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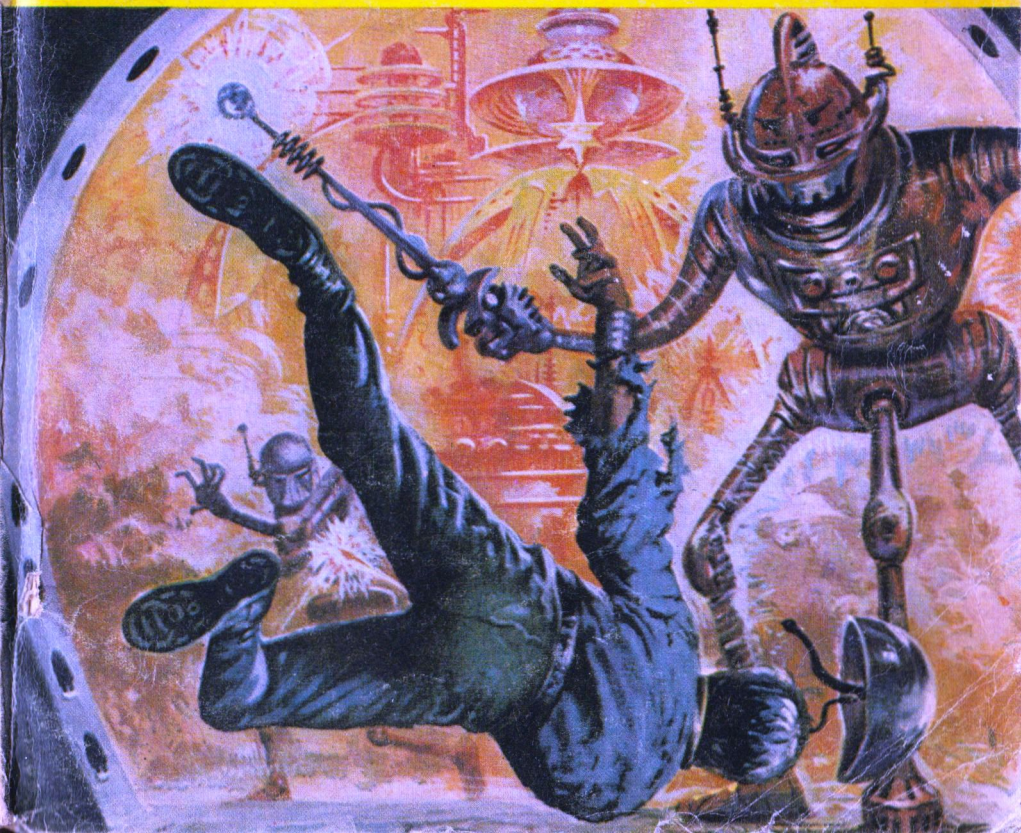
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The Housebreakers Ron Goulart

Illustrated by JEFF JONES

The first time we spotted the Ron Goulart name, it was appended to a memorable one-page parody called "Letters to the Editor" (F&SF, April, 1952), which he wrote while still a freshman at the University of California. Now—fifteen years older, a dozen choice parodies the wiser, and surely the best humorist in the field—Ron gets an even firmer grip on the title with the following grand spoof in which troubleshooter John Raker must find out how the raiders of Cercana manage to appear and disappear—without benefit of teleporters at either end.

THE computer came rolling down the beach toward him. John Raker heard its horn, turned in the bright water and swam back toward shore. He walked free of the surf and strode to his sunmat. Raker was tall, over thirty, crew-cut, and he seemed always to be tilted slightly forward. He put on his sunglasses, looked at the low black and silver landcar parking next to his gear.

"You just ran over my lunch," he said.

The rear door of the car swung open, and Raker nodded hello at the computer built into the back seat. "You know they don't trust me with driving, John," said the computer. "They built an auto-

matic driver under the hood. Some garageman near the harbor changed its oil before I could call a halt. Now the deranged thing keeps going off the tollway after bicycles."

The black and silver car rumbled and reversed a yard.

Frowning at the jerking spools and tiny bubbles of light and crosshatched grids in the rear seat, Raker asked, "You have a new assignment for me?"

The computer said, "We hate cutting up your vacation, John. Out here under the sky, wind-blown, green gulls circling. Golden surf billowing. Man to man with nature, away from the constrictions of office cubicles. Run-

ning free across the sun-dazed sand without a care."

"Why do they program all that crap into you?"

"You're nothing if you can't make small talk," said the computer. "I am Assistant Chief of Soldiers of Fortune, Inc., after all. In charge of all field recruiting and assigning of jobs for this entire section of Barnum. People should like me."

"I like you," said Raker. "Tell me about the new job."

"You don't think I'm gay or something because I get poetic now and then?"

"Nope."

Wheels spun, three pinpoint red lights blinked. The machine said, "Soldiers of Fortune, Inc., sent me out to assign you to a clean-up job on Cercana."

"Cercana," said Raker, "is that bedroom planet, nothing but suburbs, isn't it? Loaded up with people who teleport from the other planets in our Barnum system. They should be too comfortable and preoccupied to be having any trouble."

"They've got trouble enough," the computer told him, "to have taken Tomlinson out."

Tomlinson was one of the best free-lance operatives Soldiers of Fortune, Inc., had on retainer. "Killed?"

"Probably, John. There's no trace of him."

Raker rested a bare foot on the door jamb. "Okay, you want me

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to take over Tomlinson's assignment. What's the problem on Cercana?"

"The country beyond the hundred or so suburbs out there is all wilds, John. Forest, jungle, mountains. Plus which about six of the suburbs are populated with criminal and political deportees and other unwanteds from the Barnum system. That's background. Now to the problem. About three months ago a series of raids started up. Striking by day, bands of armed, mounted raiders began riding into the suburbs and looting."

"There's no native population left on Cercana, is there?"

A green light flared. "We don't think so, John. There was, as you know, an unfortunate massacre when the first suburb was built. No natives are known to have survived. These raiders must be made up from the populations of the deportee suburbs."

"How many raiders roughly?"

"At least fifty men."

Raker scratched his back. "I know Cercana is a protectorate of our planet, Barnum. What kind of local government do they have, some kind of democracy?"

"Yes. The suburbs each have their own mayor and are formed into a loose Federation Of Suburbs, over which is a Lord Mayor."

"Why can't the Cercana government police its own suburbs?"

A spool came loose, rattled,

fixed itself. "Understaffed for one thing," said the computer. "Cercana police are made up of quite a few men who've retired from police work on other Barnum system planets. These raiders aren't exactly like the usual outlaws either, John."

"Is the Barnum government going to send troops or police agents out to Cercana?"

"Barnum doesn't want to. After that thermonuclear trouble on Murdstone last fall they're a little edgy. The problem on Cercana is open, therefore, to an outside group. Soldiers of Fortune, Inc., is the biggest free-lance trouble-shooting agency in the Barnum system. The job has fallen to us. We want you, John, to go in, investigate, see what needs to be done. We hope you can handle it all yourself. If not we may have to get permission to ship a force of SOF troops out there."

Raker leaned against the warm side of the landcar. "What's the unusual angle about the raiders? Why couldn't Tomlinson cope with them?"

"We don't know exactly what happened to him," said the computer. "SOF, by the way, offers a bonus if you find Tomlinson or his remains."

"How much?"

"\$500."

"No, I'm not going to look for him for under \$1,000."

The computer lowered its lights and was silent for nearly half a

minute. "Fine, John. SOF'll go a thousand, provided you bring back his body. No body, no money."

Raker said, "About the raiders?"

"One of the reasons we decided to try you, John. It seems the raiders have the ability to, well, appear and disappear."

"So do the commuters," said Raker. "It's called teleportation."

"The raiders do it without any apparent equipment, John. You know it's presently impossible to jaunte without a platform at each end. No trace of anything like that in this case. These barbarians pop up, strike, pillage, ravish and are gone."

"Hey, wait," said Raker. "SOF thinks it might be magic. Right? I keep telling you that business on Peregrine wasn't witchcraft at all."

"The matter is filed in my memory banks under *magic*, John," the computer told him. "However, go to Cercana with an open mind. Be it magic or science, solve the problem. And, John, if they've got some new teleportation process, SOF would pay considerable extra, in the area of several, thousand, for the secret. Bringing back the person or persons who know the secret, without involving us in any legal troubles, would be nice."

Raker dug his toes into the crisp sand. "Do we have any contacts

on the planet. People who know the wilds?"

"Tomlinson had a contact, a local girl who's worked for SOF before. I'll sleep-brief you on everything Tomlinson reported to us."

"Who exactly is our client?"

"It's the development company which built nearly half the suburbs there. The raids are causing a lot of lease-breaking, and some of the suburbanites are talking of forming vigilance committees. The Cercana Land Company is our client."

"They built a real city there once, didn't they?"

"Years past, yes. Out in the jungle, as part of an effort to force expansion beyond the settled areas. A failure long since. I'm sure the jungle has claimed the city back by now."

"Do I report to Cercana Land when I get there?"

"To their main office in, what is it, Suburb #26. A man named Pete Waggener is Acting Manager."

"Their suburbs only have numbers?"

"Cercana Land found everybody wanted similar names and it got too confusing. For awhile there were six separate Cercana Tropicanas and four Cercana Heights. Today, numbers only." A row of small orange lights flashed in sequence. "Did I mention to you, John, there's a possibility I'll get an indoor job

with SOF's central bureau soon?"

"Oh, so?" They're going to build you into an office?"

"Exactly. I've been in the field, driving around, for two decades, John. I'd get a new title as well," said the computer. "I don't suppose you can appreciate my desire to move indoors."

"No," said Raker. "I never much liked office jobs."

"I have all that on my memory. What you did to your desk at that insurance company on Venus. Soldiers Of Fortune, Inc., is happy to have you, though. We like restless, quirky people."

"Do I get my usual fee on this job?"

"An extra \$500, since we're slicing into your vacation. Plus the usual Danger Zone fee of \$1,000. Altogether you'll gross \$5,000. Oh, and when you have some time, I'd like to go into your part in the profit sharing plan. There's quite a nice sum built up for you. If you can manage to survive for two more years, you can collect the whole pot."

"I bet that's what you told Tomlinson." Raker gathered his things. "Meet me back at the cottage I'm staying at, for the briefing and so on."

"Check. To Raker's vacation cottage," the computer told the landcar while the rear door was closing.

The engine hummed and the car started straight for the ocean. Raker went chasing after it, yell-

ing, and he and the computer managed to talk it into turning and heading for the tollway.

II

Raker studied his ale stein, frowned across the office at Pete Waggener. Finally Raker asked, "Where's the music come from?"

Waggener was a thin, blond man, younger than Raker. His clothes were pastel, narrow and tight. "There's a complete speaker system in the base of the stein, all old-fashioned microminiaturized equipment."

"And it *plays* Venusian folk music?"

"No, there's also a powerful radio in there, picking up a radio station on Bailey. They actually have radio in the backland there," said Waggener. He was sitting on the edge of his hand-carved realwood desk."

"I'd like to hear about the raids," said Raker.

"There's been an incredible number of raids," said the Acting Manager of Cercana Land. "I'd estimate a good seventy in the past dozen weeks. We've had forty-two, no forty-three, of our suburbs hit. Roughly a million dollars in plunder has been made off with." Waggener frisked his desk top. "I had the specific statistics, based on reports from six of our field men. My secretary seems to have filed them somewhere or other. She's over

having a Swedish massage and I don't want to rouse her simply for statistics. Had the whole massage parlor teleported in from Barnum. What's a job without fringe benefits?"

"How do you think the raiders appear and disappear?"

"I can't fathom it," Waggener thoughtfully swished ale through his teeth. "There is, believe me, not a trace of any kind of teleporting device."

"Who do you think they are?"

"Your government on Barnum has dumped a lot of dregs on us here. Political protestors, misfits, out and out criminals and crooks and hoodlums. These types have been shoved into six of the older suburbs. It's my feeling and belief that the core of raiders has been recruited from those sorespots. Suburbs # 84 through # 89," said Waggener. "We have no proof."

"Something I'll have to check," said Raker. He held the musical stein away from him, placed it on the hand-carved realwood end table and stretched out of his chair. Moving to the tinted rear window, Raker looked down. A truck was driving into the courtyard. From the rear of a wrought iron and brick supermarket two stockmen hurried.

"A week or so more of raids and the vigilantes now in the planning stage will become realities, Raker."

Raker watched the stockmen begin to carry cases of hydroponic

gourmet items from the newly arrived truck. "I'll talk to the vigilance committees, too."

Suddenly twenty shouting men on horseback were next to the truck in the courtyard below. Hooves clacked on the grey brick, stun rods hummed.

"Sounds like them again," said Pete Waggener, from the edge of his desk. "Makes our third raid here in # 25."

Raker flipped his laser pistol out of the holster beneath his left arm. "I'll go take a look." He spun, ran from the room.

Waggener followed down the flagstone steps. "Don't let anybody stun you, Raker."

The horsemen all wore sleeveless scarlet tunics. On the backs of a few, names were spelled out in jade-colored rivets. "They're not too subtle," said Raker, hitting the courtyard. He dived for a shaggy palm tree.

"Let's not kill any of them," said Waggener. "It would only get Cercana Land in trouble. Grab one for questioning."

A redhaired man with Merle written on his back waved a blaster rifle in the air and hooted, his head tilted far back. He charged the rear door of the market. The grillwork doors were smashed aside, and the rest of the mounted men galloped into the store.

From the palm-lined street outside a heavy man in a pale green uniform came skittering. "I heard

the rumpus," he called to Raker and Waggener, who were moving fast in the wake of the raiders. "I'm primed for a fight."

"This is Constable Knerr," explained Waggener. "Head of the Law Patrol in Suburb # 25."

"Oops," said Constable Knerr. He had dropped his hand gun. The weapon bounced twice and slid into a drain grating. "Could one of you younger boys bend down and fetch that? I get woozy if I stoop too far."

"Oh boy," said Raker. He sprinted up the ramp leading into the storerooms. Across them and he was in the high, wide market.

The raiders were pillaging the place. Some of them had dismounted and were filling wicker market baskets with cartons of synthetic breakfast food and packages of sliced lunch meat. A man labeled Edward was stuffing a sack with frosted bottles of pink Venusian ale. Two of the raiders were steeplechasing over the checkout stands. A willowy brunette mother of two was screaming, while her children jumped up and down. A clerk swung at a raider with a price-marking gun and was stunned to the floor. A matron in tropical green and orange was kicked by a horse right into a bin of frozen soy products.

Raker aimed his laser gun at the nearest raider. "Okay, Collin," he said.

His hand was forced down by

Waggener. "No killing, no killing. It's too hard to explain. Here, use my stun rod. I went back to the office for it."

Raker grabbed the rod and ran for the man marked Collin, a burly guy covered with tattoo birds. Collin noticed Raker, picked up three pseudo-turkeys and heaved them. "Watch it, you sissy commuter."

Dodging, Raker swung with the stun rod. "I'm just visiting."

The man went hopping down the market aisle, pulling boxes down from both sides as he fled. Raker jumped the boxes as they fell, narrowing the distance between himself and Collin. He was lunging with the rod when a horse sailed over and its rear hoof wacked him across the side of the head.

Raker fell against a barrel of candy-coated seafood. There was a man dressed as a banana hiding behind the barrel, and Raker landed on top of him. "Damn," said Raker.

"What a day I picked to give away free samples," said the banana man.

Raker closed his eyes, took quick breaths through his mouth. His head seemed filled with horses and bananas. He got himself untangled, worked to his knees. Massaging his knees, he grunted to a standing position.

By the time he reached the doorway at the front of the super market, he saw the twenty raiders riding away down Tropicana

Avenue. The dust of the cobblestones rose behind them, and then they weren't there. The street was empty. A quart bottle of sunflower oil fell out of the blankness and smashed.

Raker stepped out onto the sidewalk. "I wonder how they knew the truck was going to be parked right there," said Raker to himself. He walked down the street middle. "You'd think one or two of them would have materialized inside, since it just got there." He stopped where the raiders had popped into nothing and knelt down.

"Finding any clues?" asked Waggener. He wiped his left cheek and watched Raker.

"Sure, all we do is make a copy of this hoofprint on my skull and then we search Cercana till we find the horse who did it."

"Your man Tomlinson was angry and baffled, too."

Raker paced the street, hunched low. "You think those guys were hungry?"

"Meaning what did they want with food?" asked Waggener. "They've stolen a wide range of stuff. Usually, though, they do limit themselves to jewels, appliances and the like, taken from the homes. Perhaps we've seen a terror raid here today."

They spent almost ten minutes on the disappearance site and found nothing. The two men returned to the inside of the market. "There were only a couple dozen

raiders on this one," Raker said.

"Right, Raker. More often they use up to thirty-five or forty. From other's of our hit suburbs we've had reports of as many as fifty on a single foray."

"You're sure you've never recognized any of the raiders, you and your field men?" Raker stopped and rested against a display of frozen Martian sushi.

"No. Except for Gabe."

"Gabe who?"

"Gabe Hoban," said the Cercana Land executive. "Gabe used to live right here in Suburb # 25. His wife still does. There, let me put in, is a really heart lifting sort of thing, Raker. The way the folks here in Suburb # 25 have pitched in and seen to it that Mozelle Hoban, Gabe's wife, has enough to tide her over. A sample of the # 25 spirit at its best."

"In the next suburb they have # 26 spirit?"

"Tomlinson was the same as you, tough and cynical. That's why we went to SOF. We love you detached bastards. You don't give a damn about the heart being uplifted, about simple everyday people rallying around a cause. No, it's smash through to victory."

Raker looked at Waggener, the corners of his eyes wrinkling up. "Let's check over the courtyard. Afterwards you can fill me in further."

"Except for the six deportee suburbs you Barnum people

forced on us we're all a spirited bunch on Cercana."

In the Courtyard Constable Knerr was sitting under a palm tree. "Almost had the darned thing plucked up but it slipped away. Young man came by dressed up exactly like a banana and I asked him to help, but he said he'd had enough for one day. What a world, huh, Pete?"

"Yes sir, Constable Knerr."

"Maybe Suburb # 25 will pitch in and buy you a new gun," said Raker.

III

After the rough realwood table poured him some sherry, Mozelle Hoban said to Raker, "I didn't think you'd be this direct."

"I told Waggener I was going to ask questions about # 25. Your husband is running with the raiders. That gives me a reason to talk to you. Nobody has to guess you're my Soldiers of Fortune, Inc., contact."

The girl was slim and dark. Her long hair was pulled back and held with a scarlet cord. "Tomlinson was told all about Gabe. I know very little about the raiders, or exactly how Gabe went about joining up. His reasons I'm fairly sure of."

The leather and wood chair Raker was sitting in began rocking. It tilted and dumped him on the rugless living room floor. The chair straightened and rolled out

of the room. The hall door opened for the chair, and it sped into the night. "I guess you and your husband had financial problems."

"That's right," said Mozelle. "Some of the furniture dealers here rig their pieces to return automatically if payments aren't kept up. Isn't that a Barnum custom, too?"

"Outlawed by Parliament ten years ago," Raker told her. "Tomlinson's reports were sketchy about you and your husband. Did Gabe know you provided information to SOF agents on Cercana?"

"There've only been three of you out here since Gabe and I were married. The man who recruited me, Tomlinson and you," said the girl. "Gabe and I had separate lives anyway. No, I never told him about Soldiers of Fortune, Inc. Gabe worked in the research department of a war toy company on Barafunda. For relaxation he liked to lift weights. He got tired and depressed one day and drifted off. We still have eleven years to pay on the house."

"According to SOF files you know the areas beyond the suburbs."

Mozelle swung one long leg. "I grew up here on Cercana. My parents were commuters, too. In Suburb # 15. I was a restless kid, ran away a lot. Up to the jungles, the hills beyond."

"Ever get to the city?"

"The one built out in the wilds?"

No, I haven't been there so far."

A brass bell hanging over the doorway sounded. "More repossessing?"

"A neighbor probably. The credit people just walk in." Mozelle made an excuse-me motion with her fingers, went into the beamed hallway.

Raker sipped his sherry.

Mozelle returned with a plaid coat over her arm. "Mrs. MacQuarrie over on Lot 18A. Giving me a spare coat."

"The Suburb #25 spirit in action."

"Yeah," said the dark girl, tossing the coat over a decorative wine barrel. "I've three coats that don't fit, four pairs of too-small shoes and a Venusian boa. Once in a while somebody comes up with cash."

"I'm authorized to give you some dough."

The girl held out her hand. "Fine, a hundred would be nice. And I do have some new information for you."

After handing her the money Raker asked, "Do you know what Tomlinson was tracking when he disappeared?"

Mozelle shook her head. "I think. I'm not sure. I think, though, he was on to the same thing I've heard about."

"Which is?"

"Some of the loot from the suburbs is turning up over in Suburb # 89, the rundown suburb. In second-hand stores and pawn

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shops. The Law Patrol hasn't tumbled to this yet. In fact, there's a rumor one of the constables in # 89 is in on the whole raid racket."

"Tomlinson never mentioned any of this in his reports."

Mozelle gave a half shrug. "I know he was planning to go out to Suburb # 89. He mentioned a club named Bluebird's. He suspected the club was in on the fencing somehow."

Raker positioned his sherry glass on the floor near his foot. "Anybody right in # 25 you suspect?"

"No, they're a nice bunch."

"Come on," said Raker. "I've seen teleportation worked by machine, and out on Murdstone I saw a shaman do it. You simply can't go banging around through space. You have to know exactly where you're going. Otherwise there's a chance of materializing in the middle of a wall or a marble monument. Watch any of your commuter platforms right here in # 25, and you can see how careful the teleportation business has to be. Now these scarlet raiders, I saw them hit the courtyard without even brushing a leaf."

"So?"

"Somebody has to be giving them advice, coordinates."

"Tomlinson had a similar notion," said the girl.

Raker said, "I'll stay here in # 25 for today. Then maybe poke

around in # 89. If I need some jungle lore, I'll get back to you."

Out of the dusk, through the patio windows, came two men in buff jumpsuits. "The sofa payments," said one of them. "Or we haul it."

Mozelle unfolded the hundred dollars in bills she'd balled into her palm. "Here, Mr. Alch."

"Thank you, mam. A pleasant evening to you, sir."

Raker watched them heft the sofa away across the yellow patio stones. "How much in debt are you?"

"I'm on top of it," said Mozelle. "I don't need SOF messing in my finances. Yo'd best get continuing."

Raker left.

IV

Three chimney sweeps were fighting, batting each other with their long-handled brushes, in front of the boarded-up supermarket. Raker edged around them, stopped next to a green uniformed Law Patrol man. The cop was watching the fight, holding a rusty bird cage filled with quiet orange and blue finches.

"Most of the street signs are down here in Suburb # 89," said Rakers.

"They do it behind my back. Don't blame me. Vandalism."

"The point being I'm not sure where McClennan Drive is."

"Three blocks down, turn left

one and then right again. What address?"

"Place called Bluebird's."

A chimney brush came sailing toward them, and they both dodged. "I'd warn you against it as a rough place. Still, what the hell. Most places around here are."

"Thanks." Raker tapped the cage with a forefinger. "Somebody lose those birds?"

"No, it's my part-time job," said the cop. "I'm a cage-bird street vendor."

"How come, police work pay bad?"

"Not merely that. See, this is part of the Barnum Job Program. They assigned me a job as a cage-bird street vendor. I told them I was a full-time patrolman, but you can't argue with JP. Financed by government on Barnum, to solve our unemployment troubles here. All done with computers, big office near the mall full of computers."

"Sell many birds?"

"One, a couple weeks back," said the policeman. "Still I do better than those chimney sweeps. See, Suburb # 89 is made up of what they call ranch style houses."

"No chimneys?" said Raker.

"Right. You argue with JP, once you've been placed, and they put you down as a malcontent."

"How much for a finch?"

"Two dollars. It's a fair trade item."

Raker bought a hunched orange finch. A block beyond the cop he let the bird fly free.

Bluebird's was between a rag and bone shop and a marine chandler. Both the bracketing buildings were soot smeared, grey and sunken. Bluebird's was painted a fresh bright white. All the businesses on this block were in what had once been suburban houses. Bluebird's still had its ranch house look, with checkered curtains in the picture window and bright red gravel on the wide path leading to the polished realwood door.

Raker hit the buzzer and bells chimed inside. After a moment, an apple-cheeked old lady in a grey dress and a paisley shawl answered. "Bless you, lad. I'm Mother Bluebird. Come in and sit by a furnace outlet and warm your bones. I've got a fresh pie baking in the oven."

Following the old woman in Raker asked, "Isn't this a saloon?"

