WORLDS OF IF

DECEMBER 1966
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SCIENCE FICTION

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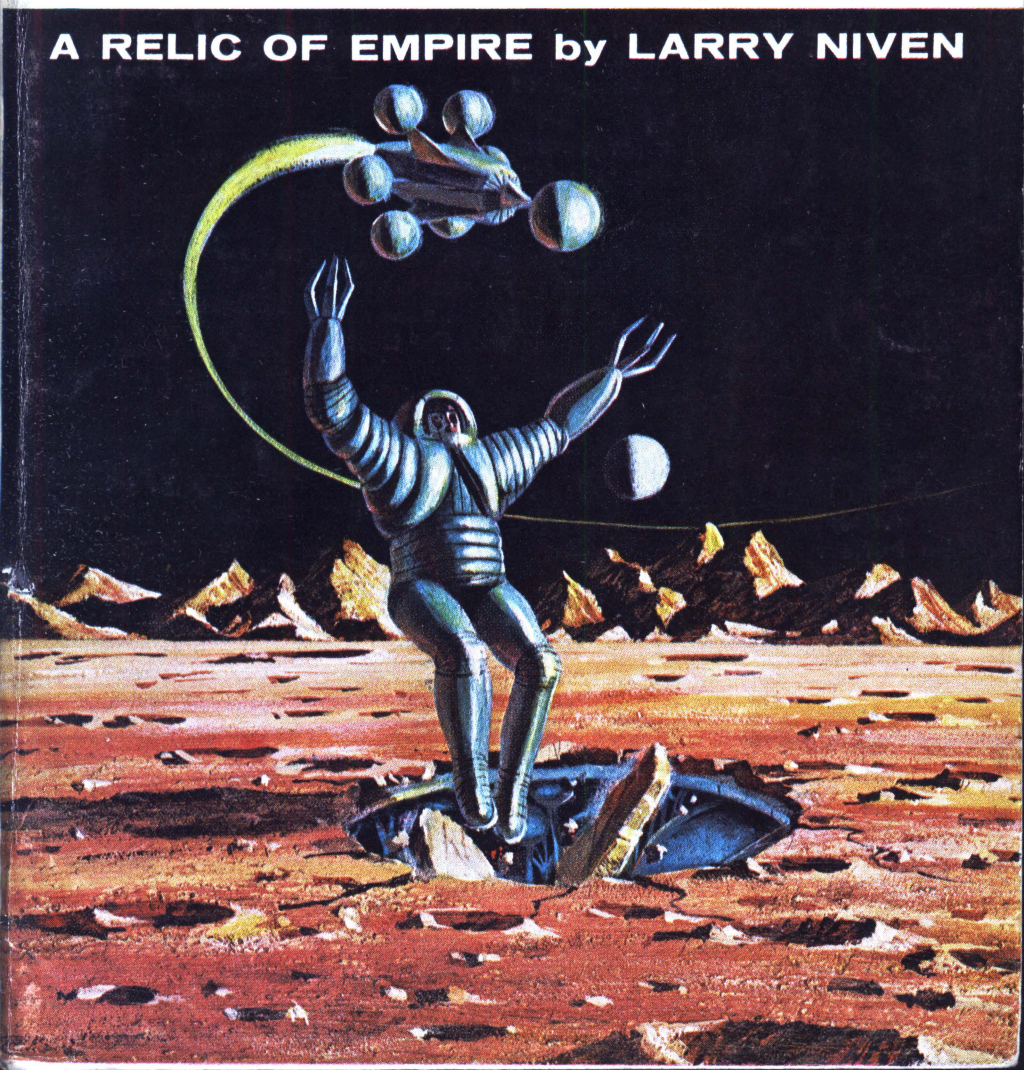
Complete new novel
BE MERRY

To save their lives, the aliens slew half of mankind. Now Man was taking his revenge!

A RELIC OF EMPIRE by LARRY NIVEN



DECEMBER, 1966
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WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

ALL NEW STORIES

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On Hugos

In case you missed it, we've got a piece of good news to pass along: at the World Science Fiction Convention in Cleveland, Labor Day weekend, the magazine to win the Hugo for best sf magazine in the world is — the one you're holding in your hand right now!

Naturally, we're delighted. Naturally, we're more determined than ever to try to hang on to it, now that we've got it. Seems to us the way to do it is by putting together the best stories we can find, and that's what we've been trying to do anyway . . . but it certainly gives us added incentive.

And it also gives us an idea.

Besides *If*, the Hugos — that is, the annual science-fiction achievement awards given by vote of the members of each year's world sf convention — went to:

Best Novel: Tie between Frank Herbert and Roger Zelazny.

Best Short Story: Harlan Ellison (for *"Repent, Harlequin!" Said the Ticktock Man*, which we are pleased to point out originally appeared in our sister magazine, *Galaxy*.)

Best All-Time Series: Isaac Asimov.

Best Artist: Frank Frazetta.

What struck us about the list is

"Look who's smiling now!"

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Occupation.....Working Hours....A.M.....P.M.

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that — well, say: wouldn't it be a nice thing to have an issue of a magazine that contained stories by Ellison, Herbert, Zelazny and Asimov — and had a cover by Frazetta? Especially if the magazine happened to be that other Hugo winner, *If*?

The more we thought of the idea, the more we liked it; and what we are doing now is attempting to make it come true. We already have several of the stories, and Frazetta working on a cover; and we hope to have the rest shortly . . . and that's what will be in *If* for March.

It's our way of saying thank you — very much.

The rest of the convention was interesting, too. We got to see of couple of TV and motion-picture previews — well, they were previews then; by the time you read this, they'll be yesterday's news, no doubt. But *Star Trek*, the new NBC television sf series, and the motion picture *Fantastic Voyage* both received rather surprisingly wholehearted enthusiasm from the viewers. What is surprising about it is not just that they were good. That is very likely to happen, if only because the producers of both had the wit to get writers who *know* science fiction to make up their scripts for them. (*Star Trek* has bought stories from Ted Sturgeon, Harlan Ellison and many other sf favorites; *Fantastic Voyage* was based on a story by old-time sf writer Jerry Bixby.) What surprised us was that not only did these have the ingredients that pleased us aficionados, but they also have clearly begun to register big successes with the public at large. Say, fellows, do you suppose public taste has begun to catch up with us?

Another pleasant sight at the convention was the clothes-of-tomorrow pageant sponsored by our companion magazine, *Galaxy*, and called, appropriately enough, *A Galaxy of Fashion*. (Maybe you saw it on television if you weren't there in person. If not, you may be getting some more chances; it will be carried on several programs this winter.) Some 22 glamorous girls dressed up in what they thought the well-dressed young lady of a couple centuries would be likely to wear. In some cases it was clear they thought they wouldn't wear *much* — but that wasn't too hard to take, either.

Interested? You might think of coming around to next year's convention and seeing for yourself. It will be in New York City, Labor Day weekend, and it ought to be something special.

For one thing, it's got a rather exceptionally well chosen Guest of Honor. You've seen him on these pages — most recently last month, as a matter of fact. And *we* see him quite a lot. It happens that, early in 1954, he and his wife came out to our home in New Jersey to spend a weekend. The weekend lasted several months; then they bought themselves a house down the road and they've been there ever since, much ornamenting the community by their presence.

His name? Why it's Lester del Rey, of course. Can you think of a better choice?

— THE EDITOR

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

BE MERRY

by ALGIS BUDRYS

Illustrated by MORROW

Two races had met on a collision course in space. Now the survivors of both had to learn to live again!

I

Our Old Man is a good Old Man. His name is Colston McCall, and I don't know what he used to do before. Now he's Chief of Policing for the Western District of Greater New York, and he knows what's important and what isn't.

I was sitting under a big pine tree, feeling weak and dizzy. I had taken a load of aspirin, and my stomach wasn't feeling right. But it was a nice sunny day. I could feel the soft, lumpy back giving in to the weight of my back. The branches made a sweet, shady canopy.

The ground was soft under the

spongey pine needles, too, and it felt good sitting there, looking out over the meadows. There were wild flowers growing.

We might have had that ground plowed up, and people planting things. But there weren't enough people to plow up everything, and we had as many fields going as we had machinery for. We were doing our best. It still took a lot of people who had to go into the warehouses for packaged food that hadn't spoiled. There just wasn't any way we could have been organized better. We all had something useful to do, all of us who weren't in beds. I shouldn't have been sitting under any tree.

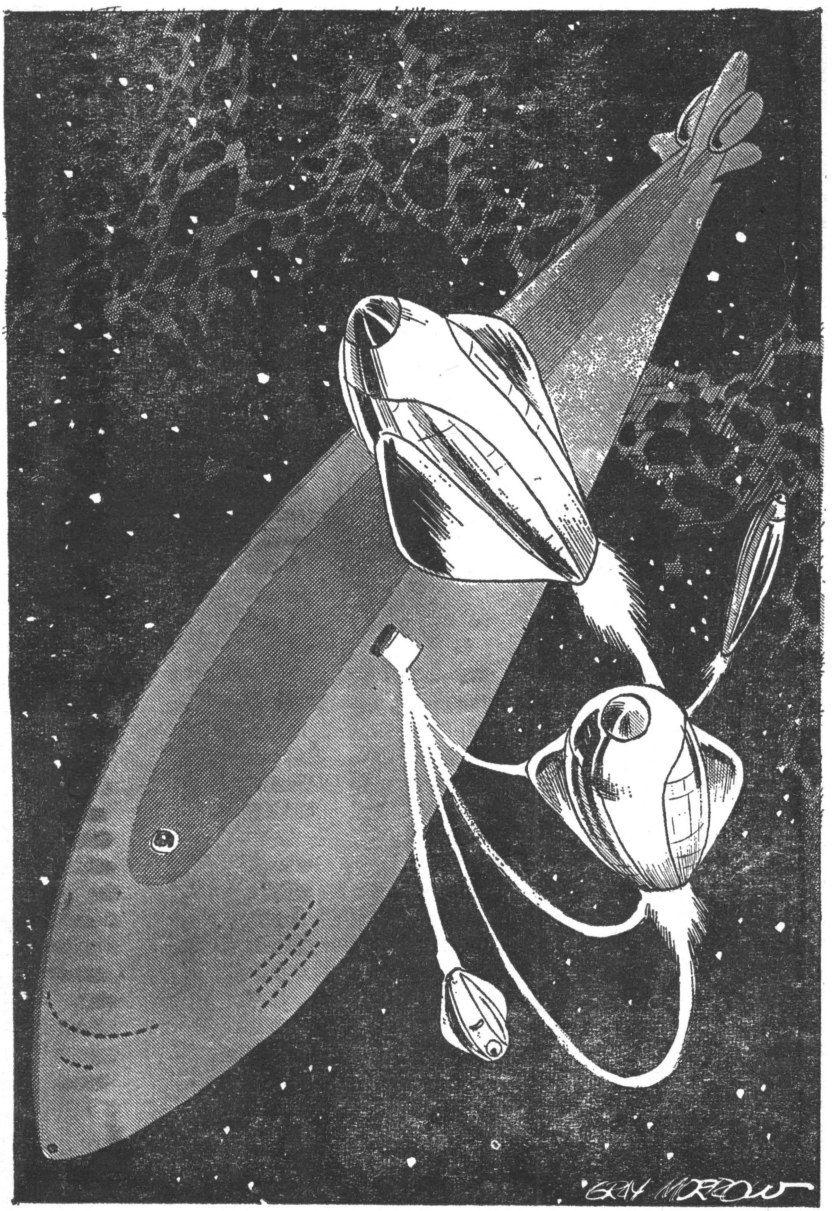
But it was a beautiful day, and I had been hurting bad all night and morning. The doctors in the hospital had given me a piece of paper saying I only had to work when I wanted to. I guess that means I only had to work when I could stand it, but if they had written it out that way it would have made a sadist out of anybody who asked me if I would do something for him. We've gotten very careful. Very considerate, in nice practical ways. Our manners are lousy, because there's no time to be polite, but it's true what people used to say — the fewer people are, the more important people become. I remember what it was like back in the 1960's, before the Klarri had their accident, but I can't believe how mean people used to be to each other. I remember specific things they did to each other, and it gets me boiling mad because that's how I'd feel if somebody tried to do that kind of thing to me these days. It's how we'd all feel.

I think some of the things that used to make us sick, before, came from living like that. I think that if I was fifteen years younger and just coming to make my own way in the world we have now, I wouldn't have my trouble, and I wouldn't have to sit here thinking. I mean, a man like me who had come so well through the Klarri sicknesses should have had a lot to do in this world, and instead I was shutting off because of something the old world had done to me.

I wished I wasn't sitting under the tree. I wished I wasn't trying to soak it all in. I knew that if I could, I would soak in all the sun and pine trees and wild flowers in the world, just for me.

I had thrown away the note the doctor had given me on the back of a page torn off a calendar pad. Well, you don't keep a note like that. Not when it's been written with a pencil stub by the light of a gasoline lantern in a big tent. Not when the doctor's so tired, and the people in the tent are so bad off from sicknesses nobody knows. I mean you don't walk around with something like that in your pocket. I would rather just sit here for a while and feel guilty.

But, you know, you can't keep that up very long. You know all you're doing is playing with yourself, because any time you feel guilty for having something simple and clearcut like cancer, you're really


GRAY MORROW

just pretending you can afford luxuries. I didn't have to feel guilty about anything, not one blessed thing. But it's human to feel guilty, and the thing about any kind of pain isn't the pain. It's that it turns you back to that wet, helpless thing you were when you were born. You know the sky and the earth have gone soft and could smother you or swallow you any time. You know it's not that way for anybody else. Other people are still doing things in a world that will still be there and be dependable tomorrow. But you're not. You've poled your raft to a one-man island of jelly. So you enjoy the chance to put splinters into yourself. And that's playing.

I was just starting to get up when Artel, my partner, came walking to me from the Old Man's house. "Ed," he said, "Mr. McCall wants to talk to us."

"Right," I said, and the two of us walked back. Facing this way, I could see all the tents, and the houses that had been turned into offices, and the tracks of trucks and people cutting back and forth across what used to be the front and back lawns of the development. The whole thing was turning into a plain of mud, but at least there was a decent amount of space between the houses and a decent amount of open ground to put up tents and prefabs on, instead of everything jammed together the way it was in the cities and towns.

It was rotten in the cities and towns. Not just the fires, or the other kinds of trouble you get when a bunch of close-packed people get awfully sick and lose their heads. We were over that, but still when you went into some place where the buildings were like walls along the street and everything should have been alive and working, selling shoes and groceries, the feeling of death would come over you and you couldn't do anything useful. They used to talk about how people were all moving out of the cities, before. Maybe because they already had something like that kind of feeling. Anyway, this place where the Old Man had set up was a development out along Route 46, and back in there up in the hills there were lakes and wild animals, and you had a better feeling. You had better contact with the permanent things of the world.

"Is he sending us out on something?" I asked Artel.

"Yes."

Artel didn't ever talk much. The Old Man had teamed us up about a year ago, and it worked well. Klarri are a lot like us. Their arms and legs are longer in proportion to their bodies, and their shoulders are wider. They have long, narrow skulls, with all of the cerebral cortex formed over what would be the back of the brain in a human, so if you're a highbrow among the Klarri, you're a bigdome. When they haven't washed for a few hours, there's a light, rusty deposit that forms on their skins and turns them that color. And nobody likes the way their teeth look. If a human being had teeth like that, he had

some bad vitamin deficiency when he was a kid. But they're decent people. When they look at a hospital, I think they feel exactly the way we would if spaceships of ours had brought pestilence to a whole world of theirs.

There's one other thing about Klarri. Their kids all walk bent forward, and so do some of their adults, because that's the way their spines are. But they have a lot of trouble with that. It's like appendicitis with humans, and there isn't a Klarr who isn't aware that he could have severe back trouble almost any time. So there's a lot of them have had a fusing operation on the lower spinal column, either because they became crippled, or they started to feel little twinges and they got worried and had it done right away. It's just like people. Only instead of appendicitis scars, the ones who've had the fusing operation have this funny way of walking and standing as if they were about to fall over backwards. Artel was like that, but he also had to wear a back brace because he'd been hurt in the lifeboat crash that killed his wife and children. Back braces are faster than re-fusing operations.

You see, there can't be any doubt about it any longer. You do the best you can. We don't much believe in theory any more. You can be as civilized as the Klarri, and know you shouldn't go around contaminating other people's worlds, but when your faster-than-light ship breaks down and you've got to ditch, you pile into the lifeboats and you ditch. If you're really lucky you've had your FTL breakdown within reaching-distance of a solar system, and the solar system's got a planet you can live on; you come down any way you can, and you don't put decontamination high on your priority list. Life is hard; it's hard for Klarri, it's hard for humans. You spend each day living with whatever happened the day before, and that's it — that's how it is in all Creation, for everything with brains enough.

II

Colston McCall was a big man — there must have been a time when he weighed close to two hundred fifty pounds. He was way over six feet tall, and now he was all muscle and bones except for a little bit of a belly. He was about fifty or fifty-five, I guess, and he would lean back in his chair and look at a problem and solve it in a voice that must have been hell on his help in the days when he was running some kind of company. Whenever he raised his voice and called out a man's name, that man would get there quickly.

We went through into his office, and he looked up and waved us toward a couple of folding metal chairs. "Sit down, men." We did, with Artel straddling his chair backwards the way cowboys did in movie saloons.

"How are you feeling, Ed?"

"All right."

The Old Man looked straight at me for just a second. "Can you go twenty miles to someplace where there might not be any doctors?"

Well, the only other answer to that is, "No sir, I'm ready to lie down and die," so I didn't say that.

"All right. There's a town down the coast where nobody's sick."

Artel sat up straight. "I beg your pardon?"

The Old Man laid his hand down flat on a small stack of papers. "These people have never asked for any medicines. Now, I don't know what that means. We first contacted them about two and a half years ago. One of our scouts found a party from their town foraging through the highway discount houses down along Route 35, there."

I nodded. That was the usual pattern in those days. The towns were all gutted on the inside, and any survivors had to start spreading out and looking for supplies outside. But that was a mug's game. You burned up what fuel you had, running emptier and emptier trucks farther and farther, coming back with less and less. What happened after that was they'd pool their remaining fuel, load everybody into the trucks and come busting up north, because everybody had the idea the big city had to be different.

The Old Man went on: "Well, it turned out that, for once in a great while, these were the kind of people who'd stay put if we'd promise to send food down. So that's how it's been ever since."

And pretty grateful we were, too, I thought.

"Well, that was all right," the Old Man said, "but it's getting to be too much of a good thing, maybe. They're not complaining at all. You've got to figure any medical supplies they might have had left would be pretty much down to basics by now. Your antibiotics and your other fancy drugs either don't exist any more or have turned to mush. Well, hell, you know that."

We knew. It was the biggest problem we had; things were tightening up pretty badly. And it wasn't any use being able to grow penicillin or any of those fermentation drugs you don't need much of a plant for, in a pinch. All that stuff was just so much extra peanut butter on the sandwich for the strains of bug we had now.

"But these people don't seem to have noticed that. They don't even complain about their food; they take whatever the trucks bring, they never ask for more, they never ask for anything different from what they get. I don't like it when people don't gripe about what we can deliver. And these people just take it and go away with it and never say a word."

"How many people?" I asked.

"A hundred and eighty-odd. I cut down their ration by three per cent just to see what would happen. They haven't reacted at all. About the medicine, I had one of the drivers ask them if they needed a doctor, and they said no. They didn't say they had a doctor, and they didn't say they were all healthy. They just said 'No' and walked away."

"They're either very lucky or very generous," Artel said.

The Old Man gave him a quick look. "I'm always ready to believe in those things up to a point. But

now I'd like to know if maybe there's something they haven't told anybody about."

Artel nodded.

I wanted to know about the food part. "What kind of a town is it?" I asked. "What kind of people are they? Could they be fishing or farming?"

"Not in that country," the Old Man said. "They're just property owners — squatters, some of them, but it's a community. All friends and relatives, all townies. Real estate agents, storekeepers, tree surgeons— all they know is how to sell cars and salt water taffy to each other." He sounded angry. The same thing angered us all: it had turned out farming was more than scratching the ground and dropping seeds into it. And it's slow, besides being hard to learn. He'd tell you just the opposite, but your hungry townsmen would rather die than farm.

It sounds good, to just wave a hand and say, "Let there be light again." But *that's* the kind of thing that drives you wild. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are ducks, and they nibble you to death.

"No, I don't believe it," the Old Man said, slapping the inventory control forms again. "Go down there and find out about it. Come back and tell me about it, quietly. Quietly."

"Of course," Artel said. "It wouldn't do to raise false hopes."

"Or even real ones." That was what made him a leader and me and Artel troopers. Our Old Man likes to go softly. He might not have been a top man before, when you had to move bing, bing, bing because the competition was clicking along right behind you. But he was good for us now.

You want to keep it soft. You want to take it slow and easy, and you have to know what to let slide. Cancer, they say, used to hit twenty-five per cent of the population in one of its forms or another. They had been pretty close to cures, before. They weren't any closer now, because you can afford to ignore something like that when you've had diseases that each kill sixty, seventy per cent in one summer.

You don't even care whether it was all the Klarri's fault or not. They were in awful trouble, too, cast away on an uncharted shoal, with our diseases beating the hell out of their survivors, and them with fewer biochemists than we had. I mean — what are you going to do? You could have some kind of lurching war and string them all up to lampposts, but there were better things to do with the energy, especially now that the first impact had passed and most of us that were going to die of each other were pretty much dead. If somebody was to put me in a time machine and send me back to 1960, the people then ought to shoot me down like a mad dog in the streets; I was carrying more kinds of death in me than anybody ever dreamed of, before. And if it wasn't for this home-grown thing of my own, I'd count as a healthy man by today's way of judging. So you don't worry about yesterday. You take what you have, and you work with it today.

"All right," the Old Man said. "Go down there, the two of you. Maybe we've got a miracle." That was as close as any one of the three of us got to laughing and clapping each other on the back and crying hallelujah.

I went down to the hospital while Artel waited for me. I walked through to the back, to where the dispensary was. The idea was, if you were well enough to walk in and ask for medicine, you had better be sick enough to walk by all those beds and still want medicine. I saw them all; the ones with the sores, and the ones with the twisted limbs, the ones with the blind eyes, and the ones with the hemorrhages. I heard them and I smelled them, human and Klarri.

These were survivors. The losers were dead. These were the ones you could expect still had a chance to live, if they could be kept strong enough to avoid things like pneumonia and the other killers of the weakened. I still had some kind of low-grade lymph node trouble. My arms would go to sleep, and I couldn't squeeze anything very hard without having my fingers go numb for hours afterward. While they were trying to do something about whatever bug it was that had made my lymphatic system react, they found this other thing that had been living in me for quite some time already.

It didn't matter. I was around yet to walk down between the beds. Now, my Mary had drowned in her own blood. And I'd had this kid, about six, with his own little two-wheeler. A sidewalk bike, with solid rubber wheels, that was supposed to be for just diddling around in front of the house. Kind of a first step after graduating from a trike. There was an ice cream store that was open on Sundays fourteen blocks away from where we lived, and about ten days before the Klarri lifeboats came showering in from the sky, this kid and I had gone to that ice cream store, with me on my Sears, Roebuck three speed and him on that boneshaker of his. Six years old, and pumping away like mad with just a little four-inch crank sprocket that gave him no speed at all, and me reminding him to slow down and pace himself, and him grinning over at me as he went bouncing over the potholes in the alleys. Good little kid.

The dispenser nodded when he saw me coming. He was a young Klarr, usually with his head bent over a medical dictionary; the wall had human and Klarr anatomical charts, and there was a human clerk putting together the mimeographed pages of a new medical text. We were beginning to shape up. For a long time, now, the Old Man hadn't been letting them put Klarr and human patients at separate ends of the tents. The idea was, if you were doctor in the ward, by now you ought to be able to work most of the problems you saw no matter who had them. You'd have maybe one or two Klarr patients in the hospital at any time. It meant something that you'd always have more Klarr than

that on the staff, or studying to join it.

Anyway, I showed the dispenser my Special Branch requisition permit, and he punched another notch on the edge of it and gave me a plastic bottle with twenty-five aspirins, and I said thank you and went back out through the tent. There was a supply truck running down to Trenton that would come within twenty or twenty-five miles of this place we were going to. Artel had drawn a couple of bikes from the transport pool for us on his permit and was just lashing them on to the side of the truck. We got in and we rode in the back, on top of a bunch of cases and bags. Artel made a kind of a hump-back pad out of bean sacks for himself and lay down on his stomach. I wedged myself into a nice tight fit where I wouldn't be bounced around too much, and after a while we took off.

III

The name of the town was Ocean Heights. After the truck dropped us, we moved toward it through some very pretty country, using the Garden State Parkway for a while. We had good gear; Artel's bike was a Peugeot and mine was a Raleigh, both of them fifteen-speed lightweights with high pressure sew-up tires and rat-trap pedals; they weren't specially comfortable, but they were very fast on any kind of decent surface, and with all that gearing to choose from, hill-and-dale touring was a snap.

We each had a .22 hunting rifle — the Old Man would have had our hearts if we'd carried anything to kill more people with — and some food, some tools and a water bottle apiece. We looked very technological, and you feel pretty good when you've got good gear. So we were both pretty well off in our own minds as we went zipping along, through the pine woods and along that smooth asphalt track. When we cut off and got onto Route 35, of course, we started running into signs of taffy salesman life — lots of roadside stands and one saloon painted DaGlo orange, and a lot of garden tool and outboard motor shops, along with great big discount centers. All of it looked shabby, beat up, and just a shell. There was nothing left in the discount houses but phonograph records, and little plastic pots to raise rubber plants in, and games made by the Wham-O Manufacturing Company. The wind was in off the ocean, and that was all right too.

It started to get dark while we were still five miles way from Ocean Heights. That was the way we wanted it.

We took ourselves a couple of miles further, and then we cut out up a side road, into the woods. We found a good place to leave the bikes and made a little bit of a camp. It was good getting off the bike. Artel was walking very slowly, and he was leaning farther over backwards than ever. I didn't remark on it; I guess I've already said that in our own eyes from ten or fifteen years before, we'd all seemed like

very rude people. Artel sighed when we were finally able to sit down and lean against something. So did I, I guess.

We sat down close together. Artel had one of those squeeze type flashlights that generates its own power. We put my windbreaker over our heads to muffle the light and we studied the map, laying out a heading for Ocean Heights from where we were. We'd be able to walk it in not much more than a couple of hours. We got our compass headings straight in our heads, and then we were able to come out from under the windbreaker, which was all right with me. One of the reasons Artel and I could work as a team was because I didn't mind his smell. (That was what I said; actually, I liked it). But not in big doses like this. It was like eating a pound of milk chocolate.

We'd done this kind of thing before; we knew what we were doing. A couple of hours from now, when it was still dark and we could expect most people to be thinking of sleep, we'd get moving, so that by the time we hit the place it would be tight-fast in dreamland. We'd ghost around and find out what we could. Get the lay of the land, figure an escape route and boltholes if we needed them. It sounds like playing Indians, but it's the kind of technique you work out when you're dealing with unkown people these days. You can't even tell in advance sometimes whether they're humans or Klarri; that was originally why a Special Branch team had to have at least one of each.

We sat in the woods and waited until it was time to move. We didn't talk much as a rule. For one thing, what had happened to Artel's respiratory system gave him a lot of trouble with breath control. For another thing, life's too simple to need a lot of conversation. But it was lonely out there, and nightfall bothers me. "Listen," I asked Artel, "do you think your people will ever find you?"

"Pretty unlikely," he said after a while. "The volume they'd have to search is mighty big." After a while he added: "It'd be better if they didn't. We'd be as deadly now to our home as we were to you." I could see him smile a little. "We Klarri here have traded too much back and forth with Earth. We've become much more like you than like our people."

He folded his arms with his hands over his shoulders, the way they do. "I don't see much difference between us, in anything, really. Our machinery may be a little better. But most of us don't understand it any better than you understand yours. We lose ships, once in a while. We don't find them any more often than you'd expect. We have to pretend this isn't so, because otherwise we couldn't sell tickets to each other."

"Travel agents about the same any place, I guess," I said.

He shrugged. "Civilization's about the same any place. You take a ship from one star to another, and you say to yourself, 'Here's something my father couldn't do.' It's true. My father couldn't infect a world with a

population of three billion, either. Nor lose an interstellar passenger ship. And end with only a few thousand survivors from it. And have a whole future to solve."

He pushed himself down and lay on his back for a minute, with his hands behind his head, looking up. "I'm glad I don't have to imagine how they're going to do it." He didn't sound particularly worried; well, it wasn't our problem. I'd heard humans and Klarri talk about things like what'll happen when we build spaceships again. It's a cinch they won't be rockets; they'll be a lot like the Klarr ships, I guess. But where will they go? Looking for planets where Klarri and humans from Earth could start the same business of living together, or contacting the Klarr worlds, or what? What would happen if we met Klarri from some political faction that didn't like our Klarri? Well, there are damn fools everywhere, I guess. When the real problems really came, they'd more than likely have some shape of their own, and they'd either be solved or flubbed in some way that was possible to their own time.

"You heard about this new idea?" Artel said cautiously. "There's some biochemist with a hypothesis. He says that with two or three generations of gene-manipulation, it might be possible to have Klarr- and human-descended compromise people who could breed true with each other. Think there's anything to that?"

"I've heard that. What do I know?" It shouldn't have, but the idea made my stomach turn. I guess Artel felt the same way.

"It's an idea," Artel said, and I could see he didn't like it any better than I did. But that was one of those things the two of us didn't have to worry about. And I appreciated what he was trying to do. You try to make as much contact as you can. Probably the Old Man has put us together originally because we were both lonely in the same way. Everybody wants to see a team as good as possible. Just for its own sake; not just because so many of the Klarr ships had happened to hit the Western Hemisphere. Other places, there'd been so few Klarr, I think they killed them all during the pestilence feelings. There were people who talked about national pride being involved; they said a lot of things like that, maybe getting ready to hand the next generation something they could go to war about.

Talk's all right in its place. Now we'd done some, Artel and I just waited in the woods.

IV

At about ten o'clock we started to slide into the outskirts of Ocean Heights. These Jersey coast towns are all a lot alike. There's always a highway paralleling the ocean, leaving a strip maybe three miles wide with feeder roads running down to the Atlantic. Follow the feeder road and you find you're on the main street of some town that was in its heyday in 1880. Right up near the water there'll be a strip of big Steamboat Gothic summer homes; frame and shingle construction, three, four

storeys high, with lots of cupolas, and gingerbread, and maybe even an imitation widow's walk. Big verandas, hollow wooden columns and lots of etched glass in the ground-floor windows. Some people think that's a sign of gracious living. I think it just proves how much we wanted mass production.

Closer in toward town there'll be a lot of stores. Some of them will have bright new cast stone or aluminum fronts, but the buildings are all fifty years old behind them. There'll be a couple of yellow firebrick structures, with almost anything in on their ground floors now, that used to be the A & P and the Woolworth's. Those moved out to the shopping center back in the 1950's. There'll be a couple of movie theaters, and one of them was closed long before the rouble hit the town itself. There's a Masonic Temple, churches of various Christian denominations, a hotel for little old ladies and salesmen. Used car lots full of stuff carrying ten dollars worth of paint over the salt rust. A railroad track. A couple of television repair stores, and a weekly four-page newspaper dedicated to getting people to shop at home.

On the ocean there are some seafood restaurants, a miniature golf course and a building that looks like a horse barn but in the summertime houses a wheel of fortune and a couple of dart-toss games, with most of the stalls standing empty even in the height of the season. The parking lot for the oceanfront amusements is where the dog track used to be. The boardwalk is falling down everywhere. There are piles and sheets of rusty iron sticking up out of the beaches farther along, where the boardwalk used to reach. The people say it's the Republican legislators from the inland counties, with their blue laws, that killed these towns. If you approach from the beach, the first thing you notice is the plastic-coated paper from the frozen custard stands. It doesn't mash up and wash into the ground at all; it just turns gray.

We slid on in through the outskirts. Artel said: "It was bad here."

Looked like it. There was a lot of burnt pits full of bricks and pieces of charred timber, with dead trees standing around them, where there had been fires. There was all sorts of trash in the gutters, swept in from the fires and the general scraps that blow around and pile up when nobody collects them. The gutters were clogged with odd pieces of wood, tarpaper, sand and gravel. The sewer grates were all choked, and the streets were broken down. Rain water and frost had broken up the asphalt and undermined the cement. Some of the streets had been laid in brick, and they now looked as if long walls had collapsed onto the ground. It wasn't unless you looked hard, toward the ocean, that you could see the occasional lantern burning and could believe that anyone lived on beyond this mess.

We found only one street that was really open. It had truck ruts in it, with trash smashed down into them, and unmarked sand washed into pools in other places. The last sup-

ply run had been a couple of weeks ago, and it looked as if our trucks were the only things that came and went. Once we had found the main drag this way, we moved off away from it and worked our way along the back streets. We came across dead cars, and the weathered tumble-down of barricades. Once I tripped over a shotgun with a broken stock, the wood grainy from rainwater and sunlight, the barrels just tubes of rust. "You'd think they'd have cleaned up the useful things," Artel said.

"It's broken."

"But it could have been fixed."

"No, not here," I said. The soil was sand, just one great big bar that the Atlantic had raised over thousands of years of pounding itself up against the rock coast of what were now the northern counties, and you couldn't raise anything on it but scrub pine. West of the line running from New York down to Camden you were off the interstate highways and main railroads. The only thing you could do with this part of the world was sleep in it and play in it, and sell taffy to each other. We'd passed a horse-racing track coming in. Big looming plant, standing dirty in the darkness. Its parking lots had been full of cars, and there was a smell, originally trapped in all that wet upholstery, that hung in the air. That was as far as they'd gotten — the people trying to get out of the city. They were turned back by the local cops, cursing and sweating, and thanking God there was some place to point to where all those people could go to die.

Farther in toward the town we passed the Women's Club building —a big place with a phony Grecian front, that the local people had probably tried to make into a supplementary hospital at this end of town. We padded on up the steps, and there were three-year-old bodies right up against the doors, inside. We backed off.

"We won't find anyone living right around here," Artel said. Twenty years from now, the Women's Club building and the cinderblock walls of the bowling alley down the street would be all that stuck up out of the second growth. There'd be trees growing out of the sewers.

We crossed the railroad tracks, and we stood there as if we'd just sat straight up in bed in the middle of the night. The first thing I noticed was the smell of fresh paint. But there was plenty of other stuff to hit you, all at once.

It must have been one of the best parts of the town to begin with. The houses were brick, two and three storeys high. They were all set in the middle of very nice lots, and most of them had those Georgian fronts that spell class. In daylight, we might have seen soot and patches in some of the brickwork, but we didn't see it now. All the outlines were crisp and sharp; there wasn't a warped board or a sagging roof anywhere here. There were neat, well located privies in the backyards, we found as we started to move around. The fronts of them were made out of brick and had shrubs planted around them.

It was all like that. The hedges were trimmed. The lawns were like velvet. There wasn't a chipped place in any sidewalk, nor litter on the grass, or anything.

There were lanterns burning upstairs in two or three of the houses. "What the hell?" I said. There were eight or ten solid blocks of this stuff. All it needed was a wall around it.

"This is 'way off the supply route," Artel said. "To see this part, you'd have to do what we did. You notice the trees — how thick they are? I think they even had airplanes in mind when they picked this spot."

"Listen," I said. From one of the houses, through a window open to the soft night air, you could hear it: *"Bella figlia del amore . . . "*

"What is that?" Artel asked.

"Opera. Somebody's got a wind-up phonograph."

"Or a generator."

"But no bulldozer to bury his dead with."

Artel looked back over his shoulder toward the other side of the railroad tracks. "That is different."

We kept moving, with faint music. There was no other living sound. No night birds, no cats in love, no dogs. There wasn't any sound of people sneaking through yards. This town didn't have teenagers who liked to visit each other. All these people were locked up tight in their little clean town-within-a-town, most of them sleeping the sleep of the innocent. The innocent and the healthy.

We worked our way closer toward the ocean. We were only a block away from it. The waves were rolling in to the shore regularly and gently, making the only steady sound we could hear, now that we were out of range of the phonograph. I looked back over my shoulder, and I could see nothing but those few upstairs lights, some of which had been put out since we had gone by. Solid citizens turning in. I thought they were lantern lights. They might have been lightbulbs on low voltage. We were getting more questions than answers out of this town.

We got down to the beach, and we found another dirty fringe — a motel with its windows broken out, a playground with scrub bushes growing up among the teeter-totters and the monkey bars, a flight of wooden steps tumbled down the stone jumble of the sea wall. If you had been going by in a boat you would have never known about that neat little clean patch with its edged flower beds and its unlittered streets.

There was a big, dark building just inland of the playground. Flat-sided and square, it was two storeys high, and the ground floor windows were well over the height of a man's head, long and very narrow. If this was a war, and the building was at a crossroads, I would have reported it for a bunker. The sign over the doorway said "Ocean Heights Professional Bldg." The double doors were at the head of a flight of stairs set back and flanked by solid masonry. I could have defended it from the inside with one machine-gun. There was a padlock hanging on the doors, closing a chain looped through the handles.

"There was a gambling casino in Ocean Heights during World War II," Artel said. He was the one who'd gone through the Old Man's background file on the town. "It was closed by state investigators in 1947."

"We've found it." Going by the delicately scalloped, once white-painted directory board bolted to the wall beside the stairs, an architect and a real estate agent had set up offices in it after the space became available. There was no sound in it now, and no lights. But I noticed something, and it made me wonder. I pulled in a deep breath through my nose.

"It's not empty," I said.

"I agree," Artel said. "I have that feeling. And yet I can't say why." In the starlight, I could see him shake his head quickly. "It bothers me. It was built to be a hiding place. They might be doing almost anything in there."

"Let's look around some more," I said.

"If you say so," Artel said hesitatingly.

The other thing we found was down at the beach. It was something looming, most of it under the water, the waves phosphorescing weakly against the one side that we could see. It stretched away into the darkness, and its curved sides went up like the biggest dead whale in the world. I could see a long strut extending out over the water at a shallow angle, and the round circle of a landing pad hanging at a crazy angle from the end of it. It was a crashed Klarri lifeboat.

"What happened to the people in it, I wonder," Artel said.

"They're in that building back there. Locked up and kept out of sight," I said. I had smelled them, the scent seeping out weakly through the double doors and God knew how many other barriers inside. "What do you want to do about it?"

It was up to him. They were his people. If he wanted us to go in there and break them out now, I didn't see any way for me not to help him. Maybe we could get away with it; I wasn't crazy about the idea of trying to do all that without making any noise, but it was up to him. "Anything you say."

"Come off it, Ed. We don't know anywhere near enough about the situation in this place. We haven't found what we were sent for." Artel sounded a little mad. He had a right to be. I'd as good as said he wasn't a team man. I felt bad about having been rude. "Come on — let's go back to camp. We had a plan and let's follow it." Artel slipped off into the darkness.

I followed him. We didn't say anything more to each other that night. We got back to our camp and sacked out.

A team is a little bit like a marriage. I don't care what anybody says, sometimes it's better not to talk it out. It makes you feel like hell for a while, but you've got an even chance the next morning one or the other of you will say something in a friendly way and then the other one will feel relieved and it will be all over.

V

In the morning we went in straight. There's no point to horsing around. If we'd had things like phone taps, snooper microphones and truth serum to work with, we might have decided on something different. But life's too simple these days for any of that kind of stuff to be worth a damn. We'd just ask them questions, and then see what their lies added up to.

Coming down to main drag on our bikes, we went right through the dead shopping district of the town and then cut right on a concrete street a couple of blocks in from the ocean. I figured we'd be coming up to signs of life soon.

What we heard first was the sound of a ball bat from some field two or three blocks away and off to our right, somewhere near where the clean patch of houses was. We couldn't see anything, but we could hear kids yell; it was the kind of noise you get from a schoolyard at recess time.

We made another half a block, still going by houses that were all abandoned, and then we heard some little kid yelling "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" The sound of fast, little feet on the floor of a veranda went clattering in echoes along the street, and then a screen door slammed shut. We'd finally been spotted. We stopped and began walking our bikes up the middle of the street.

About a hundred fifty yards ahead there was a traffic light hanging from guy wires over an intersection. There were a couple of gas stations there, and the drive-in apron of an ice cream stand. It made a kind of open place where you might expect people to gather when you unloaded your supply truck. Between there and us there were a couple of houses that might be lived in. They didn't have any broken glass in their windows, and there were light-colored streaks of unpainted putty in places along the sash. They didn't look neat, but they looked livable. They looked about the way you might expect houses to look in a town, if it wasn't a town on its feet enough to have that nice little residential section tucked away back there.

A screen door slammed again, and this time we caught the direction of the sound. It was coming from a couple of houses down and to our right. It was a big, green, three-story house, and we could see faces at the windows, but the glass was dirty, and we couldn't tell much about them. What we could see was the man coming out from the veranda and walking down the front steps. He stood there for a minute as we came closer.

He was a tall, thin, oldish-looking man with a checked shirt and suit pants, wearing glasses and carrying a pipe in his hand. He looked seedy and comfortable, with the pants hanging down flat and butt-strung behind, and the knees baggy in front. He waved a hand at us in a nice neighborly way, and then he walked around the side of the house. There was a sudden hammering of metal on metal — a wild, carrying sound — and all the other noises we'd been hearing stopped. The only

things to listen to were the steady wash of the ocean off to our left and the grit of our tires on the street. The man came back from around the house just as we reached his front walk. He had bushy salt-and-pepper hair growing out of the sides and back of his head, and a streak of it growing back from his forehead; his hairline was shaped like a thick-tined pitchfork, and he reminded me of all the retired men who might come around to your place in the summertime and help you build a rose arbor for a few dollars.

"Howdy!" he said. "Didn't hear you coming." He was looking closely at Artel. I had the feeling he was having trouble making up his mind whether Artel could possibly be a Klarr.

"Howdy," I said. "My name's Ed Dorsey. This is my partner, Loovan Artel. Artel's his first name. What was all that racket?"

