot of coffee at the party, and wasn't at all sleepy. He went into the chart room, looked idly at a large scale map of the Friendly Islands, and then went back to stand beside the helmsman.

The roaring rain lay like a curtain around the ship. If Bergson had gone out on deck in oilskins, he wouldn't have been able to see more than a meter in any direction. But, since there wasn't anything around for thousands of kilometers on which the *Odin* could hurt herself, the zero visibility didn't matter.

Bergson yawned again. He was just about to say good night to the helmsman, a cheerful young Samoan everybody called Toto, when two bright and almost simultaneous flashes of lightning, not far ahead of the ship, made him change his

mind. He'd better stay in the deckhouse until the ship was out of the electrical part of the storm.

Time passed. The *Odin* slid smoothly ahead. The lightning flashes continued, but Bergson thought the storm was dying away. Then, without any warning at all, a terrific lightning flash struck the water dead ahead of the ship.

The *Odin* shuddered through her whole fabric. She had been missed by inches. The electric discharge had caused a momentary waterspout, and the next minute tons of water were thudding down on the roof of the deckhouse. Bergson couldn't tell whether the noise in his ears was the crash of thunder, the roaring of the water, or the pounding of his own alarmed heart.

He glanced at the helmsman. Toto's brown skin had turned pale yellowish tan. He said something in Samoan. "Steady, man," Bergson told him. "A miss is as good as a mile."

Toto nodded and licked his lips. The first officer came into the deckhouse. "Everything's sound, sir," he said. "I was checking the gas tank." Water ran in rivulets off his plastic oilskins as he spoke.

"Thank you, Mr. Andreas," the captain answered. "Go on to bed. I'll wait until Ibbets comes on watch."

The storm was dying away. The lightning had ceased. Bergson walked over to the port side of the deckhouse and stood staring out through the raindrops on the glass. A dolphin—no, a mermaid—was reclining comfortably on the smooth, phosphorescent water and smiling at him.

It couldn't be. He must be dreaming; the terrible lightning flash had addled his wits. With trembling fingers the captain picked up his binoculars and focused them. The mermaid was still there; she seemed to be keeping pace with the ship. She was holding a large book, like a volume out of an encyclopedia set, in her hands. She held it out to him.

Desperately Bergson stared at her. He'd lost his mind—he'd have to radio the owners; it wasn't safe to have a mad captain in charge of the ship. Andreas could take over the command.

No. He wouldn't give in to this. Bergson stared hard at the mermaid, and, after a moment, she disappeared.

Thank God. Bergson pressed a button. When one of the stewards appeared, Bergson told him, "Get me something to eat." Fifteen minutes later, when four bells sounded and Ibbets came into the deckhouse, the captain was eating a cold ham and turkey sandwich, quite restored to himself.

Beulah Annatak and her husband were walking home from a dance in the community center. They had had a fine evening. They both liked to dance, and that new dance, the Wellington Lemon, was lots of fun. Also, the parks co-operative had closed its books for the year, comfortably in the black, and they both had fat checks coming. They felt good.

The night was still but not especially cold, only about fifteen below. There was no moon in the sky, but for all that there was plenty of light. One could have read a newspaper by it.

"I never saw the lights so bright before," said Beulah, looking up. "The sky is all one big yellow-green flame."

"Me neither," her husband answered. "My grand-dad used to say that when the northern lights are extra bright like this, it means trouble coming. But I bet he never saw them this bright. I bet nobody has."

"I don't think it means trouble," Beulah said slowly. "It's too pretty. Look at that big red-purple curtain, with the edges blue! And those long red streamers, with streaks of gray on them! I'm surprised there aren't some men from the University at Ottawa to study it."

"Maybe they didn't know it was coming," Henry said. "—Here come Josie and her husband. Let's wait for them."

The other couple soon caught up with the Annataks. "Did you ever see such lights?" Josie called in greeting. "See that purple one go!"

"The light's better out here than it was in the hall for the dancing," George Innatuk, her husband, said. "Josie, may I have the pleasure of your company for the next dance?" He made her a sketchy bow and held out one hand.

Josie giggled. She took his mittened fingers and they moved three steps to the right, three steps to the left, and then turned back to back, in a complicated Wellington Lemon step.

"Want to dance, Beulah?" Henry asked. "We can do as good as that."

"Sure, you bet." They linked arms at the elbow and began to glide over the snow.

Other stragglers from the community hall joined them. In no time at all there were six couples dancing on the snow's crisp surface, bowing and twirling, like peasants in a Breugel painting.

The dance grew wilder as the banners and curtains of light leaped in the sky. The strange yellow light rustled its red edges above them. They bounded and twisted, leaped and cavorted. They bounced away from each other like billiard balls. They introduced unheard-of new steps into the Wellington Lemon. They were as mad as March hares.

Beulah Annatak stopped suddenly, seized by a paroxysm of coughing. The fit brought her to her senses. She ran among the others, shouting and striking them with her mittened fingers. "Stop! Stop! Stop, all of you! Do you want to freeze your lungs dancing like that? Stop, I tell you, stop!"

The words and blows sobered them. She was right, and they knew it. Besides, some of the others had begun to cough.

"What got into us, to dance like that?" Beulah asked as she and Henry reached the front door of their prefabricated house. Now that she had stopped dancing, she was painfully tired, and her body, inside her fur garments, was wet with sweat. "We all know it's dangerous."