"Sure thing, laddy buck," said the old lady.

The living room was thick with small round tables covered with white cloth. Each table held a squat vase with one red flower in it. "You serve hard liquor and all?"

"You're from some other suburb, aren't you, honey bunch?" She nodded at an unoccupied table and patted him down into a cushioned chair.

Raker glanced at the half dozen

scattered patrons. "Yeah, I'm from # 25."

"Well, lambkin," said Mother Bluebird, "the big trend right now is homespun decor and sentimental fun. I tried to keep the hashish den atmosphere we used to have. Profits dropped, so we had to switch. I get dressed up in drag, and we've been grossing \$3,000 a week."

"You're a fellow?"

"Yes, I'm a thirty-year-old former certified public accountant," said Mother Bluebird. "I went by the Job Program offices a couple years back, and they assigned me here. The first six months I had to run this as a bordello. Fortunately bordellos went out of fashion in # 89. Care for a drink?"

"A beer."

"We still have hashish, but you have to take it in apple tarts."

"Beer's fine."

"I can fix you an eggnog with hallucination juice in it."

"Nope."

Mother Bluebird nodded and went off the kitchen. The opening door let in an aroma of fresh baked pie.

A tight mouthed young man in a stiff black suit came in from a side room and sat at a white piano in the corner. "A medley of songs about mother love and puppies," he announced and began to play and sing.

A brunette girl at the next table overturned it on her escort. The

man righted himself and the table and smashed the vase on her head. Mother Bluebird looked in from the kitchen and scolded the couple. They sat down again.

The chair across from Raker scraped. A tall wintry man with white hair falling in bangs said, "I write my mother a personal letter once each week."

"Splendid."

"Would you be interested in some bargain-price appliances, sir? Goods obtained in a manner not to be too fully chatted about."

"The stuff is here?"

"Upstairs, yes." He rose.

Standing, Raker said, "I'd really like to pick up a nice deep freeze."

"We have three upstairs in very pretty decorator colors." The white haired man worked across the room and held a side door open. In the hallway there was a wooden spiral staircase. The walls were dotted with oval portraits of Mother Bluebird, framed in gilt gingerbread. "Climb and go through the second white door. I'm following right close."

Behind the second white door two men in scarlet tunics pointed laser pistols and stun rods at Raker. "I'm afraid you've walked into raider hands," the bigger one said, jerking Raker into the empty room.

"If I haven't, I've listened to a lot of mother songs for nothing," said Raker before they stunned him.

The warehouse was low ceilinged, long and musty. Stacked high with packing cases, loose appliances, defrosting units, thermo cookers, ponc tanks. A hard rain fell on the flat roof. Water was splashing next to Raker's feet. He rubbed his temples, moved free of the water, kneed himself to his feet. He tried to look at the leaking ceiling, but a sharp pain made him lower his head. "Yang," he muttered, running his tongue along his dry lips.

In the shadows near the heavy front door a scarlet raider stood with a blaster rifle resting against his hip. His other hand was keeping a blue kettle in the path of a leak. He lowered the pot to the straw floor and said, "Hello there, Mr. Raker."

Cocking an eye, Raker said, "This isn't Suburb # 89."

"Exactly," said the man. He was chubby, with pale pink skin. He moved closer, kicked a pewter pitcher a few inches to the left so it caught dripping rain. "You're out in the wilds. One of our depots. We're waiting at the moment, Mr. Raker."

"Waiting for what?"

"Tasma," said the raider. He forked out a polka dot handkerchief and wiped the rain spattered top of an antique trivision set.

"What's Tasma, a religious holiday?"

The pink man chuckled, swung the rifle barrel into Raker's stomach. "Tasma, he's the leader of our group. He's due in from somewhere else."

Raker moved. "You from one of the deportee suburbs?"

"Quit kidding. Hardly any of us are. We're from the better suburbs mostly."

"You're a commuter?"

"Sure, four days a week I work as an Assistant Key Punch Supervisor on Barnum. On my days off, at least on three out of every five, I run with the raiders."

"So," said Raker, massaging his head again, "all this looting isn't motivated by the bad economic conditions in the rundown suburbs?"

"You talk like the Job Program. Didn't you ever have an office job?"

"In the past."

"So you know nobody can meet all the expenses of living in the suburbs with only one job." The rifle tip inscribed an arc on Raker's left side. "You have to moonlight to survive. We make a good profit on the loot, porting it out to the lesser planets, unloading some of it here too in the suburbs that don't ask questions."

"Doesn't anybody recognize you, when you hit?" Raker got out of contact with the blaster.

"We have it worked out on a schedule. No guy raids his own suburb, or one where he's got friends," said the plump raid-

er. "Hell, who ever knows what the people in a neighboring suburb look like? Twenty miles from my home and nobody knows me from a mole. It all helps give the impression we're, as you thought, from the slum suburbs."

A new leak started, splashing hard between them. Raker grabbed a mixing bowl and placed it to catch the rain. "I appreciate your confiding in me."

"Sure. Makes no difference. Tasma is going to do you in. Same like the other gentleman, Tomlinson."

"Tomlinson," said Raker.

"Your other Soldiers of Fortune, Inc., boy. He walked into this, like you. We tried some devices out on him. The last one really worked. He was gone like a finger snap. Research is important in any field, Mr. Raker."

Horses drew up in the rear of the warehouse. In a moment the whorl lock on the front door whirled and swung in. A view of rain-swept jungle flashed as a thin dark man stepped in. "Outside now, Wally," the man told Raker's guard.

The pink man left the warehouse, calling, "Nice to have met you, Mr. Raker."

"I'm Tasma," said the dark man. Water broke through the roof and slapped at his tightly curled dark hair. He sidestepped, smiled. His face was long and sharp, with a smile that used only one side. "Renzo Tasma, the lead-

er of this entire operation."

"One of the leaders," said Raker.

"Oh?"

"You have to have cooperation for the kind of raids you've been pulling," said Raker, leaning against a tower of packing crates. "Probably from people like Pete Waggener. And I don't see him entering into anything where he hasn't got a percentage of control."

"Why would the key man for Cercana Land work with us, Raker?"

"For a share of the million you've made so far," said Raker. "That raid in # 25 was too smooth and perfect. It was a set up for me to see. I figure Waggener and Mozelle Hoban are in with you."

Tasma grinned a half grin. "Why then did you walk right into our hands?"

"Easiest way to get to you people quickly."

"Tomorrow morning you'll be killed," said Tasma.

Raker shrugged. "How do you do the appearing and disappearing?"

"With outside help," said Tasma. "From the same source we'll have a few new gimmicks quite early tomorrow. One, at least, will dispatch you." Tasma laughed and went back out into the rain.

VI

The guard changed at night fall. The new one was a tall blond

young man with a boomerang shaped moustache. He ticked his head at Raker and asked, "You met my wife, huh?"

"Who, Mozelle?" Raker hunched his shoulders and walked nearer the guard. "You're Gabe Hoban."

"That's me. We sure suckered you in, Raker. Just like Tomlinson. Mozelle's a great double agent."

"Sure," said Raker. He hooked an elbow on the top of a sea-colored freezer. "How come everybody knows you're a raider? I thought the victims weren't supposed to tumble you guys weren't slum suburbanites."

"What's your opinion?"

Raker said, "You're a decoy. To give people in # 25 the idea only one guy is really from the residential areas. Word like that has probably drifted around to most of the other suburbs by now. Giving the impression clean-cut suburban men, except for one out of stepper, wouldn't think of looting."

"Pete Waggener and I thought it out," said Hoban. "An obvious public relations device. You can't run a band of ravagers without using good publicity techniques. Particularly in middle class suburbs."

Raker emptied a bowl into the washing basin he was collecting rain water in. "Mozelle told me you had a muscle building hobby."

Hoban smiled, flexed the arm not holding the blaster rifle. "I don't build those big flashy muscles. Compact, sports muscles. I'm packed with them."

Raker, scratching his ear, said, "Back on Mars, in the Solar System, I used to fool around with weight lifting."

"No challenge there, with Mars gravity what it is."

"You take that into account," said Raker. He bent and gripped a simulated ivory chest. He shifted it in the straw and raised it, grunting, over his head. "Yeah, I'm still in shape." Raker dropped the chest in front of the plaid wash basin unit. He glanced over at a deep freeze. "You still do much lifting?"

"I have a steer out at one of our outer depots that I've been lifting since it was a calf," said Hoban. "Though it sort of hoodooed the steer. Thing doesn't feel right now unless it's a couple of feet off the ground. We had to build a little platform for it to ride around on."

Raker pointed at the freezer with a foot. "You lift that?"

"Sure."

"I'm wondering."

"I lift the freezer and you'll grapple with me while both my hands are full. Admit it."

"A sportsman doesn't think about tricks when he's competing," said Raker. He wandered to the freezer. "I'll try it myself."

"Don't strain anything." Hoban

moved nearer, stopping in front of the plaid wash stand.

Raker crouched and braced himself. He got hold of the heavy appliance, coughed, lifted it from the ground. When the freezer was between him and Hoban, Raker growled low and shoved it into the air. The freezer took Hoban in the chest, and he bicycled back, tripped over the ivory chest and fell back against the wash stand.

Raker jumped. He flat handed the rifle free and grabbed it before it fell. He forked his other hand against Hoban's throat and pushed the guard's head under the surface of collected rain water. He counted off five seconds, then clawed Hoban back into a breathing position. Keeping the rifle handy Raker said, "No yelling."

"You suckered me."

"Given enough time," said Raker, his fingers tight on Hoban's throat, "you can sucker most anybody."

"You walked in here on purpose, waiting for somebody to down."

"There are still some things I want to know," said Raker. "Who's giving Tasma the teleporting process. How's it done?"

"My lips are sealed."

Raker shoved his head underwater for another five seconds. "Tell me now or I'll use the blaster rifle on you and find out from Tasma."

Hoban blinked away raindrops.

"You'll never be able to assault the old guy anyway. Even if you do know."

"Who?"

"He lives in the city. An ancient old man named Maximo Sample. He's way up in the nineties and he's a native. Really. The only Cercana native I've ever heard of, and he knows all kinds of things. I don't know if it's magic or science. Tasma stumbled onto him a couple years back, and they started a partnership in a way."

"How's the teleporting work?"

"We don't know," Hoban told him. "We have to tell Sample where we're raiding. He tells us where to wait, how long to stay in each suburb, exactly which way to ride in and out. Tasma, Pete Waggener, Mozelle and our other spotters all beam him information. Sample works it from the city."

"He there alone?"

"Guards, around ten men at least."

"I thought the city was run down."

"No, said Hoban. "Sample's got it all working. The suburbs are for young people, middled aged people at best. Out in the city they'd planned for older folks. So Sample lives in a place called Golden Towers."

"The city's how far from here?"

"Fifty miles north of this warehouse, through the jungle."

"Roads?"

"There was a tollway put in for getting to the city. It's tumbled down some but you can still use it. But you can't get near Sample. You should have seen what they did to Tomlinson. Less than two seconds he was dust."

Raker's grip tightened. "Tomlinson was disintegrated?"

"Wasn't my fault. Don't retaliate against me," said Hoban. "I didn't know he was your buddy."

"I never met him," said Raker quietly. Then he inhaled sharply, bobbed his head. "Okay, Gabe, we'll leave now. We'll leave by the back door. There's a stable or something out there, from what I've been hearing."

"Horses. You planning to take me?"

"Part way. As a buffer."

"You're going to murder me and leave me for the vultures."

"They have vultures on Cercana?"

"I'm not sure."

Raker righted Hoban, led him toward the back of the warehouse. "When we get clear and I'm headed for the city, I'll truss you up and leave you in the wilds." Raker pressed the rifle end into Hoban's back until the rear door was open. Outside a dozen horses stood quietly in the rain.

VII

Alone, on the road again, Raker slowed his mount as dawn caught

up with him. The rain was thin now, gritty. Ahead, off the pitted tollway, was an overturned Department Of Public Works truck, twisted in among dark leaves and vines. A yellow bird was hopping on the mouth of the disposal unit. Raker reined the horse to a stop, swung off and led it. An askew City Limits sign pole served him as a hitching post.

Raker moved into the brush and trees, working toward the city. From the road he couldn't see it yet. After a few minutes of rolling and tumbling through dense foliage and fuzzy damp trees, Raker came down a slope and saw Cercana's only city. It was blue, the high rise buildings made of some deep blue near-concrete. All the window-sided towers had blue tinted glass. Even the conveyor walks and streets were pale blue. "They must have got a good buy on blue," Raker said, watching.

Downhill the roadways began. A bluebird appeared on a blue street pole and a Keep-Your-City-Clean truck swung around the corner and started washing, waxing, vacuuming, polishing and setting out vinyl flowers. All automatically.

The bluebird chirped again and the programmed music started for the day, coming out of blue megaphones attached to all the buildings. An office Raker'd worked in on Callisto had had the same music tape, rural blues from Io

played in the 3/3/2/2/2/1/2/2/2 waltz meter popular years back.

An android meter maid putted into view searching for illegally parked landcars and cruisers. An andy blind man shuffled by, rattling an empty blue cup. Trying to appear programmed, Raker left the jungle and entered the early morning city. "Have a happy day," the bluebird said to him.

At a corner information booth Raker flicked the query switch. The booth was man high, made of blue tiles and tinted glass. "At your service. You may ask any non-controversial question."

"How can I get to the Golden Tower from here?"

"Hetch Hetchy," said the booth.

"Beg pardon?"

"Hetch Hetchy Avenue. It begins at the War Memorial Merry-Go-Round six blocks south of here. Follow Hetch Hetchy for a mile and you'll find our Senior Citizens and Young Oldtimers Complex. That's where Golden Tower is. Would you care for a free complimentary cup of near-coffee?"

"Nope," said Raker. He continued south.

He tried to keep close to buildings, using as many of the narrow slits between the big buildings as he could. Two blocks along Hetch Hetchy a land cab started tailing him. It speeded up, swung across the roadway and paced him. The automatic driving mechanism had

a voice box in the hood ornament. "Give you a lift, jocko?" asked the blue cab.

"Conveyor belts are fine."

"Can't make no time, chappy. Get in."

"Get off my tail or I'll dismantle you."

The cab had a rear engine and its back hood swung up now. A blaster rifle blossomed and swiveled toward Raker. "Get in, bright eyes."

"Okay, I'll get in, but I won't drink any of your free coffee."

"You got me mixed up with the infos."

Raker slid into the cab. "Golden Tower."

"Where else?" said the cab. "Sample has had you tagged since you hit town."

"I figured."

"You sure do have a liking for walking right in," the interior cab speaker said. "I've been over the data on you in Sample's background files."

"I'm me," said Raker. "And that's the way I like to do things."

Finally the cab said, "Those two wide ginzos on the lawn in front of Golden Tower are real. Don't try any of your anti-machiner bigotry on them."

The cab ejected Raker into the four-handed grip of two guards wearing scarlet tunics.

VIII

Raker rubbed a flat hand across the back of his neck and eyed the

door marked Executive Director. The reception room was ten degrees too warm. "Sample behind that door?" he asked the raider guard left with him.

The bald man pointed a pencil-sized rod at Raker. "You can bet."

"What's that little thing you keep flashing?"

"Sample worked it out. Move your foot off the occasional table and I'll show you."

Raker dropped his foot.

The guard made a tiny whip-lash jerk with the rod. The table jumped six inches in the air, wavered, turned into sparkling dust and hit the rug as a heap. "On people it's even better. We clown around with it on cats sometimes."

A dust pan rolled out of a wall panel and shoveled up the remains of the table. It reversed and went to a large slot in the wall. The pan hit the slot and the wide panel swung in, swallowing the flicked-out dust.

"Sample's invention, too?"

"No, it comes with the city. All the office junk and paper debris and stuff from the senior citizen suits was to go down a big system of funnels which lead into a processing room down below."

The executive door opened and the other guard, the one tagged Vincent, appeared. He motioned at Raker with something shaped like an old-fashioned teaspoon. Raker stood up. "What kind of weapon is that?"

"Weapon?" said Vincent. "It's a spoon. I was stirring Sample's cocoa."

The executive room was draped in yellow. Golden-hued rugs on the floor. Computer banks, the big outmoded kind, masked most of the walls on three sides. A yellow-tinted window showed the towers of the city.

Sitting in a gilt wheelchair was a vaguely blue old man. A dark cord snaked over the rug and was attached to the back of his chair. The old man, who was several degrees off center, winked at Raker. "How is old Rasmussen these days, eh now?" He made a toast with his cocoa mug. His freckled hand stopped, but the cup continued and sailed over his shoulder. The cup bounced twice, smashed, scattering spots of chocolate brown. A clean-up pan rolled out of its panel, swept and mopped and flipped the shards into a big wall flap next to the far computer.

"He thinks you know a pal of his name of Rasmussen," whispered Vincent.

"They had to operate on Rasmussen's leg," said Raker crossing the rug.

"Don't step on the wires," said Vincent. "He's getting power for the chair from the city generators."

"Power, power," said Sample. "I had a leg operation at one time. I also have a puckery scar on my stomach. When we are bet-

ter acquainted I'll display it."

"Who are you exactly?" Raker said.

"So Rasmussen lost a leg, eh now? He had plenty of them." Sample's thin blue face was brittle, inscribed with thin wrinkles.

"I'm Maximo Sample, you young rascal. My people owned this planet once. We knew the old stuff, the secrets, the magic. You outlanders stormed in with complexities, weaponry, sophistries. Wiped out most of us. Not Sample. Sample, here's to him, Sample hid in the wilderness for five long years. Sample watched them build their suburbs, and he watched them build this city. The city failed and I bided my time. Sample bided his time. When they gave up here, those off-planet bastards, I moved in. I knew the old stuff, couldn't handle much of the new. So I took over the whole damn city. I learned, Sample taught himself, to control all this hardware. All of my devices, you callow whelp, all of them are mixtures of magic and technology. That's how I can jaunte raiders anywhere."

"What do you call the process?"

"Sample's process is a good enough tag," the old man said to Raker. "The secret, the way it's done, is all hidden here in this room. How Sample can move the raiders. The secret of how he can turn you into a little patch of dust, or slice you up. Sample waits, patient, thinking. I intend to de-

stroy the suburbs eventually. Tasmania's objectives are not so vast, though his partnership is at the moment necessary. When the ranch houses are rubble, Sample will take over. Cercana will be mine."

"That'll be fun for you," said Raker, "riding your wheelchair through the ruined streets."

"Cruel," said Sample, letting his hands slump into his narrow lap. "Cruel with the arrogance of youth. Admittedly it has taken a bit longer than I'd expected to get myself in a position to conquer. All that circuitry to master, those little toggles and those tiny, tiny lights. Not to mention having to brush up on Boolean logic and soldering. Now tell me all about Rasmussen."

"Rasmussen," said Raker, "hasn't changed a bit. Except for the leg." He pointed a thumb at the far computer. "You the one who made the clumsy modifications in that 403L?"

Sample puckered. "Raker, that's who you are. A nasty young rogue. Selling himself on the marketplace, putting his heart on his sleeve. Afraid to face responsibilities in a full-time office job. Seeking any man's grail. Don't badmouth my mechanisms, you greenhorn."

"Maybe you want it to function badly."

Sample clutched the arms of his chair, fingered a button and made

the chair turn to face the 403L. "What, what?"

"I know a faulty gudgeon pin when I see one," said Raker. He started moving, in long steps, for the computer. He made a standing jump for the waste outlet. It was just his height and size, and he sailed through it clean.

The dispose tube was wide and it rollercoastered down and around. After somersaulting for what he estimated was fifteen or so floors, Raker heard the grinding mechanism gnawing at nothing. He tumbled himself onto his back and used his elbows and heels to brake himself in the pocked tube surface.

He went down more slowly, was finally able to hook out with a hand and catch a disposal slot. He grabbed hold of the opening's edge, feeling his palms blister and trying to stop his feet from fluttering and pulling him on down.

Raker came out of the garbage system in a senior citizen suite. He had to fight a dusty android nurse who wanted to give him a floorsunk whirl bath. In two falls Raker got the andy fouled in its own whirlpool. He ran from the suite and into the corridor.

Raker reached the street level uncaught. He pushed outside. He ran on the roadway to make better time than the conveyor gave. A block from Golden Tower he found an information booth. "The

public library and city hall," Raker said.

"Two blocks west. Both face on the simulated rose garden. On McKinney Esplanade," the booth informed him.

Raker sprinted for the library. He was going up its front ramp when he heard the two raider guards shouting a block behind.

IX

The blue library doors hissed open in Raker's path. He ran to the Central Information Desk. An Android with a feathery moustache shook his head at him. "Don't clomp in the library, sir. It would bother the other patrons, if we had any."

"Background material on the city itself," said Raker. "When it was built and how it works."

"Yes, we have such materials here."

"Where?" He could hear the sound of pursuit growing louder.

"Local History Wing, third level. Ramp to your left. Don't clomp."

Raker ran again, up and around, into a small blue room. There were no andies here, only a filmspool guide and a simple portable computer. "How," asked Raker when the question light flared on the computer, "can the whole city be turned off. The entire thing, generators and all?"

"Yes," answered the machine, "we have such material hereabouts someplace. Yes."

"I'd appreciate some haste in getting it." The two guards were shouting on the lower level now.

"Take a viewing chair, and I'll rush the record spools from our storehouse of microed documents."

"I'll get killed if I sit down," said Raker. "Can you tell me?"

"Very well. Go to the downtown office of Cercana Power & Light, located on Bascom Way some three blocks south. The master switch is in the basement. None but authorized personnel can go near it, except in an emergency."

"Okay," said Raker. He left the room and moved quietly up the ramp. From below he caught the sound of the two pursuing raiders running.

Raker passed a door marked *Awesome View*, pushed through it. He found himself on a balcony a hundred feet above the ground. He swung over the guard rail and went down the balcony's emergency stairs.

The raiders didn't pick Raker up until he'd found the Power and Light office and built a fire under its back door, using nearwood benches from the flower garden up the block. "Fire!" yelled Raker. "Emergency!" All the building's doors snapped open. Raker went in.

"There he is," shouted Vincent from half a block away. "If you can't use the new stun rifles, just kill him."

Fire alarms were going off in the basement. "Run for your life," Raker told the P&L guard in front of the basement door. "It's a national emergency, the militia's been called out and the suburban rabble is aroused. Get out there on the barricades."

"Who, me?"

"The whole place will be an inferno in less time than it takes to tell," said Raker, reaching around the guard for the door release.

"Right you are, sir." The guard went.

Raker checked the basement, a wide chill room. On the near wall was a small box marked Master Switch, Raker opened the box' door. Inside was a toggle with two positions indicated, on and off. Raker knuckled it from on to off. All the lights in the room went out, and the sirens died.

Raker drifted to the door and slipped into the hallway. It was dark, too. Raker heard the raiders creeping heavily down the ramp. He reached out into darkness and caught hold of a bald head, chopping with his other hand. The raider grunted and slumped. Raker twisted the man's weapons out of his hands and waited for Vincent.

The other raider was quieter, skulking in the hallway. Raker could see some in the darkness now. So could Vincent, but as the Raider swung up what must have been the new stun rifle, Raker

already had the borrowed pencil rod activated.

Vincent turned into briefly fluorescent dust. Raker took time to truss up the unconscious raider and left the hall. With him he took two stun rifles, a blaster pistol and a dust rod.

He picked a defensible position in the rose garden across from the Light & Power office. He had to gamble that the stun rifles had enough range. Raker stretched out amidst spurious leaves and blossoms, waiting for Sample to send more men to turn his city back on.

The stun rifle worked at this distance, and after Raker'd crossed off seven raider guards, he went back toward the Golden Tower.

Raker moved cautiously, but the guard who jumped out of an alley next to an open-air cafeteria surprised him. He pivoted, aiming the dust rod.

"This is from the brand-new weapons lab," shouted the raider. He held a melon-shaped glass ball in an about-to-pitch position. "It gets its first trial on you."

Raker had activated the rod, and the raider blossomed into dust and scattered away on the wind. "You should make your speeches after you win."

The blue glass ball floated to the ground, rolled back against the leg of an outdoor table and exploded. Splinters of flame splashed, and the chairs and tables burned instantly.

There were no more guards now, and Raker climbed the long ramp to the Executive Director office with no trouble.

Old Sample was collapsed sideways in his wheelchair. "Get it back on." His voice was tired and thin. "I need the power to keep this chair going. Sample can't survive without the chair."

"First," said Raker, "you tell me where you've got the secret of your teleportation trick hidden."

"Here," said Sample. His right hand began to climb up from the arm of the chair, crawling across his chest.