The man came forward and stuck out his hand. "My name's Walter Sherman. Got one of those iron fire-alarm rings set up next to the house. I kinda let people know when we've got company. Pleased to meet you." He shook my hand, and then he gave Artel another look, very fast. He thought it over and shook Artel's hand. "Pleased to meet *you*."

"My pleasure," Artel said, grinning a little.

Sherman blinked once. He was trying to act right. He was doing pretty well, I thought, considering he hadn't ever before seen a Klarr wearing human clothes and riding a bicycle. Sherman looked all right, too. He was getting old, but there was a nice glint in his eye and good color in his face. His hair wasn't dead and dull, and the whites of his eyes were clear. He didn't move or talk like a man who was anywhere near sitting down and waiting to get older. He looked like an upstanding gent, and you don't get to see very many of those any more.

I took a quick look around.

There were people beginning to show up. One or two of them were coming out of nearby houses, but most of them were beginning to gather down at the intersection under the traffic light, coming up side streets and back from where the clean houses were. Just looking down that way, if you were a supply truck driver, say, you'd guess that they had all come out of the houses down there. "We're from Philadelphia," I said to Sherman. "Survey team." Artel and I got cards out of our shirt pockets and showed them to him. They were signed "F. X. Daley, United States Commissioner, Philadelphia District."

"We're just starting to check this part of the country," I said as Sherman took the cards in his hand and studied them, peering and blinking with the pipe in his mouth. The pipe was cold and empty — had been for years, probably. "We'd just like to find out a little bit about this community — how many people, what kind of social organization . . . that kind of thing."

"That's right, sir," Artel said. "We'd appreciate your cooperation.

Or if you'd rather direct us right away to your mayor or whoever's in charge, why, we'll get out of your front yard and let you go back to what you were doing."

"Oh, no — that's all right," Sherman said, handing us back the cards. "I imagine there'll be some people from our Town Council here in a minute. Glad to help."

There wasn't any doubt we were bothering him. He was talking off the top of his head and thinking very hard about something else. I wondered for a minute if these people had some way of knowing there wasn't anything in Philadelphia — not a blessed thing — but it didn't seem likely. One of the hardest things to be sure of in this world is nothing.

"Well, come in and — " he waved with his pipe toward the steps of his veranda. "Ah, why don't you sit down?" He was looking at the touring saddles on our bikes. "I imagine it might be nice to rest yourselves on something flat."

He tried to chuckle. He was trying to be pleasant, he really was. But we had caught him off base very bad by not coming into town with a truck engine roaring ahead of us, and by not both of us being human.

We sat down on his front steps. We left our bikes up on their kickstands, with the .22's strapped down to the carriers, just like any survey team would have.

"You — ah — people look bushed," Sherman said. "You come all the way from Philadelphia on those bikes?"

I nodded. "Easy stages, yeah," I told him. "There's a lot to check out." He looked a lot healthier than either one of us, that was for sure.

"We ought to explain," Artel said. "It's the people who can't do a regular day's work they can spare for things like surveys." Like me, he was watching the bunch of people coming toward us. They were walking fast. Not running; just coming on at a good pace. There were young and old, and a few kids, a good mixed human crowd coming to the railroad station to watch the streamliner go by. A good, healthy crowd. Even not running, they were moving faster than any bunch of people I'd seen in years. They looked good; clean, eager. They looked the way people ought to look when something exciting is happening. You could see the front ones slow down and frown as they made out what Artel was.

A freckled man in suntans and a rainhat, with squint-wrinkles around his blue eyes, came through them as they began to gather into a clump on Sherman's front lawn. "Hi Walt!" he said as he came up to us. "I see you got company."

"Couple of government men from Philadelphia," Sherman said.

"Philadelphia, eh?" he said, shaking hands with us as we stood up. "My name's Luther Koning. Pleased to meet you both."

"Luther's sort of like our mayor," Sherman explained.

Whatever he was, he was the man we'd come to see. I guessed he was about fifty; all long,

flat muscle under that weather-tight skin, and able to act as if it was nothing unusual to see a Klarr walking around outside that big, silent building out behind the abandoned playground. He had fast reactions, Koning did, and where other people had slowed to a walk and stopped, he had come on forward.

"Glad to meet you," I said. I told him my name, and I told him: "This is Artel, my partner.",

"Mm-hmm," Koning said. "Well, I can see that," he said in an agreeable enough voice, looking over at that bicycles and the two rifles. "Two equally intelligent races in the same jam, after all. They waste their strength in fighting, there's no hope at all. So they work together. It makes sense." He looked at me and then at Artel. "You look tired — both of you. Things still aren't so good in the big city, huh?"

"Things aren't so good anywhere, Mr. Koning," Artel said. "But we're trying to make them better. That's why we're here."

"Why *are* you here?" Koning grinned again. "We're standing here talking, and for all I know you two are anxious to get something done right away."

"They've got I.D. cards here from Philadelphia," Walter Sherman said. He had gotten a chance to settle down some, and his voice was easier. But he was really fast in getting that across to Koning, even though he said it in a careless voice. "Gave me a turn, coming in that way. On bicycles." He chuckled: "Real fancy machines, those are. Smart idea. Saves on gasoline." I think the point he was trying to make was that we were dissimilar from the people who came in trucks, and that we might not even know about any other organization.

"We're just trying to find out if you people need anything," I said harmlessly to Koning. I was watching the crowd. There were thirty or forty of them, and it seemed to me that any time you can collect twenty per cent of the total population at the drop of a hat, you're dealing with an excitable population. But they didn't look jumpy the way a crowd of sick-nervous people might. You don't see the kind of shuffling and fevery face-jerking you get sometimes. These people weren't looking for excitement. Sick people need excitement because it interrupts their misery. When they get it, they lose their dignity; it's a dose of the stuff they crave, and when you pour it out in front of them they can't hide how much they need it. These people weren't like that. They didn't need to be a mob. But they were very, very interested. Like members of the same club, and a famous guest-lecturer. There wasn't a Klarr among them. That would have struck me even if I hadn't known about the special building.

I couldn't make this crowd out. I kept looking at them; men of all ages, housewife-types in cotton print dresses, some of them with water-spotted aprons around their middles where they'd been washing up the breakfast dishes. There were young men in T-shirts, who looked as if they'd been working around the yard, and older men who were like

Sherman and Koning in looking like they'd lived useful, cheerful lives, and had a lot of useful time in them. It was the kind of crowd that gives you the feeling life is comfortable and pleasant all the time. There wasn't another one like it in the whole world.

It bothered the hell out of me. Some of the kids had brought their gloves and started a game of catch out beyond the fringes of the crowd. Other kids were circulating back and forth; you couldn't get their attention with a conversation on a veranda, but they were either going to be where the attraction was, whatever it was, or they were going to spread the news. Some of them had been up to Sherman's house and back down to the intersection several times already. Now one of them on the edges of crowd yelled: "Here comes Tully!" Koning turned around as if he'd been shot, but he recovered nicely.

"Hey! Let's keep it down; we're trying to talk here," he said. But he kept looking sideways over at a man ambling along the sidewalk, so Artel and I did too.

VI

Tully was like one of those men you'll see sitting on a beachfront bench staring out over the water. Nobody can do anything for or to them. They're past the big tussle. He had given up trying to look as if God never made pot bellies, and was wearing loose-weave light pants with a big, comfortable waistline and big baggy legs. He had rubber-soled cloth shoes on and bright socks that you could see showing under the flipping cuffs of his pants. He had broad-strap suspenders holding up his pants, and he was wearing a short-sleeved, bright shirt. His bare arms were thin and knobby, tanned an even darker and shinier brown than Koning's face was under his freckles. He was wearing a headband with a transparent green eyeshade. There was a fringe of white hair around his stuck-out ears, and the top of his skull was tanned and glistening. He had a big, amiable grin. He walked along as if he had all the time in the world, knowing that he was a center of interest, too, and the rest of the show would wait for him.

Neither Koning nor Sherman said a word. People will do that. People think that if they stop, time stops.

Tully ambled into the crowd, still grinning, and the crowd drifted out of his way. There wasn't anything obtrusive about it; it wasn't like the Red Sea parting for Moses into two straight-edged and shiny walls. It was just that they drifted out of his way, easily and naturally as if everybody in town knew from a baby that you didn't stand close to Tully. Tully walked forward, still grinning.

He cocked his undersized, round-chinned, round face up at the veranda. He looked at Artel, and then he looked past Koning and me at Sherman. When he spoke, his voice was high, like the cackle of a chicken with the biggest egg in the yard. "Ah-heh, Doc. Heard you had one of them Hammerheads visiting on

your porch." He looked Artel up and down. "Looks like a prime example, considerin' how puny critters are these days."

He looked at me now. His eyes under the shade were small and black, and smart. "His partner don't look so good either, does he?" He stood there with his little squirrel-paw hands hooked into the front of his trousers, and when he began to laugh, first his cheeks quivered, and then the loose skin in his neck, and then his belly under the shirt, and then he was bouncing on the balls of his feet. But he didn't make any noise. He flapped with laughter as he ran his eyes around from Sherman and quickly across Artel and me to Koning, and then he began to turn very slowly and his glance didn't miss one of the people around him. And then he walked away. He went back down the sidewalk the way he'd come, his hands still hooked in the waistband of his pants, his back shaking a little bit, the suspenders tight across his wizened shoulders, and a reflection of sunlight bouncing off the curved sheen of his eyeshade.

"Well," Artel said in an amused and careless voice, "I see every town has its character."

Koning rubbed his hand across the back of his neck, where the skin was seamed and granulated from years of exposure to sunlight. His jaw was out; I could see his lower teeth. They were wet and brown, and snaggled by oncoming age. The breath was pushing out steadily through his nostrils, making a very thin whistle. He took off his khaki rain hat and ran his hand over his scalp. He put the hat back on, all without taking his eyes off Tully. The crowd was looking up at us expectantly, and I believe half of them were holding their breaths.

"I didn't know you were a doctor," I said to Sherman, as if this were interesting but not vital. Of all the things that had been happening to us since Sherman had given the alarm, this was the one that I couldn't make out to have not noticed. "Want to make a note of that, Artel?" I went on. "It's good news. It means we won't have to send one of our own in." Artel nodded and took a pad of mimeographed form sheets out of his pocket. He got out a pencil, licked the tip and made an X-mark in a box.

"Doctor present. Right," he mumbled boredly.

"By the way, Doctor, congratulations," I said to Sherman. "You must be doing a fine job here. These people look fine."

Sherman said quickly: "Now, wait — you're getting the wrong idea. I'm no doctor. We don't have any doctor. That's just something that crazy old coot calls everybody." His glance flickered over to Koning.

"I ought to lock — no, God damn it, I . . . can't . . ." Koning wasn't talking to me. He was talking directly to Sherman.

Whatever it was, it had them completely shaken up. I can imagine how they must have planned for snoopers in advance, sitting around a kitchen table and nerving each other. *"Well, listen, Luther —*

what'll we do if somebody comes around asking questions?" "We'll handle it, Walt. After all, it's our town, we live here. The important things are all kept out of sight, and how would they know what questions to ask? Don't you worry about it, Walt. You just always let me do most of the talking, and I'll make sure they don't find out anything but what we want them to know." That was exactly how it had gone between them; it's the kind of conversation smart, decent men with a secret have held between themselves since time knows when. And it had worked, back when things were looser.

They were looking at each other like two men tied to opposite ends of a rope, and the middle of the rope hooked over a spur of rock on the side of a twenty thousand foot mountain.

"Oh. Sorry, Mr. Sherman," I said. "Artel, looks like you're going to have to start a new form."

"Yeah. Before I do that — Mr. Sherman, do you have very many seniles in your population? Will you require any special supplies — tranquilizers or that sort of thing?" Artel asked.

"Well, I wouldn't know," Sherman, said doggedly. "And Tully don't seem to do any harm, as long as you don't pay him any mind."

"We've been very lucky here," Koning said. He was beginning to get back to himself. He was talking a little fast, and the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes weren't completely relaxed. But he was doing a good job of recovering. "We're all healthy people here. Oh, once in a while somebody mashes his thumb with a hammer or something. But that's not anything that can't be taken care of. We live nice and quiet. It's good. When I look back on how it was in the old days, I've got to say we live better. That's a terrible thing, when you think of how this town used to have twenty-five thousand people in it and mighty few of them ready to be dead. But now we've got through the bad time, things are pretty good. For the live ones. Meaning no insult, maybe a lot better than they are for you outside."

He was looking steadily at Sherman. And he had come to something in his mind. He wasn't back on his heels any more. He was nervous, and he didn't like to trust his own improvisations any better than anybody else would. But he was going to go with it, whatever it was. He wasn't looking to Artel and me for his cues any longer. You could see that happening in him; you could hear it in his voice. "Look, gentlemen," he said, stepping back and smiling. "I got taken up here in a hurry, and there's a couple of little things that I'd like to finish up, if that's all right with the two of you. I mean, this isn't any kind of an emergency. It's a surprise, but it isn't an emergency. So if you could excuse me for about a half hour, I could come back then and I'd have the rest of the day clear to talk to you. I'm sure Mr. Sherman can keep you entertained, and maybe fill

you in on some of the background. Just the general stuff; I'll be back in time to give you the specifics. How would that be?" He grinned at Sherman with everything but his eyes. "Why don't you take them inside, Walt? Millie could maybe give them a little refreshment."

"Well, I don't know —" Sherman looked at Koning as if he had gone just as wild as Tully. "I mean, the house is a mess . . ."

It was sad, watching a man turn into a nervous housewife right in front of my eyes.

"No, you go ahead and take them inside," Koning said. "Don't worry about the house." He grinned again. "Relax, Walt! You're just not used to company," he chuckled.

Sherman nodded slowly. "All right," he said, "take your word on that."

His face went through a spasm; I think he started to grin back, and then realized immediately he couldn't make it stick. I didn't dare look over at Artel myself, for fear we'd lay ourselves open in the same way.

The crowd was livening up again; Koning's starting some kind of action was taking the dismay of Tully out of them. The kids, of course, hadn't stayed quiet for more than a minute. Some of them were back to playing catch, and some of the others had drifted on down the street after Tully — I didn't know whether on purpose after Tully or just happening to be headed in the same direction. I noticed nobody had tried giving Tully any catcalls or joshing, not even the kids.

It was a nice town; they were polite to their sick ones.

"It sounds like a practical idea," I said. "And I sure could use a cool drink, Mr. Sherman. How about you, Artel?"

Artel nodded. "Yo."

"Oh, well, sure," Sherman said. "No problem about that. Got a good well down by where the Nike site used to be. Deep, Government-dug well. Lucky that way, too, we were. Lots of good water."

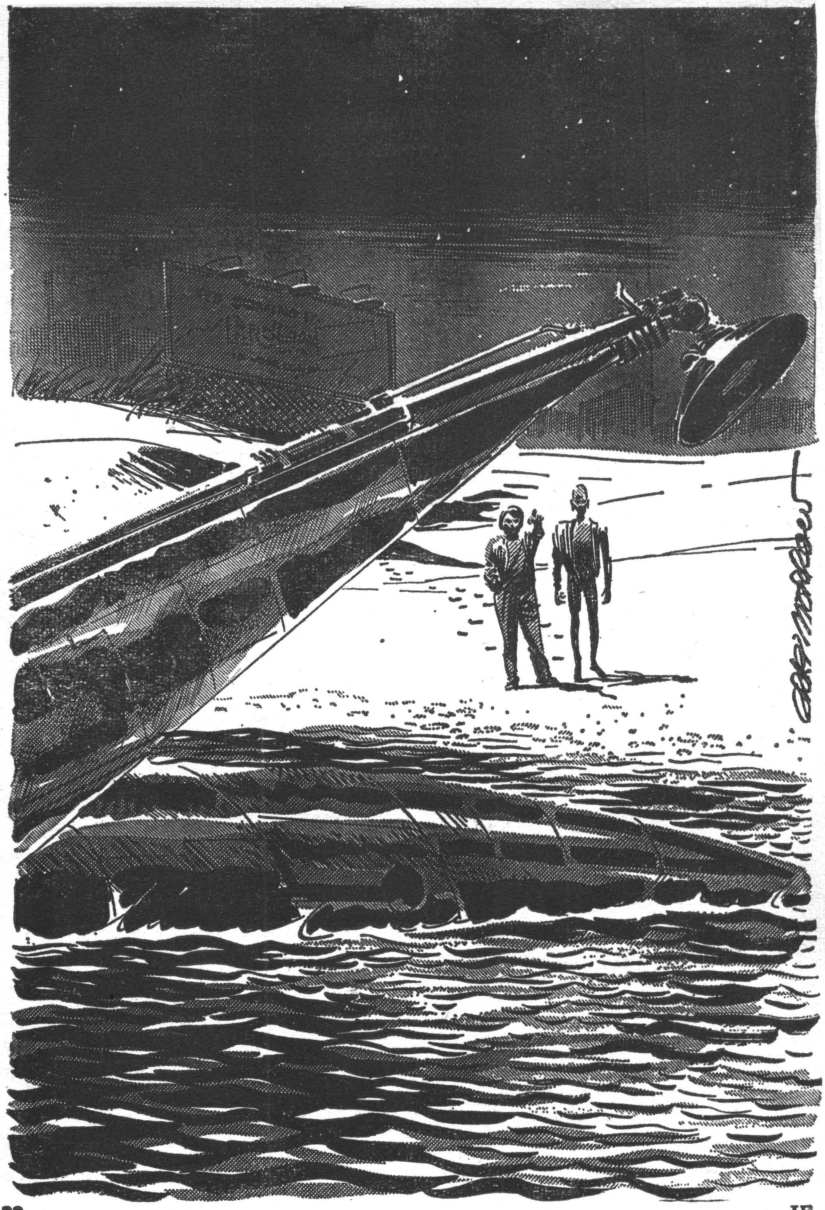
"Well, that would be fine!" I said.

I could hear Koning sigh just a little bit. "Okay! So it's all settled — Doc here'll take care of you two fellows 'til I get back, and everything'll work out just fine." Koning turned and trotted down the steps. "Be seeing you!"

I waved a hand cheerfully after him. So did Artel. "Well," Sherman said. "Let's — let's go inside." So we did.

VII

A blonde young woman of maybe twenty-five was waiting in the hall, carrying a baby over her shoulder, one arm around it and the spread fingers of her other hand supporting it over the fresh, clean diaper. There were a couple of other kids clustered around her; a girl maybe a year older than the baby, and a boy in a T-shirt and corduroy rompers who was just under school age. He had little leather shoes on, scuffed up around the toes since the time this morning his mother had coated them with some of that polish that comes in a bottle with a dabber.



The little girl had her arms around her mother's knee and her face buried in the side of her skirt. Sherman said: "This is my wife, Millie. And my kids. That's LaVonne, and Walt, and the baby's name is Lucille. Millie, this is Mr. —" He looked over at me.

"Dorsey. I'm very pleased to meet you. This is my partner —"

"Loovan Artel. Loovan's his family name," Sherman said.

Millie Sherman nodded, looking at Artel. Her eyes were very big, and the corners of her mouth kept twitching. Finally she said, "Oh."

"It's all *right,* Millie," Sherman soothed.

"We just need a place to sit, Mrs. Sherman," Artel said gently. "Until Mr. Koning gets back."

"That's right, honey," Sherman said, throwing Artel a grateful glance. "Luther just asked me to give these men some refreshment until he gets back. He asked me to bring 'em in."

Putting the seal of authority on it seemed to buck her up, some. "Oh." She wet her lips. "Well, won't you come in?" She pulled the boy Walter out of the way and stood back against the wall. We were in one of those narrow foyer things, that runs through toward the back of the house and has doors opening off it into the main rooms, and a flight of stairs going up.

"Let's go straight on through to the kitchen. I'm sure you fellows don't mind," Sherman said.

"Not at all," Artel said, and we followed him toward the back of the house. I threw a glance into the living room as we went by. There were couches and a lot of chairs up against the walls, with a coffee table in front of each couch. There were books on the tables, bound in bright-colored cheap cloth. Novels.

The kitchen was big, with a chrome-legged table, wooden cabinets and a lot of chrome-legged chairs with padded plastic seats and backs. Next to the capped stub of a gas-pipe coming up through the floor was a cast iron wood range, and in the sink was a big, galvanized iron pan with the washing water in it. The drinking water was in a regular office-type water cooler with a big glass bottle held upside-down in it. And in one corner, standing spindly-legged, was a kerosene refrigerator. "Well, now, that's something," I said, nodding toward it. "You people are really starting to get straightened around here." Sherman's eyes followed mine. He looked at the refrigerator as if all hope were lost.

"I have to have it," he said.

"Oh? Are you a diabetic?" I said.

What happened to his face now was like nothing I could recognize, but if he had been made out of strings, I could have heard them snap. The look he gave me was damn near unbearable; I might have been a cobra.

Without taking his eyes off me, he said to his wife: "Millie, I'm sure you and the kids have things to do elsewhere. I can take care of these gentlemen by myself. You go on Millie. You go on, now."

Millie nodded and backed out of the room, taking the kids with her.

The kitchen had a swinging door on it, and it swung shut.

"What do you mean, am I a diabetic? All the diabetics are dead."

"It's just that refrigerators and insulin go together in this house, Doctor," I said. "And before you tell me again you're not a doctor, any fool can see Koning doesn't care any more whether we find out or not. Artel, you figure his office is across the hall from that waiting room?"

"Uh- huh. I could smell the antiseptics."

"Look, Dr. Sherman, why don't you relax?" I said. "Koning told you that, and I'm telling you that. So you're getting it from both sides, and you might as well believe it. Let's sit down and just wait. We can talk if you like. Koning's obviously gone to do something."

"Town Council meeting, I guess," Sherman said desperately.

"I figured something like that. Take it easy, Doc — it's us that may have our heads in a noose. Artel, drift out there and see what his office looks like, will you?" Artel nodded and went out. I could hear Millie Sherman gasping out in the hall and Artel murmuring something reassuring that ended in " 'scuse me, Ma'am, kids . . ."

Sherman sank down in one of the kitchen chairs. He held his head in his hands with his elbows on his knees. "You had to bring one of them in with you," he mumbled.

I pulled another chair away from the kitchen table and sat down. "Well sure, Doctor. He's a United States citizen. At least where we come from he is, and he's got just as much right to walk these streets as I have."

"You don't realize what you're doing to us."

"No, I don't, except I know guilt when I see it. But it's a pretty good question who's doing what to whom."

Sherman's head came up fast. "What do you mean? What do you know?"

"Whatever we know, we'll know a lot more, and if we never go back to tell our Old Man about it, why that'll tell him something, too."

I started to talk very fast. I had him on the ropes, and win, lose or even, I was going to press that as long as Koning would let me. "What do you people think you're doing here, Sherman? Living in some little world of your own? You may think so, all fenced off behind a bunch of skeletons and burnt-out houses, but there's a whole goddamned world out there, and in the middle of the night sometimes you know it. This is just one town. *One* town, in a whole country. On a continent. On a world. We're not just dying out there — we're living and breathing, too. You think it's *fun* for me and Artel to come down here and play patsy with you people? There's no time for that."

He was white and sweating. He was shaking his head back and forth. "No. No, this is a good town. You're not the only people we've seen. We've seen other people from outside. You're all sick — all of you. You're weak, and you're in pain. I've been watching the way you

move, Dorsey. You treat your bones like glass. I can imagine what it's like out there. You lived through it — you were the lucky ones, and look at you! Your livers and your kidneys must be like old pieces of sponge. Your lungs are in rags. And maybe, maybe if you get halfway decent food, and enough rest, and enough time, you'll slowly get back toward what you were. But most of you will never make it. Your kids might — for those of you who've got the energy for parenthood, and those of you who can successfully transmit immunities to your offspring. What's your infant mortality rate, Dorsey? What's your live birth rate? Who takes care of your kids? Who educates them? Who keeps up the public sanitation? How many psychotics have you got?"

Artel came back into the kitchen. "All he's got in his layout is surgical stuff. He's a bonesetter. Just about the only medicines he has are aspirin, iodine and vaseline. Funniest doctor's office I've ever seen. Well, Koning told us. But it's no surprise they thought they ought to hide it." Artel got a chair for himself and sat down watching Dr. Sherman with a sleepy, unwavering expression. "I'm sorry your wife and children are so upset by me," he said. Sherman nodded blindly, not looking up from the floor.

"Boy's by my first wife," he said. "I married late. Always figured it would be too big a change in my life. Got older, changed my mind."

"You've been very fortunate," Artel said.

"I know it. There isn't another family in town with two survivors. You think I didn't know the odds, when I finally realized what we had on our hands? What do you think I wouldn't have done to save Mary and the boy both? It was hopeless in the hospital by then. I voted to dynamite the place, it was so bad. Didn't matter — if they'd all voted with me, there wasn't time nor sense or strength to do it. Man, you can know how to swim, but when the wave hits you the next thing you know you're smashed up against the shells on the shore. I came home, and I barricaded this place. Had big pans full of carbolic acid, soaked rags in it and stuffed them in the windows. Had spray guns full of disinfectant. You could barely breathe in here. What good was it? I wasn't even thinking. We were all out of our heads. We were sick, and we were using it all up. When it started, we were using up the antibiotics as if we could always order another truckload in the morning. Had lab technicians — *technicians* — working up slides, and had all the doctors out on the floor. We did everything backwards. We couldn't believe —" Sherman held his head and laughed. "We couldn't believe what was going to happen. We couldn't act like we believed what was going to happen. I mean, if we'd let ourselves think about what was going to happen —"

He stood up quickly. "I never got you your water." He went to a cabinet over the sink and got out some glasses.

"We kept listening to the radios, telling ourselves somebody some-

where would announce treatments. I had a radio with me everywhere I went, in my shirt pocket. I listened to that radio night and day, had my pockets full of batteries. When I couldn't get stations any more, I kept it on anyhow — kept it on wanting to know if WOR would get back on the air." He pushed the glasses clunking under the spigot of the water fountain.

"I wasn't listening for any announcement. I was just listening to the cities die. Every time a station went off the air, I'd say to myself 'There, you smart people at Massachusetts General. There, you fancy labs down at Johns Hopkins. There, Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center — you couldn't find it either.' That's how we were — you remember how you were?" He came over to us and pushed the glasses into our hands. "Here. Here." Water slopped on my wrist.

VIII

Sherman went back to his chair. He sat there looking at us. His hands turned the pipe over and over, and the ferocity had taken hold of him. "Luther wanted me to give you the background. All right, I'll give you the background. What do you think happens to the organization of a place like this? The water mains lead from a reservoir that belongs to a town fifteen miles away. What happens when they close the valves up there because they're scared they'll need it all to themselves? What happens to your food storage when your refrigeration goes? How much do you think we had stored around here, when we could always bring everything down from Newark in a couple of hours? What happens when you realize that's all there is, hah, and you're not going to bring any more from any place else, 'cause nobody's producing any more, nobody's packing it, nobody's putting it on trains? By God, they fought for it in the dark! They broke into houses where fat people lived, sometimes before and sometimes after they set fire to a block on account of pestilence.

"It's dead, it's dead out there," he said, pointing. "You came in through it. You saw it. You lived through it where you were, but you were in a goddamned metropolis with the rivers to scoop water out of and the warehouses jammed up. Do you know what we had to do to clear the site for that well you're drinking from now? They were dead! They were all dead, and we'd come crawling through the gutters, we'd come through three hour journeys that took a block. We didn't clear them out. We — we as good as burrowed through them. We were twisted around them like snakes." He looked up. "Of course, it's all clean and neat now," he smiled. "Everything's clean and neat. This is a model community." He wiped out his eye sockets with the backs of his hands. There was sweat drenching his shirt under the arms.

"Drink your water," he said.

"Thank you," I said. I took a hearty swallow. "I gather you didn't save your Mary."

"No," he said bitterly, outraged

at my manners. "I didn't save my Mary."

Well, I hadn't even intended for him to get some of my point. But it would have been nice if he'd been able to realize you couldn't buy anything with that story these days. They were always like that, when you contacted them. The loners — the ones we pick up in open countryside because they used to be farmers — would run around our town for days, telling their particular story over and over again.

It always took them a while to understand that nobody was listening. The communities we'd contact couldn't believe that the rest of the world was just like them. They all had this vision that theirs was the only town blighted, even though nothing that used power or fuel or the cooperation of large groups of people could be seen in the world any longer. We had all run screaming. We had all spent everything we had, trying to run, trying to learn an answer, trying to hide, trying to wipe out. You could only be glad the world's military was still shocked from what the air defense missiles had done to the incoming Klarr lifeboats, because if they'd been full of their usual, spirit we would have found some excuse for unloading that stockpile on ourselves, too. The only special grief Ocean Heights might have would be from having that lifeboat land on their doorstep and provide them with five hundred-odd immediate centers of cross-infection instead of their having to wait their turn from the winds and the refugees. But I figured that silent building farther down canceled that excuse, too. And besides, Mary is a common name.

"Look, Doctor," I said, "we've got cards from the United States government. You remember the United States. We obviously represent the return of some kind of social organization to the world. You see us — you see what kind of shape we're in. You say you've seen other people. What's more, you can't tell me somebody in town doesn't know how to build a crystal set. There isn't much to pick up, but there's something. You're trying to tell me you're cut off, but you're not — you know what kind of shape the world's in, even if what you know is only little bits and pieces. We're sitting right here in your kitchen working on the little bits and pieces we know, and it adds up bad. It adds up real bad, Doctor, just from what you've given us. What's going on in this town?"

Sherman shook his head miserably. "I can't tell you," he whispered.

"You've been trying to," Artel said. "You're doing everything but putting it into words." Sherman's glance jerked over toward him and met pity. I don't know whether he could tell that's what it was on a Klarr face or not. "Doctor, you have a great secret in this town. But you are its only sentry. It's possible to get as far as your house without being detected. And then you call attention to yourself by hammering on a gong. When you and Koning talk to each other in front of us, you

make sure we notice every lie. You think Tully told us about you? We didn't need Tully for that. But it was you and Koning who told us Tully is important — you and Koning, and all your other neighbors and friends. When you tell us how things were in this town, you're apologizing in advance for what we'll know when we put all the pieces together." Sherman was going whiter and whiter. The wood of the pipe was creaking in his hands as he squeezed them and the skin slipped damply over it. "You couldn't fool anybody who's the least bit interested," Artel finished up, still gently. "You know that. You've always known that."

I put down my water glass and walked over to the refrigerator. "He marched us by the waiting room because it was smart not to let us sit there and figure out he was a doctor, so we wouldn't ask him any medical questions. He walked us right in here into the kitchen. Where the refrigerator is." I opened it.

Sherman cried out: "We couldn't get two! We could only find one, and it made sense to keep it in the kitchen!"

I nodded. "And there was a fuel problem, too," I said. I could afford to be understanding. I didn't have the foggiest notion yet what the hell he meant. "It's a hard world; we've got to economize."

I was looking through the refrigerator, and it was dark enough in there so that I was having trouble. There were a couple of heads of lettuce, wrapped in cellophane with the New York seal on them, and some leftovers in plastic covered dishes, half a sausage . . . and, up close to the weak cooling coils, half-pint cream bottle with a homemade rubber diaphragm stretched over its mouth.

I took it out and held it up to the light. It was three-quarters full of a just faintly yellow liquid with white clouds stirring around the bottom.

Sherman stared at it and me and Artel. Then he jumped up and made a lunge for it. He had his hand open, and he was trying to slap it away and smash it. His eyes were bulging. His face looked like it was a foot wide and made of chalk. "No, let me!" he panted as I ducked it out of his reach. "Please!"

First, I stepped back from him, so that he fell clumsily against the standing cabinet, and then as he put his hands down to catch his balance, I said: "All right," quietly, and held the bottle out. He straightened up, and I carefully put it into his hands. He stood looking down at it, and just as suddenly as he'd jumped up, tears began to fall on his shirtsleeves. Woebegone, he carefully put it back in the refrigerator and closed the door. He turned around and leaned his back against it. He took a long, gasping breath, and then he sniffed sharply. Well, anyone will when they're crying.

I looked over at Artel.

"That's the kind of setup they use when they want to measure out doses for injections."

Artel nodded. "He'd do his sterilization in here, on the stove." He began opening cabinet doors, and

on the second try he found the leatherette-covered tin case with the syringes and the needles carefully nested. I turned to Sherman. "We've been in this town what — forty-five minutes? That's how long it took you folks to lead us straight to the wonder drug. Sure this is a good town." Sherman kept his eyes on the floor. He had shrunk inside his clothes. He was shuddering, and he was still weeping. I looked over at Artel. Artel shook his head — he couldn't tell what that stuff was either.

IX

"That's it, huh, Doctor?" I asked. "The stuff in that bottle replaces all other kinds of medicines. You come into Dr. Sherman's office with, say, liver flukes, a bad heart and a broken arm. He sets your arm, and he goes back into the kitchen and comes back with a syringe full of this stuff and squirts it into you, and you walk out smiling, all cured. You come in with spots in front of your eyes, a roaring in your ears and a swelling in your armpit. Doctor gives you the needle, and six hours later you're dancing with your best girl. Doc, is that the way it is?"

"Don't make fun of it," Sherman whispered.

He was down to that. It was all he had left. We had broken him — well, no; the three of us together, and this town, and this world had broken him. That'll happen, if you let it, every time. Sherman was saying: "It's specific against Klarr-transmitted infectious diseases and allergic reactions. And it has broad-spectrum applications in treating the older forms of infectious disease. It won't repair a damaged heart, no. But it reduces that heart's burden."

He looked at Artel and winced the way he would have if he were hit with a gust of windy rain. "It may be a panacea," he explained. "In a matter of hours after a three cubic centimeter injection, the subject is completely free of everything that can possibly be destroyed by an antibody. I'm — I'm trying to make myself clear to you. The human body reacts to the stuff by manufacturing counteragents which not only destroy it, but every other invading organism. At least, I've never seen the infectious disease that one dose isn't effective for. I —" he waved his hand in the air. "The population's too small for me to have seen examples of all the sicknesses that humans could get. But it's never failed me yet. And the reaction's permanent. The only people we need it for is the new babies. There's no disease in this town, Mr. Loovan." The tears were starting in his eyes again; not the big, steady running wetness on his face he'd shown before, but he had to keep blinking. "You see, the human body has its defense mechanisms. And this stuff stimulates them. Fantastically." He shook his head violently and turned to me, because Artel had kept looking at him deadpan.

"You can see it, Dorsey! You must know that the normal human being's body is constantly engaged in staving off all sorts of potential illnesses. At any time, a great deal of

the human mechanisms's functioning is directed toward the destruction of invading micro-organisms and the filtering and disposal of the resultant wastes. And I'm sure I don't have to tell you how vulnerable the organism is if it has been exhausted. And I don't have to tell you how debilitating even simple illnesses are; at some time in your life you must have had a common cold, or a reaction to an infected tooth, or a cut. Can you imagine how much energy was constantly being drained from your system by things as commonplace as that? Energy that could have gone to doing work or maintaining the growth and repair functions of your body?" He was shifting back and forth between the two of us now. We kept looking at him blankly because there wasn't any need to encourage him and we weren't planning to interrupt him. And he kept trying to get through to us — trying to get us to smile, or pat his hand and say. "It's all *right.*"

"Can you imagine what the population of this town is like? It's free to devote full energy to life. There's none of that gray, dragging stuff they used to come in to me with in the old days, that I couldn't diagnose, and made them miserable, and I'd write tonics for. Do you realize how much tension has been wiped out of their lives? They're not nagged by a hundred little illnesses. They're not terrified by sudden stomach-twinges and mysterious rashes or coughing spells. They don't find themselves spitting or passing blood. They don't worry themselves into stomach ulcers, and they don't come down with nervous diseases. When you add that to the fact that they no longer have many of the old social tensions . . . Don't you see? It's like a miracle for them! It's like perpetual springtime — they're alive — they're vital. They don't tire as fast, they don't mope —"

"And they laugh all the time," I said. "Artel and I could see that; running and dancing and singing and clapping their hands when they saw us. Like a bunch of happy South Sea islanders in a book. Nature's Children."

Sherman ducked his head again. "They were pretty well off until you showed up," he muttered.

"No arthritis, Doctor?" Artel said. "No athlete's foot, no kidney stones?"

"I didn't say that," the doctor said. "If you had something like that before the Klarri came, there's nothing that can be done for you except to make you generally healthier. That helps." His head came up a little farther, "There is something interesting about that, though. I don't see any new cases starting. You can't tell with a sample this size, but it just may be we won't have any of that after this generation.

"There's a lot I don't know about it. What I've got does the job it has to. But I'm not going to pretend to you that my extraction methods are exact. I haven't got the time or equipment to isolate the precise effective fraction, whatever it is. I've got a bundle of stuff there, and some part of it does the job. The rest

doesn't do any harm." He was starting to gather the little pieces of himself back together again. Talking shop was doing him good. Well, that had to be one of his reasons for talking shop.

"What does it do for cancer, Doc?" I asked.

"I think it prevents it. I know it doesn't cure it."

"That's fine, Doctor." I looked at him from a long way away. I had an idea I was about to smash him again.

I looked over at Artel. He had caught it in the doctor's choices of words. It was sad to see his face. "Doctor — where do you get this stuff?"

He had nearly made himself forget it. He had been talking, and talking, and all the time his mind had been putting the screens back up. He stared at me as if I'd belched in church, and then he took a little half step away from Artel, a little, sidling, sheepish step I'm sure he didn't know he was performing. "I extract it from human-infected Klarr blood," he said, his mouth blowing each word in its own bubble. Artel sighed and bowed his head.

I'd had my next question ready, and I was pretty sure of the answer to that one, too, but I had to stop and study him for a minute. Then I said. "And everybody in town knows where it comes from?"

Sherman nodded, two or three times, slowly. "All the adults. I *wish* you hadn't brought in Mr. Loovan."

"I think we'd better move, Artel."

He wasn't keeping all his mind on the spot we were in, but he nodded. "Yo." We pushed open the swinging door.

"Wait!" Sherman cried behind us. "If you try to run for it, they're *bound* to kill you."

Artel was moving quickly up the foyer. "We know that," I said over my shoulder. That kind of talk annoys me. I didn't need him to teach me by business. Sherman's wife and his kids were hanging over the bannister three-quarters of the way up the stairs, staring down at us. Artel hit the front door as hard as he could, slamming it back against the wall, and then kneed the screen door open so that it spanged against the outside house wall. The people standing around out there jumped. Well, that was the effect that he wanted.

"Good-by, Mister Boogeyman!" the little girl piped as Artel hit the veranda with his boots clattering. I went just as fast behind him, slamming both doors shut. Artel didn't slow; you never want to do that. I jumped the steps and picked up speed, so that we reached the crowd side by side. We went right by our bikes, picked the biggest man in the group, and stood with our toes practically on his. "Where do we find Luther Koning?" I barked in his face. The rest of the people were falling back. Artel and I were both glowering and obviously beside ourselves with rage. The man took a step back, and we took a step forward. Artel reached down and grabbed his belt. "Come on, you! You're fooling with the Govern-

ment!" The man waved vaguely down the street toward the intersection.

"Right!" I said. "Let's go, buddy." Artel pushed the man back firmly, letting go of his belt, and the two of us swung down the sidewalk, marching side by side, our feet coming down regular as heartbeats, our faces grim, our arms swinging. Kids and housewives scattered out of our way. "You can't —!" somebody protested.

"Well, then, you run tell him," I said, and we kept going.

"Dorsey! Loovan!" Sherman shouted, coming down his veranda steps, his feet thudding across the lawn as he cut over to us. We kept marching. He came panting up to us. He was trying to keep up, but he kept losing speed as he turned to try to talk to us. I kept my eyes on the people down at the intersection; there were a fair number of them down there, and I saw one of them notice us coming and freeze.

"Dorsey!" Sherman panted. "You don't understand. It's not just —" He tripped over the cover of a water meter, stumbled, and lost pace. He came trotting up even with us again. "Loovan —" Then he realized he'd picked the wrong one to tell the rest of it to. "Dorsey! We were dying. We were too weak to move. We hadn't eaten in days. We hadn't eaten enough in weeks, and all that time we'd been burning with fever. My wife was lying dead upstairs. For three days. And I couldn't get up there. I had the boy in my office; on the examining table. I was lying on the floor. I couldn't reach him. I had him strapped down. He was crying. I couldn't reach him. We were all like that."

"So were we," I said. I had run out of patience with him entirely.

But Sherman wanted to make his point. I had been waiting for him to tell me where their captive Klarrs were, and it seemed to me at the time that would be the only other interesting thing he could have left to tell us. Instead, he kept babbling on: "You weren't lost and cut off from the rest of the world! Do you know how bad the human animal wants to live? Do you know what it will do to keep alive? Do you know what it will keep trying to do, right up to the last minute? As long as it has its teeth and claws?"

I was listening for any footsteps coming up fast and determined behind us. I was paying most of my attention to that. There weren't any. We'd left them standing there. Now we were almost up to the intersection. The Fourth corner was a big saloon-hotel thing, and I guess it was a town hall now, because I could see Koning and a bunch of other men come out quickly through the doors and stop dead, watching us. There was a grinning, jumping figure with them, pointing at us coming on and slapping his broomstick thigh, making the flapping cloth of his pants billow as if he had no bones at all.

"It was Tully!" Sherman puffed out. "There was a lot of Klarr-killing going on for a while. Then we got too weak, and we gave it up. But Tully wounded one someplace where

they'd both crawled to die, I guess. Starving to death, both of them. Tully must have been just as far out of his head — just as far back to being a dying animal as you can get. You know what I mean?" he pleaded. "You know how Tully was? It was just him and this dying Klarr. It was Tully. It was Tully that was the animal. But it was Tully then that had sense enough to come and save me — and save little Walt — after he was back to being a man again." He barely got it out. "It was Tully who found out. I just refined his discovery. Made it nice and medical and sanitary. But you see how it is — they *can't* let the two of you go!"

Artel had stopped dead. He had turned to salt in the blink of an eye. "Move. Move." I said to him, "You've got to move," still looking straight ahead, stopping dead with him. Whatever we did, we had to do it together. "If you don't move, none of this gets back." We moved.