Henry looked up toward the zenith, where the awesome curtains of light still moved and waved. "It was the flags," he said, "the flags in the sky."

These were only a few of the human beings to whom, over the Earth, the approach of the guidebook signaled itself. The phenomena of approach, primarily magnetic in origin, were augmented in intensity by the hothouse effect of the projector the Vaeaa had established out on Pluto so long ago. The experience of Captain Bergson had precognitive elements, too. And then were was the case of Tsong Gam-po.

Tsong Gam-po slept later that morning than the rule of his monastery allowed. He had got up dutifully at mid-

night, when the sound of the gongs roused him, for prayers; but the same gong-stroke, this morning, failed to waken him. Since he was the monastery Master of Novices, nobody liked to bother him and he slept on. In the end, it was not the droning chant of "Om Mani Padme Hum" coming from fifty throats that roused him, but the high whine overhead of a turbo-rocket, bound for the air strip at Lhasa.

He yawned and stretched. What had he been dreaming? He seemed to remember something about a dragon . . . and hadn't there been something about a white bear? He grinned. The dragon and the bear were obvious symbols for Tibet's two menacing neighbors, China and the U.S.S.R. He didn't usually dream so politically. But it seemed to him there had been something else, something new and extraordinarily interesting, in the dream.

Tsong Gam-po had had a good education. At the time he had finished his novitiate, there had been a good deal of competition between Moscow and Peking for Tibetan favor. Tsong had been offered scholarships in both capitals. After a good deal of consideration, he had refused them both and had studied for three years at the University of Bernares. Nothing he had learned there had made him doubt the essential validity of the lamaistic buddhism in which he had been brought up.

Tsong shook his head in dissatisfaction. No, he couldn't remember what the rest of his dream had been about. But he'd better get up. From the way the light was coming into his cell, he must be almost an hour late.

He threw the sheepskin cover aside and jumped out of bed. He pulled his long woolen robe on over his head and thrust his feet into felt slippers. Then he hurried into the monastery kitchen.

The cook greeted him politely. "Good morning, Honored Master of Novices Tsong. Shall I make you a mug of tea?"

"If you would have the kindness, Respected Cook. . . ."

The cook churned the tea, and Tsong swallowed it hastily. Then, somewhat fortified, he hurried into the hall where the novices were repeating their prayers.

They were well-trained. None of them looked up when he came in. They went on with their chanting, bodies rocking and eyes half closed. Yes, a good bunch of lads. But there

were less than half as many as there had been when Tsong had done his novitiate. Boys simply weren't going into the priesthood on the scale that they had even ten years ago. Tsong's monastery was dwindling.

Perhaps it was better so. If Tibet were to survive, her fertile land must be tilled, and the recruitment of so many of her youth into a celibate priesthood had led, historically, to a steady population drop. Empty, fertile land—and to the south an able, many-millioned people, eager to fill the gap. Tibet would have been a Chinese colony these past five years if the Gray Death, breaking out in the late 1960's, hadn't cut China's population in half and given her empty space within her own borders to fill. For Tibet, it had been an unanticipated respite.

The deep shivering note of a gong rang out. Time for breakfast. At the head of his novices, Tsong Gam-po led the way to the refectory.

Here monks and novices alike sat down at long tables. Breakfast—boiled barley groats and plentiful mugs of buttered tea—was served by three lay brothers. Since it was a feast day, there were shreds of boiled mutton in the groats. After breakfast was over, there was to be a doctrinal assembly in the monastery's great courtyard.

The last of the buttered tea went down. Tsong gave his novices fifteen minutes' recess for personal hygiene. Then the gong struck once more and the monastery personnel began crowding into the courtyard and sitting down on the stones.

The Abbot Gan-den, Tsong's immediate superior, read the scripture. Discussion was invited. One of the novices wanted to know why the Mahayana was called "the greater vehicle," and the abbot dealt patiently with this elementary question. The discussion went on.

Tsong listened abstractedly. He was still preoccupied with his dream. When the abbot referred a question to him for his opinion, Tsong's neighbor had to nudge him with his elbow before he realized he was being addressed.

"The question was, whether one who had been emancipated from the chains of desire exists after death," the abbot repeated helpfully. "We should like your opinion, Honored Tsong Cam-po."

Tsong stood up. He cleared his throat. "It is said that

there are four questions to which the Enlightened One refused to give any answer," he said. "The questions are, first, whether the universe is eternal, second, whether the universe is finite, third—"

Tsong stopped, his mouth open. He had the sensation of having physically experienced a dazzling flash of light.

He looked about him. The courtyard, in honor of the feast day, was decorated with hundreds of tiny paper prayer flags. Prayer wheels, with tiny windmills attached, had been mounted in suitable spots and were rotating dizzily. One of the more artistically gifted monks had painted a banner depicting the Buddha Sakya-muni at the moment when he saw the corpse being carried out for burial; the banner hung over the courtyard's outergate.

Tsong swallowed and tried to go on. The scene about him seemed as alien to him as the mountains of the moon. The trappings of piety were meaningless; the content had drained out of them. The faces turned toward him expectantly were the faces of strangers. He felt that he stood on a height above the faith in which he had been reared, as if he stood on a mountain, and that the pious beliefs he had held had become a flattened-out maze of error and superstition at the heart of which there had been, initially, a kernel of ethical truth.