"Easy," said Raker. "Don't try for a weapon."

Sample's laughter was out of sync. It didn't sound until his mouth had snapped shut. The climbing hand moved up his neck and tapped the side of his head. His mouth opened, and he said, "Here, you poor underage idiot, here in my head is where I keep all my secrets. You don't think Sample would trust any machine with them?"

Raker ran toward him. "That process means extra money to me."

Sample raised his head slightly and sighed. "Youth," he said and fell completely out of the chair. He hit the floor dead.

"Damn," said Raker.

The End

HOK VISITS THE LAND OF LEGENDS

Illustrated by JAY JACKSON

Every time we reread one of the Hok stories—such as “Battle in the Dawn” (March, 1967) or “Hok Draws the Bow” (May, 1967)—we marvel at the author’s ability to make the lusty adventures of a Stone Age hunter seem far more exciting than the sophisticated capers of .007 and his plentiful heirs. And—to judge from your many requests for more—that’s a reaction many of you share. So for all of you—and for those who meet Hok for the first time—here’s the superb short novel with which Wellman concluded one of the finest series from the Golden Age of Pulp.

Only Hok could have done it—only Hok the Mighty, strongest and wisest and bravest of the Flint Folk whose chief he was. For Gragru the mammoth was in those days the noblest of all beasts hunted by man—to bring one down was an enterprise for the combined hunter-strength of a tribe. Save for Hok, no man would even think of killing Gragru single-handed.

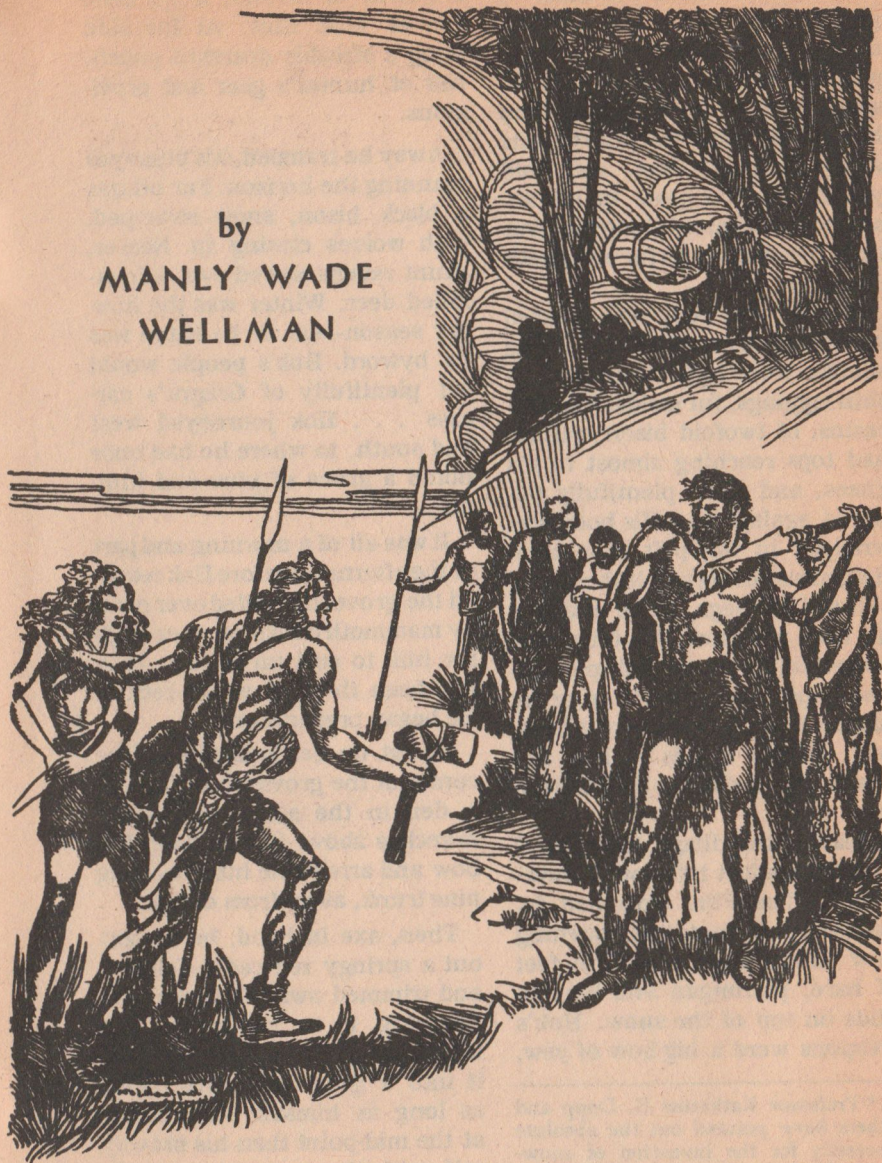
But Hok had so thought. And for Hok, to think was to do. When winter’s heaviest snow had choked the meadows and woods that Hok’s people had won by battle from the half-beastly Gnorrls,* he put his plan into action.

Not that food was scarce. A late flight of geese had dropped floundering on the frozen river before the village of mud huts, and Hok’s sturdy young son Ptao had led the other children to seize them. Hok’s brother Zhik had traced a herd of elk to their stamped-out clearing in a willow thicket, and was planning a raid thither. But Hok’s big blond head teemed with great thoughts; his blue eyes seemed to gaze on far distances of the spirit. Already he thought of such game as trivial.

On a cloudy gray day, not too cold, he spoke from his cave-door

* See “Battle in the Dawn” and “Hok Draws the Bow,” etc., *Fantastic*, March, '67 and May, '67.

by
MANLY WADE
WELLMAN



in the bluff above the huts. "I go on a lone hunt," he told the tribe. "It will be several days, perhaps, before I return. In my absence, Zhik is your chief." Then he gave his handsome wife Oloana a rib-buckling hug, and told young Ptao to grow in his absence. He departed along the river trail, heading south for mammoth country.

His big, tall body was dressed in fur from throat to toe. His long shanks wore tight-wound wolf-skin leggings, fur inside. His moc-casins, of twofold bison leather, had tops reaching almost to his knees, and were plentifully tal-lowed against wet. His body was wrapped in the pelt of a cave-lion, arms fitting inside the neatly skinned forelegs, mane muffling his neck and chest. Fox-fur gloves protected his hands. All openings and laps were drawn snug by leather laces. Only his great head, with golden clouds of hair and beard, was defiantly bare to win-ter.

Leaving the village, Hok paused to strap his feet into rough snow-shoes.* The Flint Folk had de-veloped such things by watching how nature made broad the feet of hare, ptarmigan and lynx to glide on top of the snow. Hok's weapons were a big bow of yew,

a quiver of arrows, a big keen axe of blue flint. At his side hung a sizeable deerskin pouch, full of hunter's gear and provi-sions.

Away he tramped, his blue eyes scanning the horizon. Far off was a black bison, snow-swamped, with wolves closing in. Nearer, gaunt ravens sawed over a frost-killed deer. Winter was the hun-gry season—eat or be eaten was its byword. Hok's people would eat plentifully of Gragru's car-cass . . . Hok journeyed west and south, to where he had once noted a grove of pine and juni-per.

It was all of a morning and part of the afternoon before Hok reach-ed the grove. He smiled over near-by mammoth tracks, large enough for him to curl up in. The prey had been there. It would return. He began preparations.

He set up headquarters in the center of the grove, scooping out a den in the snow and laying branches above it for a roof. His bow and arrows he hung to a big pine trunk, away from damp.

Then, axe in hand, he sought out a springy red cedar, felled it and trimmed away the branches. Dragging it to his camp, Hok laboriously hewed and whittled it into a great bow-stave, twice as long as himself and thicker at the mid-point than his brawny calf, with the two ends properly tapered.

* Professor Katherine E. Dopp and others have pointed out the absolute necessity for the invention of snow-shoes by Stone Age hunters of Hok's time.—Ed.

Bending the bow was a task even for Hok. From his bag he took a great coil of rawhide rope, several strands thick. With a length of this he lashed the bow horizontally to the big pine. To each end he fastened a second line, making this fast to a tree behind. After that, he toiled to bend one arm, then the other, using all his braced strength and weight and shortening each lashing. The stout cedar bent little by little into a considerable curve.

Next Hok affixed his bowstring of rawhide, first soaking it in slush. When it was as tight as he could make it, he lighted a row of fires near it. As the string dried and shrank in the heat, the bow bent still more.

Meanwhile, Hok was cutting an arrow to fit that bow, a pine sapling thrice the length of his leg. From his pouch he produced a flint point longer than his foot, flaked to a narrow, sharp apex. This he lashed into the split tip, and with his axe chopped a notch in the opposite butt. The finished arrow he laid across his big bow.

"My weapon is ready to draw for killing," he said with satisfaction, and put himself to new toil. A lashing of rope held the arrow notched on the string, and Hok carried the end of this new lashing backward, around a stump directly to the rear. With braced feet, swelling muscles, panting chest, he heaved and slaved and outdid himself until the bow was

drawn to the fullest and his pull-rope hitched firmly to the anchorage. He stepped back and proudly surveyed the finished work. "Good!" he approved himself.

He had made and drawn a bow for such a giant as his old mother had spoken of, long ago in his childhood. The big pine to which the bow was bound stood for the archer's rigid gripping hand. The back-stretched rope from the arrow's notch was the drawing hand. All that was needed would be a target in front of it.

And Hok arranged for that.

He cut young, green juniper boughs and made two heaps, three strides apart, so that the arrow pointed midway between them. Then he hacked away branches and bushes that might interfere with the shaft's flight. It was evening by now. He built up his fire behind the drawn bow, toasted a bit of meat from his pouch, and finally slept.

At dawn he woke. Snow was falling. Hok rose and gazed along the little lane in front of the arrow.

There came the prey he hoped for.

Gragu the mammoth, tremendous beyond imagination, marched with heavy dignity to the enticing breakfast Hok had set him. A hillock of red-black hair, more than twice Hok's height at the shoulder,* he sprouted great spiral tusks of creamy ivory, each

a weight for several men. His head, a hairy boulder, had a high cranium and small, wise eyes. His long, clever trunk sniffed at one stack of juniper, and began to convey it to his mouth.*

Hok drew his keen dagger of reindeer horn. The Mammoth gobbled on, finished the first stack, then swung across to the second.

Hok squinted a last time along the arrow. It aimed at the exact point he had hoped—the hair-thatched flank of the beast. Hok set his knife to the draw-rope—sliced the strands—

Huong! With a whoop of freed strength, the bow hurled its shaft. A heavy thud rang back, and Gragu trumpeted in startled pain.

"You are my meat!" yelled Hok.

Gragu wheeled and charged the voice. Hok caught his bow and arrows from their hanging place, gathered the snowshoes under his arm, and danced nimbly aside. "I shot you!" he cried again. "I, Hok!"

Blundering through the brush, Gragu looked right and left for his enemy; but Hok had sagely trotted around behind him. A

* This was a specimen of the Imperial Mammoth, which stood some 14 feet high. Partial remains of such a giant can be seen at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.—Ed.

* Examination of the stomachs of frozen mammoth remains has enabled scientists to decide on juniper as a favorite article of their winter diet.—Ed.

savage exploration of the thicket, to no avail—then Gragu sought the open again. His blood streamed from wounds on either side where the pine-shaft trans-fixed him, but he still stood steady on his great tree-stump feet.

Hok came to the fringe of the junipers. "You shall not escape!" he yelled at the mammoth. "Hok will eat you!"

This time Gragu did not charge. He knew that death had smitten through hair and hide and bone, to the center of his lungs. No time left for combat or revenge—time only for one thing, the thing that every mammoth must do in his last hour. . .

He turned and struggled away southward through the snow.

Hok watched. He remembered the stories of his fathers.

"Gragu seeks the dying place of the mammoth, the tomb of his people, that no man has ever seen or found.* I shall follow him to that place—learn the secret and mystery of where the mammoth goest to die!"

Quickly he bound on his snowshoes, gained the top of the drifts, and forged away after Gragu,

* A similar legend is told about modern elephants and their "graveyard"—it is a fact that bodies of naturally dead elephants are seldom seen. The great beds of mammoth fossils in Russia, from which as much as 100,000 pounds of ivory was gleaned annually in pre-Soviet times, may bear out Hok's belief.—Ed.

now a diminishing brown blotch in the middle distance.

Chapter II Where Gragru Died

Even the elephant, degenerate modern nephew of Gragru's race, can outrun a good horse on a sprint or a day's march; and the beast Hok now followed was among the largest and most enduring of his kind. Despite the wound, the shaft in his body, and the deep snow, Gragru ploughed ahead faster than Hok's best pace.

The tall chieftain, however, had a plain trail to follow—a deep rut in the snow, with splotches and spatters of blood. "Gragru shall not escape," he promised himself, and mended his stride. The rising wind, bearing more snowflakes, blew at his wide shoulder and helped him along. Ahead was a ravine, its central watercourse many men's height deep under old snows. Gragru sagely churned along one slope, into country more than a day's journey from Hok's village. Hok had hunted there only a few times.

They travelled thus, hunter and hunted, all morning and all afternoon. Evening came, and Hok did not pause for a campfire, but gnawed a strip of dried meat as he marched. His longest pause was to melt snow between his ungloved hands for drink. Then on into the dusk. The clouds

broke a little, and the light of a half-moon showed him the trail of Gragru.

With the coming of night he heard the howl of winter-famished wolves behind. They were hunting him, of course.* The safety of a tree, or at least a rock-face to defend his back, was the dictate of discretion; but Hok very seldom was discreet. He paused only long enough to cut a straight shoot of ash, rather longer than himself. Then, resuming his journey, he whittled it to a point with his deerhorn knife. This improvised stabbing spear he carried in his right hand, point backward.

The howling chorus of the wolves came nearer, stronger. It rose to a fiendish din as they sighted Hok. He judged that there were five or six, lean and savage. Without slacking his pace, he kept a watch from the tail of his eye. As they drew close to his heels, several gray forms slackened pace cautiously. Not so the leader—he dashed full upon Hok and sprang.

* Hok's people were contemporary with *Cyon alpinis fossils*, a species of wolf larger and stronger, and probably fiercer, than modern types. Such hunting animals must have had to pursue and drag down the powerful game of the age, and would not have shrunk too much from combat with man. At least once among the remarkable artworks of Stone Age man is included a painting of a wolf—a lifelike polychrome on the wall of the cavern at Font-de-Gaume, once the home and art studio of a community of the magnificent Cro-Magnons, Hok's race.
—Ed.

Hok had waited for that. Back darted his reversed spear. The tough ash pike met the wolf's breast in mid-air; the very force of the leap helped to impale the brute. There rose one wild scream of agony, and Hok let go of the weapon, tramping along. Behind rose a greedy hubbub—as he had foreseen, the other wolves had stopped and were devouring their fallen leader.

"The bravest often die like that," philosophized Hok, lengthening his stride to make up for lost time.

The long ravine came to a head in a frozen lake. Across this, to the south, brush-clad hills. Gragru's wallowing trail showed how hard he found those hills to climb, and Hok made up some of the distance he had lost on the levels. As the moon sank before morning, Hok caught up. Gragru had paused to rest, a great hunched hillock in a shaggy pelt. Hok yelled in triumph and Gragru, galvanizing into motion, slogged away southward as before.

Another day—second of pursuit, third of absence from home. Even Hok's magnificently trained legs must begin to suffer from so much snowshoeing; even Gragru's teeming, reservoir of strength must run lower from pain and labor. Given a chance to idle and nurse himself, he could let the air clot and congeal the wounds, but the shaft still

stuck through him, working and shifting to begin fresh bleedings. The trail now led through impeding thickets, and after a brief spurt by Gragru, Hok had a new advantage, that of using the mammoth's lane through the heavy drift-choked growth. By afternoon more snow fell, almost a blizzard. Lest he lose the trail entirely, Hok tramped in Gragru's very tracks instead of on the firmer drifts beside.

"He weakens," Hok told himself, eyeing new blood blotches. "At this point he rested' on his knees. Yonder he fell on his side. Brave beast, to get up again! Will he reach the dying place?"

Full of admiration for Gragru, Hok half-wished the animal would triumph, but he did not slow down. Hok was weary, but warm from his exertions and far from faltering.

Night again. During the darkness Hok again kept up a dogged march. Up ahead somewhere, Gragru was forced to make a halt of it. His wound was doing its grim best to heal. Once or twice the mammoth's trunk reached back and investigated that lodged shaft. But there was too much wisdom in that high crag of a skull to permit tugging out of the painful thing—that would mean bleeding to death on the spot. Once again, as the deepest dark heralded the dawn, Hok drew nigh to his massive quarry. Once again Gragru stirred to motion, break-

ing trail for the third day of the chase.

The mighty stumpy feet were shaking and stumbling by now. Gragru fell again and again. He rose with difficulty after each fall, groaning and puffing but stubborn. A fresh hunter might have caught up—but Hok, however much he would not admit it, was himself close to the end of endurance. His deep chest panted like a bullfrog's. He breathed through his mouth, and the moisture made icicles in his golden beard. Frost tried to bite his face, and he rubbed it away with snow. Only his conscious wisdom kept him from tossing aside his furs as too much weight. By noon he made his first rest-stop. Knowing better than to sit down and grow stiff, he leaned his back to a boulder and gulped air into his laboring lungs. After he had paused thus, and eaten a mouthful of meat, he was no more than able to resume the pursuit, at a stubborn walk.

"Gragru," he addressed the fugitive up ahead, "you are strong and brave. Any man but Hok would say you had conquered. But I have not given up."

The afternoon's journey led over a great flat plain, rimmed afar by white wrapped mountains and bearing no trees or watercourses that showed above the snow. Almost on its far side was a gentle slope to a ridge, with a peculiar

length of shadow behind. Hok saw Gragru ahead of him. The mammoth could barely crawl through the drifts, sagging and trembling with weakness. Hok drew on his own last reserves of strength, stirred his aching feet to swifter snowshoeing. He actually gained.

Narrower grew the distance between them. Hok drew the axe from his belt, balanced it in his gloved right hand. Coming close, he told himself, he would hack the tendon of Gragru's hind leg, bring him down to stay. After that, get close enough to wrench out the piercing shaft, so that a final loss of blood would finish the beast. Then—but Hok could wish only for a camp, a fire, sleep.

He toiled close. Closer. Gragru was only fifty paces ahead, tottering to that ridge of the slope. At its top he made a slow, clumsy half-turn. His head quivered between his big tussocked shoulders, his ears and trunk hung limply. His eyes, red and pained, fixed upon Hok's like the eyes of a warrior who sees death upon him. Hok lifted his axe in salute.

"Gragru, I am honored by this adventure," he wheezed. "Eating your heart will give me strength and wit and courage beyond all I have known. You will live again in me. Now, to make an end."

He kicked off the snowshoes, so as to run more swiftly at Gragru's sagging hindquarters. But, before he moved, Gragru acted on his own part. He stretched his

trunk backward to the shaft in his wound.

Hok relaxed, smiling. "What, you would die of your own will? So be it! I yield you the honor of killing Gragru!"

The mammoth's trunk surged with all the strength it had left. Fastening on the head of the lance, it drew, dragged, pulled the shaft clear through and away. A flip of the trunk, and the red-caked weapon flew out of sight beyond the ridge. Then, blood fountaining forth on both sides, Gragru dragged himself after the shaft. He seemed to collapse beyond the ridge.

"He is mine," muttered Hok into the icicles on his beard, and lifted his axe. He ran in pursuit. So swift was he that he did not see what was on the other side of the ridge until too late.

There was no other side, really. Ground shelved straight down from that highest snow-clad point, into a vast, deep valley. There was a drop of eight or ten paces, then the beginning of a steep muddy slope. Hok felt a beating-up of dame warmth, like the rush of air from a cave heated with many fires. He saw thick, distant greenery below him, with a blue mist over it as of rain-clouds seen from a mountain top. All this in one moment.

This his moccasins slid from under him on the brink, and he fell hard.

Striking the top of the slope all

sprawling, he rolled over and then slid like an otter on a riverbank. Perhaps something struck his head. Perhaps he only closed his eyes as he slid.

In any case, Hok dropped into sleep as into warm water. He never even felt himself strike a solid obstruction and halt his downward slide.

Chapter III

The Jungle Beneath the Snow

Hok stretched, yawned, opened his eyes. "Where have I fallen?" he inquired of the world, and looked about to answer his own question.

He had plumped into a great bushy thicket of evergreenscrub, and had lain there as comfortably as in a hammock. By chance or instinct, he still clutched his big flint axe. Above him was the steep slope, and above that the perpendicular cliff with a crowning of snow. But all about him was a spring-like warmth, with no snow at all—only dampness.

Hok wriggled out of his branch, examining himself. His tumble had covered his garments with muck. "Pah!" he condemned the mess, and used his gloves to wipe his face, hair and weapons. A look at the sky told him it was morning—he had slept away his fourth night from home.

Then he gazed downward. The valley seemed to throb and steam. He made out rich leafage and tall

tree-summits far below. One or two bright birds flitted in the mists. Hok grimaced.

"Summer must sleep through the cold like a cave-bear," he decided. "I will go down and look for Gragru's body."

There were shoots and shrubs and hummocks for him to catch with hands and feet, or he would have gone sliding again. The deeper he journeyed, the warmer it became. Now and then he hacked a big slash on a larger tree, to keep his upward trail again. Those trees, he observed, were often summer trees, lusher and greener than any he had ever seen.

"Is this the Ancient Land of safe and easy life?"* he mused.

He threw off leggings and gloves and the muddy lionskin cloak, tying these into a bundle to carry. Further descent into even more tropical temperature, and he hung the superfluous garments in a forked branch of a ferny thicket. "I will get them when I return," he decided, and went on down, clad only in clout and moccasins. Bow, quiver and pouch he slung from his shoulders. The deerhorn dagger rode in

his leather girdle. His big axe he kept ready in his right hand, for what might challenge him.

The first challenger came, not up from the valley, but down from the misty air. Hok saw gray-green pinions, four times wider than his own armspread, and borne between them something like an evil dream of a stork. The wings rustled as they flapped—he saw, as they settled upon him, that they were unfeathered membranes like a bat's—and two scaly rear talons slashed at him.*

"*Khaa!*" cried Hok, revolted, and set himself for defense. He parried the rush with his axe. The side, not the edge, of the flint struck that monster's chest, blocking it off. Down darted the long lean neck, and the sharp-toothed beak fastened in Hok's hair. A moment later the clutching lizardy feet closed on the axe-haft. Hok found himself carried shakily aloft.

There was a struggle for the axe. The thing could barely sustain Hok's weight clear of the ground, and it tried to kill, not capture. A long tail belabored him like a club, hideous hand-like claws on the wing-elbows scratched and scabbled at his chest and throat. Hok, dangling in mid-air, found himself able to voice a savage laugh.

* Johannes V. Jensen, Danish poet and scholar, predicates his celebrated "Long Journey" saga on the race-old myth of a warm Lost Country—the memory among Ice-Age men of the tropical surroundings among which the earliest human beings developed, and which were banished by the glaciers. —Ed.

* The race of pterodactyls, of which this specimen was a survivor, had wingspreads as wide as twenty-five feet, with beaks four feet long. —Ed.

"*Ahai!* You think to eat Hok, you nightmare? Others have found him a tough morsell!" Quitting hold of the axe with one hand, he whipped the dagger from his belt. Thrusting upward, he pierced the scaly throat to the bone.

The jaws let go his hair, and emitted a startled screech. Snaky-smelling blood drenched Hok, and the two fell. The wings, though out of control, partially broke the tumble, and Hok had the wit and strength to turn his enemy under and fall upon it. They struck the slope some paces lower than where the fight began. Hok pinned the still struggling nightmare with his foot, and cleft it almost in two with his axe. Then he stepped clear, nose wrinkled in disgust.

"*Khaa!*" he snorted again, mopping away the ill-scented gore with handfuls of fern. "I'd have doubly died if that bird-snake had eaten me. Are there others?"

His question was answered on the instant. Dry flappings, shrill screams—Hok sheltered in a thicket, and watched a dozen more birdsnakes swoop down to rend and devour their slain brother. It was a sight to turn the stomach of a Gnorrl. Hok slipped away down slope.

Now he came to a gentler incline and larger trees. He journeyed on without mishap for the rest of the morning. Hungry, he ate several strange fruits from

vine and tree at which he saw birds pecking. Once, too, a strange thing like a tiny tailed man* scolded him in a harsh high voice and flung down a big husk-fibered nut. Hok dodged the missile, split it and enjoyed both the white flesh and the milky juice. "Thanks, little brother!" he cried up at the impish nut-thrower.