Now there were about fifteen or twenty people at the intersection. They were all men. They were wound up tight, moving their feet and hands back and forth. They stood on the corner in front of the hotel as we marched off the end of the sidewalk and across the street toward them.

Tully was bouncing and grinning at the crowd's left. He had a lot of energy; a lot of drive. You had to figure him for spunk. For him to be the historical personage he was, he had to have had the persistence to have haggled hot raw meat with loose teeth in a mouth full of open sores.

You won't often find that kind of grit, even in your really desperate person. Even so, the nearest man to him was drawn a little away from him. Like the others in the crowd, he was watching Artel and me, but he kept darting side-glances at Tully, too.

We walked up to Koning, who was trying to keep his face blank and was keeping it tense instead. I looked only at him; straight into his eyes. It was important to hit him before he could say or do anything. I said casually: "Well, it worked out the way you were hoping. Sherman cracked wide open and told us all about it. So you didn't do it. It's all out of your hands and off your mind."

Koning started to frown. "What do you mean by that?"

Artel said "Look, Mr. Koning," with his voice patient, "if you really didn't want it taken off you, you would have made sure to ask the supply trucks for some drugs now and then. Whether Doc wanted to deprive the poor sick outside world or not."

"Now you can just be mayor," I said. "That'll be a lot easier, won't it?"

"Well, we've got things to do, Mr. Koning," Artel said. "Let's go, Ed. That building's four blocks down and over to our right."

Sherman had been trying to catch his breath over to my right for the last few moments. He said: "I never —"

I gave him something that might

pass for a smile. "We know where the lifeboat is, too, Dr. Sherman. And those over there." I waved my hand in the direction of the neat houses, off beyond the bulk of the hotel. "Well, you can see we have to open that casino building, Mr. Koning. Care to come along?"

Koning's jaw flexed a couple of times. He looked around, and once you do that, of course, you've lost it.

He took a deep breath. And then nodded hastily, looking back at the crowd. "All right. Okay."

Artel and I stepped out. We walked down the middle of the street, with Koning walking along beside us, and having to compromise between a casual walk and a trot, until he finally settled for keeping in step with us. Doc Sherman tagged along. One or two other people started to follow, and then the rest of them, and with the group that had slowly followed us down from Sherman's house, it made a respectable bunch. Tully had set out down the sidewalk. He was keeping pace with us the best he could. He kept trying to attract the attention of people who passed near him. I could hear him saying: "Where do you think you're going, you chicken punk?" He said it to young and old, irrespective of sex. "Where do you think you're going, you chicken punk?" I could hear it as a fading mutter in the background. People were looking at him and then looking away. They were dodging around him, and twitching their feet nearer the center of the street. Except for him, nobody was talking.

X

In daylight, the building was painted green. Not new — from before. Artel and I trotted up the steps. Koning pushed himself ahead and unlocked the doors into the lobby. The crowd waited out in the street.

The lobby was dark and musty. It was floored in a checkerboard pattern of red and brown vinyl tiles with a black rubber runner laid down over them. There were office doors opening on the lobby, but Koning went ahead toward a flight of stairs leading to the left. "Lantern around here somewhere," he said.

"Never mind," Artel said, taking his flashlight out of his windbreaker. We went up the stairs with it whirring. At the top of the stairs there was another set of double doors. Koning unlocked those. The smell kept getting stronger.

There was some light coming in from one window near us. They had bricked up the rest from the inside. The entire second floor was one big room from here on back, and the open window was on this side of the row of bars and cyclone fencing they had put in from one wall to the other. Artel shone his light in through the bars.

"We could see six iron cots with mattresses on them. There were two Klarri lying on two of them. The mattresses were turned back and rolled over on three others. There was another Klarr sitting on the edge of the remaining bed. He was wearing what was left of his shipboard clothes, I guess.

"All right, unlock that," I told Koning, pointing to the pipe-and-cyclone-mesh gate that went from floor to ceiling. Some master craftsman had worked hard and expertly, custom-building that. Koning nodded, went over to it and trembled the key into the lock. He pushed in on the gate, and it swung back. He turned around and looked at Artel and me expectantly.

"I don't think anything much is going to happen to you, Koning," I said. "We don't mess with communities if we can possibly help it. We all had to live through a bad time, and we all found out things about ourselves."

Koning nodded.

"We didn't find out what you found out. I'll give you that," I said.

"But that was just luck," Artel said; he took a deep breath before each phrase. "Just your luck. Instead of somebody else's, somewhere else."

Koning shook his head. "Listen — that Tully —"

"I'm sure Artel understands," I said. "After all, you couldn't do anything to Tully."

Koning said bitterly: "The son of a bitch kept reminding us and mocking us. He'd ask us if our arms were sore from Doc's needle."

"I wish you'd go away," Artel told him.

Koning nodded again and went around us to go back down the stairs. He went down quickly, and then we could hear his footsteps in the lobby, and the sound of him going out through the double doors outside. He was not a bad man. Not the sort who would eat the flesh of a Klarr, no matter how hungry. Just the sort who would take a Klarr's blood to make medicine out of it. And take. And take.

As soon as it was all quiet, Artel began to tremble. He shook like a leaf. He put one hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "Oh, Ed."

"Easy, easy, easy."

"Chicken punks," Artel muttered.

The Klarr who'd been sitting on his bed had gotten up. He came shuffling forward, peering ahead.

"Artel, I don't see any reason why it might not work the other way. Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't see why Klarr-infected human blood fractions wouldn't do it for your people."

"They didn't try that, though, did they?" Artel said with his eyes shut.

"Well, they couldn't," I said. "They needed these Klarri to stay infected."

Artel nodded. "I understand that."

The other two Klarri had noticed something was different and had turned over on their beds. I speak a pretty good version of Klarr. "Hey," I said to them. "We're policemen. You can come out."

"What are we going to do with them, Ed?" Artel said.

"Move 'em into one of the houses. I'll stay with them until you send a truck down to pick them up. If you take a bike out to the Camden route, you'll probably be up at the Old Man's maybe late tonight, tomorrow morning for sure."

Artel nodded. "All right." He put his hand back on my shoulder as the white-haired Klarr came closer, got to the gate, and stood in it with one hand on each upright, leaning forward and looking out at us.

"I am Eredin Mek, Sub-Assistant Navigating Officer. My companions here are very weak and may be frightened. Could one of you go in and speak to them, please?" He came closer.

"Go ahead, Artel," I said, and he ducked through the gate and walked quickly toward the back of the cell.

"Is is possible to go outside?" Eredin asked me.

"Certainly," I said.

"I'd like that."

We walked together to the stairs, and then, with him putting one hand on the bannister and the other over my shoulders, we got down the stairs and out into the lobby. I could see the crowd milling around outside, and for a minute I thought we were in trouble again, but their backs were to the glass doors. Then we got out through those, and stood at the head of the steps. Tully was across the street. He was standing on the sidewalk, and he was saying something to the people. They were ducking their heads away from him.

Tully saw Eredin and me. He pointed over at us. "Hey, critter!" That made them raise their heads. They all turned, and when they saw Eredin leaning against me, they sighed like an extra wave. Sherman and Koning were in the middle of them, pale. They could all see what it meant, the Klarr up there on the steps with me, stinking and sick, but out. Only Tully didn't see what it meant to him. He thought he still had something going for him.

He laughed. "Hey, critter! I b'lieve you're even scrawnier than me! What's the matter — ain't we been feedin' you right?" He looked around for his effect.

"Who is that man?", Eredin muttered, peering, groping like any sensible person will when he's weak and is in a world he doesn't understand; like somebody senile. "What's he saying?"

Klarr is a language that made my answer come out: "He is the savior of their tribe."

"Yah!" Tully was crying out. "Yah, ya bunch a needle-pushing arm-wipers —"

"Ah, God!" Sherman groaned and turned and rammed back through the crowd toward Tully. Then they were all as if they were being yanked on strings. They clustered suddenly around the squirrel-cheeked man in the green sunshade. I could see Koning's face. The veins were standing out; his mouth was wide open, and what was coming out of him and all of them was what you might hear if all the lovers in the world were inside one big megaphone. The people at the back of the crowd tried to push in. The whole mass of them fell against a tall hedge.

Eredin looked up at me, squinting, his eyes watering; there had to be a lot of things he couldn't know the reasons for. "They — they kept taking our blood," he complained.

"I know," I said. I patted him on the shoulder. END

THE THOUSANDTH BIRTHDAY PARTY

by DURANT IMBODEN

Today was his birthday . . . and he dared not open his birthday gift!

It was party time. Or rather it would be party time soon. The event was scheduled for the following day, at six in the evening, and Ogilvy Carr, the guest of honor, was nervously biting his fingernails in anticipation of the party game which would have a most profound effect on the outcome of the affair — an affair which celebrated his 1,000th birthday, as it happened.

Carr chewed his fingernails indeed. He pondered, and with each additional bit of pondering a little more calcium would leave his fingertips and find itself lolling in the warm recesses of Carr's mouth.

"You're chewing your fingernails again, love," his wife said.

Carr looked down at his hand. "Or somebody's fingernails," he said. "I hardly know who I am — or who I'll be — any more. I suppose I can thank medical science for that."

"And the government, of course." Helen made the remark with a somewhat tired smile adorning her face.

"Of course," he answered.

"I suppose it is kind of interesting, when you think of it, how many people we're made up of," she said. "Heaven knows, my great aunt Nellie could be the donor of that new bone in my hip, or Uncle Herbie, bless his lovely soul, could some day replace my heart or my lungs or my left foot. That left foot *will* have to be replaced one of these days, you know . . . Dr. French said he's willing to bet that in another fourteen or fifteen years it's going to be cancerous."

Carr wasn't particularly happy. "And in fourteen or fifteen years . . . it could be *my* foot that replaces yours, you know."

"I hardly think so, Ogie. More likely someone like Uncle Herbie will have the honor. You do have very large feet, you know. I'm a ladies' seven, of course, but you're a fat man's twelve. Our feet would hardly match." She thought a moment and giggled. "Of course, I could take both your feet and look

like a duck. I could even go skiing, barefoot — and without skis."

"It's hardly funny, my dear," Carr said softly.

"You're quite right," his wife agreed, this time speaking in a more serious tone of voice. "Ogie, love — Ogie, I'm so *worried* about the party."

Lots of people worried about the party. Practically anyone in his or her 900's, as well as the kinfolk of these most senior citizens, worried about the party. For on a person's 1,000th birthday, the lucky fellow or woman would be the guests of — and participants in — the lottery.

It was a lottery which decided not whether a man would win a soccer or baseball pool, or which women would be lucky enough to win a washing machine in a supermarket drawing, but which men would live and which men would die; which women would live, and which would go on to their heavenly reward.

It was, needless to say, a lottery of great importance for the people involved in it. And eventually practically anyone of any signficant economic status would become involved in it, since the upper middle-class and the well-to-do invariably managed to reach their 1,000th birthdays.

How? Well, the health of the nation and of the technologized world was booming. It took money to live to be a thousand, but then lots of people had money in this era of unprecedented prosperity. Most of them chose to spend a large share of their money on keeping their feet — not to mention the rest of their bodies — out of the grave. Medical science could work wonders these days. If a man's heart started to give out, all he had to do was undergo special drug and nutritive treatment. If that didn't show results quickly, he would be given a reconditioned heart from the organ banks. Or if there was a momentary shortage of reconditioned hearts to prevent this rehabilitative surgery, he could settle for an artificial heart, which worked just as well or better, although it necessitated annoying yearly battery replacements and interfered with reception on many transistor radios. If an arm or a leg became mangled in an aircar accident, or if a stomach decided to come down with a stubborn cancer virus, all that was needed was a trip to the hospital. If drugs couldn't do the job, the organ banks almost invariably could.

There was only one significant problem brought on by semi-universal longevity, and that was overpopulation.

Birth control had helped to alleviate the difficulty somewhat, but the fact remained that if far more people were being born than were dying, Mother Earth would eventually have to give up trying to support them, since there would be no other alternative. The interplanetary colonies would continue to absorb some of the excess population, of course, but they were still relatively new, and their growth was limited by many logistical and economic factors.

So one year someone came up with the idea of the lottery.

It was a simple idea, of course. For that matter, it wasn't even a terribly new idea. Prophets in the fiction and alarmist propaganda fields had been predicting similar lotteries for several centuries.

In any case, the lottery was put into effect. It naturally upset a great many people. But necessity was necessity, and the world's leaders — who were exempted from the lottery, by the way — accepted the inevitable and told their subjects that they would have to do likewise.

The plan worked quite simply. Whenever a person reached the age of 1,000, as verified by a check of government birth records, the lottery officials of his region would treat him to a birthday party. The primary game at the party was not Blind Man's Bluff or Pin the Tail on the Donkey, but the lottery. And the lottery was a life-or-death game.

It did help to make the party more interesting than the average party, though.

After the senior citizen and his clan had enjoyed a feast of gargantuan proportions and had lightened their hearts and heads with synthetic champagne (far cheaper than the real stuff; government economy was always an important political issue, after all), the lottery officials would escort the guest of honor into a soundproofed, concrete room at the end of the long, concrete corridor.

There one of the officials would unlock a large bin filled with Ping-pong balls.

One of the balls was coated with a substance which would cause it to glow when placed under an ultraviolet light source. The senior citizen would be told to pick one of the balls from the bin; if he happened to be lucky enough to get the one which glowed, he would be escorted back into the banquet hall, and everyone would drink even more synthetic champagne, on the house, and jubilation would reign as the man blew out the candles on his cake and rejoiced in his good fortune and in the most lovely and lasting birthday gift of all . . . immortality. Or at least as much immortality as medical science and the military-industrial power structure could promise him.

On the other hand, if the guest of honor failed to pick the winning Ping-pong ball, he would immediately be shot. A high-powered rifle was held by a hidden sharpshooter who kept it aimed at the back of the lottery participant's head as he drew the ball from the bin. At a sign from one of the officials, the senior citizen would be sent into God's kingdom without so much as a last cigarette.

In such cases one of the officials, a psychiatrist specially trained to calm screaming relatives, would go back into the banquet hall to console the next of kin and to extinguish the candles on the deceased guest's cake before the melting wax spoiled too much of the frosting.

"Ogie."

"Yes, darling?"

"Ogie, honey, I'm *very* worried

about the party. What if you don't win the lottery?"

"I think the answer to that question is fairly obvious, Helen. And I haven't a chance in a million of winning."

"Kitty Murphy's thirty-second cousin's best friend's brother won the lottery, Ogie. People do win it, after all."

"Yes, but how about the billions of other people who don't?" Carr's expression was glum. It reflected his disposition perfectly.

"You'd better win the lottery, that's all I've got to say."

"What do you mean, I'd *better* win the lottery?"

"If they kill you, Ogie, I'll kill myself. I want to be with you."

"There's no heaven, Helen."

"For me there is. And for you, because you're mine. I've known there was a heaven since 'way back in Sunday school."

"I hope there is, dear. I'll admit I don't look forward to not meeting up with you somewhere along the line. Although I'll be damned if I want to spend eternity playing a bloody harp."

"Ogie, you're going to die!" She blurted the words suddenly. "But I'm going to die with you."

"You can't let yourself die, Helen. You've got too many years of happiness and excitement ahead of you. You're only 258 years old."

"Our first batch of kids are grown up, Ogie, and we never got around to having more. I would have liked to have more, Ogie. But I guess it's too late now."

"You could remarry," he said, putting a slightly trembling hand on her shoulder.

"Do you want me to remarry?" she asked.

"No."

"There you are. And I don't want to remarry, either. Even if you did have that other wife, I know you loved me best, and I don't ever want anyone else, Ogie."

"Don't say 'loved'; Helen. I don't like to hear you speaking in the past tense already. You know I'll love you right up to the end."

"And I'll love you, too, Ogie. Only —"

"Yes, dear?"

"Ogie, if there are girl angels up there, don't go hanging around with them. Wait till I'm up there with you, okay?"

The official had just unlocked the bin. He stuck his arm down into the Ping-pong balls, up to his shoulder, and stirred them around quite thoroughly.

"What are the odds today?" Carr asked, trying to sound light-hearted about the whole thing.

"4,523 to one. Not very good."

"No. But then, I guess they never are, are they?"

"I guess not."

Carr stepped in front of the bin, standing in the spot indicated by the head official.

"You're taking it pretty calmly," the official said. "More calmly than most."

"I'm a fatalist," said Carr. "I consider the game fatal. I didn't come here with any hopes or illusions, anyway."

"Well, you're an odd one, then." The official scratched his groin. "Hardly anyone ever comes here really believing that he's going to die. I don't think *I'm* going to, if I reach a thousand. Dying doesn't seem very real these days. Most people hardly ever see it happen, and when you're like me and you see it happening all the time, it becomes pretty mechanical. Maybe because everyone goes the same way."

"I guess so."

"The people back at the party are going to wonder what's happening," the official said. "I guess you'd better go ahead and draw. I don't like to keep the widows waiting. It's harder on them when things drag on."

"Sure."

The officials all stepped back, and Ogilvy Carr reached into the bin.

"You got it?" the head official asked.

"Yes." Carr sighed. "Come on. The hell with it — go ahead and shoot."

"Take it easy, pal," the official said. "We've got to follow the rules, even if you're in a hurry because St. Peter has offered you his job as head doorman at the Pearly Gates. Toss the ball over here."

"Yeah," said another of the officials. "let's get the ball rolling." No one thought it was very funny.

Carr tossed the ball to the head official. The head official handed it to one of his assistants, who placed it under the ultraviolet lamp.

Ogilvy Carr stood quietly, waiting for the inevitable. He listened carefully, wondering if he'd be able to hear the marksman's rifle hammer click before the bullet reached his brain.

"It's glowing," the junior official mumbled in astonishment. And like the sun rising on a new day, the ball was indeed glowing.

"I thought that bit about one of them glowing was all a publicity gimmick," one of the other officials said wonderingly. "Luke, I thought they just let someone go every few million times to keep everyone's hopes up."

"Well, it's glowing," said the head official. He went over to Carr and clapped him on the shoulder. "It's glowing, sir. It's glowing." He stepped back a moment and suddenly began staring at Carr in awe. "My Lord," he exclaimed quietly, "you're — you're an Immortal."

And thus did Ogilvy Carr go back into the banquet hall, accompanied by the lottery officials and much thunderous applause, to blow out the candles of his birthday cake and to celebrate his status as an Immortal.

"Thank God, Ogie," his wife whispered after she kissed him wetly during their tight embrace. "We're together, Ogie," she whispered again, as the photographers' flashguns popped all around them and she and her husband were clasped and kissed by well-wishers.

"Yes, Helen dearest, we're together," he whispered back.

And they would be, at least for another seven hundred and forty-two years. END

STARPATH

by NEAL BARRETT, Jr.

Illustrated by ADKINS

The Starpathers were always too few and usually too late . . . but without them the galaxy was dead!

I

The light flicked from OPERATIONAL green to amber READY. I leaned back in the cushioned depths, took a deep breath and let it out slowly. My body automatically began the discipline that let every nerve, muscle and fiber approach controlled unconsciousness.

Without moving, I glanced at Cadet DeLuso. The boy was quiet, but a fine mist covered his cheek. Natural enough, under the circumstances. First op-jump *ought* to bring out the sweat in a man, if he has any sense at all.

The blinking amber said 12, 11 — 10 seconds. I closed my eyes and silently wished Cadet Matt DeLuso luck. That's the least you can do for these kids — wish them a little luck . . . .

No, I caught myself — that's not all, Waldermann. There's one thing more. You can stop thinking of your Cadets as kids. They're not kids at all, they're men. And damn fine ones, too. If they weren't, they wouldn't make it this far — they wouldn't be starpath candidates.

So, seconds before jumpoff, I gave DeLuso manhood — the least I could do, and maybe the most. DeLuso himself would have to take it from there.

Then READY amber turned to red TRANSMIT, and the soft gong began pealing the seconds from one to ten — in the very special note that triggers a deeply keyed response in every Starpather's brain. My eyes closed, and I began to trance out. A deep hum rolled through my body, rising from thunder to a siren shriek. Through some far, dimly wakeful sense, I heard a faint cry from DeLuso. Then I exploded . . . .

There's always that tiny jolt, like a hundred billion little cubes of ivory clamping together at once. Ask any Starpather about that jolt. He'll tell you it's the sweetest sound in the world.

You see, it isn't a stack of cubes at all, friend — it's *you*. And if you can feel that jolt it means your body is back in one piece again, and you've made it through Starpath.

The first thing I did was look at DeLuso — fast. He was there, his eyes flickering open, breath steady. I pushed myself up, and the cushions petaled wide to let me through. DeLuso turned then and looked at me.

"Congratulations," I said dryly. "For some reason, Cadet, it appears you've made it through Starpath."

DeLuso was a light shade of classroom chalk, but he managed a grin. "Thank you, sir. It's — a lot different than I expected."

I shot his sick grin right back at him. "Oh? Really, Cadet? *Well, it's also a lot different than* I *expected, Mister!*"

DeLuso stared. I jerked coveralls and slipons from the locker and glared at him. "You made a *noise,* Cadet. Did you know that? No, you didn't hear it, but I did. *You made a noise during transmit!* Your relaxation cycle was imperfect. Something tensed, probably a muscle in the lower throat, and a little breath of air you weren't supposed to have in the first place moved over that muscle causing vibration, motion, sound. Our, as we call it in Starpath, Cadet — good old Instant Death. Evidently you stopped in time. You are here — and that pretty well proves it, doesn't it? Now, next question: How many times do you think you can get away with a damn fool stunt like that?"

I glanced at the tiny station chronometer set in the curved wall of the shell. "You have twenty-one minutes, forty-two seconds, standard time, to work out that little problem. I suggest you have it solved on schedule, or you won't have to worry about getting chewed out at the next station. Any questions?"

Apprehension had started across his face, but it faded quickly. "No, sir," he said smartly. "No questions, sir." Good man.

I tossed him coveralls and slipons. "Get dressed, Cadet. Let's see what's going on outside."

We left the dome and stepped out on the plastic circle under the dim moon of Arcturus Seven, better known to the colonists there as Gell-

hell. We were 33 light-years from Earth as the crow flies — microseconds by Starpath. The Frostrees beyond the settlement clearing were halfway through their screaming lunch, tearing each other apart and flinging bloody foilage to the pink sky. The ragged, scab-covered colonists stood just beyond the dome's field, pelting us with filth. Several of them dropped dead and began to decompose as we watched.

Cadet Matt DeLuso didn't say a thing. I was beginning to think he might actually make Starpath.

"Okay," I told him, "you've caught the scenery. Go get the cargo — we only have 18 more minutes here."

DeLuso retreated to the dome and lugged out the 3 x 5 flat aluminoid carton. I opened it near the edge of the field, checked it quickly, released the inner seal and closed it up again. They saw what we had, and for a brief minute they even forgot about throwing stuff at us. A low moan swept over the crowd.

I looked them over. One guy was a little taller than the rest. He was skin and bones like everyone else, but a trifle less scabby.

"You," I pointed, "would you come to the edge of the field, please?" He dragged himself over on shaky legs and stopped a yard away. He stared at men through rheumy eyes, then spat at my face. The spittle hit the field and rolled away.

"You're a little *late,* Starpather," he croaked. His mouth curled up in hate, and I thought for a second he might spit again.

"I'm sorry. We do what we can. How many have you lost?"

He laughed, and that just about ended the conversation right there. "You want this morning's count, or up to the last three minutes? We started with 900 people here, mister. We got about 200 left."

"I'm sorry about that, too," I told him. I picked up the case and tossed it through the field. It landed in the soft turf on the other side.

You always *throw* cargo through the field. You never roll it, or push it or shove it. The field's about an inch thick, and if you happen to shove something a little too easy, or a pebble gets in the way — or anything — your cargo just stays there till Hell freezes over. Things that get caught in that inch don't move. Once you lose momentum you can't push it through, and certainly no one on the other side can pull it. Not unless you turn off the field. And brother, that is just what you *don't* do — ever.

The colonists were already into the carton and passing out the little blue pills, but the tall man in front of me hadn't moved.

"Think that stuff'll work?" he asked doubtfully.

I nodded. "It should. They worked on the sample culture you furnished. No reason it shouldn't do the job."

"Uh-huh. But you don't really *know,* do you?" he said dully. I could tell the poor guy was dead on his feet. In his condition he shouldn't have even been standing up. He made no move to get his

share of the pills. I had an idea he just really didn't care any more.

"No," I said quietly, "I don't know for sure. I hope they do. I'd like to make you understand that we want to save as many people as possible on Gellhell."

"I'll bet you do," he said darkly. "I'll bet you stay awake nights thinking about Gellhell. I'll bet you can hardly take a drink of good Earth whiskey or pull a Fungirl into the sack you're so . . . worried . . . about . . . . "

I turned away from him. His eyes were clouding up, and he was shaking all over. "DeLuso! Over here!"

He came up quickly. "We have about 6 minutes, Cadet. Get in there and run through Operational prep. I'll be with you in three and a half minutes."

DeLuso stared. "Operational? Sir, you want *me* to activate?"

I watched him a moment. Right now he could use a bit of fatherly encouragement, a little friendly service cajolery. To hell with that. He also needed to learn to follow orders without a moment's hesitation.

"Cadet, you received an order." I let the hard freeze travel from my eyes to his. He swallowed hard. But again control returned quickly. He snapped off a perfect salute and disappeared into the dome. I turned back to my scarecrow colonist.

He was exactly where I had left him, and he made no motion toward the antiplague drugs.

"About your Frostrees," I said, "we can't help you destroy them — and we don't advise *you* to try, either. The lab boys discovered they're a part of your ecological setup, and you can't spare them."

" ——— the ecological setup, Mister!" The rage was back in his sunken eyes. "These things are killing our crops as fast as we can grow 'em. We don't hardly have the strength to burn 'em back!"

I nodded. "There's something in the carton for that. Tiger wheat. It worked pretty well on Ogirra. They had a problem very similar to yours."

His temper dropped a few degrees, but his eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What you figure something called Tiger wheat'll do to people, mister? Or did you think of that?"

"Shouldn't do anything," I told him. "Unless you're part plant. It should poison the Frostrees or anything else that tries to grow near it. Won't bother people. Just stay away from it until after it loses its strength at harvest time. It's all in the microbook in the seed pack."

He glared at me and shook his fists tight against his sides. "We don't want any part of the stuff," he hissed. "We'll make out ourselves somehow. Without Starpath handouts!"

The gong sounded softly behind us. I said, "You might change your mind when you get back on your feet. I hope so. Good-by — and the best of luck."

He tried to mouth a curse, then dropped on his thin knees to the ground. I jumped through the hatch and let the seal sigh behind me. I was in the cushion as OPERATIONAL green turned to amber.

DeLuso's eyes were welded to the bright, blinking READY.

"Everything operational, sir."

I gave him a curt, military-type nod, then added: "Watch the throat muscles; I might see you next stop . . . ."

II

DeLuso gasped as we stepped out of the dome. It was night, and Vara Vara's purple moon filled half the sky, spotting the landscape with soft, violet shadows. A slight breeze carried the odors of exotic blossoms and dusty pollen.

DeLuso said something, softly, but I didn't catch his words. Still, I understood. Vara Vara is that kind of world.

"Makes you feel kind of guilty," he said absently. "I mean, sir — after Gellhell — the things they have to go through just to stay alive."

I grinned in the darkness. "Uh-huh. Seems that way, doesn't it? You know anything about Vara Vara, son?"

He turned, and I picked up his face in the violet shadows.

"It's Paradise, DeLuso. At least, if there's a paradise anywhere in this Universe, Vara Vara comes closest to filling the bill. It's rather old, for a colony. Discovered nearly 150 years before Starpath. Long-sleep colonists — some of the few on record that ever landed anywhere in those days. They took one look at Vara Vara, and decided this was it. So they mutated — and made Vara Vara theirs."

I could feel the boy's surprise. Somewhere a night bird broke into its trilling cry. "Sir — *mutated?* But —"

I nodded. "Mutation equipment was standard on every colony ship those days just in case. Then as now, it's pretty hard to turn back. This was one of those cases. They thought it was worthwhile, and I can't say that I blame them. As to *why* they made the change, the answer is down there."

I walked to the edge of the field and pointed into purple darkness.

"Below, Cadet. We're in the top of a planet-wide forest, three miles high. Up here is where the colonists live. This is the paradise part of Vara Vara. Two miles down is the hell."

I walked back to the dome and turned up outside volume as high as it would go, aiming the directional pickups straight down. DeLuso hadn't moved.

"Now," I said. "Listen."

There was really very little to hear at this distance, but it was enough to stand a man's hair on end. It wasn't so much what you *could* hear. . . .

I looked at the cadet. He was a purple statue with a marble-white face. I turned the volume back to low.

"Don't ask what's making those noises," I said. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you. Anyway, the Vara Varans don't mind. Needless to say, they don't wander around down there."

I stopped, and faced DeLuso. His eyes were turned to the leafy dark-

ness. I knew what he was doing; he was trying to pinpoint the soft, velvety hum that had suddenly filled the night. I smiled to myself, remembering the night that almost alien sound had first reached my own ears.

"There," I said, "Look." I raised a hand toward the dim purple moon. A bright ball of cold fire was pulsing toward us through black leaves. The soft hum turned to a definite, whirring beat. Then the fluttering of wings filled the night. A blur of violet flowed across the surface of the field, then settled lightly on a loop of twisted vine. DeLuso's eyes widened.

"Hello, Lyrerae," I said.

"Hel*looooooooooooo*, Keith Waldermann, my Starpather!" Her voice was a high, golden song. She touched the coldlight bug nestling on her shoulder, and it purred into dimness.

All of the women of Vara Vara are beautiful, each in their own way. The expression of beauty is a part of the Vara Vara way of living. None of the others — to me — can touch the beauty of Lyrerae.

She smiled, glanced at me warmly, then turned her eyes searchingly on DeLuso.

"And this one, Keith? I have not seen him with you before?" Lyrerae's voice made her simple statement sound like a declaration of love.

"Lyrerae. This is Cadet Matt DeLuso. This is his first trip, but we may be able to make a Starpather out of him."

"I'm — pleased to meet you," Matt mumbled.

Lyrerae laughed. "He's pretty, but not as pretty as you, Keith."

"Of course not," I said seriously, "he's just a cadet. Maybe when he's an old Starpather, he'll be as pretty as I am. And what can we do for you, Lyrerae? Any problems?"

A light breeze ruffled the soft surface of her wings, and she made quick adjustments of balance. "There are no problems on Vara Vara, Keith. We left our problems behind many years ago. But," she said brightly, "I am going to find a problem for you, Keith. I promise. I think you will stop coming if I cannot find a problem. Yes?"

"No," I grinned, "I won't stop coming, Lyrerae."

"I know," she laughed. "I know! And you, Matt DeLuso? You will come back, too?"

"I'd like that," said Matt. "Very much."

Lyerae winked at him and stretched high on her long legs, spreading slim arms and delicate wings. The light down that covered her body fluttered briefly, then flattened slowly into place. It was something to see. It was simply WOMAN, spelled in capital letters.

"I said, "Be nice to the customers, Cadet. Smile or something." DeLuso wasn't listening. His gaze was lost in golden eyes, and Lyrerae had made another conquest.

Then she left us with a high, singsong laugh and rose out of sight beyond violet shadows.

I touched DeLuso's arm. "Okay,

son, come on. We've got calls to make."

He blinked hard and brought his eyes back from the purple moon.

"Sorry, sir, I — "

I turned him around and grinned. "Don't be, Cadet. You get used to a lot of things on Starpath. You never get used to Vara Vara. Now, let's get hopping."

We had time for two more. Gresticbor was a dawn world full of scaly beasties, but nothing the well established colony there couldn't handle. Then Styrxx, a mining planet dug in half a mile under a white sun we'd never see. They had a nice revolution brewing there, and both sides wanted arms from Starpath to, as they put it, "guarantee law and order." Arms, of course, they didn't get. Starpath figures talk is cheaper than arms and certainly a lot less lethal in the long run. So talk I gave them.

Styrxx is very heavy on rare earths, and they're almost ready to afford the luxury of a two-way Starpath terminal. I let them know that the paperwork on two-ways for a world without a stable government had a way of getting shuffled around a bit. They got the general idea, but I was glad we had a nice, firm field around us. Mining isn't entirely automated out there yet, and some of those guys looked ready and able to take a couple of Starpathers apart. Field or no field.

We'd hit four worlds in a little under 3 hours. Travel time: Zero Plus. Light-years: say, five hundred, five forty. Then suddenly the schedule was broken for us, and we were shuttled off the circuit and into stasis at Primera.

I caught DeLuso's puzzlement as we stepped out into the busy station at Primera Starpath Control. I let it go for the moment. There was nothing I could really tell him — not yet. Anyway, I didn't feel much like talking.

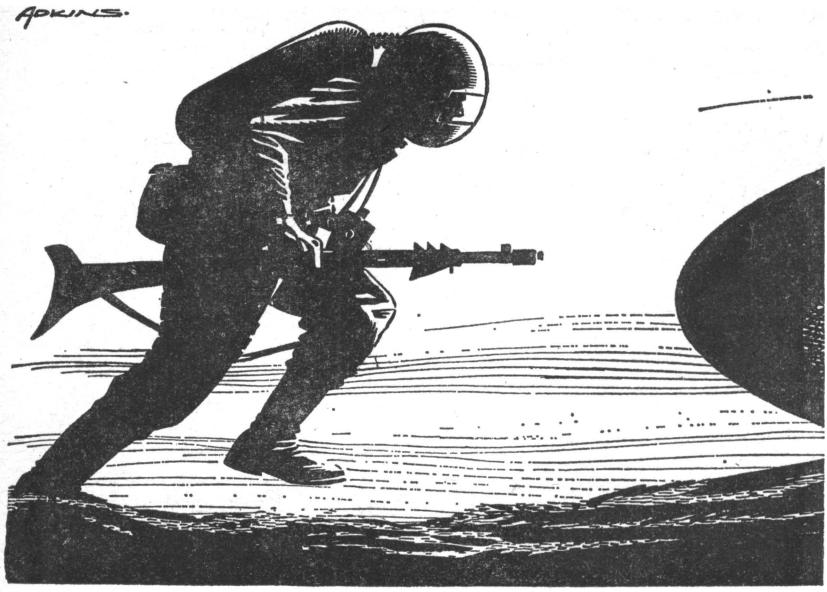
Breaking schedule is part of the game, but it always pulls that permanent knot in your stomach a little tighter. You know that each time *you* make a schedule, chances are good that other stomachs are having fits so your particular emergency can be smoothed over.

It isn't easy. And we never get used to it, in spite of what we tell ourselves: that someone else needs shuttle time more than we do. That *they'll* be waiting on the sidelines for you to finish up next time around. It doesn't work that way. Those are your worlds out there, and some of them are in big trouble. Some of them might not make it if you miss your next call. Some of them are so critical you should try to get scheduled for a call every month or so. But you know it might be a year — or two years — and you wonder what's happening out there.

But there just isn't enough power to keep all the circuits open. There just aren't enough men who can ride the Starpaths. Not yet.

III

By the book, Primera goes down as a Class-A world. By defini-

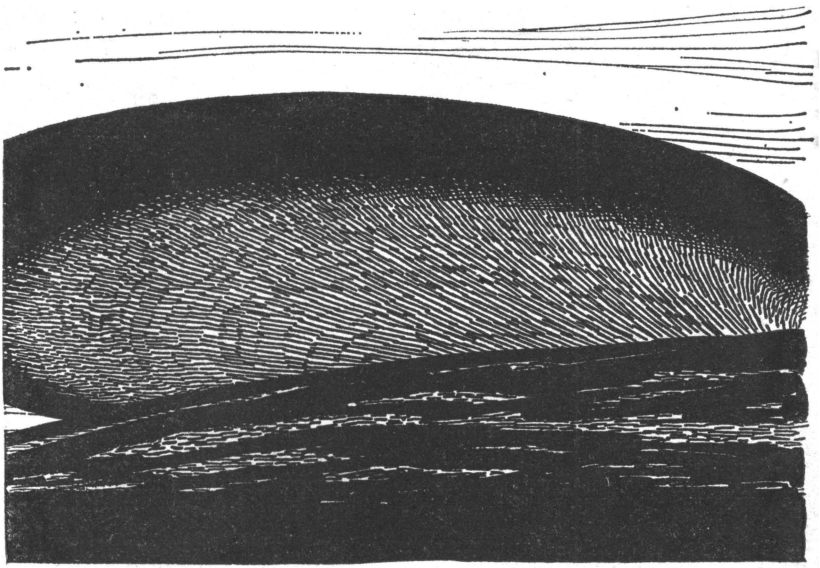


tion, that means it's old enough and rich enough to have an industrial export-import situation, a large population and a stable political setup. Most important, it means Primera qualifies as a Starpath Crossroads, a world where the power plants can handle the mainlines and shuttles for a Starpath sector — one of those unfathomable slices of the galactic pie.

There are more than enough diversions on Primera to keep a man from boredom, if you happen to be in the state of mind that allows you to enjoy them. It was, I reflected wryly, about half true what they said about members of the Corps. An off-duty Starpather is no damn good to anyone. It's a pretty fair appraisal. The men who qualify for Starpath duty are not men who easily shrug off the burden of the worlds that depend on them. It isn't a responsibility you cast aside one day and pick up the next.

There's really no such thing as a Starpather on leave.

I guess I'm a little dense. We'd been on Primera two days before I figured out what was wrong with DeLuso. The standards I easily and natuarlly applied to myself could mean little to him. I had an idea he'd make a good Starpather in time. Experience would take care of that. But for now, he was a fresh, raw cadet who had been Earthbound all his life until 48 hours ago. Since then he had crossed 500-odd light-years of space and walked on five strange worlds. Not a hell of a long Starpath career — but not bad for two days out of Earth!



As yet, I realized, Matt DeLuso was not overly interested in tradition. He was, normally enough, interested in what any healthy character of 20 or 21 years should be interested in. To put it mildly, he was straining at the bit to get at the sights of Primera — and doing his best to keep his impatience from an obviously ancient superior officer!

As we crossed the warm, sun-drenched mall to the Grand Primera's dining area, DeLuso kept his jaw clenched and eyes straight ahead, stonily ignoring the open admiration of the two dark-eyed beauties tanning themselves at poolside. Seated at our table, he gave the oversized menu the same degree of concentration I'd expect from an astrogator pouring over his charts. Even when a trio of silvermasked Fungirls brushed by, tall, statuesque creatures who moved with unworldly grace, DeLuso merely clutched his menu tighter.

So I know when I'm beaten.

"DeLuso!"

The menu dropped, and my cadet jerked into a full sitting brace. "Sir!"

"All right. Take it easy," I said. "We might as well get it over with, Cadet. It's either you or me, and I figure you win the deal hands down." DeLuso managed to maintain innocent bewilderment.

I let out a deep breath. "Come off it, Mister. You've got dancing girls and nightclubs written on your eyeballs. Order something for me and hang on a little longer. I've got a couple of calls to make."

DeLuso brightened slightly. But I've been around long enough to catch those not so subtle hints of — what? Disbelief? Doubt? I stood up, leaned my hands on the table, and stared down at him with my best parade ground scowl.

"Son, you really think I'm too palsied to make it to the phone by myself — or find a number when I *get* there?"

DeLuco paled. "Oh, no, sir!"

"Fine. In that case, Cadet — "

"Keith, all your numbers are doddering grandmothers by now. I know — you stole about half of them from my book!"

I jerked around to face the deep voice behind me and looked up into a leather face slit by a broad smile. *"Walt!* Walt, for the — !" We were pumping hands and slapping backs, and DeLuso was standing at stiff attention across the table.

"They told me at Command you were out on shuttle. I dropped by as soon as we were scheduled off."

The tall man winced. "I know. Took my adjutant half a day to get the office girls back in harness. I had an idea Keith Waldermann was in town."

I grinned. Good old Walt. "Sir," I said gravely, "you have just saved an old Starpather's creaking image. Oh, Sector Commander Martin, meet Cadet Matt DeLuso."

Martin grabbed Matt's hand, sizing up the cadet in that rapid and remarkably accurate manner that amazed everyone who had ever worked with him. It was the kind of ability you'd expect in a Starpath Commander — but it was certainly no less remarkable for that.

"Glad to have you aboard," said Walt. "Been with us very long, Cadet?"

"Two days, sir," Matt said. "I'm kind of a newcomer, sir."

"What he didn't mention," I told Walt, "is that he made his first and fifth jump during that period. Which is a little rough, Cadet," I grinned. "Didn't tell you that before. Afraid it might go to your head."

Matt reddened suddenly, and Walt smiled. At the same time, the sector commander's brow raised, and he exchanged a quick glance with me, obviously impressed.

"It looks as if you may have a Starpather on your hands, Major," he said evenly. Walt gave DeLuso another searching look as he spoke, and the tone of his voice changed slightly. Matt didn't catch it, certainly. But I'd known Walt Martin a long time.

He said, "I think a man's fifth jump calls for a drink from his sector commander. I, ah, will also include a lunch on the deal, since the chits will find their way to my office eventually, anyway. Might as well make sure they're honest. And Cadet." He turned to DeLuso. "If you think an even older Starpather might be able to come up with a few decent numbers, I suggest you get yourself fitted with some dress greens this afternoon. Now if we can be seated, gentlemen, I think we might be able to make a small but significant dent in the Starpath budget. . . . "

Nobody loves a Starpather. They envy us because we're the glory boys, the danger corps, the top rung on the ladder. Sometimes they respect us, because they know what kind of a job we're doing. But *nobody* loves us. I guess that's really asking a little too much.

Phimera City is big — class conscious, wealthy, sophisticated. It's a city full of old money, the kind that's hard to shake up and difficult to impress.

There is one thing, though, that's guaranteed to do the job: three Starpathers in full dress uniform, plus a trio of the best-looking girls in town.

We took the full tour. Matt DeLuso's eyes seemed to grow wider at every stop. We made several of the most popular spots in town and ended up at a place accurately described at the best steak house in the known universe. And everywhere, of course, we were the center of attention. If you're a Starpather, you're supposed to get used to that.