Everybody was looking at him. He walked over to one of the prayer wheels, threw it down on the stone pavement, and crushed its brittle spokes under his felt-shod feet. He plucked down four or five of the prayer flags and snapped their staffs over his knee.

An angry hum came from his audience. Two or three of the monks were running toward him. Tsong faced them unflinchingly. "Be quiet," he told them. "Something much better than paper toys is on its way to us."

Yes, the guidebook was coming. By now Tharg had received too many intimations, both physical and psychical, of its approach to doubt it. But would it be able to get through to Earth?

XIV

IT ALL TURNED on whether the projector the Vaeaa had installed so long ago was still working. On one hand, it was reasonable to think it must have ceased operation long ago; the time that had passed since the Vaeaa installed it was incredibly long. What machinery, or what power source, could continue to function efficiently for billions of years? On the other hand, the Vaeaa had designed the projector to be effective through all Earth's future history, they had been brilliantly intelligent, and they had put all their resources and skill into the projector. So it might still be operating effectively.

In any case, there was nothing Tharg could do about it. Besides, it wasn't really his responsibility. True, he felt a certain vague benevolence toward the present inhabitants of the third planet. But it wasn't up to him to solve their problems for them, even if he had been able.

Tharg was not altogether satisfied with this reasoning. He might have let it go at that, however, if it had not been for the incident of the shells.

John Scott went out in his garden early one July morning to weed his roses. After years of attempts with weed inhibitors, cultivators with power packs, robohoes and chlorophyll extractors, he had decided the easiest way to keep his flower beds clean was to get down on his knees and pull the weeds up, one at a time, by hand.

He weeded. It was going to be a hot Kansas day, but the air, at seven-thirty, was delightful. The rich, ethereal perfume of *Lady Forteviot* came to his nose gratefully. These fresh moments in his garden were the best of his whole day.

After ten minutes he paused to straighten his back and sigh. *Canadian Glory* had inflicted a nasty scratch on the back of his right hand; he sucked it thoughtfully, while he sat on his heels and looked for slug tracks on the ground.

Yes, the roses were doing beautifully. But who could he get to take care of them when he went on vacation, in late August? The U.S.-U.S.S.R. joint expedition to Venus had been a reality since last year. Now there was talk of trying

to send a ship to Pluto. But for all these interplanetary marvels, when a gardener wanted to go on vacation, it was just as difficult for him to be sure his roses would be cared for adequately during his absence as it had ever been.

The watering was no real problem. Scott could install a timing device on his sprinkling system, and be sure his roses would be watered faithfully for an hour every day. But what machine was there that would dust for fungus, bait for slugs and snails, and cope with airborne invasions of aphids? The trouble with technology was that it developed too unevenly.

He began to weed again. He reached far over to the right to pull the last few blades of grass away from the roots of *Canadian Glory,* and then made a quarter-turn to the left and started in on *Boadicea.* When he was done with *Boadicea,* he sat back on his heels again. Something on the ground near *Canadian Glory* caught his eye. Still squatting, he leaned over to examine it.

He saw four shells, shaped like snail shells but more pointed, lying on the finely-tilled earth. One of the shells was a glowing light scarlet, with golden highlights, one was a glinting iridescent black, one—the most beautiful of the four—was a wonderful deep peacock green, and one was a dark violet with a velvety luster like a real violet. The shells were empty, about an inch across, and arranged in a neat square.

Scott regarded them with amazement. They were as beautiful as anything he had even seen in his life—the best rose he had ever grown was not more beautiful—and where had they come from? They hadn't been on the ground seven or eight minutes ago, when he was weeding *Canadian Glory,* and nobody had come into the garden since then. He had been alone the whole time.

He looked up at the sky, as if he expected it to be raining shelly objects. There wasn't a cloud to be seen. The sky was bright blue, and the sun shone undisturbed.

A little nervously, Scott picked up the scarlet shell. It seemed to weigh nothing at all, but when he pocked it inquiringly with a finger nail, he jumped and said "Ouch!" It hurt, as if he had snapped his nail against an unusually hard and dense piece of brick.

Scott chewed his lip. He felt a little frightened. He

picked up the other shells, and found they were as paradoxically light as the scarlet one. Four shells, arriving out of nowhere, extraordinarily beautiful and with extraordinary physical qualities—what did it mean?

He drew a shallow breath. Once more he looked about him. Then he dropped the shells in his pocket. It was time to be starting to work. He'd show the shells to the Science Editor.

Scott was a copy reader on the *Emporia Daily Gazette*. He hung his coat up on a hanger, got the shells out of his pocket, and went over to the Science Editor, who was standing talking to one of the pressmen.

"Joe, what do you think of these?" he asked. He held out the shells on the palm of his hand.

Joe North frowned. He picked up the purple shell, moistened the end of his finger, and rubbed the shall vigorously with it. "Doesn't seem to be dyed," he commented. "Sure is light for its size. Where'd you get these, John?"

Scott told him. "That's impossible," North told him when he had finished.

"I know. But it's what happened."

"You must be mistaken."

"No, I'm not. What kind of shells are they, anyway, Joe?"

"I have no idea." He pocked one of the shells with a middle finger, just as John Scott had done, and, like him, said, "Ouch." He handed the shell back to Scott. "Funny," he said.