When noon was past, Hok had come to where he could spy the floor of the valley.

With difficulty he spied it, for it was dusky dark. From it rose fumes, mist-clouds, earthy odors. It was a swamp, from which sprouted upward the tallest and biggest trees Hok had ever seen. They grew thickly, interlaced with the root-ends and butts of vines and creepers, hummocked around with dank clumps of fungi, rimmed with filthy pools. Swarms of biting insects rose, and Hok retreated, cursing.

"I see nothing of Gragru down there," he said. "I'll go sidewise."

Nicking a tree to mark the turn-off, he travelled directly along the slope. Nor had he far to go before he saw Gragru.

Here was the place where mammoths were entombed. Above, extending up the valley's slope, was

* In Europe, where Hok lived, no remains of native monkeys or apes more recent than Pliocene times have been discovered; but, as the paleontologist Osborn reminds us, the tree-dwelling habits of such beasts might have made the remains difficult to keep whole. —Ed.

a tunnel through trees and thickets, kept open by so many falling, rolling masses of dead or dying mammoth-meat. At the bottom of the chute rose a stinking stack of remains. Hok could not have counted them—there must be thousands of dessicated and rotted carcassas, the bones gray and the curling tusks white. On top lay the freshest of these, Gragru his quarry. And beside it was one that had beaten Hok to the kill.

"First bird-snakes," grumbled Hok. "Now elephant-pigs."

For the thing was bigger than an elephant and grosser than a hog. It's monstrous bulk, clad in scant-bristled hide of slate gray, stooped above the carcass. Its shallow, broad-snouted skull bent down, and powerful fangs tore the hairy hide from Gragru's flesh, exposing the tender meat. That head lifted as Hok came into view, a head larger than that of a hippopotamus. Two small hooded eyes, cold and pale as a lizard's, stared. The mouth sucked and chewed bloody shreds, and Hok saw down-protruding tusks, sharp as daggers. Upon the undeveloped brow, the swell of the muzzle, and the tip of the snout were hornlike knobs—three pairs of them.*

Fixing Hok with that lizardlike stare, the big brute set its elephantine forefeet upon Gragru's bulk and hitched itself nearer. Its bloody, fang-fringed jaws seemed

to grin in anticipation of different meat.

"Thing," Hok addressed the monster, "you came unbidden to eat my prey. You yourself shall be my meat, to replace that which I killed."

He lifted his bow, which was ready strung, and reached over his shoulder for an arrow. Just then the elephant-pig moved toward him.

For all its unwieldy bulk, it came at antelope speed, that great toothed maw open to seize and rend. Hok swiftly drew his long arrow to the head and sent it full at the long protruding tongue. The monster stopped dead, emitting a shrill gargling squeal, and lifted one horn-toed foot to paw at the wound. Hok retired into a bushy thicket, setting another arrow to string.

That thicket would have shielded him from the charge of a buffalo or lion; but the bulk of the present enemy was to a buffalo or lion as a fox to rabbits. It charged among the brush, breaking off stout stems like reeds. Hok, lighter, had difficulty getting aside from its first blind rush.

* *Dinoceras ingens*, one of the largest and ugliest of the Dinocerata, flourished in Eocene times and may have lived later. It partook of the natures of rhinoceros and swine, and its teeth suggest it ate both animal and vegetable food. Its many head-bumps may have been primitive horns. Specimens have been found that were twelve feet long and eight feet tall at the shoulderst.—Ed.

He gained the open, and so did the elephant-pig. It spied him, wheeled to charge again.

He discharged a second arrow, full at one of those dead eyes. The six-knobbed head twitched at that moment, and the shaft skewered a nostril instead. Again a horrid yell of angry pain. Hok sprang away from under its very feet as it tried to run him down, found himself heading into the swampy bottom. There was a great cylindrical mass among the trees, a trunk which even this hideous monster could not tear down. Hok ran to it, seeking to climb the rough lappings of bark.

"You cannot climb quickly enough," said a voice from within the tree. "Come inside, where I can look at you."

Chapter IV The Man inside the Tree

It is often like that, even with a hunter as wise and sharp-eyed as Hok. Not until the voice spoke to him in the language of men,* was he aware that near him in the great trunk was a gaping hole, big enough for him to slide through, and full of blackness.

The tree itself was not a tree. For trees are straight upward shoots of vegetable growth—this seemed a high-built close-packed spiral, as if someone had coiled a rope, or a worm had made a great casting. Between two woody curves, one upon the other,

showed the shoulder-wide hole.

"Make haste," bade the voice inside.

Hok saw that the elephant-pig, after a momentary questing to spy and smell him out, was ponderously wheeling to charge. He waited for no third invitation, but dived into the space, head first. A struggle and a kick, and he was inside, among comforting dimness that bespoke solid protection all around. A moment later the huge beast struck outside, with a force that shook every fiber of the strange stout growth within which Hok had taken refuge.

"He cannot break through to us," assured the voice, very near. "This vine is stronger even than Rmanth, the slayer."

Hok made out a dark shape, slender and quiet. "Vine?" he echoed. "But this is a tree, a dead hollow tree."

"The tree that once stood here is not only dead, but gone," he was quietly informed. "If there

* The old legend, mentioned in the book of Genesis and elsewhere, that once "all men were of one speech" may well be founded on fact—witness similarities of certain key words among races so far scattered as Welsh, Persian, and Mandan Indian. Even in the Stone Age there seems to have been commerce and alliance, which means that men must have understood each other. Languages were simple then. Only with widely divergent races, as the beastlike Gnorrls or Neanderthal men, would there be a definitely separate tongue, hard to pronounce and harder to understand because of differences in jaw structure, brain, and mode of life.—Ed.

were light, you would see.”

Momentary silence, while Hok pondered this statement. Outside the elephant-pig, which seemed to be named Rmanth, sniffed at the orifice like a jackal at a rat-burrow.

“You don’t sound like a mocker,” was Hok’s final judgment aloud. “And it is true that this is a strange growth around us. As for light, why not build a fire?”

“Fire?” repeated the other uncertainly. “What is that?”

Hok could not but chuckle. “You do not know? Fire lights and warms you.”

“For warmth, it is never cold here. And for light—I do not like too much.”

“There is need of light in this darkness,” decided Hok weightily. “If you truly do not know fire, I can show better than I can tell.”

He groped with his hands on the floor of the cavern into which he had come. It seemed earthy, with much rubbish. He found some bits of punky wood, then larger pieces, and cleared a hearth-space. From pouch he brought needful things—a flat chip of pine, one edge notched; a straight, pointed stick of hard wood; a tuft of dry moss.

“Thus,” lectured Hok, “is fire made.”

Working in the dark, he twirled the stick between his palms. Its point, in the notch of the chip, rubbed and heated. Within moments Hok smelled scorching,

then smoke. A faint glow peeped through the gloom. Lifting away the chip, Hok held his moss-tinder to the little coal of glowing wood-meal. The rising blaze he fed with splinters, then larger pieces. The fire rose. “There!” cried Hok, and had time and illumination to look up.

His first glance showed him the refuge—a circular cavity, twice a man’s height in diameter, and walled snugly with those close-packed woody spirals. High above the space extended, with what looked like a gleaming white star at some distant apex. The floor was of well-trampled loam and mold, littered with ancient wood chips. His second glance showed him his companion.

Here was a body slimmer and shorter than the average man of the Flint People. The shoulders sloped, the muscles were stringy rather than swelling, there were no hips or calves. Around the slender waist was a clout rudely woven of plant fiber, its girdle supporting a queerly made little axe and what seemed to be a knife. The feet, outthrust toward Hok, looked like hands—the great toe was set well back, and plainly could take independent grasp. On the chest—quite deep in proportion to the slimness—and on the outer arms and legs grew long, sparse hair of red-brown color. Hok could not see the face, for the man crouched and buried

his head in his long arms.

"Don't," came his muffled plea.

"Don't . . ."

"It will not hurt," Hok replied, puzzled.

"I cannot look, it burns my eyes. Once the forest was eaten by such stuff that struck down from heaven—"

"Lightning," guessed Hok. "Oh, yes, fire can be terrible when big. But we keep it small, feeding it only sparingly. Then it is good. See, I do not fear. I promise it will not hurt you."

His tone reassured the man, who finally looked up, albeit apprehensively. Hok studied his face.

Long loose lips, a nose both small and flattish, and no chin at all beneath a scraggle of brown beard. From the wide mouth protruded teeth—Hok saw business-like canines above and below, capable of inflicting a terrible bite. This much was plainly of animal fashion, unpleasantly Gnorrlish. But neither the fangs nor the shallow jaw could detract from the manifest intelligence of the upper face.

For here were large dark eyes, set very well under smooth brows. The forehead, though not high, was fairly broad and smooth, and the cranium looked as if it might house intelligence and good temper.

"Don't be afraid," persisted Hok. "You were friendly enough to call me into this shelter. I am

grateful, and I will show it."

Rmanth, the monster outside, sniffed and scraped at the entrance. He seemed baffled. Hok leaned against the wall. "What is your name?" he asked.

The other peered timidly. Hok saw the size and brilliance of those eyes, and guessed that this man could see, at least somewhat in the dark. "Soko," came the reply. "And you?"

"Hok the Mighty." That was spoken with honest pride. "I came here from snowy country up above. I had wounded a mammoth, and followed him down here."

"Mammoths always come here," Soko told him. "Rmanth and his people before him—for he is the last of a mighty race—ate their flesh and flourished. If we dare descend the trees, Rmanth kills and eats us, too. In the high branches—the Stymphs!"

"Stymphs?" echoed Hok. "What are those?"

Soko had his turn at being surprised at such ignorance. "They fly like birds, but are bigger and hungrier—with teeth in their long jaws—man cannot prevail against them—"

"Oh, the bird-snakes! One attacked me as I came down. I killed it, and descended before its friends came."

"You were climbing downward," Soko reminded. "There was cover below. But if you leave

the cover to climb upward, you will be slain in the open, by many Stymphs. Not even Rmanth ventures above the thickets."

"As to your elephant-pig, Rmanth," continued Hok, "he has tasted my arrows."

That was another new word for Soko, and Hok passed his bow and quiver across for examination. "One shaft I feathered in his tongue," he continued, "and another in his nostril."

"But you were forced to take shelter here. Meanwhile, those wounds will make him the thirstier for your blood. He will never forget your appearance or smell. If you venture out, he will follow you to the finish. Between him and the Stymphs above, what chance have you?"

"What chance have I?" repeated Hok, his voice ringing. "Chance for combat! For adventure! For victory!" He laughed for joy, anticipating these things. "I'm glad I came—these dangers are worth traveling far to meet... but tell me of another wonder. This tree, which is not a tree, but shelters us in its heart—"

"Oh, simple enough," rejoined Soko. He was beginning to enjoy the comradeship by the glowing fire. Sitting opposite Hok, His slender hands clasped around his knobby knees, he smiled. "A true tree grew here once, tall and strong. At its root sprang up a vine, which coiled tightly around like a snake. In

time the vine grew to the very top. Its hugging coils, and its sap-drinking suckers, slew the tree, which rotted and died in the grip. But the vine held the shape to which it had grown, and when we tree-folk dug out the rotten wood, little by little, it made a safe tube by which we could descend to the valley's floor."*

"That must have taken much labor," observed Hok.

"And much time. My father's father barely remembered when it was begun, that digging."

"You speak as if you live up above here," said Hok.

"We do," Soko told him. "Come, kill the fire lest it burn the forest, and I will take you to the home of my people."

He rose and began climbing upward.

Chapter V

The World in the Branches

Hok quickly stamped out the fire. Its dying light showed him a sort of rough ladder—pegs and stubs of hard wood, wedged into the spaces between the coils of that amazing vine. Soko was swarming well above ground level already. Slinging his weapons to girdle and shoulder-thongs, Hok followed.

Hok had always been a bold

* Several types of big tropical vine, both in Africa and South America, create this curious growth-pattern by killing the trees they climb and remaining erect in the same place.—Ed.

and active climber, able to out-distance any of his tribe-fellows, in trees or up cliffs. But Soko kept ahead of him, like a squirrel ahead of a bear. The tree-man fairly scampered up the ladder-way.

"This is another way in which Soko's people are different from the Gnorrls,"* muttered Hok.

The climbing-sticks had been meant for bodies of Soko's modest weight, and once or twice they creaked dangerously beneath the heavier Hok. He obviated the danger of a fall by keeping each hand and foot on a different hold, dividing the strain four ways. Meanwhile, the light above grew stronger, waxing and waning as Soko's nimble body cut this way and that across its beam. Finally, noise and bustle, and a new voice:

"Soko! You went down to see what was happening with Rmanth. What—"

"A man," Soko answered. "A strange man, like none you ever saw."

Hok took that as a compliment. He was considered something of a unique specimen, even among his own kind.

"He is master of the Hot Hunger," Soko went on, and Hok guessed that he meant fire. "He has killed one Stymph, he says, and has hurt Rmanth."

A chatter of several agitated voices above. Then, "Will he kill us?"

* The Neanderthal men were of massive, clumsy build — obviously poor climbers. — Ed.

"I think not," said Soko, and drew himself through some sort of gap above. "Come on out, Hok," he called back. "My friends are eager to see you."

Hok came to the opening in turn. It was narrow for his big body, and he had difficulty in wriggling through. Standing on some crossed and interwoven boughs, he looked at Soko's people.

All the way up, he had thought of Soko as fragile and small; now he realized, as often before, that fragility and smallness are but comparative. Soko, who was a head shorter than himself and slim in proportion, would be considered sturdy and tall among the tree-folk—almost a giant. He was the biggest of all who were present. Hok smiled to himself. While he had been pegging Soko as a timid lurker in a hollow, these dwellers of the branches must have thrilled to the courage of their strong brother, venturing so close to the mucky domain of the ravenous Rmanth.

As Hok came fully into view, the gathering—there may have been twenty or thirty of Soko's kind, men, women and children—fell back on all sides with little gasps and squeaks of fearful amazement. With difficulty the chief of the Flint People refrained from most unmannerly laughter. If Soko was a strapping champion among them, Hok must seem a vast horror, strangely shaped, col-

ored and equipped. He smiled his kindest, and sat down among the woven branches.

"Soko speaks truth," he announced. "I have no desire to fight or kill anyone who comes in peace."

They still stood off from him, balancing among the leafage. He was aware that they moved so swiftly and surely because they got a grip on the branches with their feet. He was able, also, to make a quick, interested study of the world they lived in.

Though Soko had led him upward in a climb of more than twenty times a man's height, the upper hole in the vine spiral was by no means the top of the forest. Leafage shut away the sky above, the swampy ground below. Here, in the middle branches of the close-set mighty trees, appeared something of a lofty floor—the boughs and connecting vines, naturally woven and matted together into a vast bridge of platform, swaying but strong. Layers of leaf-mold, mixed with blown dust, moss and the rotted meal of dead wood, over-spread parts of this fabric. The aerial earthiness bore patches of grass and weeds, bright-flowering plants, as richly as though it were based upon the rock instead of the winds. Birds picked at seeds. Hok heard the hum of bees around trumpet-shaped blooms. It was a great wonder.*

"I wondered how you tree-men possibly live off the ground," he said with honest admiration. "Now I wonder how you can live anywhere else but here." A deep-chested sigh. "Of such fair places our old men tell us, in the legends of the Ancient Land."

That friendly speech brought the tree-dwellers closer to this big stranger. A half-grown lad was boldest, coming straight to Hok and fingering his leather moccasins. Hok's first thought was how swiftly young Ptao, at home by the frozen river, could thrash and conquer such a youth—he second was a hope that Ptao would be forbearing and gentle to so harmless a specimen. The others gathered around reassured. They began asking questions. It was strange to all that a human being could kill large beasts for food and fur, and the men were particularly fascinated by Hok's flint weapons.

"We have our own stories of old times, when our fathers made stone things," volunteered Soko. "Now we satisfy ourselves with what bones we can raid from that great pile of mammoths, when Rmanth is not there gorging himself." He produced his own dagger, smaller than Hok's reindeer-horn weapon, but well worked from a bone fragment.

* This description is no fancy. The author himself, and many others, have seen such sky-gardens among the branches of modern rainforests in West Africa. — Ed.

"After all, we need not fight monsters, like you."

"If you did fight like me, all together, and with wisdom and courage, Rmanth would not have you freed," said Hok bluntly. "Perhaps I can help you with him. But first, tell me more of yourselves. You think it strange that I wear skins. What are these weavings you wear?"

"The forest taught us," said Soko sententiously. "As the branches weave and grow together, so we cross and twine little tough strings and threads drawn from leaves and grasses. They give us covering, and places to carry possessions. Is it so marvelous? Birds do as much with their nests."

"Nests?" repeated Hok. "And how do you people nest?"

"Like the birds—in woven beds of branches, lined with soft leaves and fiber. A roof overhead, of course, to shed the rain." Soko pointed to a little cluster of such shelters, not far away in an adjoining tree.*

"You do nothing but sleep and play?"

"We gather up fruits and nuts," spoke up another of the tree-men. "That takes time and work, for a man who has gathered much must feed his friends who may have gathered little."

"It is so with my people, when one hunter kills much meat and

others return empty handed," nodded Hok. "What else, then?"

"A great labor is the mending of this floor," replied Soko, patting with his foot the woven platform. "Branches rot and break. We look for such places, through which our children might fall at play, and weave in new strong pieces, or tie and lace across with stout vines."

Once again Hok glanced upward. "And what is there?"

A shudder all around. "Stymphs," muttered Soko, in a soft voice, as if he feared to summon a flock of the bird-snakes.

"Ugly things," said Hok. "I may do something about them, too. But I am hungry just now—"

Before he could finish, the whole community dashed away like so many squirrels through the boughs, to bring back fistfuls of nuts, pawpaws and grapes. Hok accepted all he could possibly eat, and thanked his new friends heartily.

"I did not mean that you must feed me," he told them. "You should wait for me to finish my talk. But since you bring these fruits, I will make my meal of them. You may take my provision."

From his pouch he rummaged the remainder of his dried meat. It was one more new thing to the tree people, who nibbled and discussed and argued over it. Flesh they had occasionally—small climbers, fledgling birds,

* The great apes make such nests, roofs and all.—Ed.

even insects—but nothing of larger game, and both cooking and drying of food was beyond their understanding. Hok chuckled over their naivete.

"A promise!" he cried. "I'll give you Rmanth himself for a feast, and I shall roast him on a fire, that which you call the Hot Hunger. But let Soko sit here by me. I want to hear of how you came to this place to live."

Soko perched on a tangle of vines. "Who can tell that? It was so long ago. Cold weather drove us from the upper world," and he pointed northward. "Those who stayed behind were slain by it. Our old men tell tales and sing songs of how the remnants of the fleeing tribe blundered in here and gave themselves up as trapped."

"Why did the ice not follow you in?" asked Hok.

"Ask that of the gods, who drove it to right and left of our valley. In any case, we were sheltered here, thought there were many fierce creatures. But the cold was fiercer—we could not face it—and here we stay."*

"Treed by Rmanth and harried by those Stymph bird-snakes," summed up Hok. "You are happy, but you could make your-

selves much happier by some good planning and fighting. Who is your chief?"

"I am their chief," growled someone behind him, "and you had better explain—quickly—why you seek to make my people dissatisfied."

Chapter VI

A Chief Passes Sentence

There was a sudden gasping and cowering among all the tree-folk, even as concerned the relatively sturdy Soko. Hok turned toward the speaker, expecting to come face to face with a fearsome challenger.

Around the spiral vine-column a little grizzled form was making its way. This tree-man was old and ill-favored, with almost pure white whiskers on his chinless jaw. He wheezed and snorted, as though the exertion were too much for him. Perhaps this was due to his weight, for he was the fattest Hok had yet seen among those dwellers of the trees. His belly protruded like a wallet, his jowls hung like dewlaps. But there was nothing old or infirm about the power in his big, close-set brilliant eyes.

* The Piltdown Race seems to have flourished in the Third Interglacial Epoch, a warm age when even northern Europe was as pleasant and temperate as Italy. Such African-Asiatic fauna as hippopotami and tigers flourished side by side with these fore-

runners of human beings. When the Fourth Glaciation brought ice and snow to cover Europe, the robust Neanderthals and the later, greater true men of Hok's race could survive and adapt themselves; but a less rugged prehuman type like the Piltdown must flee or perish.—Ed.

Gaining the side of the nearest tree-man to him, this oldster put out a confident hand and snatched away a sizeable slice of the dried meat Hok had distributed. Though the victim of this plunder was an active young man, he did not resist or even question, but drew diffidently away. The old man took a bite—his teeth, too, were young-seeming and rather larger and sharper than ordinary—and grunted approval. Then his eyes fastened Hok's, in a calculated stare of hostility.

But Hok had met the gaze of the world's fiercest beasts and men, and his were not the first eyes to falter. The old tree-chief finally glanced away. Hok smiled in good-humored contempt.

"Well?" challenged the oldster at last. "Do you know how to act before your betters?"

Hok was puzzled. The simple truth was that Hok had never recognized anyone as his better from his youth upwards.

Years before, when a big boy not yet fully mature, the slaying of his father by Gnorrls had made him chief of his clan. His young manhood had barely come to him before he had driven those same beastly Gnorrls from their rich hunting-empire of meadows and woods, and founded in their stead an alliance of several tribes, with himself as head chief. The mighty nation of Tlanis was sunken under the sea because of him. The

Fishers in their seaside pile-villages had changed their worship from water-god to sun-god out of sadly learned respect for Hok. If ever he had been subordinate, even only the second greatest individual in any gathering, he had had plenty of time to forget it.

Just now he spat idly, through a gap in the woven branches.

"Show me my betters," he requested with an air of patience. "I know none, on two legs or four."

"I am Krol!" squeaked the other, and smote his gray-tufted chest with his fat fist. "Be afraid, you hulking yellow-haired stranger!"

"Men of the trees," Hok addressed those who listened, "is it your custom to keep fools to make game for you? This man has white hair, he should be quiet and dignified. He is a bad example to the young."

It was plainly blasphemy. Soko and the others drew further away from Hok, as though they feared to be involved in some terrible fate about to overwhelm him. The chief who called himself Krol fumbled in his girdle of twisted fiber, and drew forth an axe of mammoth ivory set in a hardwood handle. Whirling it around his head, he cast it at Hok.

Hok lifted a big knowing hand, with such assurance that the movement seemed languid. The

axe drove straight at his face, but he picked it out of the air as a frog's tongue picks a flying insect. Without pausing he whirled it in his own turn and sent it sailing back. It struck with a sharp *chock*, deep into a big branch just above Krol's head.

"Try again," bade Hok, as though he were instructing a child in how to throw axes.

Krol's big fangs gnashed, and foam sprang out in flecks upon his lips and bears. He waved his fists at his people.

"On him!" he screamed. "Seize him, beat, him, bind fast his arms!"

Hok rose from where he sat, bracing himself erect. He looked with solemnity upon the half-dozen or so biggest men who moved to obey.

"Come at me, and you will think Rmanth himself has climbed up among you," he warned. "I do not like to be handled."

Krol yelped a further order, backing it by a threat. The men rushed unwillingly.

Hok laughed, like an athlete playing with children. Indeed, the tree-men were childlike in comparison with him. He pushed the first two in the face with his palms, upsetting them and almost dropping them through the branchy fabric. A third attacker he caught and lifted overhead, wedging him in a fork of the boughs. The others retreated fearfully before such effortless

strength. Hok laughed again, watching.

But he should have watched Krol as well. The plump old despot had stolen close unobserved. In one hand he clutched a big fiber husked nut, of the milky kind Hok had enjoyed earlier in the day. A swinging buffet on the skull, and Hok staggered, partially stunned. At once the tree-men rushed back, and before Hok could clear his brain and fight them off, he was swamped. They looped his wrists, ankles and body with quickly-plucked vine tendrils tough and limber as leather straps.

Krol found time to take some fruit from a child, and husk it with his teeth. "Now, stranger," he sniggered, "you will learn that I am chief here."

Hok had recovered from that stroke. He did not waste strength or dignity by striving against his stout bonds.

"A chief who plays tricks and lets other men do the fighting," he replied. "A chief who strikes his enemies foully, from behind."

Krol had repossessed his ivory axe. He lifted it angrily, as though to smite it into Hok's skull. But then he lowered it, and grinned nastily.

"I heard you blustering when I came up," he said. "Something about fighting. What do you think to fight?"

"I spoke of Rmanth, the elephant-pig," replied Hok. "Yes,

and the Stymphs. Your people fear them. I do not."