Me, I never do. I don't think many of us do.

You see, it's not quite the same as being a planet-wide, stereo star, or a high government official. It's not like that at all. A better analogy would be the attitude most people have toward their police force: necessary, maybe, but not overly welcome — until you need them.

Take the analogy a bit further, and you have the general feeling toward Starpathers. We're the highest paid, most privileged cops in history. We go places no one else is allowed to go, see things not one in a million will see in their lifetimes. We patrol the known segments of the galaxy — that small arm of stars lost on the edge of the Milky Way's rim.

It's dangerous, sure. Not too many of the people who complain about our so-called status would trade places with us for a day. But who thinks of that part of the job when they see a cop out spending the taxpayers' money?

Matt DeLuso seemed to find a great deal to consider on the black surface of his morning coffee. I had an idea his silence wasn't entirely due to the effects of wine, women and song. I thought — and I was right — that he had managed to glimpse a few of the negative aspects of Starpath service.

"You'd have to be pretty dense not to see it, wouldn't you, sir?"

I knew what he meant, but I asked, anyway. "You've discovered that we're liked — but not *well* liked. Right, Cadet?"

DeLuso nodded. "We heard about it in school. You know the way things filter down, sir. But that was just talk. When you see it out here — the way they look at you. . . . "

I smiled to myself and poured a fresh round of coffee. "There's something else, too," I told him. "Another factor. You don't get so much resentment when you are where people have everything — and that's the situation back home. Old Mother Earth is riding high — has been for a long, long time. Why

feel bad about Starpath? No, Cadet, the formula works this way: a Starpather is loved in direct proportion to the current amount of comfort available on Homeworld 'X'. Primera tolerates us; Gellhell hates us. You've seen both worlds, and it's not too difficult to follow their reasoning. Look at it this way. At about 20 times light speed which is the best we can manage so far, a Longsleeper still takes 20 years to cover the distance out to Deneb. Subjectively the colonists haven't missed a thing. They haven't aged; that 20 years was spent in blissful sleep.

"Deneb wasn't bad — they found two good worlds there — but they're still a long way from home. It'll be several generations before they can begin to tame their worlds to the point where minimum technology begins. But they do have one thing. They have us. Within a few weeks they have their Starpath receiving station open. We get the signal and drop in to say hello. One more link in the chain is complete.

"Naturally, these people are pretty happy to see us at first. We just left home, seconds ago. We have all the latest news for the past 20 years. So we say hello. Then . . . . "

"Then," DeLuso finished for me, "we seal up the works and say good-by. Yes sir. I get the idea."

"So do they, very quickly. The thrill of pioneering wears off as soon as the supplies run out. Soon they need things. Maybe they need things badly, like Gellhell. We do what we can, but we can't do everything. Most of the time we stand behind our force field and give friendly advice. But we don't take passengers, and we don't bring in supplies. We don't, because it's economically impossible. It costs a small fortune to break up the mass of two men and assemble them at the other end of Starpath. The load of necessities for just one world would bankrupt the whole spiral arm!

"The colonists know this," I said, "but it isn't much comfort when you need help in the worst way. We have the stuff — but we can't give it to them. And it looks as if we're still a long way from pushing heavy cargo through Starpath. That leaves us in kind of a touchy position. Until a world has time to develop its own power — like Primera — we can't even set up a Starpath transmitting station. We just run through on the circuit and drop off 10 or 15 pounds of whatever will do the most good at the time."

"Sir," asked DeLuso, "did you ever read about the early 19th- and 20th-century railroads on Earth? They laid track across the country, but they couldn't afford to stop at every station along the line. Only the economically important areas had anything like *real* two-way travel. Starpath is about in the same position now."

I shook my head. "Worse, Cadet. Remember, those trains *could* stop and let off cargo and people, or take something out. We can't. Even the richest worlds still have to send anything out the hard way — through every long mile of space. Starpath is a link between the

worlds. A valuable link, certainly. But for now that's *all* it is. We've been in space a little over 300 years, but we haven't always had the advantage of even 20 times light speed. Space travel has been a slow, hard pull. And Starpath's even younger — less than a hundred years. We're just getting our feet wet, Cadet! We have a long way to go."

IV

There were two more days. Matt DeLuso spent them with the girl he had met on our big night out. I spent mine alone, and didn't regret it at all. They were quiet, good days, with the balmy sun of Primera following me over bright beaches and through shaded parks.

For the first time since I can remember, I managed to put Starpath in a small compartment somewhere and let the old nerves unwind. It was still there, of course. It never goes away. But there was something else there, too. It was almost as if some part of me had an idea it might be a good thing to store up visions of green grass and wet mornings and red sunsets over gray mountains. I remember every minute of those 48 hours, and I hang onto them. They say it takes a good three to five years to grow a new pair of eyes, even if the first ones work out. So I need pictures of those two good days.....

I was half awake on pink sand when the shadow of the Starpath floater dropped over me and shut out the sun. A port opened before the gear touched sand, and I took one quick look at the young pilot's face. Just one. Then I grabbed my gear and sprinted the few yards to the ship and pulled myself in. The boy wouldn't look at me; his face was a sick ash-gray, and his eyes were somewhere else. I laid a hand on his shoulder and turned him around.

"Okay, son, take it easy. Now. Is this what I think it is?"

He nodded dumbly, trying hard to work his mouth over the words. "Sir . . . *it's Priority Red.*"

I didn't say anything. Like the boy, I knew there was nothing to say. I didn't believe it any more than he did. You just don't believe there'll ever be a Priority Red . . . .

The ship screamed down and jerked against the roof of Starpath Control. It only took me half a minute to reach the staging room, but I knew it was true long before then. I could feel it — the unbelievable surge of power pouring into Control from all over the planet. There'd be no private or industrial power left on Primera now. It was all channeling into this one building, down into the giant generators beneath Control and out to some flyspeck world that had bought itself the big package of trouble.

We were draining a planet to feed raw power to a distant star. The same thing would be happening on a dozen other Starpath Control worlds. Electric transport would halt; atomic plants would scream as hot power was torn from their vitals. If you needed power

to live — you'd die. Whatever problem you had, Priority Red was bigger.

"Keith! Over here!" I jerked around, vaulted a power truck hauling an ugly, snouted weapon and faced Walt Martin. He grasped my hand and signaled to a nearby captain. The captain nodded and sprinted away.

"I'm glad you're here, Keith," Walt said softly. "We're going to need everyone who's had over fifteen minutes of Starpath experience!"

"It's true, then. It finally happened."

Walt nodded grimly. "It's true, and it's bad." He turned to the high-vaulted chamber of the staging room. It was chaos, unless you knew what was going on there. Every bank of Starpath conveyors was in use. As men stepped from their missions on a hundred worlds, they were handed a combat suit and shuffled into line. Weapons, trucks hummed back and forth like blind beetles through the auxiliary tunnels. And everything, men and equipment, funneled eventually toward one particular Starpath portal.

"Where is it, Walt? Where did they hit?" The sector commander's face was gray and drawn. He had aged ten years in half an hour.

"I said it was bad, Keith. It's worse than that. It's Corphyrion."

I took a deep breath and held it. "Yeah. It would be. *Damn*, Walt! We'll never hold it! It's too far!"

"We'll hold it," said Walt. "We'll hold it because we have to hold it."

And he was right, of course. If we didn't hold Corphyrion, we'd lose more than Starpath. Starpath first, but then the whole spiral arm.

The captain pulled up to us then and handed me a set of combats. Behind him sprinted Matt DeLuso, half in and half out of his fighting gear.

"Major!" he said and started a salute in my direction. Then he saw Walt beside me and turned the gesture to him. "Commander Martin! Sir, I — "

I said, "Okay, hold it, Cadet. This is a Priority Red, son. I don't have time to tell you what that means. Neither does the Commander. Get yourself to supply and draw a weapon. Pull one for me while you're at it. There won't be a briefing on this one, Matt — just stick close and come out shooting."

Matt stared. "Shooting? Sir, shooting at *what?*"

I looked at him, then at Walt. Walt smiled grimly. "Cadet, we haven't the faintest idea. But I think we'll know what to shoot at when we see it."

I didn't have the slightest doubt about that.

Walt and I transmitted together, on the second wave. DeLuso and Captain Hamiel, Commander Martin's captain-aide, came right behind us.

It was a pure, textbook hell. There were about forty men already crowded outside the dome, behind the bubble of our force field. There was no room to do anything. Every-

one was on top of someone else. Beside me, a heavy-weapons sergeant cursed under his breath as a combat foot came down on his gauntlet hand. He was trying to assemble a bulky disruptor that had of necessity been transmitted in four sections.

Raw, unimaginable power was surging in from Starpath worlds to supplement and reinforce the dome's generators. The field's protective bubble was expanding to make room for our forces — but not fast enough. The dome's air conditioning wasn't built to handle this kind of thing. On top of that, whatever was outside our field was letting us have it with some pretty awesome stuff. Energy washed over the field, turning it faintly red, and we were getting plenty of heat from that alone.

A hand tapped my shoulder, and I faced Commander Martin. He motioned me to the far side of the dome where a harried group of technicians were laboring over a small, glowing screen.

"Their weapons output makes it damn near impossible to pin down any positions," he growled. "But we think we have *something*." He pointed. "There. Those three blips keep turning up in spite of the static. We have three disruptors assembled. I can't afford to wait for more. We can't take much more of this pounding, Major — get this stuff in line and try to knock out those positions!"

I pulled Captain Hamiel along with me and sent Cadet DeLuso back to key in the cables from radar to our bank of disruptors. Sweat burned into my eyes under the heavy combat armor. I glanced up once and saw a deep circle of cherryred pouring across the side of our field.

Suddenly the sweat under my helmet turned to ice. We were dealing with some smart cookies. They hadn't been able to penetrate our force field with their mass firepower — so they were turning everything they had on one spot. That spot was absorbing a hell of a lot of energy — and holding. For how long?

I didn't want to think too much about that.

DeLuso sprinted up and signaled me the cables were keyed. I turned. Two Starpathers were gingerly lowering the deadly disruptor tubes and extracting the shiny safety keys.

"Ready, Major," said Hamiel. "I've set it up for one blast over each of the three targets. I think, sir, if we hit them while they're still concentrating fire on one area — "

I nodded quickly, cutting him off, and glanced once more at the deep, red scar spreading across our field. I wondered what the enemy — whoever or whatever they were — would be thinking right now. The more I considered that concentrated firepower stunt, the less I liked it. It was a good idea, certainly. Maybe I'd have done the same thing in their place. Still, maybe it was just *too* good an idea . . . .

I turned back to Hamiel. "Captain, change your settings. Concentrate two of your weapons on targets one and three. Lob the other

one high and slow over target two. I want it to fire a good two seconds ahead of your other weapons."

Hamiel stared. I could see his eyes darting around to the side and behind me, probably hoping to find Walt looking over my shoulder.

"Major," he said slowly, "we don't know much about their weapons, but we do know they have the capacity to knock off a slow-firing battery."

"That, Captain, is my thinking, too. It's getting hotter than hell in here — please carry out the order, Hamiel! Now!" He turned red under his helmet, his mouth opening with the beginning of another protest. I moved him aside quickly.

"DeLuso!"

The cadet nodded, moved to the weapons and made rapid adjustments. He raised his hands from the board, and I pressed the button of the first disruptor, sending the silver bolt in a high, slow arc they couldn't miss.

They didn't. Before I'd counted off the two seconds, a white blast shook the dome, and I jammed home the other two buttons at once. Twin missiles thrummed through the field in a ground-hugging trajectory. A mile away, double cones of silent purple light winked and died. I ran around the dome and glanced at the small screen.

Two of the blips were gone for good. A disruptor missile plays some pretty horrifying tricks on its target. Every atom in the area moves a meter to its right and changes place with its neighbor. Result: some pretty gory scenery.

"Major." It was Hamiel. "Sir, I — "

"Forget it, Captain. We don't have time for a bloody court martial — those characters aren't licked yet!" In answer, a flood of red splashed over the dome. I grinned anyway — their concentration was a lot weaker than before.

We fed bolts into our three disruptors as fast as they could fire. Some of them got through — and a lot of them didn't.

We weren't fooled by the enemy's strength any more, but they had learned a lot about us, too. They were answering us from three new positions now. But they had spread their power thin. I could feel their concentrations weakening, and I could read the story in the viewer. Walt looked over my shoulder. I looked back, and he smiled grimly.

"Okay," he said, "let's take 'em, Major."

It always seems to end up that way, doesn't it? You can soften up the enemy with the most awesome of weapons. Then you have to go in yourself and dig 'em out.

We went. And every Starpath soldier that leaped through that force field knew there was only one way back. He knew that field couldn't be turned off to let him in unless every enemy position was destroyed first. I did what every other soldier did. I tried not to think about it.

There wasn't time to worry about getting back. We found that out soon enough. I lost half a dozen troopers before we made the small

gully about 100 yards from the dome.

I knew Walt's group had fared a little better. But not much. We gave them everything we had — hand disruptor, V-grenades, small arms fire. We did a pretty fair job of it, too, because the second wave got through our covering fire with only half our casualties.

I moved out of our gully down a small ridge and got my first sight of the enemy. A dark beak opened under black pinpoint eyes, and a stubby weapon came up fast in long arms. I kicked in the green-tinted faceplate and kept going. A trooper in front of me turned with half a face and dropped under my feet. We stormed the first position and fried a good fifty of them. They died silently, great horny beaks straining for whatever poison they breathed back home.

I turned, then, to take a quick count of my men. My stomach sank, and a bad taste welled up in my throat. There were three of them left: Matt DeLuso and two veteran Starpath troopers.

I looked at Matt. He managed a tight grin. He didn't look much like a raw cadet now. You couldn't come through that last hundred yards without earning Starpath wings.

Martin stepped into our post and held out a weary hand. "Well, Keith, we got 'em. It was a high price for Round One. But we did it."

I looked at him. "Sir?" Then I got it. A cold hand reached up and touched the hairs on the back of my neck.

Of course — *the ship!* Somewhere, there was a ship that had brought the aliens to Corphyrion.

Walt nodded grimly. "I've ordered a couple of small flyers, but it'll take half a damn hour to get them through piece by piece and reassembled. Hell, Keith, this is no way to fight a war — sneaking back and forth across the galaxy through a mousehole!" He cursed under his breath and ran a glove over his mud-streaked faceplate. "Come on, let's get these troopers back to the dome area — fast!"

We almost made it . . .

Suddenly a soldier in the rear looked up and yelled loud enough to burn out every receiver in the area. And there it was — a black, egg-shaped ship rising out of the hills not two miles away.

We turned and sprinted for the dome area, but it was already too late. Red lights winked from the black ship, and troopers began to die. The disruptors behind our field opened up to cover us, but there was little they could do. It was too late now to even think about lifting the field to let us in. No matter what happened on Corphyrion, we couldn't risk losing the dome.

So that was that. If our disruptors couldn't stop that looming black egg, the enemy could scoot for home and come back with a thousand, a million more — before we could get enough power on Corphrion to put down a small-sized riot.

There were five of us — Walt, DeLuso, myself and two troopers. We all hit the dirt at once and hung on. We had a pitiful amount

of cover — a small, dried up creek bed and a couple of leafless shrubs. All we could do was wait. And I didn't figure we had too much longer for that.

The alien ship dropped lower, then settled atop a small hill overlooking the dome. I cursed aloud, and DeLuso turned with a questioning look.

"They're landing, Matt," I said dryly, "because they're a particularly nasty bunch of characters. They're in no hurry to finish us off!"

"They don't have to be," grunted Walt. "That ship is just big enough to neutralize our disruptors, long enough to ram a beam through that field. Look!"

I glanced across the gully and squinted at the dome. A bright red spot was growing on one perimeter.

It couldn't have been more than a foot wide, but it was a concentrated circle of awful power. Theoretically the dome's field would hold. But it had never been meant to stand that kind of attack.

"Major!"

I jerked up, following DeLuso's arm. I frowned, seeing nothing.

Then figures moved in the churned up debris before the dome, and three troopers suddenly plunged into the open, running for a grove of trees to our left. They made 15 or 20 yards before the ship spotted them. I clutched Walt's shoulder as red lances leaped out and cut the legs from under the last trooper. As he dropped, he tossed a long sliver of silver to the man beside him. He and his companion made it to the trees as angry beams of light cut through every leaf and branch above them.

Walt and I exchanged quick looks, then belly-crawled our way back along the ditch. DeLuso and the troopers followed.

We met them halfway — Captain Hamiel and a young Starpath technician. Hamiel grinned, snapped a quick salute at Martin.

"I thought you might find some use for a couple of these, sir. We also borrowed a carton of fuses."

I looked at Hamiel's feet, and I suddenly knew what the dying trooper had tossed to his buddy. There were three bound cannisters of disruptor missiles. Enough to send every alien on Corphyrion to his own particular heaven — the hard way.

I grinned and pounded Hamiel on the back as darts of crimson fire searched the air over our heads.

"Captain, the apologies are on me! Walt, it'll work, if we can get close enough to drop this bundle within a hundred yards of the ship. There's cover at the base of the hill, and they're not likely to have troops out now. They're too damn busy trying to get one of those beams through the field!" Walt managed a tired grin, but it was the old Walt again. He glanced at me, then at Hamiel.

"Okay, Captain — let's get ourselves a spaceship!"

V

It was there, less than a hundred yards away, squatting like a black bug on the crest of the hill. We

came up from behind, away from the scathing red beams, but a terrible crimson aura lit the ship to tell us of the awful firepower pouring over the Starpath dome below.

I glanced up the hill, then at Commander Martin. Walt's face was grim in the fading light. He slid back around the dark slab of rock to my side and shook his head.

I understood. It wasn't going to be a pushover, if it was possible at all. The first 75 yards weren't too bad; scattered outcroppings offered cover, particularly after Corphyrion's sun dropped lower behind the hills. That was the beginning — 75 yards of possible protection. After that came 25 long yards of red death.

That last stretch of ground was completely bare. There wasn't a loose pebble for cover. All we could do was count on the increasing darkness — and hope that aliens had naturally poor night vision. There was some consolation in the fact that they were likely to be concentrating most of their attention on the dome in the opposite direction, but — I wasn't personally counting a hell of a lot on that. I'd seen them fight.

We *had* to lay those disruptor missiles right on the enemy's doorstep. It was obvious, now, from this distance. The alien ship glowed with a faint, blue-green aura — they had a screen of their own. There was no way to tell how strong it might be, but we couldn't afford to guess. There was too much to lose if we happened to guess wrong. For all we knew, they had already alerted their home world through some means of communication we knew nothing about. We had instant transmission — but only through Starpath. Another race could have already solved the problems of hyperspeed radio in a totally different manner. It might be too late already . . . .

We couldn't dwell too long on that. The job now was to get those missiles up the hill, as close to the ship as possible. It was enough for the moment.

It happened — and none of us saw it. Hamiel was with us, right behind me, then he was gone. Then Walt cursed and stiffened beside me. I turned to see a dim figure disappear in the rocks to the right of the ship. Commander Martin stared for a quick second, then jerked around and plunged after his aide. I jumped up and wrapped my arms around his combat suit in a tight grip.

Walt tried to shake me off, and we both went down to the hard ground.

"Damn it, Major," he raged, "get — your — hands — !"

I shook my head and held fast. "No, sir. It's done. Someone was going to have to do it. He just decided first."

Walt relaxed slightly, but his eyes still blazed into mine. "That wasn't his decision, Keith. It was mine."

I nodded. "That's why he didn't wait, Walt. He got the job he wanted before you decided to volunteer. He was right about that — wasn't he?"

Walt didn't answer. He walked slowly over to the cannisters and

hooked them over his shoulder. He looked back and smiled distantly.

"Everyone else is disobeying orders today, Major. Guess I better take a crack at it myself." He turned and motioned to the nearest trooper. "Come on, son, let's get our luggage up the hill."

"Walt," I said tightly, "just a damn minute! That doesn't happen to be your job either!"

He turned to answer, but his words died as a spark of blue fire flashed in the darkening hills.

I looked up. Captain Hamiel was framed against the sky, perched high atop a scarred boulder on our right. He was yelling at the top of his lungs emptying his sidearm at the great black egg. The bolts splashed harmlessly off the screened shell, and a dark muzzle shifted in the middle of the alien hull and seared Hamiel's boulder with red flame.

Hamiel dropped. For a second I thought he was hit; then I caught him again as he crabbed his way to another position. He fired again, then jerked away as another red beam split the landscape.

I turned to catch Walt and his trooper melt into the darkness. DeLuso stood beside me, unmoving. I cursed myself silently. Three Starpathers were out there now, moving up on an alien ship, while I stood behind a damn boulder with DeLuso and two troopers, waiting to offer history's most helpless covering fire.

I had known it the minute we reached the hill. Walt had known it, and so had the Captain. It was perfectly clear.

Whoever moved up that hill could forget about coming back.

I was looking right at Hamiel when he died. A red beam simply sliced him in half as he changed boulders. It was all over. The captain had finished his job.

And it worked. Walt and the trooper reached the last bit of cover without trouble. I glanced at the dark muzzle in the alien hull. It still swept the boulder's around Hamiel's body, searching the shadows for more of the enemy.

All Walt and his trooper had to do was stay in the darkness — and wait for that one, perfect heartbeat when something tells you *NOW!*

I strained against the growing night, gripping the barrel of my gun until steel burned into my glove. I guess the distance Walt and the Starpather must have covered, then silently signaled DeLuso. We moved off up the hill, hugging the dark side of the stony ridge. I stopped once, searching for movement ahead.

Nothing. Only the red aura of deadly fire pouring into Starpath's dome, and the faint blue shimmer of the alien screen. Then —

— two shadows, silent, close to the ground. I strained against the darkness. For a quick second, I saw them — Walt and the trooper, outlined before a patch of white, only a few yards from the black hull, a few steps away.

DeLuso shouted beside me and the two dazzling white flares exploded overhead like small suns. The two bright figures in combat gear

paused for a split second against the blinding light, then raced for the alien ship.

The trooper was ahead, Walt a few steps behind. The deadly muzzle above them cut a swift, angry arc out of the sky. A thin tongue of red fire licked across the hill and burned the trooper to his knees. His quick, short cry echoed through my receiver; then he was quiet. Walt ran on another ten feet before a beam of crimson winked against his helmet.

He kept moving — a weird, aimless dance before the beam found him again and slammed him hard against the ground. The thin pencil of energy stayed there, searching him out with murderous vengeance, probing, cutting, slashing away until a billion fiery segments of Walt Martin blazed against the night.

DeLuso and I moved as one man, dodging the bright lances, sprinting for the silver bundle of missiles ahead. Red fire dug at my heels, turning cold rock into molten pools. We spread, Matt to the left, me to the right. For a brief second, we were free of the deadly fire as alien guns shifted to cover their splitting targets.

I saw it coming as if I had all the time in the world. A thin lance of fire hissing across the hill in a precise, slow, agonizingly perfect arc. I even knew exactly where and when my legs would intersect that blazing circle. I was down, clutching dumbly at a raw, charged grove of black where a portion of thigh had been a moment before.

There was no time for pain. I crabbed awkwardly along the ground, ahead of the hungry lances that probed the landscape for the rest of me.

DeLuso dodged past, and I fired a short and ineffectual burst over his head toward the dark ship. The two troopers behind us joined in.

Matt grabbed the cannister without stopping and bolted for the ship. A bright beam clipped his shoulder, and he staggered briefly, then went on. I fired another burst and got a splash of hot liquid rock for an answer. It burned through a soft spot in my armor and lay like a small sun on my spine. I screamed until the noise hurt my ears, then —

"Major! Over here!"

I turned, caught the two troopers a few yards to my left, behind a low ridge of rock. For a second I just stared at them, wondering how the hell they had made it through that forest of red fire. Then I got a good leg under me and moved.

I glanced up the hill once and froze. My throat went suddenly dry. Matt was down! *Gone.* An ugly circle of fire churned the ground where he had been a second before. I cursed something to myself, turned away from the troopers, and started up the long hill.

A trooper yelled, leaped out after me. I aimed a savage kick at his head with a leg that wasn't fit for kicking. He shoved me behind cover as the ground turned to flame behind me. Pain hit my leg in a pulse of agony. I lashed out, slamming a

weak fist at an anonymous faceplate. The trooper pulled back, startled, his mouth moving frantically. I was in no mood for listening.

"Damn it!" I screamed. "A soldier's down out there, trooper!"

"Major, he's safe! He made it!"

"He — what?" I sat up, pushing the trooper off, and raised my head over the ridge. An alien flame brightened the sky, but I saw him.

Red lances probed and screamed around our own cover, but no beam could reach Cadet Matt DeLuso. He was flat beneath the curve of the alien ship, face pale in the bright light, the silver cannisters safe beside him.

"Come on, Matt; Get those fuses set!"

I gripped the barrel of my weapon, wondering what was holding the boy up. All he had to do now was —

Then I saw it, and my body went suddenly limp with defeat. Even from here you could tell that the fusing elements were nothing but masses of useless metal. Somewhere on the long trip up the hill they had been hit.

I cursed and pounded my fist against cold stone. Men had died to get those missiles up there, in the shadow of the alien ship. And now they were nothing. Useless.

"Oh, my God, sir. Look!"

I caught the trooper's tone and jerked around. For a moment there was nothing. Then I saw, and a pulse of grim pleasure shot a burst of laughter from my lips. The two troopers heard and returned black grins.

We were licked. sure. But now we had something to shoot at, something with a blue aura of protection. The aliens knew Matt was under there, and they knew whatever he had with him meant trouble. So they made the big mistake. They sent their own troopers out to get him.

Fire pinned us to the ground, but we poured in a wave of death at the enemy soldiers. Faceplates burst, and parrot beaks screamed for homeworld air. We piled them up in charred heaps as fast as they came around the black ship. The trooper beside me dropped as a red beam neatly sliced the left side of his body from the right. Through a storm of crimson death I saw Matt DeLuso, far away, crouched beneath the enemy ship. I saw him calmly snap the safety keys from his disruptor missiles, and I realized coldly — and proudly — what he was going to do. I added another trio of aliens to the burning pyre beside the ship, and then red fire crawled along the barrel of my weapon and plunged a million hot needles through my eyes . . . .

VI

They bought us time on Corphyrion — Matt DeLuso, Hamiel, and 17 other Starpathers who died there. Only one — Walt Martin — knew just how much we needed that time.

I wish Matt DeLuso could have known what he was doing when he pulled the keys and set off his missiles by hand against the cold

hull of an alien ship. He would have done it anyway, certainly. He didn't need any big reasons. It was a job that had to be done — and that was enough.

But there's so much Matt didn't know — Matt, the troopers behind our field at the dome, the young soldier who carried me through red hell just before Matt's disruptors did their job. There are some things we can't talk about, even to that most exclusive group of men who make up Starpath.

You can't tell a man he's a Starpath trooper because he's one out of a billion — because his brain contains some rare quality that enables him to withstand that terrible twist through whatever strange dimensions Starpath passes. You can't tell a Starpath cadet he has one slim chance in hell of making it through his initial flight — of waking up to stand on a new world and gaze at unknown stars.

Oh, we try. We try to weed them out before it's time for that deadly voyage through wrenching darkness. But — we need them — we need them so badly!

And if we think they can make it — if we think they *might* make it we put them into a Starpath capsule and shut out the thoughts that come.

When we get a Matt DeLuso, a man who can ride the Starpath lanes, we give him hell and tell him he's a foul-up Cadet who'll probably never make the grade. What *can* you tell him? That you lost a thousand others in another dimension, hoping for one DeLuso?

You see, there *isn't* any vast, Starpath army out there. It doesn't exist. We don't have a cop on every beat to guard the alien stars. We don't have anything like that at all.

We have half a thousand troopers — five hundred men — and 3,000 lonely worlds spread across the great spiral arm. Three thousand tiny, vulnearable worlds, and only five hundred men who can span the depths between them. That's it. That's the Starpath secret.

We spread out from Earth too fast. We weren't ready to fling colonies across the great gulfs between the stars. We weren't ready because our ships were too slow to spread a network of impregnable defenses over a thousand light-years.

We weren't ready because there was always the chance of Priority Red.

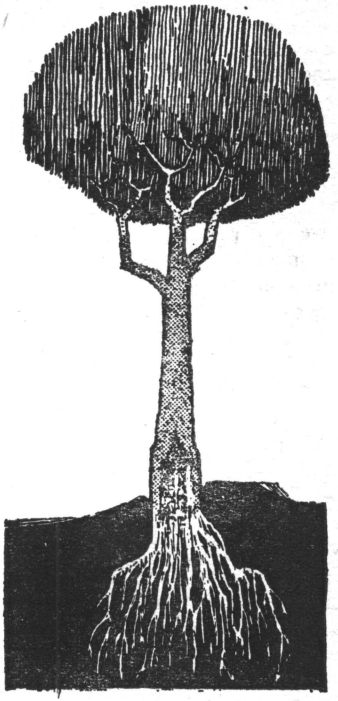
And now it's happened. A nonhuman intelligence. An alien intelligence that wiped out the colony on Corphyrion without a second thought

Starpath has warned the other worlds, and the ships are sweeping out to the far reaches with men and weapons. But starships take too long — much, much too long to save a world. Only Starpath can be there instantaneously — when it happens. It's up to Starpath to hold them back until we can build new, faster ships — ships with *Starpath drives* that can wrench an armada through the dark dimensions to any point in the galaxy.

It'll take time, but we can do it. *We must do it!*

END

A RELIC OF THE EMPIRE



They were pirates, but of a harmless, gentle sort. He was their victim — and far deadlier than they could be!

by LARRY NIVEN

Illustrated by BURNS

I

When the ship arrived Dr. Richard Schultz-Mann was out among the plants, flying over and around them on a lift belt. He hovered over one, inspecting with proprietary interest an anamolous patch in its yellow foliage. This one would soon be ripe.

The nature lover was a breadstick of a man, very tall and very thin, with an aristocratic head sporting a close-cropped growth of coppery hair and an asymmetric beard. A white streak ran above his right ear, and there was a patch of white on each side of the chin, one coinciding with the waxed spike. As his head moved in the double sunlight they changed color constantly.

He took a tissue sample from the grayish patch, stored it and started to move on . . .

The ship came down like a daylight meteor, streaking blue-white across the vague red glare of Big Mira. It slowed and circled high

overhead, weaving drunkenly across the sky, then settled toward the plain near Mann's Explorer. Mann watched it land, then gave up his bumblebee activities and went to welcome the newcomers. He was amazed at the coincidence. As far as he knew his had been the first ship ever to land here. The company would be good . . . but what could anyone possibly want here?

Little Mira set while he was skimming back. A flash of white at the far edge of the sea, and the tiny blue-white dwarf was gone. The shadows changed abruptly, turning the world red. Mann took off his pink-tinged goggles. Big Mira was still high, sixty degrees above the horizon and two hours from second sunset.

The newcomer was huge, a thick, blunt-nosed cylinder twenty times the size of the Explorer. It looked old. Not damaged, not even weathered, but indefinably old. Its nose was still closed tight, the living bubble retracted, if indeed it had a living bubble. Nothing moved nearby. They must be waiting for his welcome before they debarked.

Mann dropped toward the newcomer.

The stunner took him a few hundred feet up. Without pain and without sound, suddenly all Mann's muscles turned to loose jelly. Fully conscious and completely helpless, he continued to dive toward the ground.

Three figures swarmed up at him from the newcomer's oversized airlock. They caught him before he hit. Tossing humorous remarks at each other in a language Mann did not know, they towed him down to the plain.

The man behind the desk wore a captain's hat and a cheerful smile. "Our supply of verinol is limited," he said in the trade language. "If I have to use it I will, but I'd rather save it. You may have heard that it has unpleasant side effects."

"I understand perfectly," said Mann. "You'll use it the moment you think you've caught me in a lie." Since he had not yet been injected with the stuff, he decided it was a bluff. The man had no verinol, if indeed there was such an animal as verinol.

But he was still in a bad hole. The ancient, renovated ship held more than a dozen men, whereas Mann seriously doubted if he could have stood up. The sonic had not entirely worn off.

His captor nodded approvingly. He was huge and square, almost a cartoon of a heavy-planet man, with muscularity as smooth and solid as an elephant's. A Jinxian, for anyone's money. His size made the tiny shipboard office seem little more than a coffin. Among the crew his captain's hat would not be needed to enforce orders. He looked like he could kick holes in hullmetal or teach tact to an armed kzinti.

"You're quick," he said. "That's good. I'll be asking questions about you and about this planet. You'll give truthful, complete answers. If some of my questions get too personal, say so, but remember I'll use

the verinol if I'm not satisfied. How old are you?"

"One hundred and fifty-four."

"You look much older."

"I was off boosterspice for a couple of decades."

"Tough luck. Planet of origin?"

"Wunderland."

"Thought so, with that stick-figure build. Name?"

"Dr. Richard Harvey Schulz-Mann."

"Rich Mann, hah? Are you?"

Trust a Jinxian to spot a pun. "No. After I make my reputation I'll write a book on the Slaver Empire. Then I'll be rich."

"If you say so. Married?"

"Several times. Not at the moment."

"Rich Mann, I can't give you my real name, but you can call me Captain Kidd. What kind of beard is that?"

"You've never seen an asymmetric beard?"

"No, thank the Mist Demons. It looks like you've shaved off all your hair below the part, and everything on your face left of what looks like a one-tuft goatee. Is that the way it's supposed to go?"

"Exactly so."

"You did it on purpose then."

"Don't mock me, Captain Kidd."

"Point taken. Are they popular on Wunderland?"

Dr. Mann unconsciously sat a little straighter. "Only among those willing to take the time and trouble to keep it neat." He twisted the single waxed spike of beard at the left of his chin with unconscious complacence. This was the only straight hair on his face, the rest of the beard being close cropped and curly; and it sprouted from one of the white patches. Mann was proud of his beard.

"Hardly seems worth it," said the Jinxian. "I assume it's to show you're one of the leisure classes. What are you doing on Mira Ceti-T?"

"I'm investigating one aspect of the Slaver Empire."

"You're a geologist, then?"

"No, a xenobiologist."

"I don't understand."

"What do you know about the Slavers?"

"A little. They used to live all through this part of the galaxy. One day the slave races decided they'd had enough, and there was a war. When it was over everyone was dead."

"You know quite a bit. Well, Captain, a billion and a half years is a long time. The Slavers left only two kinds of evidence of their existence. There are the stasis boxes and their contents, mostly weaponry, but records have been found too. And there are the plants and animals developed for the Slavers' convenience by their tnuctipun slaves, who were biological engineers."

"I know about those. We have bandersnatchi on Jinx, on both sides of the ocean."

"The bandersnatchi food animals are a special case. They can't mutate; their genes are as thick as your finger, too large to be influenced by radiation. All other relics of tnuctipun engineering have mutated almost beyond recognition. Almost. For the past twelve years I've

been searching out and identifying the surviving species."

"It doesn't sound like a fun way to spend a life, Rich Mann. Are there Slaver animals on this planet?"

"Not animals, but plants. Have you been outside yet?"

"Not yet."

"Then come out. I'll show you."

II

The ship was very large. It did not seem to be furnished with a living balloon; hence the entire lifesystem must be enclosed within the metal walls. Mann walked ahead of the Jinxian down a long unpainted corridor to the airlock, waited inside while the pressure dropped slightly, then rode the escalator to ground. He would not try to escape yet, though the sonic had worn off. The Jinxian was affable but alert. He carried a flashlight-laser dangling from his belt, his men all around them, and Mann's lift belt had been removed. Richard Mann was not quixotic.

It was a red, red world. They stood on a dusty plain sparsely scattered with strange yellow-headed bushes. A breeze blew things like tumbleweeds across the plain, things which on second glance were the dried heads of former bushes. No other life-forms were visible. Big Mira sat on the horizon, a vague fiery semicircular cloud, just dim enough to look at without squinting. Outlined in sharp black silhouette against the red giant's bloody disk were three slender, improbably tall spires, unnaturally straight and

regular, each with a vivid patch of yellow vegetation surrounding its base. Members of the Jinxian's crew ran, walked or floated outside, some playing an improvised variant of baseball, others at work, still others merely enjoying themselves. None were Jinxian, and none had Mann's light-planet build. Mann noticed that a few were using the thin wire blades of variable-knives to cut down some of the straight bushes.

"Those," he said.

"The bushes?"

"Yes. They used to be tnuctip stage trees. We don't know what they looked like originally, but the old records say the Slavers stopped using them some decades before the rebellion. May I ask what those men are doing in my ship?"

Expanded from its clamshell nose, the Explorer's living bubble was bigger than the Explorer. Held taut by air pressure, isolated from the surrounding environment, proof against any atmospheric chemistry found in nature, the clear fabric hemisphere was a standard feature of all camper-model spacecraft. Mann could see biped shadows moving purposefully about inside and going between the clamshell doors into the ship proper.

"They're not stealing anything, Rich Mann. I sent them in to remove a few components from the drives and the comm systems."

"One hopes they won't damage what they remove."

"They won't. They have their orders."

"I assume you don't want me to call someone," said Mann. He noticed that the men were preparing a bonfire, using stage bushes. The bushes were like miniature trees, four to six feet tall, slender and straight, and the brilliant yellow foliage at the top was flattened like the head of a dandelion. From the low, rounded eastern mountains to the western sea, the red land was sprinkled with the yellow dots of their heads. Men were cutting off the heads and roots, then dragging the logs away to pile them in conical formation over a stack of death-dry tumbleweed heads.

"We don't want you to call the Wunderland police, who happen to be somewhere out there looking for us."

"I hate to pry —"

"No, no, you're entitled to your curiosity. We're pirates."

"Surely you jest. Captain Kidd, if you've figured out a way to make piracy pay off, you must be bright enough to make ten times the money on the stock market."

"Why?"

By the tone of his voice, by his gleeful smile, the Jinxian was baiting him. Fine; it would keep his mind off stage trees. Mann said, "Because you can't *catch* a ship in hyperspace. The only way you can match courses with a ship is to wait until it's in an inhabited system. Then the police come calling."

"I know an inhabited system where there aren't any police."

"The hell you do."

They had walked more or less aimlessly to the Explorer's airlock. Now the Jinxian turned and gazed

out over the red plain, toward the dwindling crescent of Big Mira, which now looked like a bad forest fire. "I'm curious about those spires."

"Fine, keep your little secret. I've wondered about them myself, but I haven't had a chance to look at them yet."

"I'd think they'd interest you. They look definitely artificial to me."

"But they're a billion years too young to be Slaver artifacts."

"Rich Mann, are those bushes the only life on this planet?"

"I haven't seen anything else," Mann lied.

"Then it couldn't have been a native race that put those spires up. I never heard of a space-traveling race that builds such big things for mere monuments."

"Neither did I. Shall we look at them tomorrow?"

"Yes." Captain Kidd stepped into the Explorer's airlock, wrapped a vast hand gently around Mann's thin wrist and pulled him in beside him. The airlock cycled, and Mann followed the Jinxian into the living bubble with an impression that the Jinxian did not quite trust him.

Fine.

It was dark inside the bubble. Mann hesitated before turning on the light. Outside he could see the last red sliver of Big Mira shrinking with visible haste. He saw more. A man was kneeling before the conical bonfire, and a flickering light was growing in the dried bush-head kindling.

Mann turned on the lights, obliterating the outside view. "Go on about piracy," he said.

"Oh, yes." The Jinxian dropped into a chair, frowning. "Piracy was only the end product. It started a year ago, when I found the puppeteer system."

"The . . . ."

"Yes. The puppeteers' home system."

Richard Mann's ears went straight up. He was from Wunderland, remember?

A puppeteer may best be described as a headless, three-legged centaur with two Cecil the Seasick Sea Serpent puppets on its hands. The puppets are actual brainless heads set on weaving necks; but they are also hands, the only toolmaking appendages a puppeteer can claim. A puppeteer's thick, mobile lips and forked tongue are as dextrous as the human hand, with taste and smell thrown in for free.

Puppeteers are highly intelligent, herbivorous and very old as a species. Their corner on interstellar business is as old as the human Bronze Age. And they are cowards.

A courageous puppeteer is not regarded as insane only by other puppeteers. It *is* insane and usually shows disastrous secondary symptoms: depression, homicidal tendencies and the like. These poor, warped minds are easy to spot. No sane puppeteer will cross a vehicular roadway, or travel in any but the safest available fashion, or resist a thief, even an unarmed thief. No sane puppeteer will leave his home system, wherever that may be, without his painless method of suicide, nor will it walk an alien world with-

out guards — non-puppeteer guards.

The location of the puppeteer system is one of the puppeteers' most closely guarded secrets. Another is the painless suicide gimmick. It may be a mere trick of preconditioning. Whatever it is, it works. Puppeteers cannot be tortured into revealing anything about their home world, though they hate pain. It must be a world with reasonably Earthlike atmosphere and temperature, but beyond that nothing is known.

Or was known.

Suddenly Mann wished that they hadn't lit the bonfire so soon. He didn't know how long it would burn before the logs caught, and he wanted to hear more about this.

"I found it just a year ago," the Jinxian repeated. "It's best I don't tell you what I was doing up to then. The less you know about who I am, the better. But when I'd got safe out of the system I came straight home. I wanted time to think."

"And you picked piracy? Why not blackmail?"

"I thought of that."

"I should hope so! Can you imagine what the puppeteeers would pay to keep that secret?"

"Yes. That's what stopped me. Rich Mann, how much would you have asked for in one lump sum?"

"A round billion stars and immunity from prosecution."

"Okay. Now look at it from the puppeteer point of view. That billion wouldn't buy them complete safety, because you might still talk. But if they spent a tenth of that on detectives, weapons, hit men, *et cetera,* they would shut your mouth for keeps and also find and hit anyone you might have talked to. I couldn't figure any way to make myself safe and still collect, not with that much potential power against me.

"So I thought of piracy.

"Eight of us had gone in, but I was the only one who'd guessed just what we'd stumbled into. I let the others in on it. Some had friends they could trust, and that raised our number to fourteen. We bought a ship, a very old one, and renovated it. She's an old slowboat's ground-to-orbit auxiliary fitted out with hyperdrive; maybe you noticed?"