"I thought you'd be able to tell me what they were," Scott objected.

"I'm sorry. I'm no conchologist. Wait, though—there might be a story in this. I'll get somebody in the zoology department at the college on the viz and see what he says."

North made the call. Since it was July, the head of the department was on vacation. The young zoologist North got said that, as far as he could tell over the viz, the shells weren't shells at all. If their physical properties were as North described them, he thought somebody in the Physics department might be interested.

North made another call. Then he got on his Vespa and took the shells over to the college for Dr. Hopkins to look at.

The result of his visit was a story on page six of that

evening's edition of the *Gazette*. The story was headlined, "Shells from Space?" and it ended with the words, "Dr. Hopkins says he is baffled by the shells. He is keeping them for further study. Is it possible the 'shells' reached earth from outer space?"

News tends to be scarce in July. One of the wire services picked up the story and sent it to its subscribers. And then *Life* took it up.

They sent a reporter and photographer to Emporia for the story. Hopkins and Scott were interviewed and photographed. The photographer got an amusingly foreshortened picture of Scott on his knees weeding his roses. And the shells, reproduced in as accurate color as high-speed presses are capable of, appeared on the cover of *Life*.

People all over the world were talking and thinking about the mysterious, beautiful shells. Enough people were thinking about them, in fact, that Tharg couldn't help being aware of their thoughts. And he, uniquely, realized what the little shells were. They were the residue, the waste product, of the projector the Vaeaa had set up.

The Vaeaa had repressed not only an interest in paranormal phenomena, but a strong innate esthetic sense. They had allowed it vent only in peripheral and indirect ways. The beautiful little shells were one of those ways.

Instead of heat, water, ash, carbon dioxide or smoke as a waste product, the Vaeaa had compressed their projector's residue into these exquisite shells. Earth scientists, Tharg thought, could derive considerable benefit from studying them.

How had the shells managed to reach Earth? There must, Tharg thought, be a sort of shutter effect, a sort of valve, involved. The projector sent its force outward, and it ejected its wastes inward, along lines of force identical with those going to the projector. Lines of force? Yes, for the projector was powered—logically, could only be powered—by the force of human thought. Only thus could the Vaeaa have been sure their projector would have power when there was danger of the guidebook being sent.

Tharg couldn't be sure how long it would have taken the little shells to reach Earth. The period might have varied between a few hours and a few years. But practically speak-

ing, the conclusion was unavoidable that the projector on Pluto was still operating, still effective. So the guidebook from space would not get through.

XV

IT WASN'T HIS responsibility. And it was highly unlikely that the new guidebook would benefit him, personally, in any way. What was designed for the present inhabitants of Earth, with their distinctive abilities and endowments, would be of no use to a disembodied Tharg. But whether or not the new guidebook would help him, he wanted it to get through to those it was designed for. It was their birthright. They had earned it. They were entitled to it.

The mechanisms that projected the deflecting barrier were located on Pluto. An expedition to Pluto, Tharg knew, was already being discussed by the joint U.S.-U.S.S.R. space administrations. Sooner or later an expedition would be sent. But the most optimistic timetable yet arrived at did not plan to surface a craft on this most distant planet in a less time than ten years.

Ten years, more probably fifteen. When the astronauts finally landed, they would marvel at what the Vaeaa had made. They would be totally unable to imagine what its purpose had been. And the guidebook, meantime, would have been deflected away from the solar system into the illimitable depths of space. Once it had been swerved away from its target, trying to recover it would be like trying to recover a particular grain of sand from the depths of the sea.

Would another guidebook be sent if this one failed to get through to Earth? Well, another one hadn't been sent to Tharg's people when they had been deprived of the original. Tharg didn't think a second would be sent to human beings if the first failed. He thought it represented a unique chance. And the chance was going to be lost. He felt corroded with helplessness. What astrophysicist, or astronaut, would listen to him, who wasn't even a ghost?

If the expedition to Pluto could be sent out immediately—but even if it left at once, it could not get there for several years, five at a minimum, in the present state of the art. The

guidebook would be at the barrier in a matter of months. Even five years would be far too late.

Very well. The guidebook wouldn't get through. What would the failure mean to the inhabitants of Earth?

The answer was fatally clear. These cruel, aspiring people —capable always of aspiring to eliminate their cruelty— would turn, in their unrecognized frustration, to the one sure thing they had ever had. What they could always fall back on, what to them was more dependable than love or intelligence, was their destructiveness. If they were balked of their birthright, they would turn to war. They wouldn't stop, Tharg thought, until not one conscious life was left on Earth.

It might not be his responsibility to see that the guidebook got through. But he *did*, after all, have an interest in the matter. It would be terrible to be tied through all eternity to a lifeless, thoughtless Earth.

The projector on Pluto must be destroyed.

Tharg had been able to hallucinate the senses of the Proctors, to fill the mine at Nouméa with shadowy shapes, to communicate with Denise. Was there no human being he could communicate with who might have power to destroy what the Vaeaa had made?

A general? The military personnel of a dozen nations had guided missiles with atomic warheads under their command. Earth was as full of bombs as a fat hen is of eggs, and there was no lack of military men who would be glad to have an excuse to let off a live bomb against anything. If a guided missile could reach Pluto . . .