"Mmmm!" Krol glanced downward, then up. "They are only little pests to mighty warriors like you, huh? You do not fear them? Hok—that is your name, I think you said—I will do you a favor. You shall have closer acquaintanceship with the Stymphs."

Mention of the dread bird-snakes made the tree-folk shiver, and Krol sneered at them with a row of grinning fangs.

"You cowards!" he scolded. "You disgrace me before this boastful stranger. Yet you know that Stymphs must eat, if they are to live and let us alone. Hoist this prey up to them."

"Bound and helpless?" demanded Hok. "That is part of your own cowardice, Krol. You shall howl for it."

"But you shall howl first, and loudest," promised Krol. "You biggest men, come and carry him up. Yes, high!"

That last was to quicken the unwilling limbs of his fellows, who seemed to like Hok and not to like the prospect of mounting into the upper branches.

Thus driven to obedience, four of the beggest men nimbly rove more vines around the captive, fashioning a sort of hammock to hold him and his weapons. Soko, stopping to tie a knot, gazed intently into Hok's face. One of

Soko's big bright eyes closed for a moment—the ancient and universal wink of alliance, warning, and promise.

The four scrambled up and up, bearing Hok among them. Now the sky came into view, dullish and damp but warm. Apparently the valley was always wreathed, at least partially, in light mists. Into a tall treetop the big captive was hoisted, and made fast there like a dangling cocoon. Krol panted fatly as he clambered alongside. The others departed at his nod. Soko, passing Hok, jostled the big bound wrists. Hok felt something pressed against his palm, and closed his fingers upon it.

The hilt of Soko's bone knife! With difficulty he fought back a smile of triumph . . .

The he was alone in the tree-top with Krol.

"Look up, you scoffer," bade Krol. "In the mists—do you see anything?"

"Very dimly, I make out flying shapes," replied Hok quietly. "Two—three—no, many."

"They can see you, and plainly," Krol informed him. "Like my people, the Stymphs have ability to see far on dull days, or dark holes, or even at night. They have cunning sense of smell, too. Probably they scent some prey close at hand now, and wonder if I have hung something up for them."

"You hang food for the

Stymphs?" demanded Hok.

"Yes, such men as displease me—don't stare and wonder. I am chief of my tribe. I must keep an alliance with other powers."

Krol squinted upward, where the Stymphs hovered in the mist-wreaths. Opening his wide mouth, he emitted a piercing cry, half howl and half whistle. The bird-snakes began to flap as if in response.

"They know my voice; they will come," announced Krol. With the evillest of grins, he swung down to the safety of the foliage below.

No sooner was he gone than Hok began to ply that bone knife Soko had smuggled to him. It was difficult work, but he pressed the well-sharpened edge strongly against the vine loops around his wrist. They separated partially, enough to allow him to strain and snap them. Even as the boldest Stymph lowered clear of the mists and began to angle downward, Hok won his arms free. A few mighty hacks, and he cleared away the rest of his hammocky bonds.

The tree-folk had bound his unfamiliar weapons in with him. Drawing himself astride of a big horizontal branch, Hok strung the big bow and tweaked an arrow out of his quiver.

"I have a feeling," he said aloud to this strange land at large, "that I was sent here—by gods or spirits or by chance—to face and destroy these stymphs."*

So confident was Hok of his ability to deal with the situation that he actually waited, arrow on string, for a closer mark. After all, he had killed one such bird-snake with a single quick thrust of his dagger. Why should he fear many, when he had arrows, an axe, and two knives? A big Stymph tilted in the mist and slid down as if it were an otter on a mud-bank. Its long triangular head, like the nightmare of a stork, drooped low on the snaky neck. Its jag-toothed bill opened.

Hok let it come so close that his flaring nostrils caught the reptilian odor; then, drawing his shaft to its barbed head of sandstone, he loosed full at the scaly beast. Hok's bow was the strongest among all men of his time, and a close-delivered arrow from it struck with all the impact of a war-club. The flint point tore through the body, flesh, scales and bone, and protruded behind. The swoop of the Stymph was arrested as though it had blundered against a rock in mid-air. It whirled head over lizard tail, then fell flooping and screeching toward the great mass of foliage.

* Readers who know the mythology of ancient Greece will already have seen some connection between the surviving pterodactyls called Stymphs and the Stymphalides, described as "great birds" who ate men. The ancient Greeks said that Stymphalides had

"*Ahai!*" Hok voiced his war-shout, and thundered mocking laughter at the other Stymphs. "Thus Hok serves those who face him. Send me another of your champions!"

Several of the abominations had flown a little way after their falling friend. But, before they could get their cannibal beaks into the stricken body, it had lost itself among the branches, and they came up again to center on the more exposed meat in the treetop. Two advanced at once, and from widely separate angles.

Hok had notched another arrow, and sped it into the chest of one. Before he could seize a third shaft, the other Stymph was upon him. Its talons made a clutch, scraping long furrows in his shoulder. He cursed it, and struck a mighty whipping blow with his bow-stave that staggered it in mid-flight. Clutching the supporting branch with his legs, he tore his axe from its lashing at his girdle, and got it up just in time to meet the recovering drive of the brute. Badly gashed across the narrow, evil face, the Stymph reeled downward, trying in vain to get control of its wings and rise again.

More Stymphs circled this third plumage of metal, which sounds very much like reptilian scaliness. Hercules, the Grecian memory of Hok, is credited with destroying these monsters as one of his twelve heaven-assigned labors.—Ed.

victim of Hok, and tore several bloody mouthfuls from it. A loud clamor rose over Hok's head—the smell of gore was maddening the flock. Slipping his right hand through the thong on his axe handle, he looked up.

The sky was filling with Stymphs. Though never a man to recognize danger with much respect, Hok was forced to recognize it now. Where he had thought to meet a dozen or score of the monsters, here they were mustered in numbers like a flock of swallows—his system of counting, based on tens and tens of tens, would not permit him to be sure of their strength, even if he had time.

For they had dropped all over him, all of them at once.

A toothy jaw closed on his left elbow. Before it could bite to the bone, he whipped his axe across and smashed the shallow skull with the flat of the blade. Back-handing, he brought the axe round to smite and knock down another attacker. Axe and bow-stave swept right and left, and every blow found and felled a Stymph. The stricken ones were attacked and rended by their ravenous fellows, which made a hurly-burly of confusion and perhaps saved Hok from instant annihilation by the pack. As it was, he knew that the Stymphs were far too many for him.

The end of this furious strug-

gle in the open top of the jungle came with an abrupt climax that Hok never liked to remember afterward. He had ducked low on his limb to avoid the sweeping rush of a big Stymph, and for a moment loosened the straddle-clutch of his legs. At the same moment another of the creatures dropped heavily upon his shoulders, sinking its claws into his flesh. Its weight dislodged him. Hok lost all holds, and fell hurtling into the leafy depths below.

His right hand quitted its hold on the big axe, which remained fast to his wrist by the looped thong. Reaching up and back as he fell, he seized the Stymph by its snaky throat and with a single powerful jerk freed it from its grasp upon his ribs and brought it under him. Its striving wings were slowing the fall somewhat, though it could not rise with his weight. A moment afterward, the two of them crashed into the mass of twigs and leaves, hit an out-thrust bough heavily.

The Stymph, underneath, took most of that shock. Its ribs must have been shattered. At the instant of impact, Hok had presence of mind to quit his grip upon its neck, and managed to fling his arm around the branch. He clung there, feet kicking in space while the Stymph fell shrieking into the middle branches.

Again he was momentarily safe. He looked up. The Stymphs,

where they were visible through sprays of greenery, were questing and circling to find him, like fish-hawks above the water's surface.

"Ahai! Here I am, you bird-snakes!" he roared his challenge, and climbed along the branch to a broader fork, where he could stand erect without holding on. And here he found shelter, even from those ravenous beaks and claws.

A great parasitic growth, allied to giant dodder or perhaps mistle-toe, made a great golden-leafed mat above him, circular in form and wider across than the height of two tall men. It could be seen through, but its tough tendrils and shoots could hold back heavier attacks than the Stymph swarm might manage.

"Come on and fight!" he taunted again. "I have killed many of you, and still I live! Ahai, I am Hok the Mighty, whose sport it is to kill Stymphs and worse things than Stymphs!"

The flattened, darkling brains of the Stymphs understood the tone, if not the words of that defiance. They began to drop down on winnowing scaly wings, peering and questing for him. "Here, just below!" he cried to guide them. Then he slung his bow behind him, and poised his axe, spitting between hand and haft for a better grip.

They settled quickly toward him, wriggling and forcing their way



through the upper layers of small twigs. He laughed once again, and one of the Stymphs spied him through the tangled matting. It alighted, clutching the strands with its talons, and with a single lancing stroke of its tight-shut beak drove through a weak spot in the shield. Hok stared into its great cold eyes, and shifted his position to avoid its snap.

"Meet Hok, meet death," he said to it, and chopped off that ugly head with his axe. The body flopped and wriggled beyond his jumble of defending vegetation,

and three of the other Stymphs came down all together to feast upon it.

That was what Hok wanted. "So many guests come to dine with Hok?" he jibbed. "Then the host must provide more meat."

He laid his longest arrow across the bow-stave. For a moment the



three fluttering bird-snakes huddled close together above the prey, almost within touch of him. Setting the head of his arrow to an opening among the whorls and tangles, he loosed it at just the right moment.

A triple shrillness of pained screaming beat up, and Hok was spattered with rank-smelling

blood. Skewered together like bits of venison on a toasting-stick, the three Stymphs foundered, somersaulted and fell, still held in an agony of conjunction by Hok's arrow. For the first time, unhurt Stymphs drew back as in fear. Hok made bold to show himself, climbing up on top of his protecting mat.

"Do you go?" he demanded. "Am I as unappetizing as all that?"

They came yet again, and he dodged nimbly back into safety. More arrows—he had a dozen left. These he produced, thrusting



them through broad leaves around him so as to be more quickly seized and sped. Then, as the Stymphs blundered heavily against his shield of natural wicker-work, he began to kill them.

Close-packed as they were, and within touch of him, he could not miss. By twos and threes his arrows fetched them down. Even the small reptile-minds of the flying monsters could not but register danger. Survivors began to flop upward, struggle into the open air above the branches, retreat into the mist. Hok hurled imprecations and insults after them, and once more mounted the mat to kill wounded wretches with his axe, and to drag his arrows from the mass of bodies.

Well-mannered as always, he took time to thank the curious tangled growth that had been his bulwark. "My gratitude to you, who made me a shield from behind which I won this victory," he addressed it. "You were sent from the Shining One, whom I worship. He knew I needed help, down here in the mists beyond the reach of his rays. My children shall never forget this kindness."*

From below came an awkward scrambling, and Krol, the chief of the tree-folk, mounted upward into view.

"Greetings," Hok chuckled at him. "See what sport I have made with your friends.

Krol might have feared the huge blood-smeared chief of the Flint People, had he not been so concerned with the retreat of the Stymphs overhead.

"They will go," he chattered. "They will never come back, because they fear you. If I had known—"

"If you had known, you would not have hung me up for them to eat," Hok finished for him. "As it is, I have driven off your ugly allies, by fear of which you ruled your people. That fear will be gone hereafter. So, I think, will you."

Hok swung down to a branch above Krol and feinted a brain-dashing blow with his axe. Then he laughed as the tree-chief let go all holds, dropping six times his own length through emptiness. He caught a branch below.

"You and I are enemies!" he snarled upward, "Though you have beaten my Stymphs, there remain other things—even Rmanths! I shall see you dead, and your body rended by the tusks of Rmanth, Hok the Meddler!"

And then,* though Hok began climbing swiftly downward, old Krol was swifter and surer. They both descended through thickening layers of foliage, to the

* The surviving myth tells how Heracles (Hok) was sheltered from the Stymphalides by the buckler of Pallas Athene, so that he was able to win victory at leisure.—Ed.

woven living-place of the tree people.

Chapter VIII

The Dethroning of Krol

By the time the slower-climbing Hok had come down to that mighty hammocklike footing, Krol had had precious minutes to gather his followers and howl orders and accusations into their ears.

"Ah, here he comes to mock us, the overgrown invader!" Krol yelled, and shook a furious finger toward the approaching Hok. "He has slain the Stymphs who protected us!"

"I have slain the Stymphs, who feasted on any tree-man daring to climb as high as the open air above the forest," rejoined Hok, with a lofty manner as of one setting Krol's statement right. "I have helped you, not injured you."

Krol glared with a fury that seemed to hurl a rain of sparks upon Hok. "You biggest men," he addressed the other tree-folk out of the side of his broad, loose mouth, "seize him and bind him a second time."

Hok set his shoulder-blades to the main stem of a tree. He looked at the tree-men. They seemed a trifle embarrassed, like boys stealing from a larger. Soko, the biggest among them, was plainly the most uneasy as well. Hok decided to profit by their indecision.

"You caught me once because I was playful among you," he said. "Hok never makes the same mistake twice. Standing thus, I cannot be knocked down from behind. Meanwhile," and he quickly strung his bow, notching an arrow. "I shall not only strike my attackers, I shall strike them dead."

"Obey me!" blustered Krol, and one of the men lifted a heavy milk-nut to throw. Hok shot the missile neatly out of the hand that held it.

"No throwing," he warned. "Charge me if you will, but make it a fight at close quarters. Those who survive will have a fine tale to tell forever." He glanced sideways, to a gap in the matting. "But the first man to come within my reach I shall cast down there. Krol, is your other ally, Rmanth, hungry?"

The half-formed attack stood still, despite Krol's now hysterical commands to rush Hok. When the old tree-chief had paused, panting for breath, Hok addressed the gathering once again:

"You cannot hope to fight me, you slender ones. The Stymphs, who have held you frightened for so long, fell dead before me like flies in the frost. Of us two—Hok or Krol—who is the greatest?"

"Hok is the greatest," announced Soko suddenly.

It was plain that none had dared suggest rebellion against Krol since the beginning of time. Krol

was as taken aback as other hearers. Soko turned toward Krol, and the old chief actually shrank back.

"He admits killing the Stymphs; he admits it!" jabbered Krol, flapping a nervous paw at Hok. "If they are gone, how shall strangers be kept out of this land of ours?"

Hok guessed that this was an ancient and accepted argument. The tree-folk naturally feared invasion, must have been taught to think of the Stymphs as their guardians against such a danger. He snorted with scornful amusement.

"The old liar speaks of 'this land of yours,'" he repeated. "How is it your land, men of the trees, when you can neither tread its soil nor look into its sky—when bird-snakes prey on you above, and an elephant-pig prowls below, so that you must dwell forever in this middle-part like treefrogs?" He paused, and judged that his question had struck pretty close to where those folk did their thinking. "I have been your benefactor," he summed up. "The open air is now yours, for Krol says the Stymphs have fled from it. The next step is—"

"To kill Rmanth?" suggested someone, a bolder spirit among the hearers.

"The next step," finished Hok, "is to get rid of that tyrant, Krol."

Krol had drawn back into a sort

of tangle of branches and vines, which would serve as a partial screen against any rush. He snarled, and hefted his ivory-bladed axe in one hand.

"You speak truth, Hok," put in Soko, more boldly than before. "Go ahead and kill Krol."

But Hok shook his golden shock-head. "No. I could have done that minutes ago, with a quick arrow, or a flick of my axe. But I have left him for you yourselves to destroy. He is your calamity, your shame. He should be your victim."

Krol made play with his axe. "I will hew you all into little shreds!" he threatened in a high, choked voice. Soko was the first to see how frightened the old despot was. He addressed his fellows:

"Men of my people, if I kill Krol, will I be your chief?" he asked. "Such is custom."

Several made gestures of assent, and Soko was satisfied.

"Then I challenge him now." With no wait for further ceremony, Soko put out one lean, knowing hand and borrowed a weapon from the woven girdle of a neighbor. It was a sort of pick, a heavy, sharp piece of bone lashed crosswise in the cleft of a long, springy rod. He approached Krol's position.

"Come and be killed," Soko bade his chief, in a sort of chant. "Come and be killed. Come and—"

Krol came, for he was evidently not too afraid of anything like an even battle. Hok, a giant and a stranger, had terrified him. The repudiation of the whole tribe had unmanned him. But if Soko alone was a challenger, Krol intended to take care of his end.

There was still pith in his pudgy old arm as he swung the ivory axe at Soko. The younger warrior parried the blow within a span's distance of his face, missed a return stroke with the pick. A moment later they were fencing furiously and quite skillfully, skipping to and fro on the shaky footing. Hok, who had a fighting man's appreciation of duelling tactics, watched with interest.

"Well battled!" he voiced his applause. "Strike lower, Soko, his guard is high! Protect your head! Don't stumble or—Hail! Now he is yours!"

Indeed, it seemed so. Krol had fainted Soko into a downward sweep with the pick, and had slipped away from the danger. With Soko momentarily off balance, Krol struck with his axe; but a quick upward jerk of Soko's weapon-butt struck his wrist numbing it. The axe fell among the trampled leaf-mold on the branchy mat. Krol was left unarmed before Soko.

Now despair made the challenged chief truly dangerous. Krol sprang before Soko could land a last and fatal stroke. He

threw his arms around Soko's body, and sank his sharp fangs into Soko's flesh at juncture of neck and shoulder. The two scrambled, fell, and rolled over and over, perilously close to a terrible fall. The chattering onlookers danced and gesticulated in pleased excitement.

Hok, whose own teeth were far too even for use as weapons was about to remark that biting seemed grossly unfair, when the issue was decided. Soko tore loose from the grip of Krol's jaws and turned the old man underneath. Krol doubled a leg and strove to rip Soko's abdomen open with the nails of his strong, flexible toes, but a moment later Soko had hooked his own thumbs into Krol's mouth corners. He forced his enemy's head back and back, until the neck was on the point of breaking. With a coughing whine, Krol let go all holds, jerked himself free, and next moment ran for his life.

At once the spectators gave a fierce shout, and joined the chase. Hok, following over the swaying mass of boughs, could hear a hundred execrations being hurled at once. Apparently every man and woman, and most of the children, among the tree-folk had a heavy score to settle with the fierce old fraud who had ruled them. Soko, leading the pack, almost caught up with Krol. But Krol avoided his grasp, and disappeared into something.

Hok came up, pushing in among the yelling tree-men. He saw a new curiosity—Krol's fortress.

It was made like the nest of a mud-wasp, a great egg-shaped structure of clay among the heavier branches of a tall tree. Apparently Krol had spent considerable time and thought on his refuge, against just such an emergency as this. Hok judged that within was a basketry plaiting of close branches, with the clay built and worked on the outside thickly and smoothly. The whole rondure was twice Krol's height from top to bottom, and almost the same distance through. It was strongly lodged among several stout forks, and had but one orifice. This was a dark doorway, just large enough for Krol to slip through and perhaps a thought too narrow for shoulders the width of Soko's.

"Krol's nest is well made," Hok pronounced, with frank admiration. "My own tribesmen sometimes make their huts like this, of branches with an outer layer of earth. Why are not all your homes so built?"

The yelling had died down. Soko, his big eyes watching the doorway to the mud-nest, made reply: "Only Krol could fetch clay. We dare not go to the valley's floor after it."

"No, rejoined a grumble from inside. "Nor do you dare go after—*water!*"

That reminder plainly frightened every hearer. They drew back from the den of Krol, looked at each other and at Soko.

"What does he mean?" demanded Hok. "Water does he say? When it comes to that, where do you get water?"

Soko pointed to the opening. "He gets it. Krol." Soko's throat, still torn and chewed from the battle, worked and gulped. "We should have thought of that. Without Krol, we can get nothing to drink."

One or two of his hearers made moaning sounds and licked their mouths, as if already dry and thirsty. Hok questioned Soko further. It developed that the tree-folk had big dry gourd-vessels, fashioned from the fruit of lofty vines, and these they let down on cords of fiber. Krol, the single individual who would venture to the ground level, scooped up water from a stream there, and the others would draw it up for their own use. Hok nodded, praising in his heart the wisdom of Krol.

"It is yet another way in which he kept his rule over you," he commented. "Yet Krol must die some day. How would you drink then?"

"When I die, you all die," pronounced Krol from his fastness. "I declare you all in danger. Without me to guide your gourds into that stream, thirst will claim you one by one."

Silence. Then a wretched little

man attempted a different question:

"What is your will, mighty Krol?"

Krol kept majestic silence for a moment. Finally:

"You will all swear to obey my rules and my thoughts, even unspoken wishes. You will range far to pluck all the fruits I like, and bring them to me. You will yield Soko up as a victim—"

"Wait, you tree people!" burst out Hok in disgust. "I see you wavering! Do you truly mean to let that murderer destroy Soko, who is the best man among you?"

Nobody answered. Hok saw them stare sickly. Krol went on:

"I had not finished. Soko as a victim, I say. And also this troublesome stranger, Hok. Their blood will increase my walls."

Chapter IX

The Hot Hunger Obliges

For a moment Hok had an overpowering sense of having guessed wrong.

He had spoken the truth when he announced that the killing of Krol was the tree-men's responsibility, not his. Violent death was no novelty in his life, and he had inflicted enough of it on large, strong foes to be hesitant about attacking weak, unworthy ones. Too, he had no wish to take on the rule of Krol's people as an additional chore. If Soko, who seemed a fair chieftainly type,

did the killing, then Soko would confirm himself as leader. Hok could depart from this Ancient Land with a clear conscience.

But just now his half-languid forbearance was shunting him into another nasty situation. Three or four of the men were murmuring together, and there was a stealthy movement of the clan's whole fighting strength in the direction of Soko. At once Hok pushed forward at and among them. Quick flicks of his open hands scattered them like shavings in the wind.

"Fools!" he scolded them. "Weak of wit! You deserve no better than a life roosting in these trees. Soko and I have brought you to the edge of freedom, and you cannot take advantage!"

"That is good talk," seconded Soko, with considerable stoutness. "Krol has fled before me. Since he will not fight, I am chief. Let any one man among you come and strive with me if he thinks otherwise."

The half-formed uprising was quelled. One or two men fidgeted. Said one: "But who will fetch us water?"

"Who but Krol?" chimed in the old rascal from behind his mud walls. "I make no more offers until you come to me with thirsty throats, begging."

The speaker glanced sidelong at Hok. He half-whispered: "Krol wants the blood of Soko and the stranger—"

"He shall have blood enough and to spare, if you even think of fighting," Hok cut him off roughly. "Krol spoke of using it 'for the thickness of his walls.' What did he mean?"

Soko pointed to the den. "He mixes earth with blood, and it turns into stone."

Hok came toward the big egg of clay, and saw that Soko spoke the truth. The texture of that fortress was more than simple dried mud. Hok prodded it with his finger, then a dagger-point, finally swung his axe against it. He made no more than a dent. Even his strength and weapons could not strip that husk from Krol.*

"Hai, the old coward has built strongly," he granted. "Well, the front door is open. Shall I fetch him out?"

Soko nodded eagerly, and Hok cut a long straight shoot from a nearby branch. This he poked in through the entrance hole. It encountered softness, and Hok grinned at the howl that came back. Then the end of the stick was seized inside, and he grinned more widely.

*Blood and earth, mixed into a primitive cement, dates back to long before the dawn of history. It is fairly universal among the simple races of the world, and is used to make durable hut-floors in both Africa and South America. The blending calls for considerable judgment and labor; the author has seen samples, and has tried to imitate them for himself, but with only indifferent success.—Ed.

"Do you think to match pulls with Hok?" he queried. "A single twitch, and you come out among us."

Suiting action to word, he gave his end a sharp tug. Krol let go, and Hok almost fell over backward as the stick came into view.

But upon it was something that made the tree-folk scream with one voice of horror, while Hok himself felt a cold chill of dismay.

Krol had clung to the end of the stick only long enough to attach a peculiar and unpleasant weapon of his own—a small, frantic snake banded in black and orange. This creature came spiralling along the pole toward Hok, plainly angry and looking for trouble. Hok dropped the pole, grabbing for his bow. Fallen upon the woven floor, the snake turned from him to Soko, who was nearest at the moment. Soko scrambled away, bellowing in fear.

But then Hok had sent an arrow at it, and spiked it to a lichen-covered stub of bough that thrust into view from the platform. The ugly little creature lashed to and fro like a worm on a fish-hook. Its flat head, heavily jowled with poison sacs, struck again and again at the shaft that pierced it.

"Wagh!" cried Hok, and spat in disgust. "The touch of that fang is death. Does Krol live with such friends?"

"Snakes do not bite Krol," volunteered Soko, returning shakily.

"I do not blame them," rejoined Hok. "Well, he seems prepared for any assault. Siege is the alternative."

"I am thirsty," piped up a child from behind its watching mother. Hok ordered a search for milk-nuts, and half the tribe went swinging away through the boughs to bring them. Soko lingered at Hok's elbow.