"No. I saw how old she was."

"We figured even if the puppeteers recognized her, they'd never trace her. We took her back to the puppeteer system and waited."

A flickering light glimmered outside the bubble wall. Any second now the logs would catch.

Mann tried to relax.

"Pretty soon a ship came in. We waited 'til it was too deep in the system's gravity well to jump back into hyperspace. Then we matched courses. Naturally they surrendered right away. We went in in suits so they couldn't describe us even if they could tell humans apart. Would you believe they had six hundred million stars in currency?"

"That's pretty good pay. What went wrong?"

"My idiot crew wouldn't leave. We'd figured most of the ships coming into the puppeteer system would be carrying money. They're misers,

you know. Part of being a coward is wanting security. And they do most of their mining and manufacturing on other worlds, where they can get labor. So we waited for two more ships, because we had room for lots more money. The puppeteers wouldn't dare attack us inside their own system." Captain Kidd made a sound of disgust. "I can't really blame the men. In a sense they were right. One ship with a fusion drive can do a hell of a lot of damage just by hovering over a city. So we stayed.

Meanwhile the puppeteers registered a formal complaint with Earth.

"Earth hates people who foul up interstellar trade. We'd offered physical harm to a puppeteer. A thing like that could cause a stock market crash. So Earth offered the services of every police force in human space. Hardly seems fair!"

"They ganged up on you. But they still couldn't come after you, could they? The puppeteers would have to tell the police how to find their system. They'd hardly do that; not when some human descendant might attack them a thousand years from now."

The Jinxian dialed himself a frozen daiquiri. "They had to wait 'til we left. I still don't know how they tracked us. Maybe they've got something that can track a gravity warp moving faster than light. I wouldn't put it past them to build it just for us. Anyway, when we angled toward Jinx we heard them telling the police of We Made It just where we were."

"Ouch."

"We headed for the nearest double star. Not my idea, Hermie Preston's. He thought we could hide in the dust clouds in the trojan points. Whatever the puppeteers were using probably couldn't find us in normal space." Two thirsty gulps had finished his daiquiri. He crumpled the cup, watched it evaporate, dialed another. "The nearest double star was Mira Ceti. We hardly expected to find a planet in the trailing trojan point, but as long as it was there we decided to use it."

"And here you are."

"Yeah."

"You'll be better off when you've found a way to hide that ship."

"We had to find out about you first, Rich Mann. Tomorrow we'll sink the *Puppet Master* in the ocean. Already we've shut off the fusion drive. The lifters work by battery, and the cops can't detect that."

"Fine. Now for the billion dollar —"

"No, no, Rich Mann. I will not tell you where to find the puppeteer planet. Give up the whole idea. Shall we join the campfire group?"

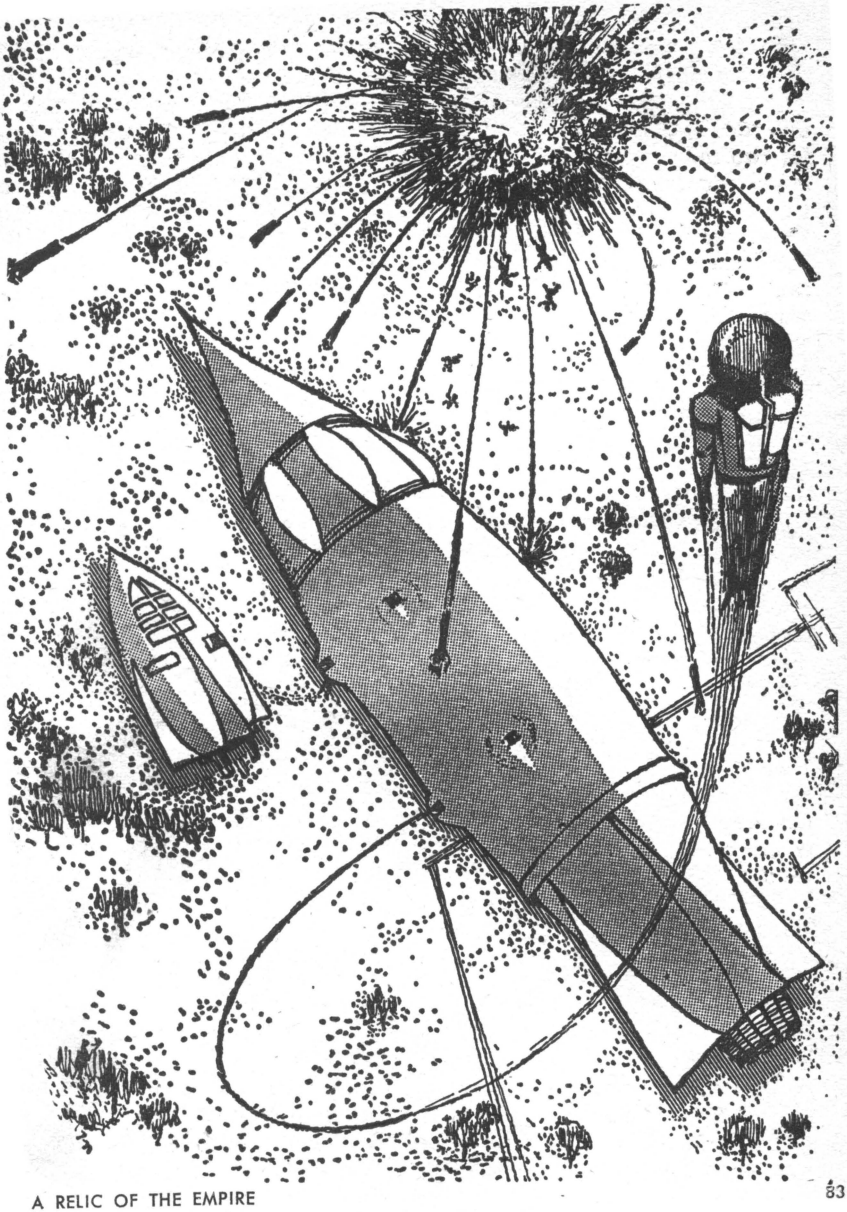
Mann came joltingly alert. *How* had the stage trees lasted this long. Thinking fast, he said, "Is your autokitchen as good as mine?"

"Probably not. Why?"

"Let me treat your group to dinner, Captain Kidd."

Captain Kidd shook his head, smiling. "No offense, Rich Mann, but I can't read your kitchen controls, and there's no point in tempting you. You might rashly put someth —"

WHAM!



A RELIC OF THE EMPIRE

The living bubble bulged inward, snapped back. Captain Kidd swore and ran for the airlock. Mann stayed seated, motionless, hoping against hope that the Jinxian had forgotten him.

WHAM! WHAM! Flares of light from the region of the campfire. Captain Kidd frantically punched the Cycle button, and the opaque inner door closed on him. Mann came to his feet in one leap and started running.

WHAM! The concussion hurt his ears and set the bubble rippling. Burning logs must be flying in all directions. The airlock recycled, empty.

No telling where the Jinxian was; the outer door was opaque too. Well, that worked to his advantage as well.

WHAM!

Mann searched through the airlock, pushing sections of spacesuit aside to find the lift belt. It wasn't there. He'd been wearing it; they'd taken it off him after they shot him down. He moaned: a tormented, uncouth sound to come from a cultured Wunderlander. He *had* to have a lift belt.

WhamWhamWham. Someone was screaming far away.

Mann snatched up the suit's chest-and-shoulder section and locked it around him. It was rigid vacuum armor, with a lift motor built into the back. He took an extra moment to screw down the helmet, then hit the Cycle button.

No use searching for weapons. They'd have taken even a variable-knife.

The Jinxian could be just outside waiting. He might have realized the truth by now.

The door opened . . . Captain Kidd was easy to find, a running misshapen shadow and a frantic booming voice. "Flatten out, you yeastheads! It's an attack!" He hadn't guessed. But he must know the We Made It police would use stunners . . . .

Mann twisted his lift control to full power.

The surge of pressure took him under the armpits. Two standard gees sent blood rushing to his feet, pushed him upward with four times Wunderland's gravity. A last stage log exploded under him, rocked him back and forth, and then all was dark and quiet.

He adjusted the attitude setting to slant him almost straight forward. The dark ground sped beneath him. He moved northeast. Nobody was following him — yet.

Captain Kidd's men would have been killed, hurt or at least stunned when the campfire exploded in their faces.

He'd expected Captain Kidd to chase him; but the Jinxian couldn't have caught him. Lift motors are all alike, and Mann wasn't as heavy as the Jinxian.

He flew northeast, flying very low, knowing that the only landmarks big enough to smash him were the spires to the west. When he could no longer see the ships' lights he turned south, still very low. Still nobody followed him. He was glad he'd taken the helmet; it protected his eyes from the wind.

III

In the blue dawn he came awake. The sky was darker than navy blue, and the light around him was dim, like blue moonlight. Little Mira was a hurtingly bright pinpoint between two mountain peaks, bright enough to sear holes in a man's retina. Mann unscrewed his helmet, adjusted the pink goggles over his eyes. Now it was even darker.

Mann poked his nose above the yellow moss.

The plain and sky were empty of men. The pirates must be out looking for him, but they hadn't gotten here yet. So far so good.

Far out across the plain there was fire. A stage tree rose rapidly into the black sky, minus its roots and flower, the wooden flanges at its base holding it in precarious aerodynamic stability. A white rope of smoke followed it up. When the smoke cut off, the tree became invisible . . . until, much higher, there was a puff of white cloud like a flak burst. Now the seeds would be spreading across the sky . . .

Richard Mann smiled. Wonderful, how the stage trees had adapted to the loss of their masters. The Slavers had raised them on wide plantations, using the solid fuel rocket cores inside the living bark to lift their ships from places where a fusion drive would have done damage. But the trees used the rockets for reproduction, to scatter their seeds further than any plant before them.

Ah, well. Richard Mann snuggled deeper into the yellow woolly stuff around him and began to consider his next move. He was a hero now in the eyes of humanity-at-large. He had badly damaged a pirate crew. When the police landed he could count on a reward from the puppeteers. Should he settle for that, or go on to bigger stakes?

The *Puppet Master's* cargo was bigger stakes, certainly. But even if he could take it, which seemed unlikely, how could he fit it into his ship? How to escape the police of We Made It?

No. Mann had another stake in mind, one just as valuable and infinitely easier to hide.

What Captain Kidd apparently hadn't realized was that blackmail is not immoral to a puppeteer. There are well established rules of conduct which make blackmail perfectly safe both for blackmailer and victim. Two are that the blackmailer must submit to having certain portions of his memory erased and must turn over all evidence against the victim. Mann was prepared to do this, if he could force Captain Kidd to tell him where to find the pupppeteer system.

But how?

Well, he knew one thing the Jinxian didn't . . .

Little Mira rose, fast, arc blue, a hole into hell. Mann remained where he was, an insignificant mote in the yellow vegetation below one of the spires Captain Kidd had remarked on last night. The spire was a good half mile high. An artifact that size would seem impossibly huge to any but an Earthman. The way it loomed over him made Mann un-

comfortable. In shape it was a slender cone with a base three hundred feet across. The surface near the base was gray and smooth to touch.

The yellow vegetation was a thick, rolling carpet. It spread out around the spire in an uneven circle half a mile in diameter and dozens of feet deep. It rose about the base in a thick turtleneck collar. Close up, the stuff wasn't even distinct plants. It looked like a cross between moss and wool, dyed flagrant yellow.

It made a good hiding place. Not perfect, of course; a heat sensor would pick him out in a flash. He hadn't thought of that last night, and now it worried him. Should he get out, try to reach the sea?

The ship would certainly carry a heat sensor, but not a portable one. A portable heat sensor would be a weapon, a nighttime gunsight, and weapons of war had been illegal for some time in human space.

But the *Puppet Master* could have stopped elsewhere to get such implements. Kzinti, for example.

Nonsense. Why would Captain Kidd have needed portable weapons with night gunsights? He certainly hadn't expected puppeteers to fight hand-to-hand! The stunners were mercy weapons. Even a pirate would not dare kill a puppeteer, and Captain Kidd was no ordinary pirate.

All right. Radar? He need only burrow into the moss/wool. Sight search? Same answer. Radio? Mental note: do not transmit anything.

Mental note? There was a dictaphone in his helmet. He used it after pulling the helmet out of the moss/wool around him.

Flying figures. Mann watched them for a long moment, trying to spot the Jinxian. There were only four, and he wasn't among them. The four were flying northwest of him, moving south. Mann ducked into the moss.

"Hello, Rich Mann."

The voice was low, contorted with fury. Mann felt the shock race through him, contracting every muscle with the fear of death. It came from behind him!

. . . From his helmet.

"Hello, Rich Mann. Guess where I am?"

He couldn't turn it off. Spacesuit helmet radios weren't built to be turned off: a standard safety factor. If one were fool enough to ignore safety, one could insert an "off" switch; but Mann had never felt the need.

"I'm in your ship, using your ship-to-suit radio circuit. That was a good trick you played last night. I didn't even know what a stage tree was 'til I looked it up in your library."

He'd just have to endure it. A pity he couldn't answer back.

"You killed four of my men and put five more in the autodoc tanks. Why'd you do it, Rich Mann? You must have known we weren't going to kill you. Why should we? There's no blood on *our* hands."

You lie, Mann thought at the radio. *People die in a market crash. And the ones who live are the ones who suffer. Do you know what it's like to be suddenly poor, and not know how to live poor?*

"I'll assume you want something,

Rich Mann. All right. What? The money in my hold? That's ridiculous. You'd never get in. You want to turn us in for a reward? Fat chance. You've got no weapons. If we find you now we'll kill you."

The four searchers passed far to the west, their headlamps spreading yellow light across the blue dusk. They were no danger to him now. A pity they and their fellows should have been involved in what amounted to a vendetta.

"The puppeteer planet, of course. The modern El Dorado. But you don't know where it is, do you? I wonder if I ought to give you a hint. Of course you'd never know whether I was telling the truth."

Did the Jinxian know how to live poor? Mann shuddered. The old memories came back, but rarely; but when they came they hurt.

You have to learn not to buy luxuries before you've bought necessities. You can starve learning which is which. Necessities are food and a place to sleep, shoes and pants. Luxuries are tobacco, restaurants, fine shirts, throwing away a ruined meal while you're learning to cook, quitting a job you don't like. A union is a necessity. Boosterspice is a luxury.

The Jinxian wouldn't know about that. He'd had the money to buy his own ship.

"Ask me politely, Rich Mann. Would you like to know where I found the puppeteer system?"

Mann had leased the Explorer on a college grant. It had been the latest step in a long climb upward. Before that . . .

He was half his lifetime old when the crash came. Until then boosterspice had kept him as young as the ageless idle ones who were his friends and relatives. Overnight he was one of the hungry. A number of his partners in disaster had ridden their lift belts straight up into eternity; Richard Schultz-Mann had sold his for his final dose of boosterspice. Before he could afford boosterspice again there were wrinkles in his forehead, the texture of his skin had changed, his sex urge had decreased, strange white patches appeared in his hair, there were twinges in his back. He still got them.

Yet always he had maintained his beard. With the white spike and the white streak it looked better than ever. After the boosterspice restored color to his hair he dyed the patches back in again.

"Answer me, Rich Mann!"

Go ride a bandersnatch.

It was a draw. Captain Kidd couldn't entice him into answering, and Mann would never know the pirate's secret. If Kidd dropped his ship in the sea, Mann could show it to the police. At least that would be something.

Luckily Kidd couldn't move the Explorer. Otherwise he could take both ships half around the planet, leaving Mann stranded.

The four pirates were far to the south. Captain Kidd had apparently given up on the radio. There were water and food syrup in his helmet; Mann would not starve.

Where in blazes were the police? On the other side of the planet?

Stalemate.

IV

Big Mira came as a timorous peeping Tom, poking his rim over the mountains like red smoke. The land brightened, taking on tinges of lavender against long, long navy blue shadows. The shadows shortened and became vague.

The morality of his position was beginning to bother Dr. Richard Mann.

In attacking the pirates he had done his duty as a citizen. The pirates had sullied humanity's hard-won reputation for honesty. Mann had struck back.

But his motive? Fear had been two parts of that motive. First, the fear that Captain Kidd might decide to shut his mouth. Second, the fear of being poor.

That fear had been with him for some time.

Write a book and make a fortune! It looked good on paper. The thirty-light-year sphere of human space contained nearly a trillion readers. Persuade one per cent of them to shell out half a star each for a disposable tape and your four per cent royalties became two hundred million stars. But most books nowadays were flops. You had to scream very loud nowadays to get the attention of even ten billion readers. Others tried to drown you out.

Before Captain Kidd, that had been Richard Schultz-Mann's sole hope of success.

He'd behaved within the law. Captain Kidd couldn't make that claim; but Captain Kidd hadn't killed anybody.

Mann sighed. He'd had no choice. His major motive was honor, and that motive still held.

He moved restlessly in his nest of damp moss/wool. The day was heating up, and his suit's temperature control would not work with half a suit.

What was that?

It was the *Puppet Master,* moving effortlessly toward him on its lifters. The Jinxian must have decided to get it under water before the human law arrived.

. . . Or had he?

Mann adjusted his lift motor until he was just short of weightless, then moved cautiously around the spire. He saw the four pirates moving to the *Puppet Master.* They'd see him if he left the spire. But if he stayed, those infrared detectors . . .

He'd have to chance it.

The suit's padded shoulders gouged his armpits as he streaked toward the second spire. He stopped in midair over the moss and dropped, burrowed in it. The pirates didn't swerve.

Now he'd see.

The ship slowed to a stop over the spire he'd just left.

"Can you hear me, Rich Mann?"

Mann nodded gloomily to himself. Definitely, that was it.

"I should have tried this before. Since you're nowhere in sight, you've either left the vicinity altogether or you're hiding in the thick bushes around those towers."

Should he try to keep dodging from spire to spire? Or could he outfly them?

At least one was bound to be

faster than he. The armor increased his weight.

"I hope you took the opportunity to examine this tower. It's fascinating. Very smooth, stony surface, except at the top. A perfect cone, also except at the top. You listening? The tip of this thing swells from an eight foot neck into an egg-shaped knob fifteen feet across. The knob isn't polished as smooth as the rest of it. Vaguely reminiscent of an asparagus spear, wouldn't you say?"

Richard Schultz-Mann cocked his head, tasting an idea.

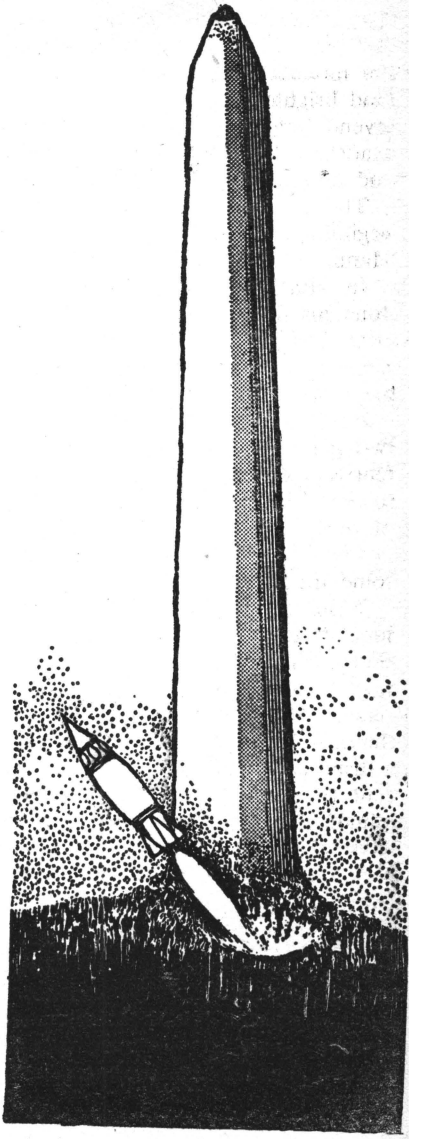
He unscrewed his helmet, ripped out and pocketed the radio. In frantic haste he began ripping out double handfuls of the yellow moss/wool, stuffed them into a wad in the helmet and turned his lighter on it.

At first the vegetation merely smoldered, while Mann muttered through clenched teeth. Then it caught with a weak blue, smokeless flame. Mann placed his helmet in a mossy nest, setting it so it would not tip over and spill its burning contents.

"I'd have said a phallic symbol, myself. What do you think, Rich Mann? If these are phallic symbols they're pretty well distorted. Humanoid, but not human, you might say."

The pirates had joined their ship. They hovered around its floating silver bulk, ready to drop on him when the *Puppet Master's* infrared detectors found him.

Mann streaked away to the west on full acceleration, staying as low as he dared. The spire would shield



him for a minute or so and then . . .

"This vegetation isn't stage trees, Rich Mann. It looks like some sort of grass from here. Must need something in the rock they made these erections out of. Mph. No hot spots. You're not down there after all. Well, we try the next one."

Behind him, in the moments when he dared look back, Mann saw the *Puppet Master* move to cover the second spire, the one he'd left a moment ago, the one with a gray streak in the moss at its base. Four humanoid dots clustered loosely above the ship.

"Peekaboo," came the Jinxian's voice. "And good-by, killer!"

The Puppet Master's fusion drive went on. Fusion flame lashed out in a blue-white spear, played down the side of the pillar and into the moss/wool below.

Mann faced forward and concentrated on flying. He felt neither elation nor pity, but only disgust. The Jinxian was a fool after all. He'd seen no life on Mira Ceti-T but for the stage trees. He had Mann's word that there were none. Couldn't he reach the obvious conclusion? Perhaps the moss/wool had fooled him. It certainly did look like yellow moss, clustering around the spires as if it needed some chemical element in the stone.

A glance back told him that the pirate ship was still spraying white flame over the spire and the foliage below. He'd have been a cinder by now. The Jinxian must want him extremely dead. Well —

The spire exploded all at once.

It sat on the lavender plain in a hemisphere of multicolored fire, engulfing the other spires and the Jinxian ship; and then it began to expand and rise. Mann adjusted his attitude to vertical to get away from the ground. A moment later the shock wave slammed into him and blew him tumbling over the desert.

Two white ropes of smoke rose straight up through the dimming explosion cloud. The other spires were taking off while still green! Fire must have reached the foliage at their bases.

Mann watched them go with his head thrown back and his body curiously loose in the vacuum armor. His expression was strangely contented. At these times he could forget himself and his ambitions in the contemplation of immortality.

Two knots formed simultaneously in the rising smoke trails. Second stage on. They rose very fast now . . . .

"Rich Mann."

Mann flicked his transmitter on. "You'd live through anything."

"Not I. I can't feel anything below my shoulders. Listen, Rich Mann, I'll trade secrets with you. What happened?"

"The big towers are stage trees."

"Uh?" Half question, half an expression of agony.

"A stage tree has two life cycles. One is the bush, the other is the big multistage form." Mann talked fast, fearful of losing his audience. "The forms alternate. A stage tree seed lands on a planet and grows into a bush. Later there are lots of bushes. When a seed hits a particularly fer-

tile spot, it grows into a multi-stage form. You still there?"

"Yuh."

"In the big form the living part is the tap root and the photosynthetic organs around the base. That way the rocket section doesn't have to carry so much weight. It grows straight up out of the living part, but it's as dead as the center of an oak except for the seed at the top. When it's ripe the rocket takes off. Usually it'll reach terminal velocity for the system it's in. Kidd, I can't see your ship, I'll have to wait 'til the smoke —"

"Just keep talking."

"I'd like to help."

"Too late. Keep talking."

"I've tracked the stage trees across twenty light-years of space. God knows where they started. They're all through the systems around here. The seed pods spend hundreds of thousands of years in space, and when they enter a system they explode. If there's a habitable world one seed is bound to hit it. If there isn't, there's lots more pods where that one came from. It's immortality, Captain Kidd. This one plant has traveled further than mankind, and it's much older. A billion and a —

"Twenty-three point six, seventy point one, six point nil. I don't know its name on the star charts. Shall I repeat that?"

Mann forgot the stage trees. "Better repeat it."

"Twenty-three point six, seventy point one, six point nothing. Hunt in that area 'til you find it. It's a red giant, undersized. Planet is small, dense, no moon."

"Got it."

"You're stupid if you use it. You'll have the same luck I did. That's why I told you."

"I'll use blackmail."

"They'll kill you. Otherwise I wouldn't have said. Why'd you kill me, Rich Mann?"

"I didn't like your remarks about my beard. Never insult a Wunderlander's asymmetric beard, Captain Kidd."

"I won't do it again, you can be sure of that.

"I'd like to help." Mann peered into the billowing smoke. Now it was a black pillar tinged at the edges by the twin sunlight. "Still can't see your ship."

"You will in a moment."

The pirate moaned . . . and Mann saw the ship. He managed to turn his head in time to save his eyes.

END

The "Other" Fandoms

by LIN CARTER

Now that Our Man in Fandom has shown you what sf fans are like, meet a few other species of fan!

Please don't get the idea that science-fiction fans are interested in science fiction *only*! Because it's just not so. The world of sf fandom likes to think of itself as being a microcosm of the outside world: a world in miniature. And just as in the outside world people have some main interests in common, but also other interests in *particular* — so it is in fandom.

Everybody who reads has a few very favorite writers. In fandom, people with like interests tend to get together and form clubs and publish fanzines and even have conventions dedicated to their particular private interests. Since I've been writing these Our Man In Fandom columns, I've had letters from lots of science-fiction readers who literally never dreamed there were clubs and magazines devoted to sf. The fact that there are fandoms *within* Fandom is even less known to you of the Outside World.

If you happen to be fond of the Oz books, Sherlock Holmes, *The Lord of the Rings*, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert E. Howard, monster movies, James Branch Cabell, old comic strips and comic books, Gothic literature, movie serials and jolly stuff like that, you may be excited to hear there exist whole clubfulls of kindreds souls. And you might want to know how to get in touch with one of these "other" fandoms. So hang on, while Your Man In Fandom takes you on another Guided Tour of the Twilight Zone . . .

Burrough Fandom

Some writers — and some books — have about them a magic, a charisma, that attracts devotees and acolytes with incredible magnetism. Edgar Rice Burroughs is a prime example. His career began with the February 1912 issue of *All-Story*, and the first installment of *A*

Princess of Mars. Today, 54 years later, he is remembered as perhaps the single most successful writer in the English language, author of some 65 books which have sold more than forty million copies in 58 languages. For about ten years now there has been a club of Burroughs fans called The Burroughs Bibliophiles which was founded by top ERB-fan Vernell Coriell.

The Burroughs Bibliophiles got a giant-sized membership boost some years ago when Don Wollheim of Ace Books discovered the Burroughs estate had allowed copyrights to lapse on a more-than-goodly number of Burrough's works and was thus able to bring out the books in Ace editions, starting a Burroughs revival the likes of which had never been seen before. The Bibliophiles now number about 1000.

Within Burroughs fandom are some active and devoted ERB-people. Vernell Coriell publishes a magazine of ERB lore called *The Gridley Wave.* And Camille Cazadessus, Jr., who rivals him for the title of ERB Fan #1, publishes *ERB-dom.* All sorts of books and pamphlets on Burroughs have been privately published by the Burroughs fans, such as *The Dream Weaver: an Edgar Rice Burroughs Chapbook,* by Alvin Fick (1962); *Edgar Rice Burroughs, A Bibliography,* by Bradford M. Day (1962); *A Golden Anniversary Bibliography of Edgar Rice Burroughs,* by Henry Hardy Heins (1962); and *The Reader's Guide to Barsoom and Amtor,* by David G. Van Arnam (1963). The ERB fans hold an annual "dum-dum" (that's Ape for get-together) which coincides with the yearly World Science Fiction Convention, same Labor Day weekend, same hotel. If you chance to be fond of Tarzan and John Carter of Mars and would like to join the Bibliophiles, why not drop a card to Vernell Coriell at 6657 Locust, Kansas City, Mo.

Sword & Sorcery Fandom

Another writer of comparable charisma, who learned a lot from Burroughs and who wrote pretty much the same sort of adventure fiction, was Robert E. Howard. He was an old *Weird Tales* author, who created Conan the Cimmerian, a grim, savage barbarian warrior who strode about the prehistoric Hyborian Age looking for princesses to rescue, magicians to fight and monsters to kill. The robust and heroic fantasy of his fiction attracted many fans, and when the Conan books began to be reprinted in hardcover editions by Gnome Press, publisher Martin Greenberg, author L. Sprague de Camp, critic John D. Clark and some other nice people founded The Hyborian Legion to commemorate his creation.

Membership gets you a gorgeous scroll in Egyptian hieroglyphics. And there is a fanzine, *Amra,* devoted to Howard and Burroughs and Leiber and other things swordlike and sorcerous. *Amra* ("The Lion" — Conan's name when he was a pirate) is a beautifully printed fanzine, winner of the Hugo Award, and regularly contains stories, articles, book re-

views and verse by such Hyborians as Poul Anderson, Jack Vance, Leigh Brackett, Sprague de Camp, artist Roy Krenkel and others (including Your Man in Fandom.) The latest issue I have seen was Vol. 2, Number 41.

The Legion has permanent officers such as the King of Aquilonia, the Count of Poitain, the Royal Sorceror, the Commander of the Black Dragons, etc. And there's an annual Muster of the Legion which coincides with the World Convention as does the Burroughsian dumdum. Legion people also publish magazines like *The Howard Collector,* Glenn Lord's excellent occasional fanzine, now in its seventh issue.

Since the Conan books are now being published in paperbacks from Lancer Books (yes, the ones with the mind-staggeringly gorgeous Frazetta cover-paintings!), any Howard fan, old or new, can find out about the Legion and *Amra* by writing to the editor, George Scithers, *Amra,* Box 9120, Chicago, Ill.

Tolkien Fandom

Maybe Conan is new to you, but surely you've read *The Lord of the Rings!* This mammoth trilogy by Oxford don J.R.R Tolkien had its first beginnings in a children's book called *The Hobbit* (1937). The Trilogy itself, completed in 1956 and containing some 1,300 pages of superb fantasy, has been discovered by millions of high school and college undergraduates, and other people (among them, C.S. Lewis, Richard Hughes, W.H. Auden, Naomi Mitchison, Anthony Boucher, and other critics and literary figures). There be some (myself among them) who feel *LOTR* is the greatest fantasy of the century. Be that as it may, the $15 price for the hardcover edition from Houghton Mifflin placed these great books out of reach until just recently, when Ace Books brought out the entire trilogy in paperback — followed closely by Ballantine Books, with "The Authorized Edition." By now, the paperback set is a runaway best seller and an underground classic of awesome success. Both pb sets have sold more than a quarter of a million copies in 10 months.

With all this excitement going on, it's no wonder there's a Tolkien Society of America now forming. It hasn't been in existence for very long, but it already has upwards of one thousand members who meet or exchange views by means of correspondence or specialized Tolkienian magazines. They are particularly excited (and you may be, too) to learn that Tolkien has been and currently is working on an equally mammoth *sequel* to *The Lord of the Rings* since he concluded the first trilogy 13 years ago. It will be called *The Silmarillion* and, unlike most sequels I know of, it takes place EARLIER than the book it sequelizes. Earlier, like by a couple of thousand years or so!

Organized by a youthful Tolkien enthusiast here in New York — 17-year-old, Harvard-bound Dick Plotz — the Tolkien Society of America has had its meetings discussed widely, in *The New Yorker* and *The*

Saturday Evening Post, for example. Pulitzer Prize-winning poet W. H. Auden attended the first meeting and spoke briefly on Tolkien (he was one of Professor Tolkien's students at Oxford years ago).

The Society publishes a quarterly *Tolkien Journal* full of news, articles, poems, stories, book reviews, art and letters. There is also an irregular supplement, a newsletter or bulletin called *The Green Dragon.* Other Tolkien Fandom magazines include *I Palantir* (the first of them all, I believe), George Heap's *Ancalagon,* Greg Shaw's *Entmoot.* The Society meets at the home of Dick Plotz, the "Thain" or headman, at 159 Marlborough Rd., Brooklyn, New York. Corresponding memberships (*i.e.,* those who can't attend meetings in person) are scattered throughout 44 states; there are local, regional chapters called "smials." If you are interested, drop a note to Dick Plotz at the address above.

Supernatural Horror Fandom

Then there are they who relish the macabre over the heroic. One group of demonic devotees, The Otranto Residents Society, very informal, was founded *circa* 1950, devoted to "the Gothic novel and the Gothic film" — and they mean the REAL Gothic novel, the literary movement Horace Walpole began back in the 18th Century when he wrote *The Castle of Otranto* (from which the Society takes its name), not these silly romantic mysteries for women that are all over the newsstands these days, with mysterious old houses brooding in the background, one lighted window in the tower, gal in white nightgown in foreground, you know what I mean.

Head Resident is a New York television producer named Chris Steinbrunner, who lives in Elmhurst, Long Island. The Society has fostered another group called The Fantasy Film Club, also under Chris Steinbrunner's aegis. They meet weekly and run off an old movie, either a classic of the creepy, like *Frankenstein Meets The Wolfman,* or sometimes a corny but delightful old movie serial like *The Whispering Shadow* or *Drums of Fu Manchu.*

The Otranto Residents Society and The Fantasy Film Club have an annual Halloween costume party. They also sponsor occasional open-to-the-public film showings of the *Flash Gordon* serials and similar things at the McBurney YMCA in New York City. And they often attend sneak previews or special preview showings of forthcoming films in the field of the supernatural. Among the members are Charles M. Collins, Jr., editor of *Fright!,* a spectacularly successful (3 printings!) and extraordinarily good Gothic anthology, Ken Beale (an editor of the Monster Movie Magazine, *Castle of Frankenstein*) and, for that matter, Your Man In Fandom.

Movie Monster Fandom

Speaking of Hollywood horrors, there a miniature fandom in that field, too. This fandom has only sprung up in the last decade or so, when the magazines like *Famous*

Monsters of Filmland and the above-mention *CoF* began publishing. But this sub-branch of fandom is booming, publishing monster fanzines galore, like *Gore Creatures* which comes from Baltimore; *Famous Fantasy Films* from Brookline, Mass.; *Classics of the Horror Screen* which emerges from Canada; *Horror Scope* from Amarillo, Texas; *Famous Fiends from Filmdom*, which escapes regularly from Bellevue — I mean, Belleville! — Illinois, and dozens more.

Within Monster Fandom are loads of small clubs devoted to favorite actors: an Oliver Reed Fanclub in Trenton, N.J., a Christopher Lee Fan Club in Warwick, Rhode Island; an Alfred Hitchcock Fan Club in Massachusetts; and even something called The Count Dracula Society, which sounds rather ominous.

These movie horror fans are quite scattered and have not yet been brought together into one central organization. But there are signs of one in the making: at least, there was a Manhattan Monstercon held here in New York on September 18, 1965, and there will be another one sometime in the latter months of 1966. So — who knows?

I see I have run out of the space allotted to me, so we'll see you next month, when Your Man In Fandom will lead you in exploring The International Wizard of Oz Fan Club, the worldwide Sherlock Holmes fandom, comic book fandom in general and The International Comic Society in particular, the new James Branch Cabell Club, and other fandoms in science-fiction's world. END

Call Me Dumbo

by BOB SHAW

Illustrated by FINLAY

The trouble with being Dumbo was that some things got mixed up. Like where Dumbo was—and who!

I

The thoughts were strange, and they *hurt*.

My husband is called Carl — and that's a nice name. My three little sons are called David, Aaron and John — and those are nice names. But I'm called Dumbo — and that sounds silly. It isn't even *like* a real name. How did I get it in the first place?

Dumbo bustled around the cottage trying to quiet her mind with work. Morning sunlight streamed across the breakfast table, making it glow like an altar. She set out five dishes of hot porridge then went to fetch the children who were tumbling noisily in her flower garden. Once out in the peaceful, sun-filled air she felt a little better. Beyond the picket fence the grain fields which Carl tended so carefully rolled down to the river like unleashed bolts of yellow satin.

"Come for your breakfast," she called. "And don't trample my roses, David. You'd miss the pretty colors as much as anybody."

"What roses?" David's six-year-old face was flushed with exertion. "You mean these green things?" The younger boys tittered admiringly.

"*Those* roses," Dumbo emphasized.

"*Those* roses," Dumbo emphasized.

David pointed straight at the freshly opened, deep red blossoms. "You mean these green things?"

Dumbo hesitated uneasily. David was being naughty, showing off to his brothers, but he was full of confidence, compactly indomitable as only a healthy child can be. And he had said this sort of thing before. Dumbo stared at the roses, but her eyes had begun to hurt now.

"Into the house!" she commanded. "Your porridge will be cold."

They went into the coolness of the whitewashed walls, and the children scrambled up on their chairs. Carl came in from the outhouse where he kept his pets and nodded approvingly as he saw the children eat. The faded shirt stretched across his thick, powerfully sloping shoulders was already dappled with sweat.

"Have your breakfast now, darling," Dumbo said concernedly. "You worry more about the animals than about yourself."

"Daddy fixed the rabbit's leg," Aaron announced proudly.

Carl smiled at the child as he sat down, and Dumbo felt a flash of jealousy. She decided to win a smile with a trick that never failed.

"Some day Daddy's going to have a daughter to worry about — and then he'll have no time for rabbits."

Carl kept his head down, scooping porridge into his mouth.

"We have to have a baby girl," Dumbo persisted, disappointed. "Isn't that so darling?"

Behind his rimless glasses Carl's pale blue eyes shuttled briefly.

"Your Daddy," Dumbo switched to the children, "just lives for the day when we'll have our own little . . ."

"For Christ's sake!" Carl's spoon clattered into the dish, and his shoulders worked beneath the straining shirt. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "Of course we've got to have a girl. Now will you please sit down and eat your own breakfast? Will you please?"

Dumbo smiled happily and took her seat. Carl had given her the reassurance she wanted. It was good to know she was loved, and yet the disturbing new thoughts thudded continuously in her head. Who ever heard of a name like Dumbo? She should be called something different. A nice womanly, motherly name. Something like . . . perhaps . . . Victor . . . no, that's a man-name . . . Victoria would be nice . . .

She finished her porridge and brought a plateful of smoking griddle-cakes to the table. The children chirped excitedly. They ate in comparative silence for a while, then Dumbo felt the pressure build up again.

"Carl, darling. I don't like being called Dumbo. It isn't a nice name. I want to be called Victoria."

Carl abruptly stopped chewing and looked at her with bleak, unfriendly eyes. "You didn't take your medicine this week. Did you?"

"I did," Dumbo answered quickly. "You *know* I never miss it." She could not remember having seen Carl look at her like that ever before, and she was afraid.

"Don't lie to me, Dumbo."

"But I . . ."

"Into the bedroom, Dumbo."

Carl stood up and told the boys to continue eating. He followed Dumbo into the bedroom, took the black hypodermic gun from its case and poured three drops into the chamber from Dumbo's egg-shaped medicine bottle.

"I'm disappointed in you, Dumbo," Carl said, his thick fingers husking audibly against each other as he primed the gun's pressure cylinder.

For a moment Dumbo considered the almost blasphemous act of resisting her husband's will, but Carl gave her no chance. He pinned her big soft body to the wall with his forearm and fired the hypodermic into her throat. The charge felt ice cold, stinging.

"Don't forget it again," Carl said, putting the gun away.

Dumbo blinked back tears. Why was Carl being so unkind? He *knew* she put her duty to him and the children above everything. And she never omitted her weekly shot.

Back at the table Carl ate in silence until his plate was clear. He got up, kissed the three boys and went to the door. Morning light caught his spectacles, turning the lenses into miniature suns.

"I'm going to the village after lunch," he said to Dumbo, "so check the larder this morning."

"All right, darling. We need coffee."

"Don't try to remember it — just check it."

"All right, darling."

When he had gone Dumbo began tidying the cottage, aware once more of the pain behind her eyes. The children played with the remains of the breakfast, and Dumbo left well enough alone, thinking idly that she might like to go into the village in the afternoon with Carl. Finally the boys' quiet absorption with the scraps degenerated into horseplay, and Dumbo determinedly pushed them outside. It was a long time since she had been to the village, and if she got through her work early . . .

"Lend me your egg, Mum." It was Aaron, the four-year-old. "I want to play with it."

Dumbo laughed. "I have no egg, sweetie. We haven't had eggs in the house for years."

"That's a *big* lie," Aaron said accusingly. "You *have* an egg! In your bedroom. In there."

Dumbo hardly heard. Why were there no eggs in the house? Eggs are so good for children. That settled it. She would go to the village with Carl and attend to the shopping herself. It was so long since she had been there she had almost forgotten . . . Her thoughts returned to Aaron.

"That isn't an egg, silly," she said, ushering the child out. "That's my medicine bottle. It just looks like an egg."

Aaron refused to be ushered. "It *is* an egg. I know 'cause David told me. David boiled it last week, but he must have boiled it too much 'cause it wouldn't crack."

"Well, that was very naughty of David," Dumbo said, feeling faint

heart-whispers of alarm. "That's my medicine bottle, and Daddy doesn't like anyone to touch it." She had no idea what was in the little bottle, but she sensed that boiling it might do it harm. Carl stored the main supply in the coolest part of the outhouse.

Aaron looked gleefully over his shoulder. "Are you going to spank David?"

"Perhaps," Dumbo said numbly. "I'm not sure." She found it difficult to speak. The pain behind her eyes had grown worse, and she had just realized that, although the family had lived at the cottage for many years, she had hardly ever set foot outside its neat, white picket fence. And it was so long since she had been to the village, she was no longer sure of the way.

II

Dumbo brooded over it during the morning.

The act of worrying was strange to her, but deep wells of comfort within her broad, heavy body seemed to be drying up. Under the ankle-length dress insistent perspiration swept her skin so that she walked with an unpleasant, rubbery slither of thighs. Several times she was tempted to shorten a dress to a more comfortable length, but it would have made Carl angry, and she already annoyed him once that day. Her purpose in life was to give Carl love and happiness, not to annoy him.