But the unmotivated insanity of shooting a bomb against Pluto might bother even a general: Tharg doubted that he could bamboozle anybody into trying it. More cogently, a bomb probably wouldn't get there at all. The distance was tremendous, the target tiny, the guidance systems totally inadequate for such a task. A realistic attempt to reach Pluto with a live bomb would involve as much preparation as would an attempt to land a space craft there.

Captain Ambarzumian? The Second Joint Expedition to Venus had already left Earth; Tharg might be able to communicate with the captain and try to persuade him to change his vessel's course. If the *Elpis* headed for Pluto

instead of Venus, she would reach the outermost planet in two or three years.

Two years would be eighteen months too late. And the *Elpis* was carrying supplies only for the shorter voyage. By the time she reached Pluto, everybody on board her would be dead.

The projector must be destroyed. So he had thought. But it would be equally effective to shut off the projector's fuel supply. Would it be any easier?

The projector was powered, or at least activated, by human thought. Tharg suspected that solar energy might be involved, too, even though Pluto was so far distant from the sun. How could he interfere with either of these sources of power? He couldn't prevent the sun from shining or people from thinking.

Wait, though. Eons ago, when he had discovered for himself the process he needed to augment and manifest himself, he had realized that this psi function was capable of other uses than the one he was making of it. Could he use the psi function—or, more accurately, the gamma function of the psi factor—to eliminate human psychic activity temporarily?

It might work. If he could promulgate a thought pattern from the remote past, before there were any human beings on the third planet, the effect ought to be one of the transient mass unconsciousness. For about ten minutes, everybody on the globe would experience a psychological blackout. And in ten minutes, if he picked them properly, the guidebook could get through.

It wasn't impossible, it was even fairly probable, that he could do it. Ten minutes of universal unconsciousness—yes, he thought he could manage it.

What would be the state of affairs, though, when people came back to themselves? Well, for one thing, anybody who had been in any sort of vehicle at the start of the ten minutes would pretty certainly be dead or badly injured. Imagine a ten minute mass blackout on a freeway! Most aircraft would have crashed, trains would have piled up, ships in harbor would have collided. The possibilities for destruction were endless. Even the housewife, getting dinner, or the patient on the operating table, would not be safe. About the

only people who could be sure of getting through the ten minutes of blackout unscathed would be people who were asleep in bed in locations remote from airlines or highways.

It would be like a mass epileptic fit. At the end of the ten minutes, the guidebook would be through the barrier and on its way to Earth. But a truly ghastly number of human beings would be dead. Mass unconsciousness, in the Stone Age, would have meant only that a hunter or two would be clawed up by a cave bear. In the mechanized world of the present, using the psi function was unthinkable.

But eliminating the projector's power supply might not be the only possible way of disrupting it. A gasoline engine stops when the gas tank is empty, or when the fuel line from the tank to the engine breaks, or when somebody puts sugar in the gasoline tank. If Tharg didn't dare to eliminate the power supply, could he interfere with the transmission of it to the mechanisms that projected the barrier?

Tharg did not think about this very long before deciding that he could not. There remained the final expedient, of supplying the projector with improper fuel. If Tharg couldn't stop people from thinking, or their thoughts from being transmitted, could he somehow impair the quality of their thought?

And here he saw a tiny gleam of hope. When the Vaeaa had built their barrier-projector, they hadn't known, of course, what sort of beings would eventually evolve on Earth. They had meant it to be activated by any sort of rational thought. But for thousands of years the projector had been responding to *human* thought impulses. It was reasonable to assume that, by now, it would have become accustomed to this particular fuel, as a gasoline engine becomes accustomed to a particular grade of gasoline. If the grade could be abruptly changed—

Tharg himself was a sort of sentient thought. He wasn't a human thought; he wasn't human in his origins. A couple of centuries ago he had discovered how to augment himself psychologically. He had already decided against trying to use the psi function here. But if he could dissolve himself, his essence, his basic identity, in human thought, he might be able to tinct and change its very nature for a short space of time. He might, in fine, be able to act like sugar in gasoline.

He didn't know whether or not it would work, and he

could only try it once. Whether or not it succeeded, the attempt would mean his annihilation. Tharg, who had persisted for so incredibly long, would cease to exist.

Now that it had come to that, he found he didn't much care. This was not so much altruism as weariness. His extraordinary existence was nothing to cling to. Yes, he would try it. The important thing was that the new guidebook should get through.

XVI

Captain Ambarzumian took the thermometer out of his mouth and regarded it distrustfully. Normal. Well, he hadn't really thought he was running a high fever. The *Elpis* was only a few days out from Earth, and he'd been in perfect shape, mentally and physically, at the takeoff. Indeed, since his responsibilities were heavy and continuous, mental and physical stability had been prime conditions of his employment. Yet just in the last few minutes he'd begun to feel feverish, languid and headachey.

And the physical symptoms were only part of the trouble. In the chart room, a little while ago, he'd been unable to attend to what Parker, his first officer, was telling him. He'd suffered from a sort of obsessive distraction, an inability to apply his mind to what was directly under his nose, while he'd had to contemplate an unwanted and irrelevant mental picture fixedly. All the time Parker had been talking, Ambarzumian had seen a bumblebee, drunk with nectar, bumbling and trembling in the depths of a dark red rose. When Parker had saluted and turned to go, the picture had been replaced by a range of mountains, extraordinarily rugged and bristling, rising out of a dense sea of mist.