"Hok! Only the death of Krol will save us. There are some in the tribe who will slay us if we sleep, if we relax watch even—"

"And your blood will plaster my walls afresh," promised Krol, overhearing.

Hok made another close inspection of Krol's defenses, keeping sharp lookout lest Krol turn more snakes upon him. He hacked experimentally at several of the branches that supported the structure, but they were tough and thick, and would take days to sever. After a moment, inspiration came to him. He began to prune at nearby twigs and sticks, paying especial attention to dry, dead wood. Soon he had cleared most of the small branches from around the den, and stacked his cuttings carefull to one side.

"What will you do to force him out?" asked Soko.

"It is not I who will force him out," replied Hok cryptically. "It is my friend, the Hot Hunger."

"The Hot Hunger!" repeated Krol and his voice sounded hollow.

As the nut-gatherers returned, Hok gave them another errand, the collection of small faggots of dry branches. They obeyed readily, for Krol voiced no more threats, and Soko was acting the part of a chief. As the little stores of fuel came in, Hok began to peg and tie them to the outside of the scaly den. Finally, while all watched in round-eyed wonder, he fished forth his fire-marking apparatus.

Upon a thick carpet of green leaves he kindled the smallest of fires. All but Soko, who had seen fire-building once before, whimpered and drew away. Hok was all the more glad, for he wanted no crowding and bough-shaking to set the tree tops ablaze. Having found and kindled a torch to his liking, he stamped out the rest of the fire with his moccasin heel and returned to the fuel-festooned den of Krol.

He ignited the broken, splintery end of a twig. It flared up, and other pieces of wood likewise. Hok nodded approval of his work.

"See, it will soon be night," he announced. "Will someone bring me a little food? I shall watch here."

"Watch what?" asked one of the tree folk.

"Krol's embarrassment. Where are some of those milk-nuts?"

Twilight was coming on, with dusk to follow. Most of the tree-men led their families to distant nests, peering back in worried

wonder. Soko remained with Hok.

"You are going to burn Krol," guessed Soko, but Hok shook his head in the firelight, and pegged more sticks to the blood-mingled clay.

"Help me to spread thick, moist leaves to catch any fire that falls, Soko. No, Krol will not wait long enough to be burned. But eventually he will come forth to face us."

From within the den came a strange sound, half wheeze and half snarl.

"You are a devil, Hok," Krol was mumbling. "It grows hot in here."

Soko was encouraged. "Come and be killed," he set up his chant of challenge. "Come and be killed. Come and be killed."

Krol wheeze-snarled again, and fell silent. Hok fed his fire judiciously. The blood-clay cement was scorching hot to his fingertips. Dusk swiftly became night.

"Hok, listen," ventured Krol after a time. "You and I are reasonable men. Perhaps I was wrong to make an enemy of you. You are wrong to remain an enemy of mine. I have it in mind that you and I could do great things. Your strength, with my wits—"

"This talk is not for bargaining, but to throw us off guard," Hok remarked sagely to Soko.

Soko peered into the dark opening of the den. "Come and be killed," he invited Krol.

Krol wheezed again. This time with a sort of sob as obligato.

"Your hearts are as hard as ivory," he accused Shakily. "I am old and feeble. The things I did may have been mistakes, but I was trying to help my people. Now I must die horribly, of the Hot Hunger, because a big yellow-haired stranger has no mercy."

Hok lashed a handful of fresh fuel together with a green vine and tied it to a peg he had worked into the clay, setting this new wood afire.

"I judge that Krol is at his most dangerous now," he told Soko. "Beware of those who seek to make you sorrow for them. Tears bedim the eyes."

"Come and be killed," repeated Soko.

He had come quite close to the opening, and Krol made his last bid for victory and safety.

He dived forth, swift and deadly as the little coral snake he had attempted to use against Hok. The impact of his pudgy old body was enough to bowl over the unready Soko.

Winding his legs and one arm around the body of his younger rival, he plied with his free hand a long bone dagger.

Hok, on the other side of the fiery den, hurried around just in time to see two grappled bodies roll over, and then fall through a gap in the broad mat. Two yells beat up through the night—Soko's voice raised in startled

pain, Krol's in fierce triumph. Then, as Hok reached the gap, there was only one voice:

"There, Soko, hang like a beetle on a thorn! You shall have time to think of my power before you die! I, Krol, depart for Rmanth my only friend, whom I shall feed fat with the corpses of my rebellious people!"

Chapter X

Hok Accepts a Challenge

In the complete darkness, climbing might have been a dire danger; but the fire that still burned around the abandoned fortress of Krol shed light below. Hok was able to find footing among the branches, and to descend with something of speed.

At a distance of some twenty paces below the matted mid-floor of the jungle, he found Soko. His friend seemed to dangle half across a swaying branch-tip, struggling vaguely with ineffectual flaps of arms and legs. Of Krol there was no glimpse or sound.

"Soko, you still live!" cried Hok. "Come with me, we will hunt for Krol together!"

"But I cannot come," wheezed Soko, pain in his voice.

A sudden up-blazing of the fire overhead gave them more light, and Hok saw the plight that Soko was in. Evidently Krol and Soko had fallen upon the branch, Soko underneath. As earlier in the day

with Hok and the Stymph, so in this case the lower figure in the impact had been momentarily stunned. Krol, above, had taken that moment to strike downward with the big bone dagger, pouring all his strength into the effort.

That dagger had pierced Soko's body on the left side, coming out beyond and driving deep into the wood of the branch. As Krol himself had put it, Soko was like a beetle on a thorn. "I cannot come," he moaned again, making shift to cling to the branch with both hands, to ease the drag on his wound.

Hok balanced himself on the bough, and began to work his way out toward the unhappy tree-man. There was no nearby branch by which to hold on or to share Hok's weight. The single outward shoot swayed and crackled beneath him. He drew back to safer footing.

"I must find another way to him," muttered Hok, tugging his golden beard. Then he thought of such a way, and began to climb upward again.

"Don't leave me," pleaded Soko wretchedly.

"Courage," Hok replied, and searched among branches for what he needed. He found it almost at once—a clumsy mass of vines, strong and pliable as leather thongs. Quickly he cut several of the sturdiest strands, knotting them together. Then he located a stronger branch which ex-

tended above the one where Soko was imprisoned. He slid out along it, and made fast one end of his improvised line.

"I am in pain," Soko gasped, his voice weak and trembling.

"Courage!" Hok exhorted him again. He hung axe, bow, quiver and pouch on a stout stub of the base branch. Then he swung down by the knotted vines, descending hand under hand toward Soko.

He came to a point level with the unfortunate prisoner of the wedged dagger, and almost within reach. By shifting his weight he made the cord swing, and was able to hook a knee over the lower bough. Then, holding on by a hand just above a knot in the vines, he put out his other hand to the knife that transfixed Soko.

Even as he touched it, Soko gave a shudder and went limp. He had fainted.

Hok was more glad than otherwise, and forthwith tugged on the tight-stuck weapon with all his strength. It left its lodgment in the wood, and came easily out of Soko's flesh. With nothing to hold him to his lodgment, Soko dropped into emptiness.

Hok made a quick pincer-like clutch with his legs. He caught Soko between his knees, as in a wrestling hold. His single hand hold on the vine was almost stripped away, but he grimly made it support the double weight. The

bone dagger he set between his teeth. Then, still holding the senseless Soko by pressure of his knees, he overhanded himself upward again. He achieved a seat on the larger branch, and laid Soko securely upon a broad base of several spreading shoots.

Soko bled, but not too profusely. Krol had struck hastily for all his vicious intent, and the knife had pierced the muscles of chest and armpit, just grazing the ribs without hurting a single vital organ. Hok quickly gathered handfuls of leaves, laying them upon the double wound and letting the blood glue them fast for a bandage. In the midst of these ministrations Soko's wide eyes opened again.

"You saved me, Hok," he said in a voice full of gratitude. "That makes twice or three times. Krol—"

"He still lives," rejoined Hok grimly, repossessing himself of his weapons. "Perhaps he steals upon us even now."

Soko's brilliant eyes quested here and there in the night. "I think not," he said. "I have command of myself again. Shall we go upward?"

His wound was troublesome and he climbed stiffly, but he was back to the side of the dying fire well before Hok. "I thirst," he complained.

"Because you have lost blood," Hok told him, and took a fiery stick to light the inside of Krol's

abandoned den. Among the great quantity of possessions he saw several gourds. One of these proved to be full of water, warm but good. He gave it to the thankful Soko.

Soko drank, and passed the gourd to Hok. "How can we kill Krol now, my friend?" he asked. "Because we must kill him. You understand that."

Hok nodded, drinking in turn. "You shall do it without my help, so as to be chief according to custom. My task will be to destroy Rmanth, and roast him for your people. I made such a promise."

"Promise?" repeated Soko. "Who can keep a promise like that?"

"I have never broken a promise in my life, Soko. Here, help me put out this fire, lest some coals destroy the jungle. And tell me how we shall find Rmanth."

Soko could not do so. His only ventures to the ground had been by way of the vine-spiral tube in which Hok had first found him. He reiterated that Krol, and Krol alone, possessed the courage and knowledge to face Rmanth and come away unhurt.

"Well, then, where do you let down gourds for water?"

"Near the hollow tube. Why?"

"Tomorrow all the tree-dwellers shall have fresh water. That is another of Hok's promises. Will you watch while I sleep, Soko?"

Later waken me, and sleep yourself."

Soko agreed, and Hok stretched out wearily upon ferny leafage. He closed his eyes and drifted off into immediate slumber.

Sleeping, he dreamed.

He thought he saw a marshaling of his old enemies. He himself was apparently arrayed singly against a baleful mob. In the forefront was Kimri, the black-bearded giant from whom he had won the lovely Oloana. There was also Cos, a paunchy, nasty-eyed fellow who had ruled the walled town of Tlanis until Hok adventured thither and changed all that. Over the head of Cos looked Romm, who once made the bad guess that renegading among the Gnorrls would give him victory over Hok's Flint Folk. Djoma the Fisher slunk pretty well to the back, for he was never over-enthusiastic about fighting Hok man to man. It was a delightful throng of menaces.

"I will have the pleasure of slaying you all a second time," Hok greeted them, and rushed. One hand swung his axe, the other jabbed and fenced with a javelin. In his dream, those second killings seemed much easier than had the first. The ancient enemies fell before him like stalks of wild rice before a swamp-buffalo. He mustered the breath in his deep chest to thunder a cry of triumph, when—

They seemed to fade away, and

at the same time to mould and compact themselves into yet another form. This one was hairy, pudgy, grizzled, but active. Bestial lips writhed and fluttered, wide eyes that could see in the dark glared.

"So, you big yellow-haired hulk!" choked a voice he knew, beside itself with rage. "I find you unprepared, I kill you *thus!*"

Hok threw himself forward, under the stroke of some half-seen weapon. His hands struck soft flesh, and he heard the threatening words shrill away into a shriek.

Then the dream became reality.

Dawn had come. Soko, wounded and weary, had dozed off during his watch, and Krol had returned to take his vengeance.

Only Hok's sense of danger, shaking him back to wakefulness, had given him the moment of action needed before a blow fell. Krol had poised a big club, a piece of thorn-wood stout enough to break the skull of a horse. This weapon now swished emptily in air, as Hok grappled and held helpless the gray old sinner.

"Soko! Soko!" called Hok loudly.

Soko looked up, washing the sleep from his own eyes. "Eh?" he yawned, then he too was aware of the danger. He sprang up.

"Soko," said Hok, "I swore that you would kill this man and become chieftain in his place. Do

so now. Do not let him escape once more."

Soko drew a dagger. Hok let go of Krol.

The deposed ruler of the tree-men made a last effort to break for safety, but Hok blocked his retreat. Then Soko caught Krol by his long hair. The dagger he held—it was the same big bone blade that had spiked Soko to the branch last night—darted into the center of Krol's chest. Blood bubbled out. The old despot collapsed, dying.

The wakening tree-people were hurrying from all sides to stare and question. Hok clapped Soko's unwounded shoulder.

"Obey your new chief," he urged the gathering. "Be afraid of him, follow him, respect him. He is your leader and your father."

Krol looked up, blood on his wide mouth. "What about the water?" he sneered, and with a coughing gobble he died.

There was silence, and Soko, in the first moment of his power, could only look to Hok for guidance.

"People of the trees," said Hok, "I have been challenged. Krol was bad and deserved death. But he spoke the truth when he reminded us that water was not at hand while Rmanth roamed below. In other words, Rmanth must be destroyed. I promised that, did I no?" He balanced his axe in one

hand, and nodded to Soko. "Come chief. We will arrange the matter."

Soko followed him, trying not to seem too laggardly. Hok raised his voice: "Go to the usual place, you others and let down your gourds. Water shall be yours, now and forever after."

He and Soko came to the tube that gave sheltered descent to the ground level. Hok entered it first, swinging downward by the rough ladder-rungs. Soko for once did not climb faster than he. Hok came to the floor of the cavity, and without hesitation wriggled through the lower opening into the outer air, standing upon the damp earth of the valley bottom. Soko had to be called twice before he followed.

"Look around for that stream of water," directed Hok. "There, isn't that it, showing through the stems below us? Come on, Soko. You are a chief now."

At that word, Soko drew himself up. "Yes, I am a chief," he said sturdily. "I will do what a chief should do, even though Rmanth eats me."

"You shall eat Rmanth instead," Hok said confidently. "But first, the water."

The came to the edge of the stream. Gourds dangled down from above, on lengthy vine strings. Hok and Soko guided them into the water, and tugged for them to be drawn up. Glad cries beat down from the upper

branches, as the hoisters felt the comforting weight of the containers.

"The voices will bring Rmanth," Soko said dully.

Hok glanced over his shoulder. "He is already here. Leave him to me. Go on and fill gourds."

He turned from Soko and walked back among the trees, toward the gray bulk with its six knobby horns and hungry tusks.

"I have a feeling that this was planned for both of us," Hok addressed the elephant-pig. "Come then. We will race, play and fight, and it shall end when one of us is dead."

Chapter XI

The Termination of Rmanth

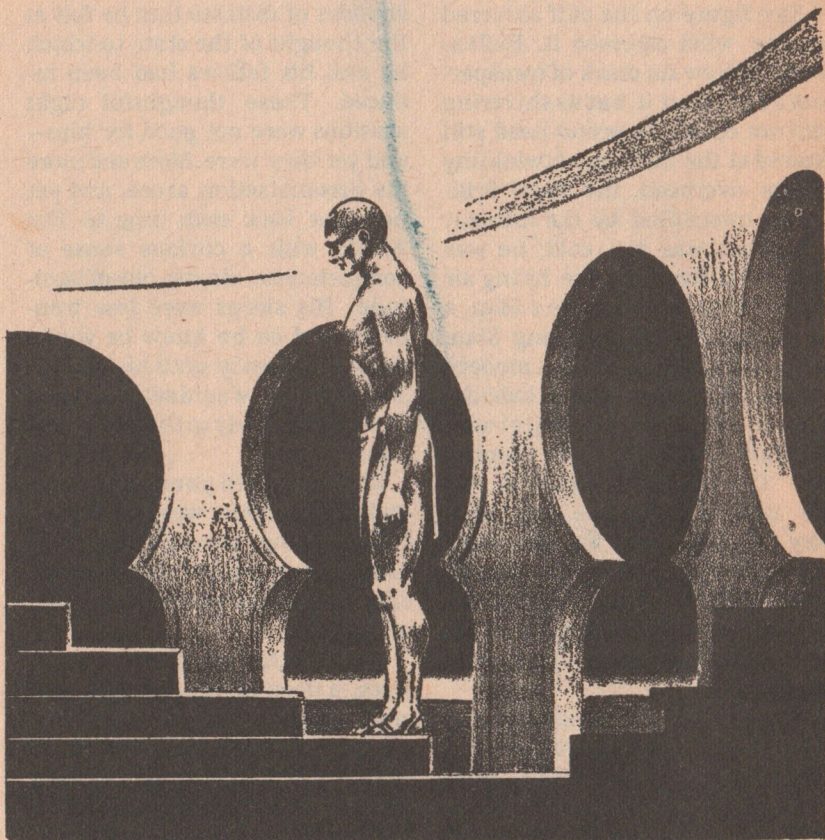
Several accounts have descended to us of how Hok raced, played and fought that day.* But names have been changed, some facts have been altered for the sake of ritual or romance. In any case, Hok himself talked little about the business, for such was not his way. The only narrators were

* The myth that will rise quickest to the reader's memory is the one concerning Hercules and his conquest of the mighty wild boar of Eurymanthis. It is odd, or not so odd, that Greek myths tell the same story in several forms. Thus Theseus, who may be another memory of Hercules or Hok, destroys such a giant swine in his youthful journey to his father's court. Meleager hunts and kills the Calydonian boar. And one of the Tuscan heroes of Latin Legend, named in "The Lays of Ancient Rome" as an adversary of

(Continued on page 151)



We hope author Charles Recour meant the following short more as fiction than as forecast—because if he didn't, then maybe a hundred million years from now Man will have bungled away control of Earth to monsters like the Master-Ants. But if he's right about one thing, then maybe he's right about the rest—especially the crucial moment when Kothan (one of the last men) meets Nayleen (one of the last women)—just as the Mutual-Mind decides to take a little nap.



The wind whispered softly across the barren plains to the South and small eddies of dust whirled behind its path. Quietly it brushed across the figure on the bluff. It was cold and dry and its soft rustle was the rustle of the night wind everywhere. For a million years it had repeated its nightly cycle and it would do the same for a million more.

The figure on the cliff shivered as the wind caressed it. Reflexively it drew its cloak of transparent *klar* about it, but its shivering did not cease. Its proud head still stared at the millions of twinkling lights overhead, the stars' brilliance intensified by the thin air.

Kothan was not cold; he was not even aware of the biting air about him. Kothan was a Man, a thinking, living, breathing Man, an anachronism in the modern world. His mind was a kaleidoscopic tumult of disjointed thought as it always was when he left The Abode to breathe real air and to gaze into the night sky. Every night for his brief hour, he left the tomb-like mustiness of the Libraries to relive for a short moment the dream which he knew must have once been reality.

The sum of all things was not The Abode nor its inhabitants, the Master-Ants. Even Kothan's Master-Ant had concurred in that thought when he had caught the overtone and had admonished Kothan gently but firmly. But these

nightly sessions would not be denied, and Kothan imagined for a brief moment that he and his kind, the pitiful few, were possessors of their rightful heritage. The taste of the cool air, the feel of it against his face, the sight of the glowing glory about him, reminded him each time that he was a Man.

His trembling was the natural shudder of distaste that he felt at the thought of the state to which he and his fellows had been reduced. These thoughtful night sessions were not good for him—and yet they were. More and more his dissatisfaction arose, and yet he went back each time to The Abode with a curious sense of completeness, almost one of lassitude. His sleeps were less troubled. And so he knew he would do this endlessly until his Master-Ant, Ameise, would send his aged and useless body to the Biological Laboratories.

But now he felt young and good, and though there was no purpose to his living, it was good to be alive. There was no point to existence but it was good to be aware of being.

One last lingering look at the stars, a deep breath, the last kiss of the wind on his cheek and Kothan turned away. His face distorted in wry and bitter smile, he lifted his smooth-shaven head, squared his lithe shoulders and trod lightly back to The Abode, its entrance marked by a small light. The three

hundred meter walk gave him a few moments to collect his thoughts, to rearrange his mind in its customary pattern of servility, and the sense of being less than nothing swept over him again like an ever-recurring pall.

The flat-roofed metallic structure loomed before him, outlined faintly against the sky, the light looking like another star. Kothan pressed the button on the smooth-surfaced wall and the cavernous door slid silently aside to allow him to step on the huge platform which served as an elevator for the Master-Ants. The sliding door closed behind him, there was the subtle hum of mechanisms as he operated the elevator controls and the machine took him quickly to the Ninth Level.

The corridors of The Abode were as deserted as usual, and going to Ameise's resting quarters Kothan encountered no one. There was no sound from the shops or laboratories, for this was the rest period for the Master-Ants and nothing must disturb them. Even Ameise would change his tolerant nature if disturbed while resting.

Kothan's nerves this night were not as calm as usual. There was an electric something in the air and sensitized to the Master-Ants' telepathic communication as he was, he could not help but feel the unusual.

The light was on in Ameise's Place! Kothan raced toward the

entrance opening on the corridor. Perhaps the Master-Ant wanted him. Perhaps he had not fed the power cells properly. A thousand possible errors raced through his mind. His nerves tingled. He dreaded facing Ameise's wrath. Only once before had he offended his Master-Ant, and the punishment he had undergone still made him writhe in retrospect.

Quickly he slid aside the panel to the Place, at the same time flipping his *klar* covering on a convenient hook within its niche. Wearing nothing but the customary loincloth and sandals of the Man, he entered the chamber of Ameise, the Master-Ant.

Humbly he stood before the inheritor of the Earth.

"Yes, Kothan, I do wish to see you now," the Master-Ant's thought answered him even as his own question formed in his mind. The sinuous antennae protruding from the chitinous holes in the monstrous ant's head waved gently almost as if to caress Kothan. The four-meter body of the gigantic creature reclined before a low desk covered with film and papers. The jointed tentacular arms went on with their indescribable writing and recording as a separate compartment of Ameise's vast brain conversed with Kothan.

The steel-hard chitinous body-structure scraped awkwardly against the metal floor of the

Place as Ameise moved, and the sound tortured Kothan's ears. But outwardly Kothan concealed his slightest revulsion. He had been dealing too long to feel any pain.

"Kothan," Ameise's thoughts infiltrated his mind in verbal equivalents, "we have decided to launch the Rocket." There were no preliminaries, just crisp scientific statements of facts. All Kothan knew of the "we" was the monstrous Mutual-Mind on the top level, a vast brain encased in a chitinous case whose function was to coordinate the efforts of the Master-Ants in their Abodes all over the Earth, a vast, thinking transmitter of telepathed radiations.

"That cylinder," Ameise went on uninterrupted by Kothan's speculations, "resting above The Abode on the Outside is a Rocket, a machine propelled by ejecting a portion of its mass at high velocities. Do you know what a rocket is, Kothan?"

"I do, Master, from my reading in the Libraries," said Kothan, "There were such machines in existence before the Great Change so long ago, the Books say, and they explain how they work. But they were no longer used after the change, I think."

"You are right," said Ameise, his antennae weaving their meaningless pattern. "There were such things before the Change. Man made them for warfare with his kind, but We are going to use

them for research. The Mutual-Mind desires us to make first an inter-Lunar exploration and then perhaps an interplanetary one. Can you imagine that, Little One?"

"Oh, yes," came back Kothan's breathless answer, and his brain burst with the thought of going to the sky on which he had so longingly, so often gazed. And the sobering thought came to him that his kind, that Man, once had these machines and with them had destroyed himself.

Ameise caught the thought at once, and Kothan felt almost a twinge of pity for him. Then Kothan felt contempt for himself that he would take pity from such an alien thing. But he guarded the thought so successfully that even clever Ameise did not catch it to become angry.

"You will not need imagination for this scientific study," Ameise's thoughts came to him again. "You are going to operate the machine. You will control it to a degree. The Mutual-Mind has suggested a Man for the purpose. Our technology does not yet permit Us to build a large rocket, nor to use anything but gaseous fuels, Kothan. So We are going to equip the Rocket with remote-vision instruments to send their sights to Us. I was told to provide a competent technician to do the fine-guiding—that is where you will be used. While We can control the Rocket

by electro-magnetic radiations over such great distances, visual guidance is necessary to make the flight's success assured. I know you to be a disturbed Man, but I also know you to be far more intelligent than any others of your kind that I have seen.

Therefore with the approval of the Mutual-Mind, you will make the journey. It will occur after this rest period. I need not tell you this is the greatest opportunity that a Man"—for an instant Kothan thought he caught "or a Master-Ant"—can ever obtain. You are going into space where no Master-Ants have ever gone. How do you feel?"

Kothan knew that his feelings mattered not an iota to Ameise, but his jubilation could not be denied.

"I am so grateful, Master, that I can say little. I am proud. I am honored. I shall do my best." The words poured furiously from him. He forgot for the moment that audible speech wasn't necessary.

"There is no training needed by you," went on Ameise, the Master-Ant, a subtle hint of pride in his thought, "for the Rocket has been so carefully designed that all you need to do is watch a dot of light on a set of cross-hairs. All else has been taken care of. Now you will leave me for the rest of the period, do as you wish, and then you will report during

the next work-session—at its beginning—to the Mutual Mind on the level number One. We will guide you from there."