Carl returned from the fields early, carrying a scythe with a broken handle. He ate lunch quickly and, with only a perfunctory check on the pets, settled down on the back porch of repair the scythe. He worked in silence, massive shoulders bowed in what looked, to Dumbo, strangely like loneliness. In spite of the distraction of her headache, she felt a pang of unhappiness. She went out and knelt beside him. Carl glanced up, and his eyes were suddenly sick.

"See to the children," he said.

"They're asleep. The heat. . . ."

"Then find something else to do."

Dumbo walked away blindly and began cleaning the already clean kitchen. A few minutes later Carl came in. Dumbo turned to him hopefully.

"I'm going to the village now," he said flatly. "Where's the list?"

Dumbo gave him the paper and watched from the door as he went out through the front gate and walked down the path to the river. She wished things were better, that she was pregnant again, this time with the girl child Carl wanted so desperately. That would make things good again, perhaps even better than they had ever been before. Almost before she understood what was happening, Dumbo found herself out through the gate, out into the unfamiliar world of brilliant yellows, and following Carl towards the village.

At first she was afraid, then her excitement became too strong. She could give the excuse that he always forgot to bring eggs, and, anyway, it would be fun to go into the village and see other people again after all this time. Dumbo kept well


Virgil
Finlay

behind Carl, now determined not to be seen too soon.

Carl turned right at the river, walked along the bank for ten minutes, crossed a ford of flat stones and climbed the steep, grassy hill on the far side. Dumbo waited cautiously until Carl had vanished over the crest before she gathered up her skirts and crossed the river. Going up the hill, she guessed the village must be visible from the top because Carl had often made the round trip in less than an hour, Heat and exertion in her heavy, shapeless garments made Dumbo's head feel worse, but she was keyed up at the prospect of seeing the village, the stores, the people. She'd walk with Carl a little while even if he was mad at her.

On the dusty crest she shielded her eyes from the sun and peered down the other side. She found herself looking at featureless grasslands which spread without interruption of the distant horizons.

There was no village.

Swaying slightly with the shock, Dumbo glimpsed the movement of Carl's faded pink shirt as he scrambled down the hill below her. He was heading towards an object which Dumbo's first brimming glance had missed. It was as large as five or six cottages in a line, and the outlines were blurred with climbing grasses; but to Dumbo it looked like a huge cylinder of black metal lying on its side at the edge of the plain.

An inexplicable reaction made her look upwards at the sky, then she sank weakly to her knees.

Carl reached the cylinder, confidently pulled open a door and vanished into the interior. Dumbo waited for him to reappear, wondering numbly why the world had gone mad. Was she sick? Could that *thing* actually be a village? The heat of the blistering afternoon pressed in around her, making her head swim in a blur of marching colors. Unseen birds chittered continuously.

Some time later Carl emerged from the cylinder with a box in his arms and came up the hill towards her. An instinct warned Dumbo it was now imperative to keep out of sight. She backed through the dry grass on hands and knees then ran down the faint path to the ford. Across the river she realized there was no chance of making it to the bend before Carl reappeared on the skyline. She threw herself into a mass of orange-colored scrub and crouched in the sudden privacy of tangled twigs and clattering leaves.

Carl came down to the ford but did not cross.

He upended the box, throwing a number of glittering objects into the water, then turned and went back over the hill towards the cylinder. The objects flashed sunlight as they bobbed away on the current. Dumbo got to her feet, thankful for the unexpected opportunity to get back to the cottage unseen, but she was curious about the contents of the box. It was, she decided, worth one further risk.

She ran downstream for a short distance for a closer look at the floating objects. They looked like

little glass boxes, each of which contained a small ball of some whitish substance. Clinging to projecting roots and leaning dangerously over the bank, Dumbo managed to snatch one from the warm, sluggish water. She examined it closely. The box was oblong, about as big as her hand, and the two smaller faces were of black, opaque material. It was too light to be glass and strangely cold to her touch.

Inside the box, floating languidly in clear fluid, was a human eye. The red cord of the optic nerve snaked around it, terminating in a tiny silver plug.

Dumbo hurled the box in the river and ran, doubled over, frantically whipping her head from side to side to fling thin nets of vomit clear of her huge, soft body.

III

In the gray light of morning Dumbo partially opened her eyes and smiled. This was the time she like best, lying in the dark warmth of her bed, before the unwelcome and unstoppable invasion of identity filled the peaceful vacuum of her mind. She stirred contentedly and let her eyes open a little further.

The bedroom ceiling looked wrong.

Dumbo sat up in bed, knuckling her eyes fiercely. The ceiling *was* wrong. In place of the familiar white plaster was an expanse of riveted gray metal, more like part of a ship than a rural cottage. It was as though she had been moved into strange surroundings during the night but — she looked around — this wa her room all right. All the simpl items of furniture were in their usua places.

She walked to the window an looked out at the front garden, bu it too was wrong.

The fence was still there, but no it was made of crude stakes an wire, and inside it there were n flowers. Her roses had been replace by wormless clumps of dark gree foliage. What was it David had said *You mean these green things?*

Dumbo brushed tangled hair awa from her face and hurried to the children's room, fighting down a sudden dread; but they were there as always, stretched on their beds in extravagant postures of sleep. She listened at the door of Carl's room and heard his regular breathing. Her family appeared to be safe; but, as she glanced around the cottage's central kitchen in the increasing daylight, she saw that the walls too had turned to gray metal. They had a patchy, slightly makeshift appearance.

Moving with quick, frightened steps in the crawling gloom, Dumbo went back to her own room, got into bed and pulled the sheets up to her chin. The first coherent thoughts came some time later, and with them the knowledge that the changes in her surroundings had been accompanied by changes inside her head. She found herself able to think, to remember.

I am not on Earth. I am on another world which I reached by starship with Carl.

I do not live in a white-washed

stone cottage. I live in a house which Carl must have built from bits of the ship.

There is no nearby community. There is only the hulk of the ship, and Carl goes there when we need supplies.

Dumbo's mind had begun to work with a speed she found exhilarating. For years she had been trying to run in waist-high water, now she was reaching shallows, gaining speed, beginning to fly. Thought crowded upon thought, memory upon deduction.

Why did I not understand all this before? Easy — because Carl was giving me a drug.

Why do I understand it now? Easy — because David destroyed the current batch of the drug.

Why was Carl giving me the drug? I'm not sure. Could it be that . . . !

Dumbo tried to pull back from the mental precipice, but she was too late.

Why the eyes in plastic boxes? In the river?

She dragged the bedclothes up over her face and lay without moving until the sun had risen and the boys were marauding noisily through the house, naked and shouting for breakfast. While she was cooking it, she heard Carl begin to move behind his door. Dumbo tensed up as he came into the kitchen; but he, at least, had not changed. She watched him move about the new, drab world, half expecting him to look round through her at any moment and reach for the hypo gun. But his pale blue eyes, behind their flakes of glass, remained disinterested and impersonal. Dumbo was relieved and somehow disappointed. After all, she was a woman — his wife. There ought to be more to it than this. They lived together, and she had given him children. Mysteries and horrors did not cancel out that sort of relationship.

She set the table for breakfast, really seeing things for the first time, testing her new powers. The chairs were all of sleek weightless metal — that was because the starship would have had chairs and they were easily portable; but the big kitchen table and cupboards were wooden and homemade. The range on which she cooked with a log fire had been fashioned from some kind of heavy machine casing, but the cups and dishes were beautifully styled in brilliant, glass-smooth plastic. In a way she did not mind the changes, except for the fact that outside the window was a garden full of dark green things. She was going to miss the roses.

"I've made your favorites this morning," she said, carrying a smoking tray to the table. "Griddlecakes."

Carl stared down at them, pressing the back of his hand to his forehead. "That's great. That's really great. My favorite breakfast every day — every God-damned day in life. You're some cook, Dumbo."

The older boys giggled appreciatively.

Dumbo opened her mouth to hit back, then realized it would have been a mistake. Carl always spoke to her like that, and she never answered back. That's why she was

called Dumbo instead of . . . her memory baulked — could it be Victoria? Anyway, the point was that Carl acted as though he hated her, and this made the mystery of their past even deeper. Suppose the starship had made a forced descent on an empty world, with no hope of ever being found. Further suppose she had been the only woman on board, perhaps married to one of the crew, and Carl had murdered all the others so that he could have her. It might account for the use of the memory-killing, euphoria-producing drug — but it explained nothing else.

The day was hot, sunny and uneventful.

Carl spent most of the time working in his fields. Surveying her surroundings from the front of the house, Dumbo noted that the sloping grain fields had not been part of the fantasy world. She wondered if the crop was indigenous to the planet or if starships normally carried seed as part of a survival kit. Assuming the ship had been lost, they had been lucky to alight on this perfect pastoral world — but perhaps it had not been that way at all. Carl might have abducted her and brought her here purposely, to escape from something.

Dumbo contented herself with the task of caring for the children and the house. It was, after all, woman's work. She could lie low for another day or two and, provided the drug had had no permanent effect, simply wait for all answers to emerge from her memory. And perhaps the explanation would be sane and reasonable, and things would be wonderful again. Dumbo began to feel hopeful.

During the night she remembered her brother.

IV

Crossing the river in daytime had been easy, but by starlight the flat stones of the ford were mere water-borne shadows of uncertain shape and position.

Dumbo slipped once and went knee-deep in water with a splash. The noise frightened her. She stared about her in the darkness, suddenly aware that this was an alien world where at night even the vegetation might be hostile. *The tree's not a tree,* she remembered a stray line, *when there's nobody there on the heath.*

Shivering unhappily, she stepped on to the bank and moved up the hill in the direction of the starship.

The mental pictures of her brother had appeared abruptly. At first she had thought they might be of a husband — this tall, rangy, fair-haired youngster with the intelligent eyes — but the emotional response was wrong. She knew the way a woman felt about her man, the way she felt about Carl. There was an immediate affection and warmth here, but an indefinable sexual blankness, the drawing of a line which meant womb-sharing. The same flesh and blood. At that point the need to know more had become too urgent to resist.

From the crest of the hill, the starship was almost invisible in the

darkness. As she walked down to it, dress slapping wetly on her shins, the ship's outlines refused to be defined. It seemed to crawl on the ground, dissolve, shake like jelly, reach gleeful hands into the sky. Dumbo watched her own feet and kept walking until she was close enough for her eyes to map the hull's contours. She had trouble finding the door; but once the handle was in her hand, instinct took over. The lever clicked sideways easily, and the door opened towards her.

There was light inside.

Dumbo sensed to run, but there was a cold stillness to the light which suggested that it always shone, even when there was nobody there to notice. She went up a narrow metal stair into a corridor which curved away for a short distance on each side, ending in featureless metal doors. The light came from a tube which ran the full length of the corridor ceiling. Two sections of it were fainter than the others, and a third had dulled to a cloudy amber.

Dumbo hesitated, then went to the right. Cold air puffed out around her as she opened the door. The large room beyond it was dimly lit and filled with rack after rack of transparent plastic boxes. Dumbo slammed the door shut but not before she had glimpsed the rows of nameless organs — glistening brown, pale blue; red-veined.

She pressed both hands to her lifting stomach and breathed deeply for a moment, snatching air.

The other door opened into a shorter transverse corridor which led to several doorways at her level and, by way of an open metal stair and catwalk, to a similar set of rooms above. Some of the doors were closed, others lay open. Dumbo looked into the nearest room — it was tiny and contained a number of long, metallic objects on a stand. Rifles, she thought, feeling the vivid stains of memory flow into yet another compartment of her mind. She opened two lockers and found pistols and grenades. She touched the luminous dials of the grenades' time fuses, frowning thoughtfully — it appeared that not all her regained memories would be pleasant.

The second room along the corridor was larger and more brightly lit than the others. In the center of it was a long, white table supported on a single, complicated pedestal. Around the walls were gleaming, incomprehensible machines and instruments, the sight of which failed to evoke any responsive wash of thought, even then. She closed the memory. I was a stranger here, she thought.

None of the others rooms on the bottom level were of interest, except the one which had obviously been a combined galley and mess. The chairs were all gone — they were back at the house — but one of the cupboards still contained cups and dishes. The sight of the familiar glowing utensils in the alien surroundings gave Dumbo a vague emotional wrench.

On the upper level she chose the central room first.

Her reaction to the five massively cushioned chairs and curving instru-

ment arrays was so strong that it caused a moment of nearly physical pain. She crossed the faintly lit room to touch the dusty seats and blank gray screens. I knew this place, she thought wonderingly, and yet it's so . . . *mechanical.* Only a trained engineer could have been at home in this room. Could she have been a pilot? Dumbo turned her head to drink in more of the strange, yet almost familiar environment, then she glanced over her shoulder.

In the shadows behind the door stood five helmeted figures.

She leapt back awkwardly, but the figures were only empty suits, clipped to the wall. Their hoses and cables hung loose, and behind the faceplates was nothing but gaping blackness. Two of the suits had triangular yellow flashes on the shoulders and name plates cemented to the chests. Dumbo went close enough to read.

The first said, SURG./CDR. CARL VAN BUYSEN. That would be Carl, Dumbo thought, moving to the next.

The second said, LT./CDR. ROBERT V. LUCAS.

Dumbo pressed both hands to her forehead. The name Lucas meant something to her — but what? This could be her brother's suit, and if that were the case then one of the unmarked suits might have been hers. But there was something not quite right about the idea of brother and sister on the same military . . .

"You haven't been taking your medicine — have you, Dumbo?"

The voice was Carl's, and it came from close behind.

Dumbo spun, arms over her face, but Carl had his hands in his pockets. He was smiling unpleasantly.

"I have been taking it," Dumbo blurted instinctively. "You gave me a shot yourself."

"Then you've been playing tricks with it. That's bad, Dumbo, very bad."

Dumbo experienced a new emotion — resentment. "Don't speak to me like that. And my name isn't Dumbo. It's . . ."

"Go on," Carl said interestedly. "I want to see how far you've got."

"I don't know. That part is harder than the rest . . . but it isn't Dumbo. Don't call me that any more."

"Poor Dumbo!" Carl reached forward caressingly, grabbed a handful of Dumbo's hair and twisted. His oval face was priestly with hatred. "Get back to the house," he whispered.

Dumbo sobbed with pain. "What did you do with my brother? And the others? You killed them!"

Carl's fingers relaxed their grip instantly. "You say that to me? *You* say that to . . . *me!*" He shuddered. "Carl is a giver of life. Understand that. Carl is a holy giver of life. He has never killed anything."

"Then where's my brother? And the others?"

"Why should I have killed anybody?"

"Because," Dumbo said triumphantly. "I was the only woman on the ship."

"*You!*" Carl stepped back slowly, appalled.

"You wanted me to yourself."

"You'll pay for saying that, Dum-

bo." Carl raised his fist, then relaxed it deliberately, one finger at a time. "Listen to me — you never had a brother. There was nobody on this ship but you and me. We were in the thick of a tactical emergency, so we tried to take the ship to Lark IV by ourselves. The suit you were looking at when I came in was your own."

Dumbo looked at the stiffly leaning pressure skin with its black maw of a face and bodly stencilled nameplate.

"But . . ."

"That's right." Carl laughed softly. "Hello, Victor!"

V

Somehow, incredibly, Dumbo was not angry. Almost of their own accord her hands crept down the front of her heavy dress and cradled the sagging, scarred belly. Perhaps it was too soon for a reaction, perhaps when she had recovered all her past and was able to compare it with the present . . .

"There had been a surprise attack in the region of Lark IV," Carl was saying. "The losses were heavy, and Sector Command was screaming for medical support, so you and I tried to get through with an organ bank. We almost made it, but they hit us fair and square with a warp scrambler. You know what that means, Dumbo?"

She shook her head.

"I thought not, but you did then. For months after we limped down on to this world, you sat up at nights with the ship's ten-inch scope trying to catch a glimpse of our home *galaxy*. You should have known better. You and I were a sitting on a billion-digit combination lock, and somebody had spun the wheels. Somebody with a bad memory."

Carl pulled off his glasses and began polishing the lenses, blue eyes peering myopically into another existence.

"There we were on a completely empty world. A clean, fresh world, ideally suited for life — and there was nothing for us to do but grow old and die." Carl's voice grew louder. "And Carl could not allow that. It would have been a terrible wrong — because the only obstacle standing in the way of Life was a few ounces of redundant male flesh.

"I had everything that was needed — the organ bank was in good condition then. The individual power cells are failing now, and I'm discarding more and more units every week, but at that time I was able to produce a usable set of basic female organs and glands for you. One hypno session after the operations and a weekly shot of an LSD derivative took care of the rest.

"That's your illustrious background. How do you like it, *mother?*"

Dumbo twisted the signet ring she wore on the third finger left hand. It turned easily on bearings of perspiration, but she felt strangely untouched, strong.

"I'm sorry, Carl — you can't punish me like that. Don't you see? The things you have just said might have destroyed Victor Lucas, but he can never hear them. He doesn't


Virgil
Finlay

exist any more. I'm . . . Victoria Lucas."

Carl shivered in the cool stale air. "You're right. My logical faculty must be getting rusty. The whole idea of punishment assumes continuity of personality, and you won't have that — not after your next shot. Are you going to walk back to the house, or do I drag you?"

Dumbo took a deep breath. "Why bother with the shots when we don't need them? There's no point in pretending all this has made me feel deliriously happy, but I can take things as they are, without the illusions. I ought to hate you, but you did too good a job on me with those glands. I really am a woman — and I'm prepared to go on being your wife."

Carl hit her back-handed, thick fingers hanging loose like flails.

She dropped back against one of the control chairs and hung on to it, staring up at him in dismay.

"My wife!" White coronas glowed around Carl's eyes. "You *freak!* You *nothing!* You think I ever *touched* you?"

"I don't remember . . . but what then? Our children?"

"*Our* children!" Carl spoke eagerly, suddenly seeing the potency of the new weapon. "Three nice kids, but what a family! You for a mother, and three unknown soldiers for fathers. You looked into the organ bank for a moment, didn't you, Dumbo? Recognize anybody?"

The words took time to reach Dumbo. When they did she stood up and moved out past Carl.

"That's right, mother," he whispered in her ear as she went by. He followed her down the metal stair towards the lower level. "But don't take it so personally, Dumbo. There are sound genetic reasons in favor of the children having different fathers — it's all for the good of our future community. Think instead of how lucky you are. Yes, lucky! No man could ever touch you and still keep his food down, yet, thanks to the wonders of medical science, you've had three children to as many different men. And you'll go on having them, until you produce the girls we need." Carl hung on to the stair rail so that he could watch Dumbo's face while he spoke.

"Of course, I was lucky too. A ship like this doesn't carry frozen semen, you know. If it wasn't for the fact that the organ bank caters to even the most drastic type of injury, there would only have been me — and that really would have been a fate worse than death.

"You hear me, Dumbo? Why don't you say something?"

Dumbo reached the lower level and passed the door to the longitudinal corridor.

"Not that way, mother." Carl caught her shoulder from behind.

"She wrenched free and ran. Carl gave a startled grunt and came after her, his footfalls speeding up as he remembered the armory. Dumbo burst through the door, throwing herself towards the rifle rack. Carl's hand raked down her back. She snatched one of the weapons by the barrel and swung it blindly, hoping to find Carl's belly. He had fallen

forward on to his hands and knees, and the rifle butt opened his face like a purse. He rolled on to his back, unconscious, with a bright red bubble quivering at each nostril.

Dumbo placed the rifle butt on his upturned throat and bore down with all the weight of her big, soft body.

VI

Morning sunlight streamed across the breakfast table, making it glow like an altar.

Dumbo set out five dishes of hot porridge and went to fetch the children who were tumbling noisily outside. She hummed quietly to herself as she watched the boys eat, taking pride in the very smell of the good, simple food. As soon as she was sure the children had everything they needed, she loaded a wooden tray and carried it into Carl's room.

"Come on, darling," she said brightly. "I know you don't feel like eating, but you must make the effort."

Carl sat up in the bed and touched his bandaged face. "What is this?" The words came slowly through swollen lips.

"It's your breakfast, of course. I've made your favorites today. Now eat up so you'll get well quickly."

He stared up at Dumbo for a moment, then his face relaxed.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said wonderingly. "I thought you were going to kill me, but you must have realized you couldn't make out here on your own."

"Eat up, darling. Don't let your breakfast get cold." Dumbo fluffed up the pillows to support Carl's back.

Carl shook his head, chuckling with relief. "Well, I'll be damned. And you even had sense enough to go back on the shots."

Dumbo leaned down on the bed to get her face close to his.

"Correction," she said coldly. "I haven't taken a shot. Not yet. I took a fresh lot of the drug from the store and primed the gun with it, but I haven't taken the shot yet. I wanted to wait." She glanced at the watch on her wrist.

"Wait for what?" Carl pushed the tray away. "What are you doing with my watch?"

"I waited to see your face, of course. I could have taken the shot earlier, when you were still sleeping, but I would have become Dumbo again and wouldn't have understood what was happening. Would I?"

"Get off my bed," Carl said thickly. "I'm getting up. Where's the hypo gun?"

"Don't rush, darling." Dumbo pushed him back on to the pillows. "Let me tell you what I've been doing while you were asleep. First of all, I brought you here from the ship, and that took ages because I had to drag you most of the way. Then I put you to bed and fixed your face and a little while ago, while the oven was warming up, I went back to the ship and . . .", she glanced at the watch again, ". . . listen, darling."

Carl pushed her away savagely, using his knees. He half rose in the bed, spilling the food, then froze as the sound reached the house.

It was a distant multiple explosion.

"What was that?" His shocked eyes hunted across her face.

"That, darling, was your organ bank. I had no idea the grenades would make such a noise. I hope they haven't worried the children. I must see how they are." She paused at the door and looked back.

Carl was kneeling naked on the bed.

"Oh, yes," Dumbo said. "I musn't forget this."

She took the hypo gun from a pocket, fired the charge into her wrist and went out to the startled boys. By the time she had washed up the breakfast things and tidied the room, the walls no longer seemed like metal. She went to the window and looked out. Her roses shone redly in the peaceful morning air. It was going to be yet another perfect day.

Dumbo smiled as she watched the boys at play. She hoped the next child would be a girl because that was what Carl wanted more than anything else in the world.

And all she wanted was to be his wife. END

The Forgotten Gods of Earth

by Andrew J. Offutt

In the haunted caverns beneath ancient Earth he found an enemy that even he could not conquer!

Kymon of Kir gazed up at the black castle towering into the dim sky, its turrets and minarets resembling dark fingers pointing the way to the forgotten gods of Earth. The Mother Planet of Man had come upon sad times, he thought, when she was reduced to scattered castle-keeps haunted by the ghosts of her illustrious history. Some said magic ruled Earth now; some said science, remembered by the sorcerers who made the Mother Planet an inhospitable place for all save themselves.

Inhospitable enough it was without the scientist-sorcerers, Kymon thought, a planet full of desolation and twisted black remains of once-was. The descendants of Earth called her Atramentos, now, and shunned the blue-black ball circling tired old Sol.

Kymon chuckled, the deep-throated sound of a giant of a man from a barbarian land. Men called Earth "barbarian", too, but not those who had visited his own dark Kir. If magic reigned here, only a Kirian could prevail, Kymon knew — and at that a Kirian with a goodly sword and the muscle to back it up. Well, he thought, soon the black mage Gundrun and all his demonic guard-

ians would go to meet the somber gods of Atramentos. Or he himself would. He loosened the pommel of his long glaive, Goreater, glanced at the ring on his finger and mounted the hill to the castle.

A small man named Fejj had told him of the place. In the fabled Black Castle of Atramentos, he had said, lay the Princess Yssim, captive of the sorcerer Gundrun. A comely girl she was, with a body to bring fire into a man's veins — or so she had been, when she had become Gundrun's prisoner. The castle was rendered impregnable by his spells and his demons. The princess alone knew the whereabouts of the treasure-trove of the pirate Senek, destroyed these twenty years in the Coalsack. Gems and precious metals there were, Fejj had said in his narrow-eyed hiss, to ransom Emperor Titus himself. And Kymon had nodded and listened. The girl was merely sweetening to the spoils.

A man such as Kymon did not go about rescuing women without good reason. Not, certainly, when they were so easily come by and, those of royal blood, notoriously spoiled and dangerous.

Over cups of wine in a dim tavern in Yttocs, on Sark, the two men had agreed to share the treasure. Then because Kymon was a barbarous Kirian and such men could be trusted to rely upon their muscles and ability rather than shrewd double dealing, Fejj had told him how to reach the place. He had told, too, of the power of the ring he wore; while it made no magic it negated all spells cast upon the wearer. Guns and science were of no value on the planet men once called Earth, he had said; only magic and copper-backed steel could prevail there. And Kyman had chuckled and showed him his copper-pommeled sword without telling him how he had come by it. Besides, he had reminded the little man, Kirians were not allowed guns anyhow.

They had made their pact and left, coming by the passage-money the same way Kymon had got the sword. On the great ship slashing through space Fejj had said, "Few men would I trust with the knowledge I have imparted to you Kymon of Kir. But 'tis well-known that barbarians are not back-stabbers, and —"

And shortly after Kymon had been thus reminded that Fejj was no longer necessary, the little man had met with a terrible accident and had gone to repose in the ship's refrigerators until planetfall. Kymon found that the ring fit his little finger perfectly.

Now, gazing up at the castle, Kymon chuckled again. The universe was full of stupid men, he thought, and the myth of barbarian honor served the men of Kir well. He set his foot on the hill on which stood the castle.

The monster bird came winging down like a giant stormcloud heavy with rain, its leathery wings flapping with the sound of thunder. It paused above his head, steadying itself on wings the size of space-freighters, then folded them and careened down at him.

Full four bursts from the photon gun Kymon wasted on the bird before he believed Fejj's words and slung the gun away. Goreater ate. Clapping a hand over the scratches laying bare the great sheaves of muscle in his chest, Kymon looked down at the flopping body of the bird. It writhed even in death, some awful virescent ichor bubbling from its neck.

Then it vanished.

"Steel backed by copper!" Kymon shouted and swished the sword joyously, spitting in the direction of the discarded pistol. Then he went on, paying little attention to the wounds in his big chest. They would heal, as had scores of others.

As he drew nearer he began to feel the strangeness of the place, the evil. Trailing tendrils of wraithy stuff like cobwebs seemed to writhe over his face. He blinked and shook his head and raised his hand to tear his way clear. But his hands touched nothing. There was nothing there; no cobwebs, no tendrils, merely the eerie feel of them. He shivered. Neither man nor beast had been woman-spawned to strike fear to the big barbarian's heart. But this palpable, evil which came of warlocks and shades, the forgotten shadow-world of necromancy and specters, that otherworld of apparitions and divinations and *things* which a man could feel but not see . . . these brought a shiver to Kymon and set his teeth a-rattle in his head. He touched the ring, realizing he had not used it, that he had fought and destroyed a sorcerer's demon with nought but his own thews and sword.

But now fear laid on him fingers cold as the nordic winds of far-off Kir, tightened them about his heart. Again he shivered. He began to shake. He felt hot water and an atrabilous taste in his mouth and he turned away, whimpering, to flee down the hill.

And then, his knees shaking, his hands chill and wet, he realized what was happening. He managed to mouth a foul barbaric curse despite the sorcery-induced fear which was attacking him. As if rooted in quicksand he turned slowly back to the castle. He raised his left hand, aiming the ring at the misty towers. "I defy you," he shouted, and thrice he repeated the words Fejj had taught him. And the ring seemed to come alive, to glow and shimmer and pour strength down his arm.

Magic or ancient science, it was effective. The haze vanished. The ghostwebs ceased their invisible twisting. His fear left him.

And there before him stood the black castle of Atramentos.

No longer was it a shadowy thing of fear and unholy blackness; now it was merely a towering pile of blackest basalt, gleaming liquidly even in the moonless night. The door rose before him, twice his height. A chain with links thick as his thumb was looped through the door handle and secured to great spikes on either side.

Growling low in his throat, Kymon drew Goreater. He sucked in a mighty breath and, laying hold of the pommel with both hands, he

swung the sword far back over his shoulder and brought it whistling down with all the strength of his corded muscles. Shock blazed up his arms like tongues of lightning. The sword rebounded and nearly took off his head.

The chain held, rattling.

Somewhere laughter rose to fill the air, a wind-howling cackle of glee and mockery. Kymon spun. There was nothing. Only the glistening Trinitite plain and the twisted remains of the civilization that had settled Kir, time out of mind.

Kymon turned back to the castle, cursing. He bent to examine the door, chain, spikes . . . and saw that the spike on the left had been driven into the castle wall with such force that it had cracked the masonry. He smiled and sheathed his sword. Laying hold of the chain and the spike's head with both hands, he braced one foot against the wall. Then he drew a deep breath and yanked.

There was no loosening, no gradual feeling of give. One moment he was tugging with all his strength, his body shaking with the effort. The next he was sprawling heels-overhead as the spike slid from the wall with a rattle of the chain and a crumbling of stone. Kymon picked himself up and stepped across the forlorn chain. He set a foot against the door and shoved. It swung in without a sound; he had expected a creak from the aged hinges. An odor of death and mouldering corpses rushed out to embrace him. With Goreater ready in his hand he entered the murkiness of the entry-hall.

The serpent was almost upon him before he knew of its existence. Its shimmering scales rose above him, its xanthic eyes gazed at him like the very fires of blackest hell. Far behind he could see its immense body stretching off along the hallway. He sniffed the evil odor of its breath as it hissed, felt the blast of fetid air and hurled himself aside as the eyes blazed up like the coals of a stirred fire and shot forward at him.

Kymon moved with a swiftness greater even than the reptile's. The great head swished past. Goreater swished after it, bit into the back of its head with a chunking sound. The monster body shivered and lashed in the final torment of death as the head plopped to the floor and rolled away. It exuded a vast pool of nigrescent ichor. The last lash of the terrible tail caught Kymon just below the knees, sending him skidding and sliding along the floor to sprawl in a great room beyond the hall. Even as he came to an abrasive stop he saw the serpentine body shimmer and vanish. Somehow he clung to Goreater.

And good it was that he did.

"Black devils of Gnish!" he muttered. He got to his feet, crouching, aching and smarting from more than one abrasion. Here there was light, bathing the big room and reflecting back from a gleaming floor of tesselated tile. Approaching him now were men who were not men, alive but not alive — creatures dead but not dead. Full half a score of them there were, bearing the gaping wounds that had been the violent

death of them. The eyes of one popped wide, and his black tongue lolled forth as it had at the moment he had been slain by the reptile in some dark yesterday. They advanced, creatures returned to life by Gundrun's evil spells, and Kymon saw himself mirrored in them. These were his predecessors; would-be heroes who had come here on the same mission as his. Now clawed hands rose as they came jerkily at him.

The first Kymon met with flashing sword to send his arm flopping away across the floor, black blood spattering forth. The fingers continued to flex and clutch. The shriek ripped from the creature's throat chilled Kymon's very blood. But the howl and gore told him that though these men might be dead, they were alive, too, and could be killed... again. He hurled the thing aside, the scarlet stump of its arm pumping out pseudolife.

And then Goreater was a flashing, live thing, spattering walls and ceiling and floor with the steaming crimson wake of its terrible smiting. He ran a black giant from Tiamar through and through and yanked free the sword, feeling the dying man's claws tear his arm as he fell. A smallish fellow Kymon seized and gripped by his heels and swung him in an arc to down one, two, three of the others. Then he released the man and heard the revolting popping noise as his skull burst against the wall and spewed forth rank red and gray. Whilst the others shrank back, checked by their awe, Kyman struck the heads from the three men he had downed.

Kymon's battle cry ripped from his lips as he spun to the man whose arm he had lopped off. The fellow's head leaped to join his severed arm on the gore-slippery floor. He turned in time to dodge an axe in the hands of a creature whose face was one great wound that had been ripped and shredded in some bygone time by the monster bird outside. Kymon's foot swept up and completed the destruction of that dead face, crushing nose and teeth and bursting eyeballs from their sockets to sail like agates into the air. Blood bathed Kymon's leg in warm stickiness.

But four remained now, and Kymon roared at them to come join their comrades. They came, mindless things, restored but temporarily from the dead to serve as fighting machines for the master of this castle of horror. The cry of the maimed and the dying was in Kymon's ears and his veins, and his own battle cry joined them to spur him forward.

They fell, gushing forth their carmine juices, their souls leaping forth to meet their liberator, the flashing Goreater. And the awesome sword drank and ate; and once again these men died. The musty halls of that darkling castle reeked and smoked with blood and gore, rang with the fearsome cry of the big barbarian from the mountains of far Kir, with the dying cries of those sent to destroy him.

And then he stood alone. His nostrils flared as he stood panting, surrounded by the corpses and heads and limbs no longer joined one to

the other. His feet were planted in curdling blood. Their blood and his dripped from his hands, trickled warmly down his bare legs.

Deliberately, with the unconcerned industriousness of a woodsman cutting trees, he hacked the heads from those not already beheaded. In the event he failed, Gundrun would no longer use these men who should long ago have been walking the afterworld with the shades of their friends.

He bellowed out his rage and his challenge.

"Gundrun! Blackest creature on Earth's face — resurrector of slain men! Gundrun! Your oversized sparrow died outside — your swollen fishing worm in the hall — and at my feet lie ten heads severed from their decomposing bodies! Gundrun, commander of the legions of hell! What else send you to meet Kymon of Kir?"

His voice ran down empty halls, dashed into dark empty rooms and out again, slashed through the thick webs of long undisturbed spiders and set them a-tremble, rose up the long stairway before him, shouted back at him from shroud- draped walls of shiny basalt.

He waited. Again he filled his lungs to roar out his challenge, again he flung wide his jaws to shout.

Then at the head of the steps stood Gundrun, black sorcerer of Atramentos.

His eyes blazed down at Kymon's as had the dead serpent's. A slender nose arced out between those eyes, hooked like the beak of the prodigious bird. Below that nose writhed tendrils of mustache like the fear-wraiths that had touched Kymon outside the warlock's lair. And below the mustache was a lipless slash of a mouth, resembling nothing more than the old wounds of the dead men at Kymon's feet. His body was lost in a long, ungirt robe of unreflecting black.

"Kymon of Kir, is it?" Gundrun asked, and he laughed, and Kymon knew then the source of the disembodied laughter he had heard outside. "And you have destroyed my guardians and penetrated to the very marrow of my keep! Well Kirian, well-met! Join me here, mightiest of men, that I need fear no more such intrusions. Be my guardian of the Black Castle!"

Kymon's eyes glittered like the bubbling tar pits of Midaldithon as he stared back at the thaumaturge. "Join you, Hell-creature? Live here as guardian of this tomb? I love life too much to live here with death!"

Gundrun's drooping mustaches wriggled like tentacles, and his mouth pretended to smile. He waved his hand, tracing invisible patterns in the air. And the air was filled with the golden glow of a thousand lights; the birdsongs of lutes and the belly-booms of drums and the ululating skirl of pipes. A vision of the finest of succulent foods from every galaxy, the richest wines served in aureate goblets. There were pillows of the softest fabrics and hues. And there were women; slender girls with breasts round and cupped as the goblets, eyes telling of love and desire, hips churning and yearning to-

ward him. And there were others, too, deep-chested women with cavernous dark navels winking in their round bellies and bronzed arms to crush a man in their embrace. Kymon gasped; they were Kirian women! Women of his own world, their eyes for him and him alone, their bodies coppery chalices of sensuality. Kymon saw, and his great sword was forgotten in his lifeless hand as he started toward them with eyes like those of the dead-alive men he had slain. He dropped the sword, raised his hands.

And the vision flickered and faded. Only for a moment did it pale, then it began to return in full color and sound and promise — but in that brief failing of Gundrun's powers the mists faded from Kymon's eyes and brain as if dissipated by the morning sun. Again his eyes, clear and blazing, glared up the steps at the black-robed man.

"Call you this foul illusion *life?* Call you the world of men shallow? Nay, sorcerer — it is your necromancy which is shallow! Your spell has but reminded me of what will be mine when I return to Kir a rich man. Your world is death, and I am here to see that you join the other dead things in it!" He frowned, slowly lowered his head to follow the sorcerer's gaze. And then he knew why the illusion had flickered, why Gundrun stared, why there was the hint of fear in his eyes. Kymon was looking down at the ring.

He scooped up his sword and set a foot upon the steps, grinning. And then Gundrun raised his arms, wrists like clean-picked skeletons emerging from loose black sleeves. Blue light flickered and danced at his fingertips. In that instant that he stiffened his arms, pointing his talons at the barbarian, Kymon flung up his hand and pointed the ring. He shouted, three ringing times, "I defy you!"

Lightning leaped from Gundrun's fingers. Down at Kymon it crackled in sizzling streams of cobalt blue. It flashed before his face so that he winced and closed his eyes against its searing glare. But he felt nothing; nothing save the power and strength coursing down his arm from the ring, shaking him as his voice had shaken the dusty cobwebs.

He opened his eyes. All around him shimmered the blue-sizzling lightning, but it was checked, held at bay by the power of the ring. With a wild roar he hurled himself up the stairs, holding the ring before him and swinging up Goreater. His war cry filled the air.

"When came you by that accursed ring?" Gundrun shouted, and fear shrilled his voice. "The ring of Br — it negates my mag — get back — NO!"

Gundrun of Atramentos died, screaming and waving his skeletal arms as Goreater bit through his skull and forehead and nose and mouth and neck and was covered to its copper hilt with spurting blood. Kymon left the body where it lay and bounded back down the steps. He waded again through the noisome river of gore with its islands of headless corpses. He rushed down

one dim corridor and up another, leaving scarlet prints in his wake. Then he found the huge brass-bound door Fejj had described.

Goreater's first bite split it in twain. Kymon jerked back the hinged half and descended into darkness.

And descended. He counted to ten and folded down a finger and began again, and then repeated the action.

There were nine-and-forty steps, seven times seven, taking him far into the earth. Yet somehow the air remained fresh, although it grew steadily cooler and damper. He stalked forward into the gloom, wishing he had brought a light. But ahead was a glow.

He rounded a corner into light, so sudden and bright that he squinted and put up a hand before his eyes. Then he swung up his dripping glaive as he saw the man.

He wore arms and armor, the nosepiece of his helmet making his face a sinister mask. He raised a hand in command to halt, then carried it quickly to his mouth as he sneezed. Kymon grinned, an ugly animal-baring of his teeth. Well he recalled his sojourn in such a place. Dungeons were universally damp and chill. But there was no time for commiserating with the fellow's discomfort.

Kymon raised his sword and started toward the small man.

The man's hands sprang to his buckle, let belt and sword and pistol clang to the dewy floor.

"Thank the gods!" he said nasally. "You've come to rescue the Princess Yssim — and me! Two years have I remained down here, locked in, held here by locks and iron of sorcery. Photon beams had no effect on *his* locks. Guard he called me; unwilling warder have I been, bearing food and water and occasional wine to the poor girl here." He stepped back and extended his arm, offering Kymon a ring bearing one huge key. "It will not open the door," the man said. "Gundrun has sealed it with his spells."

Kymon sheathed his sword and took the key. "It will now," he said. "Gundrun and his spells have gone to meet Lilith and Satanas." In the light of a score of ancient globes, fed by some forgotten science or magic in this chthonian place, he peered into the barred cell.

She was beautiful. Her hair was liquid gold, flowing down over her shoulders to cap arms round and snowy white. Her bosom was to the liking of any man; it was big, Kirian-big and swaying and shuddering beneath the shift with her excited breathing. The dirty shift she wore, he saw more with interest than compassion, was too thin for the chill dampness of her prison. Her eyes swept his tall figure.

He bent to the lock, his eyes shaded by their lids, still on the girl. She was a trifle pale — but he was not looking at her face. "A man named Fejj sent me hither, princess. He said you alone knew the whereabouts of some treasure . . . which I promised to him. I came here only to rescue you from that villainous Gundrun. But I have found my treasure . . ."

She nodded silently, seeming not to hear his words. Her eyes were bright on the lock. "Ah!" she breathed, as the keys clicked and he swung open the grille. She stood within, lovely and fair, and Kymon thought that never had he seen such a comely woman. He held out a hand. She came toward him —

— and past. He turned to stare as she fairly hurled herself into the arms of her guard.

Kymon sighed. Well, the fellow had said he was her unwilling gaoler, and he had mentioned two years. In that time a man and a girl who had seen no one else might certainly grow to love one another. Kymon flexed his weary muscles. But such a man! He sighed again, licking his lips as he watched the little guard drink the nectar from Yssim's lips. Well, there was still the treasure.

At last they drew apart, and, after gazing long down into the man's eyes, Yssim turned to her rescuer. "Sirch and I can never thank you enough, O hero. Who are you? Whence came you?"

"My name is Kymon. I was born on Kir, but it has been long since I have felt the sun on her mountains."

"We are your slaves, Kymon of Kir."

"I have no need of slaves," Kymon said. "But... Fejj mentioned that you had knowledge of a great treasure, the horde of Senek. Perhaps..."

She smiled. "Aye! The treasure trove! Enough for you and me and Sirch and Fejj; enough for a score, a hundred! The space pirate Senek did indeed bury it on Earth. 'Tis a big planet, but we need not search. It is not I who possess the secret of its whereabouts, Kymon; 'tis Gundrun. He alone knows the secret. You have conquered his guardians and his keep; now we shall wrest the secret from him!"

Kymon stared unbelievingly at her for a moment. Wrest the secret from the lips Goreater had cleft in two?

He began to curse... and at last to laugh and, laughing, turned to retrace his steps to the open sky, and space. END

Callously the giants from Elsewhen had let a thousand people die. Now they were saving others . . . but why?

SNOW WHITE and the GIANTS

by J. T. McINTOSH

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

XX

Soon the firemen had a water supply again. Wisely they first doused our own side of the river. The powerful jets of the two engines could reach practically every building on this side without having to move.

For the first time I had a good look at the blocked New Bridge. It was badly damaged and twisted, yet after the fire it might remain serviceable as a bridge, once the debris on it had been cleared. It was all too clear, however, that there was no chance of clearing it while the fire still raged. Some of the stones were still glowing red, and there was smoldering wood in the pile. In any case, I estimated that without bulldozers it would take a hundred men two days to clear the bridge.

Without bulldozers . . . . We were in farming country, and although all the resources of Shuteley itself were on the other side of the river, there were plenty of farms this side.