Could his symptoms be the result of exposure to ionizing radiation from some undetected source? No, the ship's Geiger counters were silent, and the ship herself was heavily shielded. Ambarzumian rubbed his hand over his bluish jowls uneasily. Perhaps he was getting some new sort of virus infection. If the symptoms persisted, he'd go see the ship's M.O. He couldn't think what was the matter with him.

Tharg, meanwhile, was finding his heroic intention of

self-annihilation unexpectedly difficult to carry out. It was partly a matter of timing: Tharg calculated that there was a space of not more than half an hour, all told, when interference with the projector's fuel supply would be efficacious, and he could of course be annihilated only once. He would get no second chance.

But his main difficulty was that dissolving himself was something easier said than done. At first he had feared losing his identity. He had clung to it as a timid swimmer clings to the side of the pool. But when, growing desperate with the passing moments, he had tried to abandon it entirely, to acquire momentum to let himself slide into the great current of human thought, nothing had happened. He had willed himself to dissolve, no longer to be. He still was.

It occurred to Tharg that he might have more success if he could merge himself preliminarily in *one* human personality. He had already experienced something like this with Denise. It would be like dissolving the dyestuff in a small amount of hot water before adding the coloring matter to the dye bath.

Who should it be? The time was getting short. His first choice had to be right.

The ideal person would be somebody who could help him with the problem of timing his dissolution accurately. And when the question was put in this way, there could be little doubt who the ideal person was: Captain Ambarzumian of the *Elpis*. The *Elpis* was well out from Earth, in interplanetary space where the guidebook's phenomena-of-approach would be particularly evident. Captain Ambarzumian was an immediate and competent observer. Ambarzumian would be simultaneously a personality for Tharg's preliminary dissolution, and an observatory from which he could look out for the guidebook's nearest approach.

He must hurry. The margin of choice was so small! He hoped Ambarzumian wouldn't prove a recalcitrant personality.

Tharg caught the captain just at the moment when he was going into the chart room. The captain was relaxed and off guard. In an instant Tharg was a part of his thinking. He did not "possess" the captain even as much as he had "possessed" Denise. That was not what Tharg was try-

ing to do. But he was interior to him. He could not help having a certain effect on him.

Actually, Tharg himself was more affected by his half-dissolution into Ambarzumian's personality than the captain was. Tharg felt his sense of identity leaving him. It was thinned out, watered down, to the point where he hardly knew who he was any more. Yet at the same time he must cling to enough awareness of himself to be able to act when the time came. Dissolved in Ambarzumian as he was, seeing through his eyes, sharing his thoughts, he must yet manage to be Tharg.

This was a difficulty he had more or less anticipated. But he had not realized that, once he was interior to the captain, he would be tempted to let the dissolution be final and complete. The captain's body was not like the one Tharg had had to part with forcibly, so long ago, but it was a body: to be in contact with flesh again, even passively, even with alien flesh, made him painfully aware of how unhappy his disembodied state had been. Would he be able to part with Ambarzumian when the time came, even to let the guidebook through? It would be like leaving a bright fire to go out into the darkness again. And the darkness, this time, would be the darkness of final annihilation, of complete nothingness.

He must overcome the temptation. He would not let it divert him from his purpose. Meantime, he must wait and watch.

Ambarzumian had taken some anti-histamine and was feeling, or thought he was feeling, rather better. He got a cup of coffee from the galley and took it into the chart room, where Parker already was. He was checking over the latest course data from the computers when the lights in the room began to go out.

They did not stay extinguished, but flicked off and on fitfully. Three red alarm lights, meantime, had begun to glow in the same erratic fashion as the chart room lights.

An alarm bell sounded. Its pitch kept changing as it went on and off. A recorded voice said, "All hands to emergency stations," and another recorded voice repeated, "Abandon ship, all hands abandon ship," stopping occasionally as if for breath and then beginning again.

These mechanical communications of distress were interspersed with other, more reassuring ones—a voice that said, "Fire extinguished," several times, and another that informed the *Elpis*' crew that normal air pressure had been restored. Finally, underlying all the auditory confusion, came the deep reassuring gong note that meant, "All clear."

Ambarzumian, pale with alarm, had started to his feet at the first red flicker from the alarm lamps. But as the medley of signals continued, he realized that the ship's servo-mechanisms were reacting abnormally to something.

He clicked on the closed-circuit TV that gave him a view of the *Elpis*' interior, and went over the ship carefully, section by section. Nothing seemed amiss. Then he got Vladimir, the chief engineer, on the inter-com.

"Nothing's wrong mechanically, sir," the engineer reported. His voice was a series of squawks and beeps. "But the solenoid relays keep popping off and on, and our gauge needles are whirling all around the dials."

"Send Tufts to me." Tufts was the ship's electrician, and had a Ph. D. in physics besides.

"The ship's passing through a strong, a very strong magnetic field, sir," he said when he came in. "It's extraordinary. I don't see any reason for it."

Ambarzumian was silent. He had read the report of the First Joint Venus Expedition carefully, and knew that no magnetic field, of any strength whatever, had been reported in this part of space.

"Is it . . . dangerous?" he asked at last.

"No, sir, not in itself. It won't have any effect on our motion. It's just annoying. The *Elpis* will be back to normal as soon as she gets out of it. I don't think any of our equipment will stay magnetized. But meantime, our relays and so on keep popping off."