The interview terminated, Ameise, the Master-Ant, relaxed his chitinous bulk, sank to the floor with the irritating scrapings of his kind and slumbered in preparation for the launching of the Rocket.

Kothan flipped the light-switch to darkness, and stumbled half-dazed from Ameise's Place, his mind a confused mixture of awe, wonder, horror and shock. But above all, pride and joy that he was to be the guider of the flight. He—only a Man—he arrested the thought before it began. He was a Man, and it was his right to assert his glory. Wasn't the Earth the property of Man once? The books in the Library said that Man was the measure of all things, that he was great in his glory and that the Master-Ants were mutant irritations that had been Man-made. He only half-believed this, but it was a stirring thought regardless.

He was too excited to sleep. There was only one thing for him to do. He turned his steps toward the Library. Ameise, his Master-Ant, had permitted him to use the Library as his own. It was crammed with film and papers—books that were becoming brittle with age, except for the few metal-leaved ones. The large room was unlit as he entered it,

and he bent down to reach the switch.

His hand touched something soft and warm; it was alive. Before he could throw on the switch and before the creature escaped, he threw his arms around it and dragged it up. Still grasping it firmly with his right hand and ignoring its muffled cries against his shoulder, he managed to flip the switch. Light flooded the room. Kothan looked down.

It was a girl. She struggled furiously to wrest herself from his grasp. There was fear and terror in her doe-like eyes but an anger and pride too. But Kothan was infinitely stronger. She had made no loud outcry, and for this he was respectful.

"Don't shout," he said to her; "I will not harm you. My name is Kothan and I am the servant of Ameise, the Master-Ant. What are you?" His grasp loosened on her. But he felt the strangest of sensations. He had never held a female, a woman, in his arms before though he knew what they were. He had never encountered any—no one at all. The softness of her body against him, the feel of her flesh on his, the tickling and fragrance of her hair in his nose, the warmth of her and the pleasant woman-scent were overwhelming him with emotion he did not understand.

His knowledge of this strangely stirring creature came only from the books he had read. He knew

that they existed in his time because occasionally, Ameise's thought-radiations wandered learnedly and academically to technical visions of the Breeding Chambers. No whisper of their real nature came to him from this source. Ameise's vast and alien intelligence could not communicate any hint of the subtleties that Kothan felt now.

Under the impelling of the mingled feelings of surprise and wonder, Kothan released the woman. She stepped back.

"You are a Man," she said, "I have read about you in the Library on the Tenth Level. Verhirm allows me there any time I wish."

Her speech was slow and thoughtful. Except for talking to herself, much as had Kothan, she had had no need for conversation.

"Why have you not come here before?" asked Kothan.

"Verhirm only told me about this Library now. I did not know there were any others. I have always gone to the one on my Level. I found this was the same as mine. That is why I slept when you first came." The terror had gone from her and Kothan could see that something was stirring her as much as he. He knew without asking that Verhirm was a Master-Ant, too, but he had always thought women were used only in the Breeding Chamber.

She threw back her long hair, its bloneness shimmering in

the strong light. The graceful gesture sent Kothan's pulses racing. She smiled, and it was the first time that Kothan had ever seen another human smile. His own face answered. He felt better than he had ever felt before. There was some magic to this woman. He had to talk with her and tell her of his honor. For the first time in all his years in The Abode, he felt happy. He did not recognize the sensation, but he knew he enjoyed it.

Without being aware of any compulsion, he reached out and tenderly took her hand. She did not withdraw it.

"I am Nayleen," she said. "I have never talked with anyone before. I have always worked for Verhirn, and he has not treated me cruelly. Look at how he lets me go to the Libraries. He wouldn't want me to meet a Man. I will go now."

"Don't go!" The words burst from Kothan automatically. "Please stay and talk with me. Ameise has never told me I mustn't talk with you. I want to talk so much with you. I want to tell you about me. Don't you want to stay?"

"Yes," she whispered, "I want to stay and talk with you too, but I am afraid. Why should we do this? This is not the time before the Great Change."

"You know about the Great Change?" Kothan half-stated, half-asked. "Once this was a world

with Man above all; did you know that too, Nayleen?"

"I know that," she said, her voice low, her hand still in Kothan's, "but what has that to do with now?"

Kothan did not answer at once. He looked at her slowly, his racing heart had calmed itself, and something like a great peace of mind was beginning to descend over him. There was the stirring within him of something he could not understand, some strange blend of reason and emotion, that linked itself crazily with Nayleen, glory, pride, and his feelings for the greatness that was Man . . .

He started speaking. The words tumbled from him slowly at first. Then they raced out in a torrent. All the pent-up feeling to which he had succumbed during his lonely vigils on the bluff, was released. He was talking with another of the once-mighty race of Man!

No noise, no creature disturbed them. The Master-Ants slept. And Kothan and Nayleen talked. As he spoke, her eyes took on the same transfiguration as his. While the language poured from his lips, they crept closer to each other. They did not know why. It was enough to sit near each other in the circle of their arms and empty their minds of the accumulated thoughts of socialless decades.

Kothan told her not of his service to Ameise, nor of the Laboratories, but of himself. He told her

how he had spent the years in this very room, how he had learned to read in the Books. He told her how he had read of the World before the Great Change and how Man had been the ruler. And her husky vibrant voice replied with knowledge of her own. She knew that before the Great Change, Man and his kind had not been slaves and tools of the Master-Ants. So far as she understood Man had made the Master-Ant, by some force. Neither understood the causes for the Great Change, except that Man destroying Man had initiated it.

He told Nayleen of the forces that seized him when he stood beneath the stars and breathed the thin air. The majesty and impressiveness of the natural scene moved him far more, then, than the thought of the Mutual-Mind, that gigantic convolution of thought linked to chitinous matter, who controlled the Master-Ants and all of the World. Through the magic of his inspired talk he made her understand that he felt then a dignity and pride that transcended all the horror of the living humility that was their futile lives.

And Nayleen answered him. She had never left The Abode, but she sensed his meaning. The conception that they were tools, pieces of equipment to be used by the Master-Ants was galling. They were never abused, never

hurt, always warm and always well taken care of. The shuddering horror was the indignity. Without the Libraries they would not have even considered the thoughts they so rapidly exchanged.

And so for hours the interchange went on. Time passed in The Abode, while slowly in the back of Kothan's mind came the realization that he was feeling for Nayleen such a tenderness as the Books hinted existed between Men and Women.

Then Kothan did a strange thing. Not for ten thousand eons had such a thing occurred in The Abode.

His arms closed around Nayleen's slender form and he kissed her. As his lips touched hers, he knew that all of his living before was to be changed. This was his destiny. This Woman must never leave him, and he must always have her with him. It could be no other way.

Nayleen clung to him fiercely. In spite of her reading in the Library, she, no more than he, had any realization of what was occurring. She wanted Kothan. She had to have Kothan. And he her.

In their fierce embrace The Abode was forgotten. In the scent of each other, in the caress of their arms, in the magic of their feelings, the Master-Ants, the Mutual Mind—and in Kothan's mind, the Rocket—were forgotten. Only

the two of them mattered.

Nature, abandoned for a thousand millennia, asserted her inalienable and immutable laws. There was no denial. It had to be. Kothan and Nayleen—ana-chronistic, harmless creatures in the universe of the Mutual-Mind—inherited their birthright.

After a time, Kothan disengaged himself gently from Nayleen's arms. He moved away from her. His head went down, and he buried his face in his arms. Nayleen crept to him.

"What is wrong, Kothan?" she asked softly, wanting to use a thousand endearments and knowing none. "Why do you think so sadly? Are we not together? Will we not be together again and again?"

He looked up, his face angry. The sadness was masked by his first fury.

"No, we will not be together for a time. Perhaps never. I did not tell you the greatest thing that happened to me before we met. Before this, only a little while ago, Ameise called me and told me that he and the Mutual-Mind had picked me a guide to Rocket. I wanted to do it more than anything else—until now."

It wasn't necessary for him to tell her that only he could go. The Master-Ant would not recognize emotion, or the hunger of kind for kind. From the little Kothan knew of the slim projectile poised above The Abode, through what

Ameise had told him, it was to be controlled by one Man, and the scientific objectivity of the Master-Ants left no room for understanding the trivia of their servants.

"I know what a Rocket is, Kothan," Nayleen said, "and I know what it must mean to you. The Books said that the ancients had them and they could go high into the air. They destroyed each other with them. Why do the Master-Ants want Rockets? They have no one to fight with. They are masters of all the Earth."

"They want to televise images of the Moon for scientific study. And I am to supplement their automatic controls, which are not completely perfected. I wanted to go into space and see what Man must have seen before me." He frowned. "Not even the Master-Ants can do that yet. But they will some time."

Nayleen took his head in her arms. Gently she bent down and kissed him. She ran her smooth hands over his face and through his hair.

"Oh, Kothan, must we live this lie always. Must we give up our happiness with each other? Can we not guide the Rocket together?" she asked half aloud.

He prevented her from asking any other questions with his mouth. Then he drew away, his face a mask of lines. For minutes he stared into space, his mind a

seething mass of confused emotions and thought.

Kothan was intelligent. His ratiocinations were eminently sound and reasonable and he knew that certain events were to take place in short order. He would leave Nayleen. During the next few Work-times he would guide the Rocket. He would return to serve Ameise. He would visit the Library. He would see Nayleen for a few times or many times depending on how soon his or her thoughts filtered through to their Master-Ants in an unguarded moment. They would then be allowed to see each other no longer. And eventually they would grow old and die. That was their destiny, and Kothan knew it. Its acceptance by both of them was a matter of course. Nothing in the universe could change. It was so ordained by the Master-Ants, and so it would be.

Nayleen knew something had happened in that moment. The blank stare left Kothan's face, and for a moment he looked as if he had seen a thunderous vision. The events of the Rest period, his meeting with Nayleen—all these were nothing before the engulfing thought that came to him.

"We are of the race of Man," he said solemnly, taking Nayleen in his arms. Before he said it, she knew what he was going to say.

"Yes, Kothan, I will," she answered the unspoken thought.

"Death is not a bad thing—it is good."

The corridors of The Abode had never seen Man trod them other than one at a time, but this Rest period, for the first time in a thousand times a thousand centuries, two humans walked the Earth together. Skimpily covered by their *klars*, the cloaks flapping around them, they strode down the corridor to the elevator together, heads erect. Their pride was matched only by the length of their strides, and no alien disturbed them. The Earth was Man's.

Silently the mechanism carried Kothan and Nayleen from the Ninth Level to the first. Automatically it decelerated to a stop. Kothan touched the button and the panel swept open, closing on their backs as they left the exit.

Overhead the stars had changed their course, but the pattern was the same. Kothan looked up and pointed. Nayleen knew the surface only through the Library, but she nodded as his joy communicated itself to her. For a moment they held the pose. Two tiny human beings star-lighted by the vivid backdrop of the stellar picture. The soft cool wind still sighed across the plains below them, and the tug of its eddies against their cloaks sent thrills through them.

For minutes they gazed at the vast panorama of Nature unfold-

ed before their eyes. Kothan took Nayleen in his arms and gently kissed her. Then he released her and they both turned around. On the flat metallic roof of The Abode, pointing like a huge finger to the sky, stood the Rocket. Projectile-shaped its slim bulk blotted out the stars behind it as if to say in defiance, "I am the handiwork of the Master-Ant!"

Kothan and Nayleen studied its outline, but their minds were less on it than the sleeping monstrous thing below it. Not half a meter below the base of the Rocket, shielded from its rear blast by a thin layer of stone and metal, was the hideous chitin-encased mutant that represented the ultimate evolution of the Master-Ants.

For a hundred centuries this creature had lain in The Abode, directing the lesser minds of the Master-Ants. Employing them as a brain would employ its separate cells, the Mutual-Mind reached out with tentacular thoughts and manipulated its lesser members as Ameise and Verhirm manipulated their human servants. Operating under the handicap of their great bulk, the Master-Ants used the humans as machines, and in turn they were used by the Mutual-Mind, the immobile penultimate. For Ameise and Verhirm and the hundreds of thousand others of their ilk, this was honor. They were a part of the Master plan, and to be a

part of the Mutual-Mind was their destiny.

"We must not delay too long," Kothan said to Nayleen as he took her arm and prepared to lift her the short distance to the top of the vast roof of The Abode. "We will never be able to enter the Rocket if the Mutual-Mind senses our presence. I hope the metal will act as a shield. Even Ameise never caught my thoughts here on the Outside."

"I'm ready," Nayleen said, "As long as we're together nothing can harm us." She looked at him with longing and poignancy.

The two of them scrambled to the roof's surface and approached the Rocket. Kothan knew nothing of its operation, but the discussion with Ameise had made its entrance clear to him. He had no fear that he would not be able to make it operate. Undoubtedly the Master-Ants, accustomed to dealing with the limited mentalities of humans, would have simplified the machine. Most things in The Abode were so designed.

This close to the Rocket, it was even more imposing than either Kothan or Nayleen had first imagined. It was constructed of a gleaming alloy of diamond hardness, to resist the stress of flight. Cast in the incredible workshops of The Abode, it was a single rigid structure with a shell that could not be distorted by any but the most inconceivable forces. It rose thirty meters into the thin night

air from its transparent tip to the end of the huge single tube that constituted its base.

A tenth as wide as it was long, no protruberances marred its perfect surface. Like a bullet from the foundries of the gods, it was the Earth's most perfect projectile.

As Kothan and Nayleen walked slowly around its base, awed in spite of their new-found heritage and because of the ancient training so thoroughly ingrained, they spotted almost simultaneously the source of egress. Not two meters from the base, was a slim, almost undetectable, circle—the outline of a door. And on its circumference was a button.

Kothan hoisted Nayleen to his shoulders, and by the gentle pressure of her fingers on the button, the door swung to reveal a vertical bar-studded climbing tube leading to the control chamber in the nose. Cleverly the Master-Ants had provided an entrance and a place for the examination of the motors at the same time, without the necessity of weakening the major portion of the shell.

For a moment, as Nayleen disappeared into the interior of the Rocket, Kothan felt a pang of loneliness, as if she had vanished. He gathered his courage. He had committed himself to this glorious venture. There was no returning. Jumping up he caught

the edge of the entrance and drew himself up.

"Close the port," Nayleen told him, even as he reached for the door.

"You go up and I'll follow." Kothan said. "Be careful. There may be a control sticking out somewhere."

"I will. Come."

Quickly they made the thirty-meter climb coming out at the top of the tube leading into the control room. Everything was in darkness, and the only light was that afforded by the glittering canopy of stars beaming feebly through the transparent tip of the Rocket. Nayleen huddled close to Kothan, fearful of disturbing anything, and cautiously Kothan felt around him. In a little while their eyes became accustomed to the darkness, and they could make out their surroundings. The control cabin was two meters high, its transparent dome giving them complete visibility. Even before they attempted to examine the controls, they looked about them. The sight from the vantage point of the height of the Rocket was breathtaking. Below them was the flat surface of the roof of The Abode. To one side of it was the exit, and a few hundred meters to the South was the bluff which overlooked the desert beyond. How often had Kothan stood there and communed with that which was beyond him, but which was not a part of him.

More impressive than this was the eternal star-canopy above, and more impressive than both was the realization in each of their minds that they were resting above that super-intelligence, the Mutual-Mind. What alien thoughts were slithering through that chitin-decked parody of a brain? What Monstrous thoughts would he be thinking a few moments hence when the Rocket, his proudest creation, left without his knowledge?

Nayleen shivered, and Kothan drew her close. "Don't be afraid now, Nayleen," he said. "It won't be long."

"I'm not afraid—it's just that—that—thing below," she answered tremblingly. Nayleen mentally voiced unknown endearments, as Kothan did—no one—not even the Books—had told them of love.

They explored the small control room. It was barren except for the most obvious and rudimentary devices. A couch-like bed, heavily padded lay on the Rocket's axis. At its head was a viewing plate, marked with cross-hairs. Kothan knew he would have no use for this. Below it were four levers clearly marked to indicate direction and power controls. The acceleration-couch was equipped with padded arms to gather the guide who lay there into them.

Kothan and Nayleen climbed into the couch. Pressed closely to-

gether there was room for the two of them. Kothan touched the stud that closed the arms, and the two of them were pressed into each other's embrace. Though they were vertical now, they knew that soon that word would have no meaning.

Kothan disengaged his arms from around Nayleen. "Cling to me," he said. "I will need you"—again the unspoken and unknown endearment—"and faith."

The firm resolve that moved him changed his face to a grim mask, and yet there was happiness there. Nayleen pressed to him. "Let us not wait any longer. Can you work the machine?"

Kothan did not answer. Instead he pulled one lever toward him. From within the bowels of the Rocket there came the answering click of relays and a soft hiss as the fuel left the tanks. A gasp, a cough, a roar—and the Rocket moved!

Kothan and Nayleen felt the gentle tug of weight against their feet as the Rocket rose gradually. Delicately it poised on its needle of flame, and as the volume of fuel poured into its chambers, the two humans felt the increasing force that comes with changing velocity. In an instant the velocity began its ever-increasing change, and as the flame took hold, Kothan's senses whirled. The Abode fell away so rapidly that he almost lost his perspective, but his new-

found purpose steadied him, and his hand touched one of the controls and moved it slightly. He felt Nayleen stir against him. He looked down. There was a smile on her face . . .

Beneath them, the slumbering Mutual-Mind felt the vibration above it, and all its multi-senses came into play. A hundredth of a second after it felt the tremor, it had constructed exactly what had happened. Its mental tentacles had probed Ameise's brain-case, sought out Verhirm and rebuilt the necessary course their servants had taken.

That anger should grip it was impossible. In its alien sensitivity there was no understanding of emotion, as humans knew it. There was disbelief, of the vaguest sort of a sense of loss—but above all, scientific objectivity retained its hold. With detached curiosity, unmoving, the hideous bulk of brain-tissue cased in chitin followed the course of the Rocket. It saw it rise. It saw it float momentarily on a jet of flame—then abruptly accelerate. None of these things surprised it, for it knew that that was exactly what it had been built to do.

The Mutual-Mind saw the Rocket climb a thousand meters, another thousand meters, and still another. Then it knew that the guiding intelligences within the projectile were failing to control it.

The Mutual-Mind had this belief for only a fraction of a second before it understood that the Rocket, the final product of its profound thought, was under the very conscious control of its occupants. Helplessly it watched—still unangered—still fascinated as the Rocket rose gracefully and started to curve in its course. More the curvature increased until the Rocket was heading toward the Roof of the Abode with gigantic speed as acceleration piled velocity upon velocity on its course.

Helplessly the Mutual-Mind watched, mentally making abstruse calculations, living vicariously within the Rocket, knowing with a calm and implacable certainty that Kothan and Nayleen were the instruments that were to bring it the greatest experiment of all—death . . .

Kothan was seized in the grip of the terrible acceleration, and as the blood drained from his head, it was all he could do to keep the nose of the Rocket centered on his objective. Pain wracked him, and he knew the lovely thing beside him had long since lost consciousness. On her face was a smile of satisfaction and happiness—she was with him. That knowledge alone ameliorated the agony of the tremendous acceleration. But it was only a part of the whole. He knew that he had risen above the Master-Ants. He only dimly suspected

the thoughts that coursed through the Monster's brain, but suspicion of those was enough.

This was the culmination of his life. In the last twenty-four hours, he had vindicated Man's belief in his own dignity. The thought still amazed him, that he, after the agonies of doubt and self-torture on the bluff, should have this intense happiness. To give up Nayleen was bad, but to rise to the stars with her was good.

Every muscle strained to hold the Rocket on its course. There

seemed to be no time. Was this to last forever? Duration and instantaneousness merged into one. A tremendous song surged through him. This was the rebirth! This was life! This was happiness! This was death!

The last thing that Kothan saw before the Rocket struck the roof of The Abode and penetrated the consciousness of the Mutual-Mind, was the vaguest peep of sunlight from the dim solar orb through the veil of the stars . . .

The End

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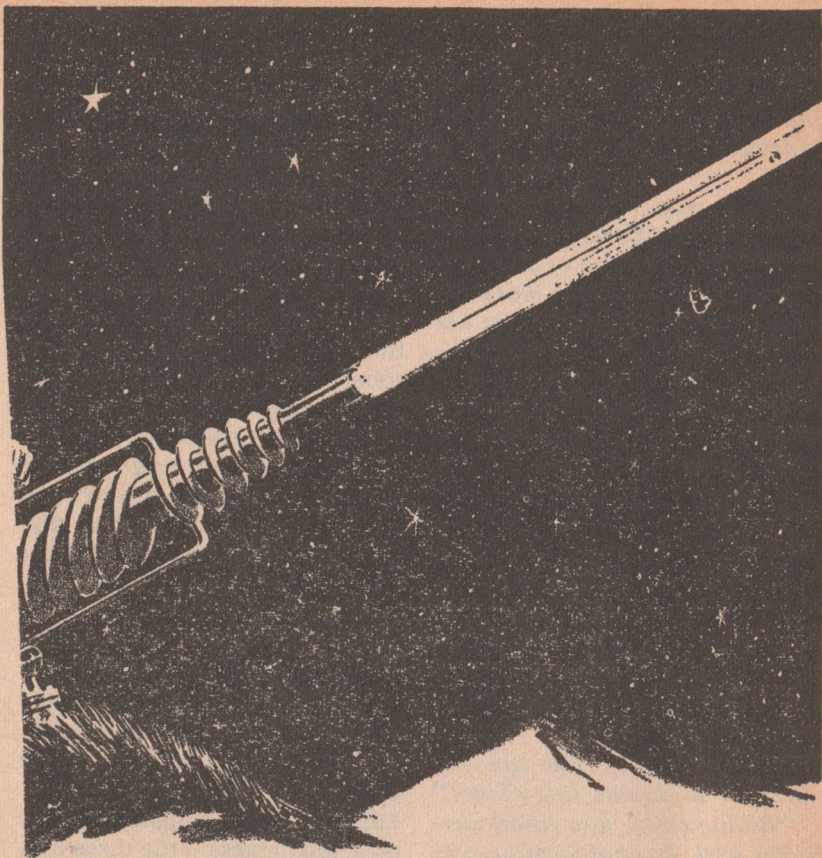
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MAKE ROOM FOR ME!

By Theodore Sturgeon





For those of you with a scholarly bent—but mostly for all of you who simply enjoy s-f at its best—here's another helping of caviar from the author of "It" and "A Touch of Strange," in which we can see Sturgeon beginning to orchestrate one of his major themes, Gestaltism—one out of the many. The idea which, two years later, would culminate in his masterful More Than Human (Ballantine, 1953), surely a classic for our time.

"WE shall never see him again . . . there will be no more arguments, no more pleasant thinking with Eudiche," mourned Torth to the other Titan.

"Come now. Don't be so pessimistic," said Larit, stroking the machine. "The idea of dissociation has horrified you, that's all. There is every chance that his components will fuse."

"So involved, so very involved," Torth fretted. "Is there really no way to send the complete psyche?"

"Apparently not. The crystals are of a limited capacity, you know. If we grow them larger, they cannot retain a psychic particle. If we sent all three encased particles together, their interaction would break down the crystals chemically. They must be sent separately."

"But—horrible! How can one third of a psyche live alone?"

"Biologically, you know perfectly well. Psychologically, you need only look about you. You will find a single psyche only in each of our gracious hosts—"

"—gracious indeed," muttered Torth, "and gracious they will remain, or die."

"—and each of the natives on the planet to which we sent Eudiche has but one psyche."

"How then can he occupy three of them?"

"Torth, you insist on asking questions requiring a higher

technological comprehension than yours to understand," replied the other in annoyance. "There are closer ties than physical proximity. Eudiche will avail himself of them. Let that suffice." More kindly, he added, "Eudiche will be all right. Wait; just wait."

The statue of Ben Franklin, by the very weight of its greyness, sobered the green sparkle of the campus. At the foot of the benevolent image the trio stood—Vaughn, tiny, with long braids of flaxen hair; Dran, slender and aquiline, and—apart from the others, as usual—Manuel, with heavy shoulders and deep horizontal creases over his thick brows.

Dran smiled at some chattering coeds who passed, then slanted his narrow face toward the semicircle of stone buildings. "After three years," he said, "I've gotten over being delighted by my own uniqueness—the three miserable years it took me to convince myself that distinction and difference are not synonymous. And now that I'm of this place—no longer on the outside looking in, or on the inside looking out, I—"

"Who's so exceptional?" growled Manuel, moving closer. "Aside from the runt here, who never will get the knack of being a human being."