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

In the little town of Shuteley, England, on the hottest summer of any resident's memory, a party of visitors appeared. They were all young, and they were enormous. Moreover, they had a couple of traits that startled the quiet people of Shuteley. The girls in the party wore dresses that disappeared from time to time; and all of them had an unusual knowledge of what was happening in the town . . . and what was about to happen.

The giants had established a camp on the bank of a river outside of Shuteley. Val Mathers visited their camp to satisfy his curiosity. Then, suddenly, incredibly the whole town went up in flames. And Val's company insured all of Shuteley!

I raced to a callbox. There was one among the sheds not a hundred yards away. I picked up the receiver.

As I might have guessed, it was dead. The exchange was in Shuteley. In any case, water, debris and heat must have put the overhead wires to the box out of service long since.

There was a callbox about a mile back, and it might be working. Sayell should know about communications. Probably, I realized, he was in constant radio contact with his headquarters.

I ran back and tried to talk to him. But he was busy and waved me away. My suggestion about the brook had enabled him to be busy; he was quite certain, however, that I could not repeat the triumph.

The fire hoses had been turned across the river, and rather unexpectedly they had made some impression. On the other side a fairly large semicircular area was free of fire, partly because nearly everything that would burn was already consumed, certainly everything highly inflammable, and partly because, being next to the river, its mean temperature was not as high as areas in the center of the holocaust. The water as it fell still rose in clouds of steam in places, but as the cooling jets played everywhere the glow of heat was fading, and the redness of everything visible was now a reflection of the flames still leaping farther back.

Indeed, the eye had now become

used to the overall redness and canceled it out. Just as, when one wears dark glasses, it is possible after a while to see colors as they really are. Everything was red. But blue-red didn't look the same as green-red.

There was less smoke than I'd have imagined. Although my eyes stung and watered all the time, that too could be ignored, like the various smells; and for a long time I had not choked, coughed, or been out of breath. I suspected that there must, after all, be a slight breath of air away from us. Perhaps it was a breeze created only by the fire, sucking air from our side.

The firemen were not attempting a desperate enterprise. Now that there was an apparent toehold across in the blazing town, one of the engines was going to attempt to cross the dry river bed.

Personally I thought the attempt was several kinds of a mistake. The last few minutes had shown that the two engines, given an adequate supply of water, could accomplish something from this side of the river. They had won back a little from the fire. And even if it was scorched earth that they gained, an area that the fire had finished with and no longer wanted, even if the area represented only a fraction of one per cent of the total area of Shuteley, the process could be repeated. Unfortunately there was no road along this side of the bank, but the engines could travel along the lanes and reach the bank from other vantage points — the one from which we had first seen the fire, for example — and do what they had done here.

The ladders could be used to enable water to be sprayed over a wide area on the other side. Of course it would turn to steam. But that was all right; it took about six times as much heat to convert water to steam as it did to raise it to boiling point.

Also I thought that it was too soon to attempt to cross to an area which had so recently been red with inner heat. Water falling on hot stone or metal draws off surface heat, but the glow wells up again to the surface. I doubted that even the firemen in their asbestos boots could stand anywhere across the river yet, and I was quite certain that the rubber tires of the machines would be burned off them in seconds. And although the heat here was just bearable (because we had to bear it), we had been insulated all along by the breadth of the river, which, though dry, had never burned. Across the river the firemen would be on ground, which had only recently been surrendered by the flames, and that much nearer the heart of the blaze and its fierce, searing heat.

Besides, I didn't think the vehicles had one chance in a hundred of making the crossing. They were ordinary fire tenders, designed rather for getting to the scene of an outbreak at top speed than crossing impossible terrain. They might cross grass or rough country, but they weren't tanks or tractors. They had four rubber-shod wheels (intact,

true, because someone had had the sense to shield the vehicles with wet tarpaulins), and they were heavy.

The bed of the river was a U. Not a deep U, for the Shute was never deep, not even where it ran into the much larger river that flowed on to the sea. Yet the Shute was no brook. It had flowed steadily along the same course for thousands of years, millions for all anyone knew, and the bed had gradually deepened, silted in the middle, perhaps, but with ever-steepening outer walls.

Even if a tender could drive down one side of the bank and cross the swampy bed, could it ever get up the incline on the other side?

I was certain it couldn't.

Sayell, however, was determined. He wasn't going to wait, either. A dozen men were stamping along the bank, grassy here, trying to establish where best to make the attempt.

A fleeting thought occurred to me. Sayell was probably no fool, even if his brother was. He was probably reasonably well trained in fire-fighting techniques. But he was no genius, and the situation which faced him had never faced anybody before.

Fires don't wait for the experts, the bosses, the generals, politicians and scientists to turn up. In an hour or two this area would be swarming with people all of whom could have handled the situation better than any of us, between cups of tea. I remembered, irreverently but not irrelevantly, how Gulliver put out the Lilliputians' fire. Some man-mountain could have done the same for us, if only he happened to be there.

Unfortunately, we were right out of man-mountains at the present time. Chance had elected poor, honest, not-too-bright John Sayell as the man in charge.

I knew already that he'd be pilloried. Whatever he did, he should have done better. If Shuteley was annihilated — and anyone from this side of the river could see it already was — well, he couldn't have done worse.

But he still didn't have to commit the criminal irresponsibility of staking all on the impossible, thus abandoning the small, yet important, things which were possible.

I strode through his crew. "Sayell," I said.

The look he turned on me was that of a tortured man. "Mr. Mathers," he said, being civil with an enormous effort, "you've done two good things tonight. You found a water supply, and you got your wife to clear the bystanders out of our way. But now we have to —"

"Now you have to do the right thing," I said, "because there's nobody else to do anything. Have you checked the footbridges?"

He said a coarse, derisive word. "They're wooden," he said. "What chance have they? For God's sake, man, get out of my way."

"For God's sake, man," I said, "remember that you didn't think it worthwhile looking at the Winshell brook."

That didn't reach him. Debating points don't register when you're in the glare of disaster, when you only

have to turn your head to see it.

"There's the fire," he said. His voice, I noticed for the first time, was raw. He had been shouting. "We're going to put it out. Please let me get on with it, Mathers."

As he dropped the "Mr." for the first time, his self-control broke again, and he nodded. "Out of my way, man! Or by God I'll knock you senseless with my axe."

I stood back. Perhaps I should have fought with him, tried to depose him as overlord of the tiny, laughable army which was the only weapon with which the Great Fire of Shuteley could be fought, at the only time when it mattered, when something still might be done.

But what was the use? He knew something about fighting fires. And I, apart from fire risk, knew nothing. I had failed long before Sayell had a chance to fail. It was up to me, indirectly and yet significantly, to do all I could to see that something like this could never happen in Shuteley.

A few years ago, a few months ago, even a few hours ago, I could have saved hundreds of lives which had now ended.

My thoughts stopped there. In a disaster such as this, there comes a time when you have to count the cost, but it's only natural to delay it as long as possible.

In the back of my mind I had thought all along that I wasn't really here.

I don't know what happened. Maybe there was a small fire among the timbered houses on the green. Maybe people stood around watching it, until it spread and they had to move away. Maybe it was gradual, quick but steady, and every area was cleared as the fire took over. Maybe nobody died in the fire. If it was steady enough in growing, that could happen.

There must have been a lot of noise. People couldn't have missed what was happening watching TV, because quite early on the electricity must have gone and all the TV's must have gone off.

Dina would have been one of the first to know what was going on. She must have enjoyed it. A magnificent bonfire, the greatest spectacle she had ever seen.

Dina, I suddenly realized with utter certainty, had escaped the disaster. Despite her feeble-mindedness (I used the brutal expression for almost the first time, because at such a time the natural tendency was to print everything bold and clear) she had the kind of abilities, physical and mental, which would make her The Most Likely Person to Survive. She would enjoy a fire, untouched by tragedy, uninterested in its wider significance . . . but the moment the fire seemed to be getting out of hand, she would know, with animal cunning (after all, compared with even the most sagacious animal she was a genius), that now was the time to go somewhere else. And she was supremely capable of doing it. She didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't overeat or take drugs, and had never been ill in her life. Nobody in the whole of Shuteley could get from one place to another quicker than

Dina once she had made up her mind.

Dina was alive and well (even if Miranda couldn't be trusted).

Sheila, I knew, was alive, well, and not even scorched.

Gil, Jota, Miranda — the other people I cared about — were probably all right too. Miranda would certainly be all right. She was with the giants. I hadn't had time to think much about the giants since I was driving back from the roadhouse, but I took it for granted that none of them had suffered in the slightest degree in the fire. It was our affair, not theirs. Somewhere they were standing outside it, watching, enjoying the fun.

So, selfishly, I tried to put the disaster in proper perspective. For me it could have been a lot worse.

Yet Sayell was sending the first of his tenders across the river, and that bothered me. To do the man justice, he leaped on it as it reached the bank at the selected place. Irrationally, like all good commanders, he wouldn't send his men where he wouldn't go himself.

The tender rushed down the incline. Still, the spot had been chosen carefully and sensibly. The vehicle stayed upright, it managed to slow (by gears, not brakes, I guessed) at the bottom and started the crossing.

There was irony and tragedy in what happened to it then. Comic tragedy, I guess, if a town had not been burning to death only a short distance away.

What looked like reasonably solid mud on the left side of the engine was merely earth mixed with water in misleading proportions, if you judged simply by the eye.

The tender keeled over on its side and commenced to sink in the mud.

XXI

Nobody was hurt, except in spirit. The firemen, mud-covered scarecrows, clambered back up the dry river bank. Sayell saw me and set a course that would take him as far as possible from where I was standing. I could do him a big favor by ceasing to exist.

The tender in the river bed, of some value just a few seconds earlier, was now so much junk. And the other tender could accomplish just half what had been possible a couple of minutes ago.

I knew how Sayell felt. In the face of disaster, continuing disaster, you had to do something. You had to try anything that might do some good. If it failed . . . well, you'd tried.

I left the group of firemen, knowing that if there was somewhere where I could be useful, it wasn't there. Sayell wouldn't listen to me. He was on a razor's edge. The fact that I had been right two or three times and he had been wrong would make it utterly impossible for me even to get him to listen to me again.

Sheila wouldn't need help with the children and old people over the hill. She was young and strong and didn't dither, and in emergency anyone old or young would be glad to obey such a leader. It was when peo-

ple hadn't a leader, or only a quasi force-of-circumstance, unconfident leader like Sayell, that everybody ran about like frightened hens.

I moved back the way I had come, along the river behind the huts. Since there was nothing particularly useful I could do this side of the river, I should get across to the other side. Although I couldn't cross where I was, and would die if I did, it would be necessary to go only a few hundred yards in either direction to be able to cross either the bed of the river or the river above the obstruction.

There might, I thought, be a chance of clearing the blockage which had dammed the river. That would certainly help, if it could be done. A river running past a fire like this was better than a dry bed. At the very least, it was a firebreak.

I wasn't really thinking, merely reacting as a human animal. Most other animals would have put as much distance as possible between them and the fire, but as a human being I had to sniff round the conflagration and see if there was anything to be done.

Some events are numbing, like a blow on the head which doesn't put you out but leaves you staggering through pain and nausea and dizziness and momentary blackouts. This was one. If you stared at the fire . . . well, you couldn't do it for long, and there was really nothing to see but glare and smoke and flame and horror, if you let your mind analyze what you were seeing. But anyway, after you'd had a glance or two across the river, you realized that you couldn't afford to watch the fire.

It was hypnotic as well as terrifying. There was flame motion, smoke pattern, that caught you and held you like the one movement in an utterly still scene. Your eyes could water and smart, but a second would grow to a minute, ten minutes, and it would be an instant.

To retain the power of movement, the power of action, you stopped looking across the river.

I knew perfectly well that if I wanted to find people who had escaped from the blazing town, if I wanted to know how it happened, I should go the other way, downriver. Practically all the roads and lanes and other escape routes came out that way. Upriver on this side there was nothing but the track that led to my house and then curved away from the river to a few farms, and on the other, Castle Hill and a rubbish dump.

But the giants were upriver.

In retrospect it's strange that the giants and their part in what was going on could be practically ignored for so long.

Obviously, as I'd said to Sheila on that mad drive back to Shuteley, they were in this business up to their necks. At the least, they had known what was going to happen. At most, they were entirely responsible for it.

Yet if somebody starts a fire, a little fire that can destroy only a single house or a farm, if somebody standing beside you strikes the match and fires the hay, you don't go for

him. Your first move, instinctive and correct, is to deal with the fire. Coldly, logically, it might be valid to go for the fire-raiser, to make sure he does no more damage.

But the fire-raiser might do no more damage anyway — and the fire already exists.

The giants were still at the back of my mind, with what might well become known as the Great Fire of Shuteley taking all my attention.

Then, as I passed a gap through which the scene across the river could be glimpsed, I saw something that brought the giants right back into the picture.

It was one of those snapshot impressions you get as you pass the end of a lane, or a window, or a gap in a hedge. The brain takes the snapshot like a camera, the picture remaining often sharper and clear than a scene you've viewed for ten minutes.

Between me and the dull embers of a building across the river which could burn no more, I had seen one of the giants — over there. He was tall and blond, but he was not Greg. He wore what looked like a plastic coverall over a hump on his back. His eyes were hidden behind thick dark glasses.

The whole thing was so much like something in a horror film that I paused for a few seconds before going back, refusing to believe I had really seen him.

No one could live over there. No one could breathe. Certainly no one could walk in any kind of footwear I could imagine, because the ground was red hot. And a plastic spacesuit would shrivel up instantly like a fertilizer bag thrown into an open fire.

I jumped back, after that moment of disbelief, but of course the giant, even if real, was past my narrow angle of view. I burst through to the riverside, and there was nobody to be seen.

Yet I had seen him. The clear picture in my mind had beaten back the disbelief. He was neither Greg nor any of the giants I had consciously looked at. The picture didn't fade. I could still see it. Shutting my eyes, I could even notice things I hadn't noticed before.

What had looked like a hump must be the breathing apparatus which made it possible to walk through fire. The giant had been hurrying, not quite running, carrying nothing in his hands, under his arms or on his shoulders. He had worn a transparent plastic covering, enclosing his head and all the rest of him. Under the covering he seemed to have nothing but the hump. He was either naked or nearly so. Colors of things seen in such a setting could be anything at all, since yellow-orange-crimson flame filled the sky.

And one thing more — he had not meant to be seen. You only have to glimpse an incompetent amateur sneak-thief for a moment to realize he's up to something and doesn't want to be observed. There had been something similar in the way the giant was hurrying. Possibly an obstruction had forced him to skirt the river for a few yards, visible from the other side. Deeper in

the blazing town, he could not have been seen. Flames and smoke, if nothing else, would have swallowed him from view.

Although he had been hurrying downriver, back the way I had come, I didn't change my mind and go that way. If he really existed, if his incredible fire-suit really worked, no doubt he could walk through the middle of the fire as easily as he could skirt the edges. The people downriver would not see him, if he didn't want to be seen.

I went on. If one of the giants was wandering alone through the blazing town, the rest of them might be doing the same.

Including Miranda. "I think I'll be seeing Dina," she had said. "We'll do something."

She had also said: "No, I shan't see you again, Val."

Maybe she was wrong.

When I saw the blockage it was clear that explosives were going to be needed before the river returned to its usual course.

Shuteley Castle had stood on Castle Hill, the one piece of high ground on the north side of the river, just above the Old Bridge. A ridge ran along the south side, but on the north, only at the eastern extremity of the town did the ground rise to any height. There the castle stood. Or had stood.

It had glowered across the town from a curious round mound which looked so artificial that historians argued about the possibility that Saxon serfs had piled Castle Hill high with only picks and shovels.

Anyway, the fire had spread round the bracken which fringed the hill. It seemed that the bracken itself had held up the hill, for when it was gone, the castle and most of Castle Hill had collapsed into the river, taking the Old Bridge with it.

Above the obstruction, the river tumbled into a hole which had not been there before, making a small, but quite impressive waterfall before dashing itself against the huge mound of rubble which was all that remained of the castle and the hill on which it had stood. The river tried to climb over the mound, which was ten feet too high, and then took the path of considerable, but least, resistance and streamed off southwards in about a dozen rivulets through a gap in the south ridge.

Until then I had not worked out that I'd either have to cross this side of the obstruction or cross twice, first the diverted river and then the river itself.

I didn't like the look of the streams rushing behind the ridge. They were shallow but very fast. It would be impossible to keep my feet if I tried to wade through, and when water flings you about you're liable to crack your head on a stone.

It would be hazardous to try to cross the river bed on the west side of the mound of rubble, because it was steep and very loose. And back the way I had come the heat across the river was too fierce. Only close to the blockage, where what remained of Castle Hill afforded some protection from the heat, and where there was nothing left to burn, crossing might be possible.

So I started picking my way across the obstruction itself.

After I'd gone about ten yards, climbing toward the top of the mound, I found I couldn't go back. Loose earth and stones were sliding down the slope under my feet, and the best I could do was slip two feet back and gain three. If I tried to go back, I stood an excellent chance of being buried alive.

I had a moment of sheer panic as I neared the peak of the mound and the rubble sliding beneath me threatened to sweep me off on the dry side of the blockage. I saw myself falling about fifty feet over rubble which would come with me, almost certainly burying me beyond any hope of rescue (if I happened to be alive when I reached the bottom) and far beyond any possibility of digging myself out.

I fought against the slide, running against it like a man on a treadmill over a precipice. The light was tricky, and my sense of direction was not all it might have been. The glare of the fire cast long, moving shadows; smoke stung my eyes, and on the other side of the mound the darkness was so intense that I couldn't even see the white water.

I overdid it.

One moment I was fighting clear of the drop into the dry bed. The next I was teetering over blackness, flicked by spray from the blocked river below. And all the time the rubble beneath me cascaded this way and that, now into the dry bed, now down the slope to the south bank, now into the foaming river.

Suddenly there was nothing beneath my feet at all. Then I was in water. Then the whole world exploded.

I came to soaked, cold, shivering, with an aching head and the rush of water in my ears. For a moment I was blind.

Dazed and deafened, I nevertheless realized where I was. I was somewhere in the middle of the delta of streams rushing into the blackness of the south side of Shuteley. The water rushing past me was not more than a few inches deep.

It seemed to take a long time before I worked out what to do and where to go. The huge mound of debris in the river bed cut off all heat and so much light that I found it hard to recover any sense of direction. And after being toasted for so long I could have sworn the water all round me was only one degree above freezing point.

At last I realized that if I forced my way through streams flowing from left to right I must come to dry land. Then all I'd have to do was cross a normal river that didn't know what trouble it was going to run into farther on.

I got across the streams somehow — and then couldn't find the river. I seemed to be in a kind of marsh with rivulets running in all directions. Only the glow of the fire, cut off by the pile of rubble which had stopped a river, enabled me to find my way back to the bank of a more or less normal Shute.

I made my way along the bank.

Dizzy and with a head which seemed to be cloven in two, I shied

away from the very thought of attempting to swim across the river. I'd probably be swept down to the whirlpool which had already knocked me silly. The Shute had always been a placid river, and in this hot summer it had been more placid than ever. But any river becomes angry if it's balked and not allowed to follow the course it has taken for centuries.

Presently, stumbling upriver, I became aware that one of my discomforts had gone. I was still soaked, but I was no longer shivering. It was, as usual, a hot night.

My house ought to be visible in the reflected glow. Yet it wasn't. Ahead of me, nothing was visible.

This was very strange. By comparison with the glare behind me. I was walking into darkness. Nevertheless, the red glow, the heat of which I could still feel on the back of my neck and through my wet clothes, should have lit up the river ahead at least as far as my house.

And ahead there was nothing.

I sniffed, and not because I smelled something. Quite the reverse. There was a sudden startling absence of smell. I was puzzled as a sleeper awakening to silence is puzzled, before he realizes that a clock has stopped.

Voices upriver gave me a clue. I had moved into a region of odorless vapor which didn't sting the eyes, had no smell, and cut visibility. I moved on. The voices grew louder.

Then I stopped.

I had almost reached my house. It was invisible, but it could be no more than a hundred yards away. I had followed the river to the copse — and there, just in front of me, was a bridge where there had never been a bridge. And there were people on it, crossing from the other side to the copse.

Not for the first time that night I acted without thought. I went closer, but along the bank, stealthily. I slipped silently into the water. Cautiously, carefully, I paddled under the bridge.

The people I had seen on the bridge were giants, in plastic suits with the hump I had already noticed, and baffled, bedraggled, frightened people who could only be refugees from the Great Fire of Shuteley.

XXII

The bridge was as startling in its way as luxon.

It was only a catwalk perhaps a foot wide with two rails three feet apart. There were no supports and no reinforcements of any kind. It lay across the river like a plank, but I felt it, pushed against it, and it was solid as a rock.

There was little or no risk that I'd be seen under the bridge. The smokescreen or whatever it was that the giants were using as cover cut visibility very effectively. It was not like fog or mist. You could see ten yards very distinctly, twenty to thirty yards vaguely, and beyond that was blackness. Sound, too, was muffled.

All the giants wore plastic suits and small, quite neat boots. Underneath they all wore as little as possi-

ble, but nevertheless seemed to be bathed in sweat.

The dark goggles their eyes would need in the center of a conflagration were folded down across their chests. Wearing them, out of the fire, they would be blind.

The others, the people who had come from Shuteley, wore a simpler sort of plastic suit, loose pants and tunics which, unlike those of the giants, were thrown open. Instead of the hump the giants had, they had merely a small black box apparently stuck to the inside of the plastic.

I thought suddenly of Jota and his part in all this. Had the giants recruited him, or was he lying drugged in one of the tents at the camp?

Miranda was not among those I saw.

Vague recollections of time stories I had read raced through my mind. Of course, I had never taken time travel seriously. It was the kind of thing which, if it ever happened, was never likely to impinge on me and affect my life.

One of the assumptions made in such stories suddenly assumed significance. You couldn't steal a man from the past, because of the effect his disappearance would have in his future, your past and present. But a man whose life was over, through accident — a man about to be destroyed in an explosion, buried for ever by an avalanche, engulfed in a mine disaster — such a man, on the point of ceasing to exist, could be plucked from his time without affecting subsequent events significantly.

Was that what the giants were doing?

I wanted to hear what was being said, and that posed a problem. In the river I was too near the flowing water to be able to make anything out, and if I crawled up the bank, the giants coming along the other side and crossing the bridge might see me.

So I drew back a little and swam across the river far enough downstream to be invisible from the bridge. As I neared the other side, the bank, though not high, had me. Then I crawled along the bank until I was under the north end of the bridge, still hidden by the bank, and pulled myself partly out of the water.

I heard: *"Well, you'd be dead otherwise."*

"But what are you going to do with us? Where are we going?"

"You'll be safe."

"This is the Mathers place. Where's Mr. Mathers?"

"In his house asleep."

"My wife! What about my wife? I haven't seen her since —"

"She'll be all right."

"I don't want to go. I want to go back and . . ."

The giants' voices were slightly muffled by their suits, but on the whole easier to make out than those of the frightened, anxious, shocked refugees. I could hear only snatches, of course, as people passed over my head.

"We'll never get back?"

"You'll be well looked after. Think of it this way — you're going to heaven."

"Heaven?"

"To you it'll be heaven. Nobody with a choice would stay here."

"What do you want us for? Did you start the fire?"

"No, we didn't start the fire."

"Why did you take us past Castle Hill and the dump? There was nobody there."

"We didn't want to be seen. If it meant being seen, we couldn't help you."

"My Moira . . . I saw her catch fire. I'll never forget her scream. She blazed like . . . ."

"We saved you, didn't we?"

"Why couldn't you save Moira?"

"Others were looking. People who aren't here. We couldn't let them see us."

And then again: "This must be the Mathers place. Where the insur-

ance manager lives. Is he in this somehow?"

"He couldn't be more out of it."

"You mean he's dead?"

"Just dead to the world."

The conversation went on, and I strained my ears to hear it, but the two who were talking were halfway across the bridge now, and it was another snatch of talk I heard.

"What happened to the fire brigade? Why didn't they . . ."

A very common word on the lips of these poor bewildered survivors was "why." If they didn't ask why God had permitted such a disaster, they asked why they had escaped, why others hadn't escaped, why the strangers, if they could do so much, couldn't do even more, like putting out the fire.

From the giants' replies it was obvious that to them, as to Miranda before I managed to get through to her, the people of Shuteley were little more than characters in a play. The answers were quiet, soothing, apparently truthful as far as they went, which wasn't far.

"Where did you come from?"

"You'll see."

"You're the kids that I saw in town yesterday, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"If I thought you had anything to do with the fire . . ." A stream of invective followed, empty, hopeless obscenity, for the man who was speaking knew perfectly well he could do nothing but curse. He couldn't even fight the giants or resist them. The giants, girls and boys, had spread themselves out among these refugees to prevent protest or rebellion.

I realized that there were a great many more of the giants than I had ever seen, far more than there could have been at the camp. I had not known of more than about a score of them. There must have been at least forty crossing the bridge, not counting any who might have crossed before I arrived on the scene.

I knew from the snatches of conversation I heard that the giants had been careful to be observed by no one who was going to live through the fire. They had led these people *through* the fire, in their simpler fire-suits (probably simpler so that they could be put on quickly and with no risk of mistake), and by a route chosen to avoid being seen. The crowds of people who must

have escaped the fire would not gather about the northeast end of town at the rubbish dump, but at the other end, where the roads were, and the straggling cottages which must have escaped the fire, and the nearest farms. That could have been confidently predicted.

Presently the procession ended. There was a gap, and then three more figures appeared, two huge, one small.

They were Greg, Wesley and Miranda.

Wesley reached the bridge, just above me, and spoke.

Oddly enough, it still surprised me, after all that had happened, that the giants' language, when they were speaking to each other and not to us, was not the English of the mid-20th century. It *was* English, and I could understand most of it by listening to the sense rather than the sound. But many of the words were not quite right, several of the vowels had changed, and since the speech was colloquial there were many phrases that were hard to figure out.

What Wesley said, roughly, was: "That's . . . (the lot?) now. We've left nothing but the stasis and the two . . . (?) in it. Who's going back?"

"I am," said Greg.

"We're both going back," said Miranda.

I couldn't see Wesley, but I sensed his uncertainty. "Okay," he said, after a pause. "I'll go on and tell them to . . . (?) everything but the stasis, is that right?"

"And the stasis just before dawn," said Miranda.

"Sure. You've got to be there then. If you're not —"

Greg said a word which was entirely new to me, and yet the meaning couldn't have been more obvious. The politest translation would be, "Go away."

Wesley went away, crossing the bridge and disappearing into the copse.

Moving slightly, I could see Greg and Miranda quite well, for they had stopped short of the bridge and were not looking at it. Keeping my eyes on them, I could duck out of sight at any moment before I could be seen, if they turned their heads.

They wore suits exactly like the others. The briefs they wore underneath seemed to be pink or gray. Seeing them both running with sweat, I wondered why they didn't take off their plastic suits or at least open them up. I also wondered why a technology capable of constructing flimsy suits which could withstand the highest temperatures couldn't go a step farther and make them comfortable as well.

Miranda said: "Let's go back, then."

"And wait till dawn?"

"Yes."

Greg laughed. "So that you can keep your eye on me, darling. Waiting for a wrong move."

"The next wrong move," said Miranda steadily.

He laughed again. "You idiot," he said. "You're all idiots, you and the others behind this . . .(?). When you found you couldn't keep me out

of it, you should have canceled it. You knew I'd kill it."

"We knew," said Miranda, and I heard the defeat in her voice. "But you might fail. Lots of things might have happened. Maybe they still will. Jota might have —"

For the third time, irritatingly, Greg bellowed with laugher. It was the laughter of a vandal, a spoiled kid with an inflated idea of his own value in the world. It was the laughter of a bully.

"Jota," Greg said, "has a little talent. I have the Gift. Nevertheless, Jota may be as important as you think. I think he is. That's why I had to see that your plans for Jota didn't work out."

"Greg," said Miranda quietly, "listen to me for a minute. Please listen."

"Go ahead. There's plenty of time. I'll listen."

"You're not necessarily bad. You never had a chance. That sounds trite, and it is. You were not only bigger and . . . (?) and better-looking than anybody else, as far back as you can remember, but when girls began to interest you you didn't have to bother to be nice to them or even go to the trouble of deceiving them. You had it all! You've often thought about how you're different from ordinary people, Greg. Have you ever thought about how ordinary people are different from you?"

This time Greg didn't laugh. He was interested enough to let her go on.

And as I waited, rather chilled by the water in which I was partly immersed, I felt for a stone or a stick.

Whether Miranda was on my side or not, I couldn't be on Greg's side. It couldn't be a mistake to take Greg if I could.

"People who haven't the Gift," Miranda said, "have to learn to coexist. When they're babies they know instinctively that they have to get and keep their parents on their side. As children they know that other children may sometimes be rivals, but they have to be allies too. So what you never learned was —"

Greg bellowed again. "Is that all? I thought for a moment you had something to say. Now listen to me. First, take off that suit."

"I can't, I have to go back and—"

"You're not going back, darling. Not to the stasis. Not across the bridge. Not anywhere."

I might have moved then, but with a silent suddenness which startled me so much I almost cried out, the bridge above me winked out.

It just wasn't there. It didn't burn or fade or shimmer or flash. It simply ceased to exist.

Although probably both Greg and Miranda noticed this out of the corner of their eyes, neither bothered to look. Which was just as well, because I might have been slow in ducking out of sight.

Miranda took a step back and turned as if to run. Greg reached out casually with his long arm and tumbled her to the ground.

Standing over her, he said: "But before I kill you, darling, I want to tell you that things couldn't have been arranged better if you'd let me plan them all myself. The stasis goes

just before dawn, right? Just before dawn you've got to get those two out and get back in yourself, right? They're left alive, here, and you're safe back home, right?"

"Yes," said Miranda.

"There are two spare suits in the stasis so that you can get those two out, right?"

"Yes."

"Wrong. They're gone."

Miranda sat up quickly. "I watched you all the time —"

He laughed. "I know you did. So I got Wesley to shift them. He wasn't keen, but he didn't want to die. So he . . .(?) for me."

"He'll know . . . " Miranda began and stopped.

"He won't know anything. He has no idea what the suits are for. But that's not all. Suppose I just kill you here and now, swim across and tell everybody you went back by yourself?"

I didn't fully understand all this, but from her startled gasp it was obvious that Miranda did. It was as if she had allowed herself to be locked in a dungeon of death, as part of a plan, and then felt in her pocket and discovered she didn't have the key.

Greg couldn't let it go. He had to savor his cleverness to the full. "They'll believe me They'll have to. You know that anything I say is the truth — always has been the truth. All I've ever had to do is go into any . . . (?) office and make a statement. Whatever I say, it has to be the truth. Otherwise —"

She leaped from under him and ran like a deer. Greg lunged after her. My hand forced, I scrambled up the bank and went after them. In my right hand I held a heavy stone.

They could both run much faster than I could. I'd have lost them in the strange mist that hid the bridge. But only a hundred yards away, the mist ceased to exist. And I came on Greg and Miranda, only six feet from the river, with Greg again standing over Miranda.

I let fly with my stone. It caught Greg full on the back of the head, and he staggered. His legs collapsed under him. He pitched right over Miranda and landed on the other side of her.

We could have escaped if we'd been quick enough. But Miranda stared up at me in surprise, astonished to see anyone at all, more astonished to see me. And I coughed as a cloud of smoke swirled round me — out of the giants' protective mist, I had forgotten to be careful how I breathed.

Greg was up. He lashed out at my head, and although I escaped the full force of the blow, I went down heavily. The next second Greg had Miranda in his grasp. Holding her, he made a quick pass at me, and something stung my eyes.

I couldn't move. I could see and hear, I could move my eyes and, with an effort, my head. But that was all.

"What went wrong, Miranda?" Greg asked, looking down at me. "Why is he here?"

"I don't know. I left the . . .(?) in the house, below the bottom shelf in a cupboard. It was set slow-to-

limit, short of death. Anybody in the house should have got sleepy very gradually, and then —"

"So it didn't work. Or he went out too soon. It doesn't matter. Take off your suit, Miranda."

"No."

"Take it off. I'm going to take him into Shuteley, in your suit. Then I'll open it."

I didn't shudder, because I couldn't.

Picturing what was going to happen to me (walking through an inferno, unharmed, and then a wrench as the plastic suit was torn, then. . . .) I must have missed something. A moment later Greg was saying:

"I want you, darling."

"Don't try to be funny."

"I'm very serious. There's nothing more important in the world to me. I want you, here and now."

Incredibly, Miranda, who had been standing up to him, opposing him, arguing with him, was as weak and pliable as if under hypnosis.

Well, was that it? Hypnosis?

"I thought . . . ." she said, visibly struggling.

"You thought after that one time, when you resisted, and I let it go, that you could stand against me. That I didn't want you. That you still had some authority over me. That for some reason, any reason, I was never going to claim you."

He laughed. It was a forced laugh. There was no mirth in it. And I realized now that Greg's laugh was always forced, completely lacking in real enjoyment.

At once, as if he had never laughed, he went on fiercely, malevolently: "I set you up, darling. For when I wanted you. And the time is now."

There was a brief pause. Then, slowly, reluctantly Miranda touched her plastic suit at several points, at the throat, at her waist, at her knees. It split and fell off her, and the box at the back came with it. So did the boots, which were part of the suit. So did the dark goggles.

Like an automaton she stepped closer to Greg.

And he hit her.

I'd never seen such a blow. At the very least he was twice her weight. He hit her as a very large man could have hit a rather small child, but perhaps never had in human history; surely even a human beast would find it impossible to hit someone so much smaller so hard.

Her feet left the ground. She would have been thrown several yards anyway. As it was, she sailed far out over the river, unconscious before she touched the water, and was swept away.

She was possibly dead before she landed. In the river, unconscious, she would drown.

Greg was satisfied. He scarcely glanced at the river. Instead, he bent to pick up her suit.

Straightening, he looked down at me. Greg must be used to looking down on people. Yet he still seemed to enjoy it immensely.

"I'm a little sorry for you, Val," he said, in ordinary English. "You didn't know what you were up against — despite knowing Jota. Miranda knew. Wesley and all the others knew — especially the girls,

of course. You didn't you poor fool. If you'd stayed quietly at home tonight, you'd at least have lived. Miranda left a sleep cylinder in the house to make quite sure, because of what we had to do here.""

He shrugged. "You needn't worry. I won't open your suit until we're right in the middle. You'll scarcely feel a thing. It'll be over in a second."

XXIII

I don't think Greg hit me again. I had been drinking at the roadhouse, not enough to show, but enough to know I'd been drinking. What had happened since would have made me stone cold sober if I'd had ten times as much, yet the residual alcohol in my system was one thing. The shock of what had happened was another. Then, the constant blast of heat from the blaze across the river must have done something to all of us, though since it was constant we soon ignored it. I had fallen into the river, hit my head and got water in my lungs. Greg had hit me and thrown a paralyzer of some kind at me.

It could have been all that which had suddenly caught up with me. In any case, the next I knew I was being led through the fire. Dazed, I hardly knew whether I was dreaming or not. Certainly only in dreams could I ever have experienced anything remotely like this before.

In spite of the goggles over my eyes, the flames were still blinding until the eyes adjusted. Greg, at my left side, grasped my arm tightly, half leading me, half carrying me. And we moved through a vast furnace.

The suits were totally efficient. They completely screened all heat, and the air I breathed was pure. No smoke stung my eyes or throat.

Yet it was an ordeal of terror.

There was nothing to be seen but living flame and smoke. Frequently the ground writhed with liquid fire — blazing oil, tar or anything which liquefied in extreme heat. The confidence I soon acquired in my suit and boots — which fitted surprisingly well — did very little to still terror of the unknown.

I was lucky, I suppose, that I was too dazed to think properly. I had that *this can't be real* feeling that makes people capable of things otherwise utterly beyond them.

It also prevented me from having to fight or at least resist Greg. He had just murdered Miranda and had every intention of murdering me at any moment in a particularly horrible way. I should have done something, though Greg could kill me quite easily simply by abandoning me.

But the feeling that this wasn't really happening made it possible to play along with it. At the moment Greg was helping me.

The vagueness did not prevent me from remembering afterwards the horror of a fire that consumed not a building but a whole town.

I saw only some of what the fire had done, and I was glad of it.

One single impression summed it up.

The damage to property was noth-

ing. Houses could be built again. Cars in the street had melted into red puddles. That was unimportant. But too often, no longer in the cars, because the cars no longer possessed any "in," there were relics of human beings, who had not, even in presumably efficient vehicles, been able to escape what was happening round them.

In a way it was all clean and antiseptic. Fires are clean. A fire like this was cleanest of all fires. There was no blood to be seen, no skin, no guts, nothing unpleasantly animal like that. The fire had taken care of all such things. There would be no plague after the Great Fire of Shuteley. The fire had been too efficient for that. Anything organic within the inner area had perished forever.

The crowning horror was the mound of blackened bones.

I wouldn't have seen it if it hadn't been in an area (where in the town I hadn't the slightest idea, for nothing was recognizable) which must have buried early and was therefore totally consumed. Around it the fire still raged, but here there was near blackness. Even the tar in the streets had been burned, and the stone merely glowed darkly.

And in the wreckage of a collapsed building was a vast mound of skeletons. There seemed to be thousands of them, but there were probably only hundreds.

For one wild moment I wondered if the giants had collected all the victims they could find and dumped them all together in one refuse heap of human remains. I almost hoped this was so. But it couldn't be. These were the victims of a single disastrous incident in the general horror. This was not the total toll, only a single part of it.

A large number of people must have been together somewhere in the town when the fire caught them. They must have died quite quickly, or the pile of bones would not have been so neat and compact.

Only the impression, the picture, registered at the time — but it registered for life. It was something I'd never forget.

It was only then that I started to *hate* the giants. What kind of beings could have known this was going to happen and not tried to avert it?

Awareness came back gradually, but rapidly, and it was to some extent retrospective.

I knew I had reached a haven of peace and coolness in the heart of the fire, which was still blazing all around me, but as if behind glass.

But what was I doing in a haven?

Greg had brought me through the fire: I knew that. He had meant to tear my fire-suit at a spot where the temperature was instantly lethal: I knew that too. Yet I had come through the fire, with Greg.

I became aware, with some surprise, that I wore only my underpants. The fire-suit I had been wearing had been removed. It lay on the ground beside me. I now understood why the giants wore little or nothing under the suits. The suits, light and not elaborate, could be effective only if they were utterly impervious to heat, a complete barrier

to it. If they let any heat through at all, they'd be useless in such a fire.

It was beyond even the giants to construct a suit which would stop heat coming in and let body heat out.

So you stewed in your own juice.

Greg was with me, he was talking to me, but the sense didn't register yet. Apparently realizing this, he stopped.

He had thrown a gas capsule at me, or something which had a similar effect. Apart from that moment when my eyes smarted, there were no painful effects. But although I could move, although my mind could register some things, it couldn't sort them out.

I glanced around.

We were in a huge hemisphere of no-fire, entirely surrounded by fire, in an area in the town which I couldn't place. It was flat, and the ground was plain, scorched earth, with few stones and no debris. In the center was a dome, a curious object. It was a plain hemisphere 15 feet high, as smooth as ice but of no material I knew. The faint silveriness suggested metal, the translucency glass, the milky opaqueness plastic. One thing was clear: since it stood in the exact center of the cleared space, and since the dome of no-fire was exactly the same shape, one followed from the other.

The air was cool and fresh, with no smell of burning. A faint breeze from the center of the stasis — there was no doubt that this was the mysterious stasis I'd heard about — confirmed that the machine there was air-conditioning the sanctuary.

Above the hemisphere, as well as around it, flames and smoke swirled up into the night sky. Indeed, there was no sky to be seen at any point. The flames were so fierce that they completely submerged the dome.

"The village green," Greg was saying. The effect of the capsule, or whatever it was, was wearing off. "Incidentally, there are a couple of people you know here."

"Why didn't you kill me?" I croaked. I wasn't grateful. You don't have to be grateful to a man for not killing you. Yet through the haze I was curious.

"You'll die anyway," he said. "Without this you'll die." He picked up the suit. "Without it you can't get out of here."

Yet he had suddenly become less certain, less confident.

And as I recovered further, I said: "I'm not down on fate's list, is that it? You couldn't kill me? It's not on the cards?"

"There isn't any such thing as fate's list," he retorted, not laughing any more. "If I decide you're to die, you're dead."

He no longer wanted to talk. He turned and walked to the edge of the stasis, not looking back. As I watched, he passed through the edge. The invisible wall flared, but seemed to offer him no resistance. I was perfectly prepared to believe, however, without experiment, that for me the stasis was a prison. Either there was some kind of wall which I couldn't get through (which seemed likely, since the air wasn't being sucked out by the oxygen-greedy flames), or I'd die, frizzled to a cinder, before I'd completed a single step outside.

I didn't immediately walk round to the other side of the machine. I was still coming to myself. Vivid as my recollection of the mountain of skeletons was, I wondered if it was part of a dream. I hoped it was.

The last thing to come right was my hearing. Stupidly I'd been wondering why, if there were two other people here, I couldn't hear them and they hadn't heard Greg and me talking. Were they bound and gagged? If so, why, when I wasn't?

Then I realized that though in the stasis there was no blistering heat and no smoke, all the sounds of the fire came through, the crackling, hissing, boiling, crashing, popping, fizzing, sizzling, roaring . . . .

Anyway, I knew who the other two were. They were Jota and Dina.

Yet although I knew, I hesitated a moment longer. Several times earlier I'd had a rather theoretical thought that if Dina perished, my own life might be simpler and better. But that's the kind of thing you think only when you don't believe it can happen. When you know it can happen, when you know it's more than likely, you discover what you really want.

Dina had to be there. I was hesitating because I was afraid I was wrong, afraid the other two might be Gil and Barbara, or Barbara and Garry, or Jota and Gil, or some other two from the four.

I might have waited much longer. But as my hearing returned to normal, I heard Jota's voice over the medley of fire sounds. I moved closer, started to go round the stasis machine, and paused incredulously.