Tufts, though a competent physicist, was wrong for once. There were a few more moments of popping relays and auditory confusion. Then the *Elpis* swerved sharply to the right. One of her rockets had been touched off.

The shock almost threw Ambarzumian off his feet. He clutched at a cabinet for support. Momentarily, he saw the bee bumbling in the heart of the flower extremely vividly. The *Elpis*' change of motion had astonished him—the inten-

sity of the magnetic field must be really remarkable, to cause one of the rockets to fire.

Tharg felt Ambarzumian stagger and almost fall. The shock roused him from his absorption in the luxury of having a body again. Ambarzumian was astonished at the strength of a magnetic field where he had expected no field at all: the field, Tharg thought, must be part of the guidebook's phenomena-of-approach, and the great question was where, in relation to the barrier-projector, the guidebook currently was.

It was impossible to give an accurate answer. But Tharg thought that the moment had come.

He hesitated, clinging for a nanosecond longer to the captain's personality. It was going to be so cold outside! Then he let himself dissolve completely. He was no longer clinging to the captain, interior to him: he *was* Ambarzumian.

Whatever happened from now on, he had no control over it. He felt his identity streaming away from him. He wished it weren't going. He was Ambarzumian? No, he wasn't anybody. He hoped he'd picked the right time. He'd never know it if he hadn't. The guidebook should be almost at the barrier.

Captain Ambarzumian pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face. How odd he felt! Lightheaded—he could almost see his thoughts issuing from between his eyes in a pale pink spiral, rolling and coiling out to be merged in the thoughts of the other human beings on the ship. And the outflux from the ship would become a tiny part of the great river of human thought that swept out from Earth.

What was the matter with him? It must be the magnetic field.

Ambarzumian had got the *Elpis* back on her course without much difficulty. Since she carried plenty of reserve rocket fuel, the extra expenditure was not serious. Now she was out of the magnetic field; conditions on board were back to normal; and the captain, in the lounge, was relaxing over a glass of tea.

His symptoms had ceased with Tharg's removal, and by now Ambarzumian had decided that they had been caused

by an over-consumption of coffee. Henceforward, he would stick to freshly-brewed tea.

He was fated to be interrupted. The glass of tea was still more than half full when the signal bell on the ship's radar system rang.

More magnetism? But the bell was ringing in a perfectly normal fashion; it ought to mean that the radar beam had picked up an object within significant range of the ship. Glass of tea in hand, Ambarzumian hurried to the chart room.

Parker was bending intently over the radar screen, a three-dimensional square box. Far off to the left, just at the edge of the screen, a tiny, slowly moving dot was visible.

"It ought to miss us by a good kilometer," Parker observed. "I mean, a kilometer in all directions. It's out of our level entirely."

Ambarzumian nodded. He sipped from the glass of tea. "Mighty slow for a meteor," he said.

He and Parker watched as the red wedge that indicated the *Elpis* and the tiny spot drew nearer to each other. The captain began to frown. Parker licked his lips nervously. "Sir, isn't it . . . isn't it changing direction?" he asked.

Ambarzumian said nothing for a moment. But the slow-moving dot's change of direction was undeniable. It was curving toward them now, and moving upward into their plane in a slow arc.

"I want direct view," Ambarzumian told the first officer abruptly.

Parker nodded. Direct view, since it involved considerable expenditure of power, was usually not called upon except at landing. He gave an order to the engineer.

Slowly the plates at the *Elpis'* bow slid back. Ambarzumian had got his field glasses out of the rack and was focusing them.

The object was quite near now, and since it was to the left of the *Elpis* while the sun was to the right, it was brilliantly illuminated. Ambarzumian studied it carefully through his field glasses.

He saw a small brownish ellipsoid, perfectly smooth and not at all like a meteor, coming slowly toward the ship. Even as he watched, it changed direction again and began to

move forward in a course that was exactly parallel to the *Elpis'* line of motion.

Parker had got his own glasses and was looking at the object too. "Sir, do you think it . . . might be a space mine or a shell?"

Ambarzumian shook his head. "No," he said with a conviction that may have been Tharg's legacy to him. "No, it's nothing like that."

XVII

IT HAD BEEN a long sleep. Tharg yawned and stretched luxuriously. Yes, it seemed to him he had been asleep a very long time. His muscles felt stiff and unused, strange to him.

He was suddenly wide awake, shocked into full consciousness by wonder. A long sleep? How could that be? The last thought he remembered having was a regret for his own annihilation, as his identity had dissolved into the great stream of human thought; and for untold eons before that he had been a mere dimensionless awareness, with no muscles to stretch, no body to be asleep or wakeful. Had he somehow acquired a body again?

He looked down at himself: His feet, his legs, his knees, his thighs, his hands, his arms, his chest, even his valued sex—all were there. Even the pouch between his shoulders, as he discovered by feeling, was present. He had a body again.

A body, but not entirely identical with the body he had had when he had lived on Earth billions of years ago. Though he felt perfectly real and solid to his own touch, his flesh was golden and faintly luminous, and his limbs had an unaccustomed lightness and buoyancy. The flesh and blood he had once had had meant limitation; this new body meant freedom. In short, it was his second body that he had.

How could that be? He had lost his second body long ago. It could not possibly have survived his long exile from it. Almost his last awareness, until now, had been of the annihilation of the sentient thought that had been Tharg. He had accepted the annihilation as regrettable but necessary. Had it somehow given him this new body?

Well, it was possible. From the thought-stream in which

he had lost his identity, he might have acquired energy so that a "new" second body could coagulate around what might be called the *idea* of Tharg. He had seemed to be dissolved completely. But he had been alien to the medium he was dissolved in, and in time he might, so to speak, have crystallized out of it again. Sugar can be dissolved in water, but it does not form a real chemical compound with it. There is always the possibility of the sugar recrystallizing out of the solution.

Yes, it was possible. And then, in the long space of time that had passed, the energetic, streaming force of human thought might have molded this new, ethereal vehicle for him. The body might have been built up, a little at a time, around the "idea" of him, as a pearl is built up, layer upon layer, around an initial grain of sand. The only thing he didn't understand was why, as his identity began to separate out from what it had been dissolved in, he hadn't been aware of himself. Perhaps the rushing force of thought had numbed him, even after he began to separate from it.

At any rate, he had a second body again. Where was he now? There was a brilliant blue sky over him, and the air seemed full of a pearly, golden light, a light without visible source.

Under his feet there was nothing. But he was not alarmed by this. Whatever it was that had need of support had found it, and was satisfied.

A sentence read eons ago, and only half understood then, came back to him. The gist of it was that on the second plane, when one is nowhere, one is everywhere. Utopia? Ou-topia? This bright emptiness was an antechamber to anything he desired. His new body had been attracted unerringly to its proper place, the second plane, and from there he had access to any time or any space. A multiplicity of choices spread out before him like the broadening blades on a fan.

He thought briefly of the second guidebook, the one sent to the indigenous inhabitants of Earth. Had it got through to them? Yes; his new body could never have been molded otherwise. Only the emancipated thoughts of beings who had received their birthright, the guidebook from interstellar space, would have had energy enough to shape this new

vehicle for him. Tharg had succeeded in what he had wanted to do.

A joyfulness like the quivering flash of light on water seized him. He had succeeded, and now he was free of the second plane. He had a multiplicity of choices? No, an infinity. He had only to will to go. He felt full of new power, like a green plant, ready to mount to the stars.

The *Elpis*' lounge also doubled as her dining salon. Captain Ambarzumian had ordered the dining table put up, and had had a glass of vodka set by every place. Now the whole crew of the *Elpis* sat around the table—the first officer, the chief engineer, his assistant, the electrician, the medical officer, the cook (who was also a chemist), and the mess boy (who had a Ph. D. in psychology).

Captain Ambarzumian sat at the head of the table. In the midst of the excitement he had found time to shave and change into his dress uniform. Now he got to his feet and addressed them formally.

"Gentlemen and comrades," he said, "I have asked you to assemble here because something very extraordinary has happened. Before I go any further, I should like to propose a toast to the success of our expedition and to the continued cooperation between our countries when we return to Earth."

There was a spatter of hand claps. They all drank. Ambarzumian put down his empty glass.

"Some two hours ago," he said, "the *Elpis* picked up a small object in her radar screen. The object was moving slowly and in a direction that, it first appeared, would take it far from our ship.

"As the *Elpis* continued on her course, however, the object gradually changed direction and in a short time was moving parallel to us.

"After considerable discussion, I directed Comrade—excuse me, Mister—Parker to have the object brought inside the *Elpis*. He did so. Here it is."

Ambarzumian reached around behind him to the sideboard. Holding the brownish ellipsoid in both hands, he deposited it on the dining table in front of his auditors.

"Now, this object is almost certainly an artifact. It is not a meteor, and it in no way resembles one. Preliminary tests

have failed to show what it is made of. Apparently it was moving in a direction that would have taken it to Earth, had not the *Elpis* deflected it from its course.

"It has been represented to me that this object may possibly be dangerous—that it may have been sent from some extraterrestrial source, perhaps a source outside the solar system, with a hostile intent. I do not agree with this view, but it is a possible one. It has further been represented to me that, since the object may perhaps be dangerous, we ought to destroy it.

"I should welcome discussion on this point."

There was a brief silence. Then the mess boy said, "I don't understand how we could destroy it, sir. The *Elpis* isn't carrying any weapons. She's a scientific ship."

"That is true," Ambarzumian answered. "But if this object were positioned at the rear of the ship, where it would be in range of a rocket blast, it could be subjected to a very high temperature. Of course, it is possible that this would have no effect on it."

There was another brief silence. Then Vladimir, the engineer, said, "Comrade Captain, why don't you call for a vote? I doubt there's much use in discussing what we should do with this object. I believe each of us has his mind made up."

"Would you mind putting that in the form of a motion, Comrade Vladimir?"

"Very well." He cleared his throat. "I move that we preserve this object and, uh, see whether it can be opened without damaging it."

"Do I hear a second?"

"Second the motion," said the mess boy.

"It has been moved and seconded that we preserve the object and attempt to open it. Will those in favor please raise their right hands?"

Every hand except Parker's went up. "Contrary minded?" asked the captain.

Parker put up his right hand, and then jerked it down again. "I withdraw my opposition," he said.

"Good," said Ambarzumian. He had begun to smile. "I believe this object is a container for something," he said, "perhaps for something of great value. Comrades and gentleman, this is a historic moment. Let us try to open it."