"Wake up, damn you," Jota was saying. "Wake up, little cousin. What use are you lying there, while we're stuck in the middle of all this? Wake up, you little darling, and become useful."

He didn't say exactly this. He used all the available oaths, particularly the sexual ones.

I moved further round so that I could see what was going on. Dina was lying on her back, sound asleep, and Jota was kneeling beside her, his back to me.

He shook her, gently at first and then more insistently. He was saying: "There's nothing wrong with you, apart from the thing nobody is supposed to speak about. Wake up, then. Wake up and —"

His words then became shockingly obscene. The kind of mindless idiot from whom deliberate coarseness usually comes, who expresses the most earthy ideas in his earthy experience in the most earthy way, doesn't have the intelligence or imagination to make much of a job of it. Indeed, the more earthy he becomes, the less he would shock anybody except elderly spinsters, who never hear such effusions anyway.

But Jota was a master of obscenity.

I might have quite admired his performance in uncommitted wonder if I'd happened to be uncommitted. But the girl was Dina. The fact that Jota was her cousin didn't particularly bother me — if the law allows cousins to marry, consanguinity ceases to be an issue in all such matters.

What did bother me was that Jota

cared for absolutely nothing beyond the fact that he was here, and Dina was here, and she wouldn't waken. He even made it plain that he didn't care much whether she awakened or not.

That Dina was a child mentally was nothing to him. That there was something unnatural about her sleep was also nothing.

Jota was single-minded.

XXIV

Why I waited, listening, watching, doing nothing, would have been hard to explain at the time, but not difficult to explain afterwards.

I hadn't forgotten the case of Jota and Sheila.

I had admired Jota, I had envied him, and always I'd been a little afraid of him. What it was about him that I feared I didn't know then, though I could have guessed that the knowledge that nobody had ever stood up to Jota and bested him had a lot to do with it.

If at the first moment when I knew that Jota was trying to seduce my feeble-minded sister I had gone round and shown myself, the incident might have fizzled out completely. Jota would have laughed, I would have cooperated with him in laughing the whole thing off, and that would have been that.

Why I waited was partly to give him enough rope to hang himself, mainly to let myself get so angry that Jota wouldn't be able to make me laugh the whole thing off as we'd done in Sheila's case.

Well, that's what it amounted to. I had thrashed Jota, but after that, instead of just contemptuously kicking him out, I had made him promise to be a good boy . . . and if Sheila had been willing, we'd all have pretended to be friends again.

I remembered Dina coming down the stairs that afternoon and wondered if it was at that moment that Jota decided the conquest of his fair cousin must be delayed no longer.

I got more and more angry.

I moved only when Jota lost his temper, started slapping Dina's face and punched her in the ribs.

"Jota," I said, "if you touch her again, I'll kill you."

He turned his head. And when I saw his face, I knew he was an animal.

Lust makes some of us cheat. But it turns only some of us into animals like Jota. I knew by his face at that moment that when he reached this state — as he must have done many times — he had ceased to be anything resembling a human being.

If he had to kill, that was all right.

If the woman died, now or later, that was unimportant.

If she was married, if her life and those of others were going to be altered irrevocably in the next few seconds — well, what had that to do with Jota?

If she was a feeble-minded kid, his cousin, sleeping peacefully through disaster — what right had she to sleep when he wanted her?

"Val," was all he said, but his thoughts and emotions showed in his face. At first he had no inten-

tion of being diverted. Then anger followed when he realized the difference my presence was bound to make. Then . . . fear?

The fist I planted in his face, rather inexpertly but with considerable force, made up his mind for him. This was neither a love scene nor a conversation piece. It was a fight. He had no choice.

He made a further effort nevertheless. He jumped to his feet and backed away, saying: "Val, let's be reasonable about this —"

I leaped on him and hit him on the mouth, which spurted blood. Jota ceased attempting to be reasonable and swung at me. I caught his arm and threw him, without any trouble at all.

There had been a wrestling bill at Shuteley one night when I was about fifteen, and someone gave me a ticket, I'd been fascinated, not by wrestling as an entertainment, but by the revelation that if you knew how you could throw people far heavier than yourself all over the place. So I found out about it.

I certainly never became an expert wrestler. As far as Jota was concerned, however, I might as well have been a world champion. I could throw him with very little effort, and he had no idea how to fall. Instead of rolling with the throw, he came down untidily with a crash each time, even on the fairly soft ground.

I threw him every time he got up and never followed him down, because this wasn't a sporting contest that would be settled by a body press or a submission. I didn't want to hurt him, exactly. Instinctively I was trying to beat him, to humble him, to teach him a lesson, so that he would never make a pass at Dina or Sheila again.

He kept backing, though he didn't actually run away, and to his credit he got up every time when he could. And he kept trying to talk to me. "Val, you and I shouldn't be . . . I wasn't going to . . . Will you listen to me." And then, rather ludicrously, considering his position: "I'm warning you, Val!"

We were close to the edge of the stasis, and when I threw him again I simply didn't think about it at all. What the stasis was I had no idea. To me it was simply a wall. Greg had walked through it, but Greg was in a special suit.

When I threw Jota and he rolled towards the edge, I expected him to stop against it as he'd have done at any other wall.

But he didn't.

There was a sudden roar, and I was sucked toward the barrier myself as air rushed from the stasis into the inferno beyond. Despite the brightness of the flames, the sudden glare as Jota rolled through made everything else seem dull.

He had no time to scream.

Outside the stasis the flames were dying a little, but the temperature had not begun to drop. Out there, things that would burn didn't catch fire, they simply dissolved in the heat.

Five seconds after I threw him out of the stasis, Jota was not identifiable even as a cinder.

As Jota died, there was a gasp behind me, a feminine half-checked moan of horror. Horrified myself, I didn't turn at once. I assumed that Dina had wakened.

It was only when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dina lying on the ground, peacefully, comfortably, breathing deeply and regularly, that I realized someone else had joined us.

I turned and saw Miranda.

I had not expected to see her again. It had seemed likely that she was dead. Even if she had survived what Greg had done to her, it was not in the cards that she'd be moving around any more that night; and then, lacking a suit, she couldn't get into the stasis through the blazing town.

But she did have a suit. And although she reeled a bit and her hair was over one eye, she was in better shape than could have been expected.

She got in first. "Didn't you know what would happen when he hit the stasis? Or did you *try* to kill him . . . murder him?"

I had certainly not tried to kill Jota, and I was shocked at the manner of his death and my responsibility for it. Yet Miranda's obvious horror at what she had seen filled me with incredulity. It rallied me and made me temporarily cease to wonder that she was here at all.

I said in sudden anger, "Whatever I did, are you to be the judge? You, who knew exactly what was going to happen and let it happen? You came here to watch a gala performance, to extract the last ounce of vicarious enjoyment out of the Great Fire of Shuteley. But was that all. Or did you *start* the fire?"

My outburst didn't bother her. In fact, she calmed down. "You didn't know," she said. "Anyway, what's remarkable is that you and Jota fought, and he died, and you didn't . . . Why did you fight?"

I said nothing, merely glanced down at Dina.

She was still sleeping like a baby. She looked so happy she must be happy, having wonderful dreams.

"What about Dina?" I said.

"She's been . . . treated. She may be different when she wakes up. That'll be in about three hours. I can't promise."

"And you left her with Jota," I said.

Miranda's eyes widened. "You don't mean he . . . So that was it. Don't say anything for a minute. Let me think."

"You seem remarkably concerned about Jota. And remarkably unconcerned about the ten thousand people you allowed to burn to death."

"Not ten thousand. Not a thousand. We saved many who would have died. You know that, don't you? Only we couldn't leave them here, we had to take them with us. We couldn't leave here, alive, anyone who should have died. Except Jota. Saving him, leaving him here alive, was one of the main purposes of the operation."

"It would have been easier to avert the fire."

She shook her head impatiently. "Could you eradicate the French Revolution? Could you negate the First World War, even if technically

the means were in your grasp? No, the Shuteley fire had to happen. All we could do was make certain small changes. Saving Jota, for one."

"He died in the fire? Before you intervened?"

"Yes."

"Well, looks like fate had it in for him. But why should a little thing like being burned to a crisp prevent Jota from living to the age of ninety? You can loop him back. It's been done before."

"We'll have to try to do something like that," she said thoughtfully. "The question is, how? I don't have any apparatus. Greg won't let me return through the copse. I can't return from here until near dawn. When I do, it's pretty certain that —"

"For God's sake, Miranda, tell me what's going on," I exclaimed. "From the beginning, you've been saying too much and not enough. Either you should have been a perfectly ordinary party of campers who knew nothing about anything, or you should have concealed nothing."

"Both Greg and I told *you* too much, Val," she said quietly. "But only you. Nothing that anyone else knows matters."

"Gil? Jota? Sheila? Dina?"

"Gil is with us, and you'll never see him again. He's supposed to have died in the fire, with Barbara and Garry. They're all with us — elsewhere. Jota, at the moment, isn't in the picture. Sheila knows nothing except at second hand, what you tell her. And Dina will know less. Or rather, the little bit that will remain with her will be so improbable that she won't tell anyone but you."

As she spoke I realized that, whatever the reasons. I really was the one person still breathing and still in Shuteley who knew anything important about Snow White and the giants. Nobody but me had paid any particular attention to them in The Copper Beech. Gil had noticed the peculiarity about the coins, but he'd kept it to himself, and now it would be impossible to prove anything. The luxon suits had made people stare, but by this time everybody but me — and Tommy — must have decided they'd been seeing things.

Apart from that, Greg had talked only to me. And Miranda had talked only to me. If I were suddenly transported to Parliament or Scotland Yard or the FLAG head office, I couldn't hope to convince the people there that the giants were anything but a party of kids in a summer camp. Of course there would be oddities to excite curiosity, even official curiosity. None of the campers would ever be traced — they'd disappear, with their camp, into thin air. Other witnesses would confirm the giants' abnormal proportions. And surely I couldn't be the only person to glimpse a giant in a firesuit? But these would be only enigmas. There would be enough to make it appear there must be something in my story. Not enough to prove any signficant part of it.

"Yes, I see," I said. "But why me? Because I'm not going to be around, is that it?"

"That's not the reason," she said,

"though just now I can't see how you and Dina can survive. One of you, yes. There's one suit. Not both, any way I can figure."

We had time to work out something about that. It was still a long time to dawn.

"Why me?" I insisted.

XXV

We had been standing talking, Miranda still in her suit, the goggles at her neck, the hood over her head. Now she started to take it off, turning away.

But almost at once she turned back. She had made up her mind.

"Val," she said, "remember the first time I saw you? I knew you. I'd seen photographs of you. And I was careless enough to show it. After that, I spoke to you. So did Greg. We both wanted to meet you, to make up our minds about you."

"So I'm famous?" I said. "Important?"

"Not important, Val. Not even famous. "You're the villain of the Shuteley fire."

The calm, factual statement shook me. I must have gone white. "I — *I* started it?"

"No, no, not that. History didn't need that to make you the villain. The scapegoat, if you like. After this there's going to be a new word in the language — mather. Not a capital .Mather. You don't talk of a capital Boycott either. Just mather, meaning a catastrophe following the most incredible incompetence."

"Me?" I said stupidly.

"Oh, it isn't fair, of course. I know that. But history often isn't fair. An inhuman monster becomes a national hero. A clever man who made one wrong decision goes down as a jackass, a blunderer. A fool who did one right thing by mistake is held up for all time as the personification of wisdom. You —"

"Well, what did I do?"

"Nothing," she said gently. "I said it isn't fair. You'll be blamed for what you did do, what you didn't do, and history will accept wild accusations as truth. You'll even be confused with old Amos What's-his-name, who died long before you were born, and blamed for what he did. He started a fire or two, you know. The general impression of Val Mathers is going to be that he was completely heartless and unscrupulous and stupid as well. He bribed and lied his way to control of all insurance in Shuteley and then he set fire to the town."

"But this is absolutely impossible!" I exclaimed. "History can't—"

"Well, there I misled you. Real history, the history of the historians, will get things much straighter. Real history is fairer to Captain Bligh, too, than the legend. The historians know you're not old Amos and didn't start the fire and lots of other facts like that. It's a fact, too, that it would hardly be to your advantage to be head of insurance and then start the fire. But it's not facts that go into legend."

She smiled slightly. "You may, now that I've warned you, be able to do something to protect yourself. That's if you do get out."

"I most certainly will," I said

warmly. "If what you say is true, there must be some villain in the piece, and if it's not me —"

"Oh, there you're wrong again, Val. It *is* you."

"I thought you said --"

She sighed and said: "We're in the same boat, you and I. You're going to be a scapegoat, and so am I. You're partly to blame, and I'm partly to blame. You for the fire, I for the failure of my mission here . . . Wait till I get this suit off, and I'll tell you the whole story."

She took off her fire-suit with obvious relief. It was cool in the stasis, but until she took off the suit she was insulated from coolness as well as heat. There were beads of moisture on her smooth midriff and her bare abdomen glittered with droplets.

A large multicolored bruise under her right breast showed where Greg had hit her — carelessly, mistakenly, for there was scarcely any other part of her body where such a blow would have done less damage.

I wanted to ask what had happened to her and where she got the suit, but refrained. I'd hear in due course.

She was going to tell me about herself and the giants and Jota and the fire.

She told me.

The fire started in the stack room of the public library over an hour after the library was closed and shuttered for the night. This was (would be?) established later from evidence pieced together too late to be of more than academic interest. Presumably an assistant who wasn't suppposed to be smoking at all had thrown down the butt. It was going to be assumed that this assistant was one Maggie Hobson, an elderly library assistant who smoked furtively and incessantly. And it was a convenient assumption — because Maggie Hobson, who lived alone in a single room near the library, did not survive the fire.

The stack room, with just enough ventilation to act as an efficient furnace, generated such heat that when at last the fire burst its prison, it was an explosion of flame. The whole library was soon an inferno.

The fire grew gross in secret by one of the many quirks of chance that enabled the Shuteley fire to become what it did. Most public libraries are in the town's main street; they have huge uncurtained windows, and a fire inside would be spotted as soon as books started to blaze.

But this library, though in the center of town, was just off High Street and presented a blank Victorian-quasi-Greek pillared facade to the world. The interior lighting was by skylights facing the other way.

And the warehouse next door, with the court behind, was in process of changing hands. It was blank, shuttered, empty. There was little in the warehouse to help the fire — but nothing to hinder it.

So fingers of flame sped covertly through the warehouse to the timbered houses beyond, through the silent court to the rear of the shops in High Street, through a church hall to a tire store.

There were automatic fire alarms in the library, connected to the fire

station and set to go off at a certain temperature. Something went wrong; the connection was broken without setting off the alarm. Even fire alarms are not always wholly fireproof.

Never before had a fire in the middle of an inhabited town — and not even a sleeping town, for all this was around 9:30 — gained such a hold unknown to anybody. At other times and places something would have been seen. But this blaze grew behind blank stone and shuttered doors.

Of course it wasn't long anyway before the secret was out. But by that time the library, the tire store, six shops, four or five houses, the inner court, the church hall, the warehouse and a filling station announced the news simultaneously with leaping, roaring flames almost beyond hope of control.

If there had been firemen on the spot within five minutes, they wouldn't have had any idea where to start.

But that was another of the laughable tricks fate played that night. At 9:35, a matter of minutes before Shuteley knew it had a fire of its own, the fire units were dashing to a farm blaze three miles south of the town. Not all of them — not for another couple of minutes. Then a barn blaze was reported, also south of the town, and Shuteley was denuded of all official fire-fighting potential.

The irony was that the last tender crossed the New Bridge seconds *after* the discovery of the Shuteley fire . . . and it left from the fire station across from the library.

Mere seconds after the first shouts of "Fire! Fire!" the blaze had swallowed the town's telephone exchange and the fire station radio.

So far there was not a single human casualty. And perhaps, if everybody had stayed calm and collected, there might not have been any. Well, perhaps a few people in the nearest houses, those which were pretty comprehensively on fire before the first alarm, must inevitably have been trapped. But others, some distance and several minutes from the heart of the blaze, should have lived, and didn't . . .

Wood smoke swept the streets. People coughed and ran. A few brave souls went the wrong way, trying to save wives, children, parents who might or might not have already escaped. Heat struck them down, for this was the hottest of fires. It wasn't a creeping, insidious fire. It was a roaring, searing, all-engulfing tiger of a fire. A man took three steps towards it and never had a chance to retrace them. Heat lashed him, blinded him, struck him down and boiled him.

Most people had the sense to go the right way. And they lived. Fierce as it was, this fire couldn't race like a prairie fire. It had to leap from house to house, taking hold — taking hold, true, in about a quarter of the usual time, yet still needing time.

And the people in the streets could outrun it with no trouble at all. They could even give the alarm as they went, that is, if it didn't take too long . . . .

Children died because they were too slow. Most of the younger children were asleep, which put them at a big initial disadvantage. They were difficult to rouse; blazing towns were outside their experience, and they were inclined to waste time over such luxuries as screaming for parents, putting on clothes, going in search of favorite toys.

Old people died because they wouldn't go without savings, mementos, insurance policies, pension books, framed photographs — and often because they wouldn't leave without locking the front door. If they'd forgotten the keys, they'd go back for them.

Others died because they couldn't believe it. Fires in towns are put out. You watch them as you watch workmen excavating. It's safe across the road. Other people are nearer than you are. These people couldn't believe that this was something different, something that was going to go down in the history books. They had the chance to run for their lives, and they didn't take it.

They thought other chances would come, and they didn't.

The fire waited for nobody. Given such a splendid start, it spread out rapidly in all directions, reaching the river very quickly, because High Street was only about a hundred yards from the river.

Hardly anybody, as it happened, fled across any of the bridges. They were forced east or west by the fire's dash to the river, over, if they had a chance, north. And the fire, reaching the river, proceeded to spread all the way along it.

That the firemen weren't even there was an irony, after the first few minutes, rather than a significant factor. They might certainly have helped in giving the warning and in the withdrawal from the town. They could not have done anything that mattered in putting the fire out.

Every man, woman and child who looked into the yellow maw of the blaze and decided at once to get the hell out of this lived to tell the tale. Those who died were the people who for one reason or another never had a chance; those who made up their minds, erroneously, that there was no desperate rush; the heroes and heroines; and those who thought that there might be an opportunity of making something out of the disaster. It was a grim night for looters, who gambled on having time that they didn't get.

In addition, there was Trinity Hall.

I should have known at once when I came on the mound of skeletons that this must be the site of Trinity Hall. Shuteley had various other halls, but only one with two upstairs assembly room where hundreds of people could gather.

On the first of the upper floors a pensioners' party was being held. Above, a school dance was in full swing.

The stairway, though narrow and wooden, was adequate. The trouble was by mutual agreement the old and the young people had shut themselves off from each other. Neither wanted to have anything to do with the other. Everyone who was coming was present, and both halls were firmly barred to gatecrashers.

The fire raced past the hall on two sides and closed in. Nobody escaped — the whole thing was too quick. The fire escape, ancient as it was, was sound enough. But if anyone ever got to it (and perhaps nobody did), it would have offered a grim, hopeless choice — the fire inside, the fire outside, the fire all around, the fire beyond the fire.

Because of the noise in both halls and those two barred, Keep Out doors, in the few vital minutes when escape would have been possible, nobody knew there was anything to escape from. People running before the fire in the streets outside were shouting, screaming, banging on doors — but no bursting in, dashing upstairs and battering on inside doors.

Brave, foolhardly people elsewhere took heroic chances to spread the alarm. But no one happened to think of Trinity Hall — no one who was in the right place at the right time to do anything about it.

The fire cut the telephones almost at once, but the electricity failed in only a few places early on. Perhaps it was a blessing that lights stayed on; their failure would have added to the panic of old and young people.

Yet if the lights had gone out when all phones ceased to operate, people who got no warning until it was too late would have been alerted. At the least, television and radio would have gone off.

In Trinity Hall, in particular, the sudden failure of all lights would have brought both parties to a sudden halt. But the lights stayed on.

So 61 pensioners and 139 boys and girls between thirteen and nineteen died in Trinity Hall. Exactly two hundred. *And that grisly piece of the disaster, more than anything else, Miranda told me, was the thing which was going to make my name stink for ever.*

I didn't attempt to interrupt as she told me what she knew, which was less than I'd have expected.

The giants didn't really know everything. Their remarkable knowledge which had so impressed me on several occasions was merely a small collection of isolated bits of exact information. Miranda, who knew so much about me, hadn't known of the existence of Dina. Perhaps, in the world in which the giants played no part, Dina became worse, had to go into a home, and was not mentioned in any accounts that survived.

Miranda did not, after all, have to do much explaining to show me how I could become the villain of the Shuteley fire. As she spoke, I could see this for myself. And I felt cold horror at the partial justice of it.

I wasn't really a villain. I had done nothing stupid, immoral or illegal. And yet . . . .

FLAG was to all intents and purposes the only insurance company in Shuteley. Practically all pressure exerted on traders, farmers, firms, factories and ordinary householders to make fire less likely was exerted by FLAG — by me. I didn't personally inspect anything, of course. But I was responsible. If there was

blame, it could be laid at my door.

And there was going to be blame. After such a catastrophe, millions of people all over the world were going to feel that such a thing couldn't happen unless someone had been criminally irresponsible.

There were fire prevention officers, too, but not one based in Shuteley. Anyway, Shuteley didn't have a bad fire record. Advice on fire prevention and official pressure for better standards usually followed incidents which showed the need for them.

We were the people most responsible for fire prevention. And we were slack.

FLAG head office was pleased with Shuteley. The directors liked having a town in their pocket, insurance-wise. As local manager, I was expected to carry on the good work. Shuteley made more money for the firm than any other town four times its size, simply because of the volume of business. And the claims record was highly satisfactory. The office ran smoothly. But after all, the directors liked Shuteley first and foremost because it was the one place where the company was supreme. Shuteley made them feel good. It was unique.

There was no actual directive, but I was well aware that I must not lose business, must not allow any other insurance company a toehold. This meant that I wasn't supposed to be too hard to please. It would never do if we wouldn't insure a property and some other company would; if we insisted on certain fire safeguards and the other company waived them; if we set a higher premium than the other company.

So, while our methods in Shuteley were not exactly bent, they had always been yielding. No doubt some of the town's smarter business men knew our position and cunningly took advantage of it. We wanted to insure them, and prestige mattered even more than profit. We could easily be maneuvered into giving a better deal than anyone else. We could also be persuaded to be satisfied with lower standards of safety than anyone else.

No, I hadn't been careless. I hadn't been crooked. I had merely been more easily satisfied than any insurance manager anywhere else would have been, with full backing from my firm.

But my firm's backing was going to fade away after this, after the staggering claims that would be made. FLAG would have to pay, in effect, the cost of the town, plus the insured value of the lives lost. Although the bill wouldn't kill the firm, it would make it very sick indeed. And instead of being the blue-eyed boy who kept a whole town in the company's pocket, I'd be the crass idiot whose incompetent methods were partly or even wholly responsible for the biggest pay-out ever made by any single insurance company in the world.

Also the firm's backing would fade away the moment there was a hint of public concern about the branch's methods.

Naturally the firm had known what I was doing and approved.

But that was before the Great Fire of Shuteley.

Oh, I could see it all. People like to have someone to blame. And I was just sufficiently involved to be a perfect choice.

"The most unfair bit," Miranda said quietly, "is the way Trinity Hall will be blamed on you. A fire officer called Christie inspected it a year ago and reported."

I groaned. I hadn't exactly forgotten the incident, I had merely failed to fit it in place. I knew what was coming.

"You saw Christie and showed him your own inspector's report on Trinity Hall. This said that although the building wasn't up to the highest fire-prevention standards and had a big proportion of wood in the structure, and old wood at that, although the situation left a great deal to be desired, all fire-safety conditions were fully met."

"That's enough," I said. It was more than that: it was too much.

I wanted to hear about other things, no longer that.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

XXVI

"Greg hit hard," she said, "but not hard enough. I'm small, yet I'm pretty tough. I came to in the river, choking, and let it carry me almost to the blockage. Then I swam ashore. I had a suit hidden in some bushes as a safeguard. It wasn't entirely a surprise to me, what Greg did."

"What I can't understand," I began and stopped. I was going to say I couldn't understand why Greg was allowed to sabotage everything that the others were trying to do, whatever that was, why Miranda and the rest of the giants had ever thought for a moment it was worth going ahead with their scheme while Greg was along with them, wrecking every move they made, and in the end trying to kill Miranda and failing only because in his vicious anger he preferred to lash out rather than make quite sure of her.

But that was only one of the things I couldn't understand. The others rose up and silenced me, tongue-tying me because I couldn't make up my mind which to press first.

Miranda, not surprisingly, was no longer immaculate. The two minute pink garments she wore were merely utilitarian, totally dissimilar from the subtle, carefully designed bikini she had worn that afternoon. It was probable that she and the giants had worn the briefs under their suits simply to avoid startling too much the Shuteley people who were to see them.

She was scratched and bruised, apart from the huge discoloration where Greg had hit her. And seeing her as she was then reminded me of the impossible glossiness of all the giants.

"You do come from the future," I said.

"What you call the future," she agreed. "What we know as the present."

"That's a play on words."

"No. Time doesn't happen all at

once. The moving finger writes, and having writ, moves on. The date is 2197."

"*Your* date."

"No. *The* date. At this moment, it's April 17, 2197 — a Wednesday, if you care to check. What comes after April 17, 2197, is the future, completely inaccessible. Before 2197 is the partly accessible past."

Her certainty irritated me. "This is what makes all you people cruel, inhuman — the delusion that your own period is the only one that matters."

She was as certain as the torturers of the Inquisition. "It's April 17, 2197."

"Then I was born to no real existence? I live out my life in the shadows, dead from the moment I was born?"

That made her pause for a moment. "The metaphysical problems," she said at last, "are far beyond me. Perhaps you lived out your life in the second half of the twentieth century . . . perhaps you're restored to play it out again at the end of the twenty-second. I can't tell you the truth from your angle. All I know is that the pointer of time stands at 2197."

When I tried to argue, she went on: "Val, just think. I was born in 2167, and I'm here. Time *must* have reached . . . "

So she was thirty. It was surprising, in a way disappointing. She could have been eighteen or eighty, from what I had known, guessed and imagined. Thirty seemed an indeterminate age for Miranda. It seemed an anticlimax.

She went on trying to convince me that time had always reached a definite point, just as a clock had to register something, even if it had stopped. The date, the vital date, the only date that had any life or meaning was April 17, 2197. Anything before that was the past; anything in front of it was the future.

Presently she realized she was wasting her time trying to convince me and abandoned the attempt.

"It doesn't matter," she sighed, sitting down and leaning back against the stasis machine. "You want to know, but you don't want to know. You think you want the truth. All you want, of course, is what you want to hear."

"I do want the truth," I retorted. "What is it? You're a history class? At a college?"

Her eyes widened. "That's near enough true," she admitted. "I'm the teacher. The rest are pupils. But we're more than just a class. There are changes to be made."

"Changes? You're committing suicide, then? Change the past — *your* past, if you insist — and you change everything."

"No," she said patiently. "Time can't be changed, though bits of it can. Think of time as a river. It's an old idea, the river of time. But the analogy can be taken a good deal farther. Time is a river. And it's April 17, 2197. Remember that, assume that, as a hypothesis, even if you're not convinced. Suppose we of 2197 interfere in the past, what happens?"

"You cease to exist," I said. "You wink out as if you never were."

"No," she said. "Remember, the past is a river. Block a river, and what happens? Except in one case in a million, just what happened here. The river flows to the sea. Block it, and it takes another course. It still flows to the sea. Can you even imagine anything else? And except in the most unusual circumstances, the contour of the land forces the river to return to its original course rather quickly, and flow on as if it had never left it. Just think — the very fact that a river exists means that gravity is forcing all the surplus water in the area to collect and flow in a certain direction. Stop the flow, and the water makes a detour and then returns to the original direction, the original bed."

What she said made sense, but only in a limited way. Arguing by analogy proved nothing. She was saying, in effect, that because a river would act in a certain way, time must act in the same way.

I said so.

She agreed. "It doesn't always happen. A river flows one side of a hill. Divert it even a few yards at a certain point, and it must flow the other side of the hill. And then it's possible that it never gets back to the original course. Well, that *can* happen in time, too, but even more rarely than it does with a river. Make minor changes in the past, and your own time is certainly affected . . . but not in a catastrophic way. The river makes a detour and returns to its original course."

She paused and then said quietly: "I ought to know, because I've done it more than once."

"You've done it? Changed the past?"

She stood up and began to walk about. The flames were dying, I saw, for the firelight flickering on her skin, making it yellow and orange and red but mainly a deep bronze, was far less bright than it had been when Jota and I fought.

"About twenty-five years ago it was discovered that it was possible to alter the past, for a purpose, without making a vast, indiscriminate chaos of time. At this moment, all the force and life of time is in Wednesday, April 17, 2197. Any time diversion made anywhere has its effect, perhaps a vast effect on 2197, but in the changed world I still exist, I'm still a teacher, I still do the same things at the same time."

The paradoxes of time travel have always fascinated some people, but I'd never been one of them. I had assumed, as most people did, that if you somehow managed to change even the tiniest event in the past, the consequnces which must result would multiply, square and cube themselves with every passing millisecond, producing even in a few years a totally different world.

If a girl were delayed ten seconds and consequently never met the man she would have married, never had the children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren she would have had, naturally the future must be quite different. Yet far tinier changes must, I had believed and still believed, be just as significant.

"What sort of changes have you

made?" I demanded. "And how do you know you've made them?"

She smiled and sat down again. But she was very restless. Something was bothering her, something that to her was far more important than the Great Fire of Shuteley — which, after all, was only history.

"Anyone who moves in time," she said, "remembers everything. You were in a loop, so you know what happens. You experience and remember the entire loop — the previous track, what happened, the return, the change in events, the consequence."

Jota and I had entered the camp, fought; Jota had been killed, and I had killed. Then we'd been pushed back a few minutes and lived through a different version of the incident. And we remembered everything.

Miranda went on: "What have we changed? Sorry, Val, I can't tell you. It's better not. They're all in *your* future. This is the farthest-back point where a change has been sanctioned."

"So it's sanctioned, is it?" I demanded. "Your parliament or senate or whatever you've got calmly decides to monkey with —"

"Wait, please." She laid her hand on my arm. "Cool down. You know nearly enough now for me to tell you plainly and simply why we're here, what we intended to do, and how the operation is going."

She was, however, in no hurry to start. And now that it had come to the point, I felt no urge to hurry her.

We all like a safe, ordered world. Me more than most. The idea of people watching you, interfering with you, manipulating you makes the flesh creep. And yet, in this very special case, if the giants had come to do the obvious thing and did it, if even now they could be persuaded to do it, I for one would have been delighted they came. Though afterwards, I wouldn't want any such interference again.

"We're here to have two people," she said. "One is Garry Carswell . . . not that he died in the original fire. If he had, we wouldn't have known his importance — he wouldn't have had any importance. What did happen was that he lived, horribly scarred and mutilated, with the mind of a genius, but a traumatic genius who never really escaped the Fire of Shuteley. We believe that by saving him, which we've done — letting him die might have been another way — we can avert . . ."

She stopped. "No, I won't tell you about our time, your future," she said. "Nobody should ever want to know that, for certain." It's enough to say that our world may be a better place if Garry Carswell never grows up to be a brilliant diabolist. We've also saved his parents, Gil and Barbara, to live in our world. They died in the original fire, and that fact didn't help Garry. You won't see any of them again."

This didn't bother me: most people who had the choice of living in 2197 or dying in 1966 would find the choice easy. Many would even be glad to make the change.

"And the other you came to save was Jota," I said. "Well, that

shouldn't cause you any trouble. Make one of your loops, as you call them, and give him a third life, or a fourth or fifth, or whatever it is.

"That might be possible, but for Greg."

"Yes, it all comes back to Greg, doesn't it?"

She shivered, probably partly at the thought of Greg and what he had done and what he still might do, and partly because it was rather cool and airy in the stasis, in comparison with the various kinds and degrees of heat we had all been experiencing. Jumping up, she pulled at her two-piece and with no trouble at all the scraps of material became a leotard, knitting at her waist with no apparent join. It was only a trivial miracle, hardly worth mentioning.

"The loops," she said, "are legal. They're allowed. Only minimal apparatus is required, and the effect is extremely local. A few people are affected; the rest of the world is quite unaffected."

"Legal?" I said. "Allowed?"

"The moment time-molding became possible, there was immediate, irresistible public pressure for loops."

Sitting down again, she snuggled close to me, quite impersonally, merely for warmth. I had been nothing; then a lover; now I was a friend, if that.

"Think how the very possibility of loops instantly transfigures the world. Most accidents can be averted up to five seconds before they happen. A precious vase is dropped . . . turn back the clock, undrop the vase, and it lasts another thousand years. More important . . . a driver is careless for a fraction of a second, and a car plunges into a river. Regain the last five seconds; drowned people are undrowned."

"As Jota and Wesley were unkilled," I murmured.

"Exactly. The permitted technique works only over a short period, a few minutes at most, and a tiny area. But it's saved thousands of lives, a lot of valuable property and prevented many disasters. Now, you want to know about Greg."

"Yes, Greg," I said. "Tell me about Greg. Explain the inexplicable."

"Why he's here? Well, he's got the Gift."

"The gift?"

"He's a witch doctor. Only his magic works."

The introduction of further go bledegook irritated me. I w just beginning to figure out how t business made sense. And then s introduced something fantastic whi could never make sense.

Before I could speak, she sa sharply: "Don't say it. Val, yo haven't been very bright. You coul tell me far more about the Gift than I can tell you. You know all about it. Or you would, if you'd ever opened your eyes."

I could think of only one explanation. "*I've* got it?" I exclaimed.

"No, not you. Jota."

Step by step she made me remember, and interpret. And I lived through years of my life with her, prompted by her.

TO BE CONCLUDED

Dear Editor:

I have just been reading some of my back issues of *If* and I am now completely sold on Retief. The first one I read was *Retief — God Speaker*, and I thought it was fantastic.

I have also enjoyed the Berserker and Gree stories as much. In the October, 1965 issue you included a bibliography of Retief. I was wondering whether or not you could do the same thing for the Gree and Berserker stories. — F. McLellan, 2436 Park Row West, Montreal 28, P. Q.

* * *

Dear Editor:

You said in *If*: "Every (series) story has to stand on its own merits, so that if you've never read anything that went before it in the series you'll still be able to understand it and enjoy it. So we've never felt it necessary to say anything about the series status of a story in the introduction."

Now there's nothing worse than reading a story studded with references to preceding stories in the series — like a private joke. But the writer can't be expected to explain everything that has happened in earlier stories. Cordwainer Smith cannot, in each Casher O'Neill story, devote a page to explaining why Casher was exiled from his own planet. (I remember in the old Hardy Boy books how the author would painstakingly rehash all the facts about Frank and Joe in all 40-odd books, for the benefit of new readers.) Far better that the reader visit a second-hand book store and read the preceding stories.

Besides which, when I read a good series story I immediately want to read all the other stories in the same series. Since the Galaxy magazines aren't indexed, the search can be long and unrewarding. It would greatly help if you listed the other stories in the series, too. — Jeffrey P. Rensch, 2433 Via Sonoma, Palos Verdes Estates, California 90275.

● You sure those lengthy rehashes were "were for the benefit of new readers?" Our guess would be they were for the benefit of old writers, looking for an easy way to fill up blank pages! — *Editor.*

* * *

Dear Editor:

When Murray Leinster writes for *If* he certainly knows which side his bread is "but" tered on. His story *A*

Planet Like Heaven, is thirteen pages long. On nine of those thirteen pages three or more sentences start with the word "but". It's enough to make a man "butt" his head against a wall! — Walter Erbach, 2979 Dudley, Lincoln, Nebraska.

* * *

Dear Editor:

As you and some of your readers know, there is an international organization, sometimes described as a "lonely heads club," called Mensa.

The only requirement for membership is a documented intelligence level above that of 98% of the population. The opportunity of communicating with others at this level, is, I think, the principal reason for joining, since many of us are essentially outside the mainstream of human activity, having been variously described as "misfits" and "social cripples."

Mensa has no political or religious orientation. It is not orthodox in the doctrinaire sense of the word. Its primary purpose is to research into intelligence via a ready-made group of high-IQ persons who are willing to assist in this sort of research by answering questionnaires and the like. There is also the opportunity for social contact with fellow intellects at the local level, since many areas have local Mensa groups.

At the present time, we are trying to form a special interest group, within Mensa, for science fiction. Anyone who is already a member of Mensa and is interested in this idea should contact Alma Hill, 463 Park Drive, Boston, Mass., 02215, and mention this letter. Anyone who is not a member of Mensa and wants information about joining will receive it if he/she writes to me.

For, lo, these many years, we have all talked about the mind-stretching qualities of science fiction and its appeal to a high-intelligence segment of the reading public. Now is a good time to prove it to ourselves.

To the barricades! — William Tuning, 2910 Foothill Road, Santa Barbara, California 93105.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Although I have been reading *If, Galaxy* and *Worlds of Tomorrow* since 1960 I have yet to see a SF fan club in the Pittsburgh area. I know there must be some in existence there since the 18th World Science Fiction Convention, but I have been unable to find any. I don't even know ONE person who doesn't think that any one who reads science fiction is an idiot. So please help me. I'm desperate. — Wade D. Thunborg, 508 New York Avenue, Clairton, Pa., 15025.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Brother Drake Maynard in Hue and Cry of the July '66 issue nominated *Build We Must* by Dannie Plachta as the best short-short of the year. I'm afraid I must protest. I am fighting rather dirty here, but I protest anyway. In the July issue along with Brother Maynard's letter was another short-short by the same author called *The Man from When.* Though I did like the first story, the second one is definitely better and hits you harder.

And also I might mention, whatever happened to that second Asimov story you mentioned way back last year in *If,* the one was in *Galaxy* but whatever happened to no. 2?

And while we're on *Galaxy*, whatever happened to the short-short by Arthur C. Clarke that you told us you had in the October '65 *Galaxy*? I've been thoroughly searching every copy that comes in and no story. By the way, I've sent in two other letters asking about this. Neither were printed and no answer has been given. Let's get on the ball! — Ron Smith, 644 S. Court St., Medina, Ohio.

● Clarke: in October, 1966, *Galaxy*. Asimov: March, 1967, *If*! — *Editor.*

* * *

Dear Editor:

Shame on you. An editor should be a bit more careful when reading stories employing a sex-switch trick.

I refer to the story *Arena*, by Mack Reynolds, published in the September, 1966 issue (#106). The key to this tale lies in the fact that Billy is Ken's wife, and therefore female, not male, as the reader is likely to assume at the beginning of the story. The reader is particularly helped along in this assumption by text which appears in the first paragraph of the second column of page 78. If I may quote:

" . . . There in the sand was Billy, *his* body bearing a score of gaily ribboned darts." (Italics mine).

What do you have to say for yourself? Do I rate a free subscription? — Jim Kahan, 206 Cottage Lane, Chapel Hill, N.C. 27514.

* * *

Dear Editor:

I have been reading science fiction for something like forty years, and in the desert of 90% unmitigated crud of Sturgeon's Law, your magazine has been a welcome oasis.

However, with the July issue I am very much afraid that my interest in your magazine has come to a regrettable end; this occasioned by the gratuitous (and badly written) attack upon the John Birch Society in the story, *Bircher*.

It is the usual editorial plea, in such cases, that a good yarn is not to be bowdlerized merely because it might be expected to offend a minority of the readers; this argument might carry a great deal more weight if I were not so very sure that if you were to receive a manuscript setting forth the society for what it is — an association of some of the finest people in the United States — you'd reject it out of hand, no matter how well written. — Curtis D. Janke, 1612 South 7th Street, Sheboygan, Wisconsin 53081.

● Pohl's Law: The more hysterically any entity reacts to criticism, the more you're likely to find to criticize about it. — *Editor.*

* * *

Dear Editor:

This is the first time I have written your magazine, but I just have to express my thanks to you. I think A. A. Walde's *Birchers*, is truly a fresh and enjoyable story. Mr. Walde seems to have great promise as a SF writer. His style is quite similar to the style used for writing some of the detective stories of the 1950's. I would like to see more of Mr. Walde's work.

Finally, I would like to say that I found Mr. Berry's letter proposing a new look for SF magazines very good. Mr. Pohl, what is the chance of such a magazine being published? — Jack V. Groves, 511 South Columbus Avenue, Medford, Oregon 97501.

● As far as we are concerned, only fair. But we do think about it from time to time. — *Editor.*

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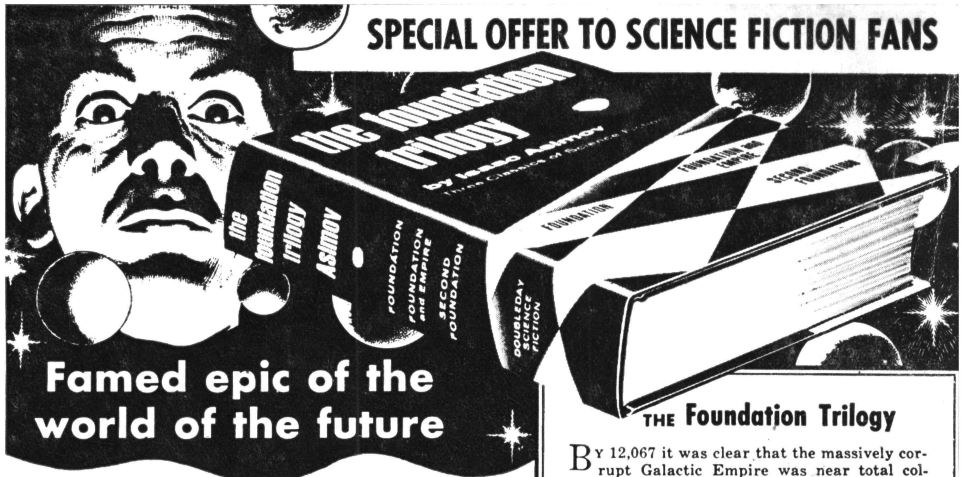

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