"Are you a specimen of hu-

manity?" asked the girl stormily. "Manuel, I don't expect compliments from you, but I wish you'd try courtesy. Now listen. I have something to tell you. I—"

"Wait a minute," said Dran, "I have something more important, whatever you have on your mind. I've got the answer—for me, anyway—to this whole question of being the same as everyone else and being different at the same time. I—"

"You said it all last night," said Vaughn wearily. "Only you were so full of sherry that you didn't know what you were saying. I quote: 'Vaughn, not only your charming person but your poetry would be a lot more popular if you wouldn't hide behind this closed door of non-aggression and restraint.' Well, I've been thinking about that, and I—"

"Manuel," Dran interrupted, "you've got muscles. Throttle her, will you? Just a little. Just until I can put a predicate on this subject."

"I'd love to get started on that job," grinned Manuel, licking his lips. "Imagine how those wall eyes would pip."

"Keep your hands off me, animal," Vaughn hissed. "Dran, I'm trying to—"

"I will not be stopped," said Dran. With a gesture completely characteristic, he knocked back a strand of his red-gold hair, scattering ashes from his cigarette through it. "Be quiet and

listen. You two have held still for a lot of my mouthings and gnashings of teeth about my being a white monkey—the one all the brown monkeys will tear to pieces just because he's different. Well, I have the solution."

"Get to the point," Manuel grunted. "It could be that I got a speech to make, too."

"Not until I've told you—" Vaughn began.

"Shut up, both of you," said Dran. "Especially you, Vaughn. All right. What are we here for?"

"To get a degree."

"We are not. At least, I'm not," said Dran. "The more I think of it, the less I think school teaches you anything. Oh, sure, there are some encyclopaedics that you sponge up, but that's secondary. A school's real function is to teach you how to learn. Period."

"All right—then what about the degree?"

"That's just to convince other people that you have learned how to learn. Or to convince yourself, if you're not sure. What I'm driving at is that *I'm* sure. I know all I need to know about how to learn. I'm leaving."

There was a stunned silence. Vaughn looked slowly from one to the other. Dran's eyebrows went up. "I didn't expect such a dramatic effect. Vaughn . . . ? Say something!"

"Y-you've been reading my script!" she murmured. Her eyes were huge.

"What do you mean?"

"Why—I've been thinking . . . For more than a year I've known what I wanted to do. And this—" she waved a hand at the grey buildings—"this hasn't been it. This . . . interferes. And I wanted to tell you about that, and that you mustn't think it all means that I've finished learning. I want to learn a world of things—but not here."

Manuel released a short bark of laughter. "You mean you made a great big decision—all by yourself?"

"I'll make a decision about you one of these days, now that I've learned the technique," she spat. "Dran . . . what are you going to do? Where are you going?"

"I have something lined up. Advertising—direct mail. It isn't too tough. I'll stay with that for a couple of years. See how the other half lives. The half with money, that is. When I'm ready, I'll drop it and write a novel. It'll be highly successful."

"Real cocky," said Manuel.

"Well, damn it, it will be. With me, *I'll* like it. So far as I'm concerned it will be successful. And what about you, Vaughn?"

"I have a little money. Not much. But I'll manage. I'll write poems." She smiled. "They'll be successful, too."

"Good thing you guys don't have to depend on what anyone else thinks." Manuel grunted. "Me, I do it the way the man

wants it done or else."

"But you please yourself doing it," Dran said.

"Huh? I—never thought of it like that. I guess you're right. Well." He looked from Vaughn to Dran and back. They suddenly spoke, almost in unison. "Manuel! What are you going to—" and—"Manuel! What will you do now?"

"Me? I'll make out. You two don't think I *need* you?"

Vaughn's eyes grew bright. Dran put an understanding hand on her shoulder. He said, "Who writes this plot? What a switch! Manuel, of all people, clinging to these walls with the rest of the ivy, while Vaughn and I try our wings."

"Sometimes you characters give me a pain in the back of my lap," said Manuel abruptly. "I hang around with you and listen to simple-minded gobbledegook in yard-long language, if it's you talking, Dran, and pink-and-purple sissification from the brat here. Why I do it I'll never know. And it goes that way up to the last gasp. So you're going to leave. Dran has to make a speech, real logical, Vaughn has to blow out a sigh and get misty-eyed." He spat.

"How would you handle it?" Dran asked amused. Vaughn stared at Manuel whitely.

"Me? You really want to know?"

"This I want to hear," said Vaughn between her teeth.

"I'd wait a while—a long while—until neither of you was talking. Then I'd say, 'I joined the Marines yesterday.' And you'd both look at me a little sad. There's supposed to be something wrong with coming right out and saying something. Let's see. Suppose I do it the way Vaughn would want me to." He tugged at an imaginary braid and thrust out his lower lip in a lampoon of Vaughn's full mouth. He sighed gustily. "I have felt . . ." He paused to flutter his eyelashes. "I have felt the call to arms," he said in a histrionic whisper. He gazed off into the middle distance. "I have heard the sound of the trumpets. The drums stir in my blood." He pounded his temples with his fists. "I can't stand it—I can't! Glory beckons. I will away to foreign strands."

Vaughn turned on her heel, though she made no effort to walk away. Dran roared with laughter.

"And suppose I'm you," said Manuel, his face taut with a suppressed grin. He leaned easily against the base of the statue and crossed his legs. He flung his head back. "Zeno of Miletus," he intoned, "in reflecting on the cromislon of the fortiscetus, was wont to refer to a razor as a check for a short beard.' While shaving this morning I correlated 'lather' with 'leather' and, seeing some of it on my neck, I

recalled the old French proverb, '*Jeanne D'Arc*', which means: The light is out in the bathroom. The integration was complete. If the light was out I could no longer shave. Therefore I can not go on like this. Also there was this matter of the neck. I shall join the Marines. Q.E.D. which means: thus spake Zarathusiasm."

Dran chuckled. Vaughn made a furious effort, failed, and burst out laughing. When it subsided, Manuel said soberly, "I did."

"You did what?"

"I joined the Marines yesterday."

Dran paled. Manuel looked at him in open astonishment. He had never seen Dran without an instant response before. And Vaughn clutched at his arms. "You didn't! You couldn't! Manuel . . . Manuel . . . the uniform . . . the pain . . . you'll be *killed!*"

"Yup. But slowly. In agony. And as I lie there in the growing dark, a sweet thought will sustain me. I'll never again see another line of your lousy poetry. For Christ's sake!" he bellowed suddenly, "Get off that tragic kick, stupid! I'll be all right."

"What did you go and do a thing like that for?" Dran asked slowly.

"What are you and the reptile leaving for?" Manuel returned. "The same thing. This place has taught me all it can—for me. I'm going where I'll know who's my boss, and I'll know who takes

orders from me. What I'll wear, where I'll live—someone else can decide that. Meantime I'll work in communications, which I'd be doing anyway, but someone else will buy the equipment and materials."

"You'll be caged. You'll never be free," said Vaughn.

"Free for what? To starve? Free to argue with salesmen and landlords? Nuts. I'll go and work with things I can measure, work with my hands, while you two are ex-prassing your tortured souls. What would you like to see me do instead? Take up writing sonnets that nobody'll ever read? Suppose I do that, and you go join the Marines."

Dran touched Vaughn's arm. "He's right, Vaughn. What he's doing would be wrong for you, or for me, but it's right for him."

"I don't . . . I don't know what to do," she mourned.

"I do," said Manuel, "Let's go eat."

"*We are parasites," said the Titan, "which is the initial measure of our intelligence."*

Torth said, "*Our intelligence doesn't make it possible for us to survive on Titan."*

"*It's an impasse. The very act of settling the three components of our psyche into the brains of the natives gives us a home—and shortens the life of the native."*

"*Wouldn't that be true of the bipeds on the third planet?"*

"*To a degree," admitted the other. "But they are long-lived—and there are two billion of them."*

"*And how would we affect them?"*

"*Just as we affect the natives here."*

Torth made the emanation which signified amusement. "*That should make them very unhappy."*

"*You speak of a matter of no importance," said the other irritably. "And it is not true. They will be as incapable of expressing unhappiness as anything else."* He applied himself again to the machine, with which he was tracking the three crystalline casings which carried Eudiche on his earthward journey.

After dinner they went to a concert. They sat in their favorite seats—the loges—and waited, each wrapped in his own thoughts. Dran stared at the dusty carved figures under the ceiling. Manuel sketched busily—a power-operated shock absorber, this time. Between them Vaughn sat, withdrawn and dreamy, turning night-thoughts into free verse.

They straightened as the conductor appeared and crossed the platform, amid applause which sounded like dead leaves under his feet. When he raised his baton, Vaughn glanced swiftly at the faces of the other two, and then they pressed forward in unison.

It was Bach—the *Passacaglia*

and *Fugue in C Minor*. The music stepped and spiralled solemnly around them, enclosing them in a splendid privacy. They were separate from the rest of the audience, drawn to each other. Manuel and Dran moved slightly toward Vaughn, until their shoulders touched. Their eyes fixed unmoving on the orchestra.

At the last balanced, benevolent crescendo they rose together and left, ahead of the crowd. None of them cared to talk, strangely. They walked swiftly through the dark streets to a brightly lit little restaurant several blocks from the Academy.

In a high-walled booth, they smiled to each other as if acknowledging a rich secret. Then Vaughn's eyes dropped; she pulled at her fingers and sighed.

"No effusions from you, please," said Dran—possibly more coldly than he intended. "We all felt it, whatever it was. Don't mess it up."

Vaughn's gaze was up again, shocked. Manuel said with an astonishing gentleness, with difficulty, "I was—somewhere else, but you were with me. And we all seemed to be—to be walking, or climbing . . ." He shook his massive head. "Nuts. I must be thirsty or something. What do you want, runt? Dran?"

Vaughn didn't answer. She was staring at Dran, her violet eyes dark with hurt.

"Speak up, chicken. I didn't

mean to crush you. I just didn't feel like listening to an iambic extravagance. Something happened to all of us."

"Thanks f-for crediting me with so little sensitivity that you think I'd spoil it!"

"Not too little sensitivity. Too much—and out of control. I'm sorry," Dran relented. "Let's order." He turned to Manuel, and froze in surprise at the look in the other's face. It was a look of struggling, as if unwelcome forces were waking within him, disturbing the rough, familiar patterns of his thinking.

Joe passed, flashy, noisy, wide open for hurt. The trio had often discussed Joe. Superficially, he was pushing into their group because of Vaughn, who appeared to make him quite breathless. Dran had once said however, that it went deeper than that. Joe could not abide a liaison that he couldn't understand. Joe called, "Hi! As I live and bleed, it's the internal triangle. Nice to see you, Vaughn. When am I going to do it on purpose instead of by accident?"

"Is this drip necessary?" Manuel muttered.

"I'll see you soon, Joe," Vaughn said, smiling at him. "We have a class together tomorrow. I'll talk to you about it then." Her nod was a warm touch, and a dismissal. Joe appeared about to speak, thought better of it, waved and went away.

"That impossible idiot," growl-

ed Dran. "A more quintessential jerk I have yet to meet."

"Oh, Dran! He's not that bad! Just undeveloped. Of course, he isn't one of *us*, but he's fun all the same. He reads good poetry, and he's quite a—"

Manuel brought his hand down with a crash. "*That's* what I was after. 'One of us.' What do you mean, 'one of us?' Who joins this union? I'm not 'one of us.' You two have more in common than you have with me."

Vaughn touched his hand. "Manuel," she said softly. "Oh, Manuel! Why, everyone links us together. I—I know I do. So much so that until now I didn't think it required questioning. It's something you accept as natural."

Dran's eyes brightened. "Wait, Vaughn. Let's not call it natural. Let's examine it. See what we get. I've been chewing on it since the business with the music tonight anyway."

Manuel shrugged. "Okay. What do the runt and I share after all? You and I can agree on politics, and we have one or two mechanical interests. But you. Vaughn—you . . ." He wet his lips. "Hell!" he exploded. "You're—useless!"

"I can ignore that," said Vaughn, very obviously ignoring nothing, "because you are only trying to hurt me."

"Hold on," said Dran easily. "I think this is worth an effort to avoid that kind of emotional smokescreen. You particularly,

Manny. You sound resentful, and I don't know that you have anything to resent."

"She makes me mad, that's all. Look—there are a lot of useful things in the world—lock washers . . . cotter pins. But this—this dame! You couldn't use her for a paperweight. She's a worm trying to be a snake. You can't approach her logically. I can get to you that way, Dran, though I'll admit the going gets a little swampy sometimes."

"Perhaps this thing we have," said Vaughn softly, "is more than emotion, or intellect, or any of those things."

"Here we go again," snorted Manuel.

"A mystic entity or something?" Dran chuckled. "I doubt it. But there is something between us—all of us. It isn't limited to any two. We all belong. I'm not sure of what it's for, or even if I like it. But I'm not prepared to deny it. You aren't either, Manny."

"Manuel," said Vaughn urgently. She reached across and touched him, as if she wanted to press her eager words into him. "Manuel—haven't you ever felt it even a little? Didn't you, tonight? Didn't you? In your own terms . . . Manuel, just this once, I'd like to know honestly, without any sneers."

Manuel glowered at her, hesitated, then said, "What if I have?" truculently. In a gentler tone, he

added, "Oh, I have, all right. Once or twice. It—like I said, damn it, it makes me mad. I don't like getting pushed around by something I don't understand. It'll probably stop when I get away from here, and good riddance to it."

Vaughn touched her knuckles to her teeth. She whispered, "To me, it's something to treasure."

Dran grinned at her. "If you like it, it's got to be fragile, hm? Vaughn, it isn't. And I think Manny's in for a surprise if he thinks distance is going to make any difference."

"I have hopes," Manuel said sullenly.

Dran spread his hands on the table and looked at them. "Vaughn stands in awe of this—this thing we have, and to Manuel it's like a dose of crabs. Excuses me, chicken. Far as I'm concerned, it's something that will bear watching. I can't analyze it now. If it gets weaker I will be able to analyze it even less. If it gets stronger it will show its nature no matter what I do. So I'm going to relax and enjoy it. I can say this much..." He paused, frowning, searching for words. "There is a lowest common denominator for us. We're all 'way off balance. And our imbalances are utterly different in kind, and negligibly different in degree."

Vaughn stared dully. Manuel said, "Huh?"

Dran said, more carefully, "Vaughn's all pastels and poetry. Manuel's all tools and technology. I'm—"

"All crap and complication," said Manuel.

"Manuel!"

Dran laughed. "He's probably right, Vaughn. Anyway, we're all lopsided to the same degree, which is a lot, and that's the only real similarity between us. If we three were one person, it'd be a somebody, that's for sure."

"It's be an insect," Manuel scowled. "Six legs." He looked at Vaughn. "With your head. No one'd know the difference."

"You're ichor-noclastic," said Dran. Vaughn groaned. Manuel said, "That was one of those puns. The only part I got was the 'corn.' Where the hell's the waiter?"

"Why Eudiche?" Torth fretted. "Why couldn't they send someone else?"

"Eudiche is expendable," said the other parasite shortly.

"Why? His balance is so perfect..."

"Answer restricted. Go away. one-third of his psyche has found a host and is settling in. The observations are exceedingly difficult, because of the subtlety of Eudiche's operations. And you are most exasperating."

For the third time in a week, Vaughn was lunching with Joe—

a remarkable thing, considering that in the two years since her departure from the University she had seen less and less of old acquaintances. But after all—Joe was easy to be with because she didn't have to pretend. She could be as moody as she chose. He would patiently listen to her long and misty reflections, and let her recite poetry without protest. The meetings did not hurt her, and Joe seemed to enjoy them so . . .

But Joe had something to offer this time, rather than something to take. As the waitress took their dessert order and left, he gently placed a little plush box beside her coffee cup. "Won't you consider it at all?" he as

Her hand was on the box, reflexively, before she realized what it was. Then she looked at him. Thoughts, feelings, swirled about each other within her, like petals, paper, dust and moths in a small sudden whirlwind. Her eyes fixed on his shy, anxious face, and she realized that she had seldom looked directly at him . . . and that he was good to look at. She looked at the box and back at him, and then closed her violet eyes. Joe as a suitor, as a potential lover, was an utterly new idea to her. Joe as a bright-faced, carefully considerate *thing* was not Joe with hands, Joe with a body, Joe with habit patterns and a career and tooth-paste and beneficiaries for life insurance. She felt flattered and bewildered

and uncertain, and—warm.

And then something happened. It was as if an indefinable presence had raised its head and was listening. This alien attentiveness added a facet to the consideration of Joe. It made the acceptance or rejection of Joe a more significant thing than it had been. The warmth was still there, but it was gradually overlaid by a—a knowledge that created a special caution, a particular inviolability.

She smiled softly then, and her hand lifted away from the box.

"There's nothing final about an engagement," Joe said. "It would be up to you. Every minute. You could give me back the ring any time. I'd never ask you why. I'd understand, or try to."

"Joe." She put out her hand, almost touched him, then drew it back. "I . . . you're so *very* sweet, and this is a splendid compliment. But I can't do it. I—If I succeeded in persuading myself into it, I'd only regret it, and punish you."

"Umm," mused Joe. His eyes were narrowed, shrewd and hurt. "Tied up, huh? Still carrying the same old torch."

"The same—" Vaughn's eyes were wide.

"That Dran Hamilton character," said Joe tiredly, almost vindictively. He reached for the ring box. "Part two of the unholy trio—"

"Stop it!"

It was the first time he had

seen her gentle violet eyes blazing. It was probably the first time they ever had. Then she picked up her gloves and said quietly, "I'd like to go now, Joe, if you don't mind."

"But—but Vaughn—what did I—I didn't mean any—"

"I know, I know," she said wearily. "Why, I haven't even thought about them for a long time. For too long. Perhaps I should have. I—*know* I should have. Joe, I have to go. I've got to get out of here. It's too small. Too many people, too many cheap little lights. I need some sun."

Almost frightened, he paid the check and followed her out. She was walking away as if she were alone. He hesitated, then ran to catch up with her.

"It's a thing that you couldn't understand," she said dully when he drew alongside. She did not look up; for all he knew she may have been talking before he reached her. She went on, "There were three of us, and that's not supposed to be right. Twos, and twos, and twos, all through literature and the movies and the soap operas. This is something different. Maybe it's wrong, maybe I'm too stupid to understand . . . Joe, I'm sorry. Truly I am. I've been very selfish and unkind." There was that in her voice which stopped him. He stood on the pavement watching her move away. He shook his head, took one step, shook his

head again, and then turned and plunged blindly back the way he had come.

"You're getting old," said Torth maliciously.

"Go away," said the other. "With two particles assimilated and the third about to be, matters have reached a critical point."

"There is nothing you could do about it no matter what happened," said Torth.

"Will you go away? What did you come for, anyway?"

"I was having an extrapolative session with another triad," Torth explained. "Subject: is the Eudiche experiment a hoax? Conclusion: it could be. Corollary: it might as well be, for all it had benefited our race. I came for your comments on that. You are an unpleasant and preoccupied entity, but for all that you are an authority."

The old one answered with angry evenness: "Answers: The Eudiche experiment is no hoax. It will benefit the race. As soon as Eudiche has perfected his fusion technique, we shall emigrate. Our crystalline casings are dust-motes to the bipeds of the third planet; our psychic existence will be all but unnoticeable to them until we synthesize. When we do, they will live for us, which is right and just. They will cease thinking their own thoughts, they will discontinue their single-

*mind*ed activites. They will become fat and healthy and gracious as hosts."

"But observations indicate that they feed themselves largely by tilling the soil, that they combat the rigors of their climate by manufacturing artificial skins and complex dwelling shelters. If we should stop all that activity, they will die off, and we—"

"You always were a worrier, Torth," interrupted the other. "Know, then, that there are many of them and few of us. Each of us will occupy three of them, and those three will work together to keep themselves fed and us contented. The groups of three will be hidden in the mass of bipeds, having little or no physical contact with one another and remaining largely undetected. They will slaughter as they become hungry; after all, they are also flesh-eaters, and the reservoir of unoccupied bipeds will be large indeed. If, after we get there, the bipeds never plant another seed nor build another dwelling, their own species will still supply an inexhaustible supply of food purely by existing be be slaughtered as needed. They breed fast and live long."

Torth saluted the other. "We are indeed entering upon an era of plenty. Your report is most encouraging. Our present hosts are small, few, and too easy to kill. I assume that the bipeds have some intelligence?"

"The bipeds of the third planet," said the other didactically, "have mental powers several hundred times as powerful as do those we have dominated here. We can still take them over, of course, but it will be troublesome. Look at the length of time it is taking Eudiche. However, the reward is great. Once we have disrupted their group efforts by scattering our triads among them, I can predict an eternity of intriguing huntings and killings in order for our hosts to feed themselves. Between times, life will be a bountiful feast of their vital energies.

"Now, leave me, Torth. As soon as the final part of Eudiche's triad is settled in, we can expect the synthesis, by which he will come into full operation as an entity again. And that I want to observe. He has chosen well, and his three seeds are sprouting on fertile soil indeed."

"You have been uncharacteristically polite and helpful," conceded Torth. He left.

Dranley Hamilton drank the highball with the cold realization that it was one too many, and went on talking cleverly about his book. It was easy to do, because for him it was so easy to define what these fawning critics, publishers, club-women and hangers-on wanted him to say. He was a little disgusted with his

book, himself, and with these people, and he was enjoying his disgust immensely, purely because he was aware of it and of his groundless sense of superiority.

Then there was a sudden, powerful agreement within him, compounded of noise, heat, stupidity and that last highball, which made him turn abruptly, to let a press-agent's schooled wisecrack spend itself on his shoulderblades as he elbowed his way through the room to the terrace doors. Outside, he stood with his arms on the parapet, looking out over the city and thinking, "Now, that didn't do me any good. I'm acting like something from the Village. Art for Art's sake. What's the matter with me anyway?"

There was a light step behind him. "Hello, Dranley Hamilton."

"Oh—it's you." He took in the russet hair, the blend of blendings which she used for a complexion. He had not noticed her before. "Do you know I have hung around this literary cackle-factory for the past two hours only because you were here and I wanted to get you alone?"

"Well!" said the girl. Then, with the same word in a totally different language, she added, "Well?"

He leaned back against the parapet and studied her tilted eyes. "No," he said finally. "No. I guess I was thinking of somebody else. Or maybe even something else."

Her real defenses went up in place of the party set. "Excuse

me!" she said vehemently cold.

"Oh, think nothing of it," he responded. He slapped her shoulder as if it were the withers of a friendly horse, and went back to the reception. *That was lousy*, he thought. *What's the matter with me?*

"Dran." It was Mike Pontif, from his publishers' publicity department. "You got that statement up about your next novel?"

"Next novel?" Dran looked at him thoughtfully. "There's not going to be a next novel. Not until I catch up on . . . something I should be doing instead." At the publicity man's bewildered expression, he added, "Going to bone up on biology."

"Oh," said the man, and winked. "Always kidding."

Dran was not kidding.

Manuel crumpled up the letter and hurled it into the corner of the communications shack. He shouldered through the door and went out on the beach, his boots thudding almost painfully down on the rough white coralsand. He drove his feet into the gritting stuff, stamping so that the heavy muscles of his thighs felt it. He scooped up the stripped backbone of a palm frond and cut at the wet sand by the water's edge as he walked, feeling the alternate pull of shoulders and chest.

He needed something. It wasn't women or liquor or people or solitude. It wasn't building or fighting or laughter. He didn't

even need it badly. What he did want badly was to find out what this gentle, steady, omnipresent need was. He was sick of trying this and that to see if it would stop this infernal tugging.

He stopped and stared out to sea. The thick furrows across his forehead deepened as he thought about the sea, and the way people wrote about it. It was always alive, or mysterious, or restless, or something. Why were people always hanging mysterious qualities on what should be commonplace? He was impatient with all that icky business.

"It's just wet salt and distance," he muttered. Then he spat, furious with himself, thinking how breathless the runt would be if she heard him say such a hunk of foolishness. He turned and strode back to the shack, feeling the sun too hot on the back of his neck, knowing he should have worn his helmet. He kicked open the screen door, blinked a moment against the indoor dimness, and went to the corner. He picked up the letter and smoothed it out.

*"From some remembered
world
We broke adrift
Like lonely stars
Divided at their birth.*

*For some remembered dream
We wait, and search
With riven hearts
A vast and alien earth . . ."*

With the poem in his hand, Manuel glared around at useful things—the transmitter, the scrambler, the power supply. He looked at worthwhile things—the etched aluminum bracelets, the carved teak, the square-knotted belt he had made. And he looked at those other things, so meticulously machined, so costly in time and effort, so puzzling in function, that he had also made without knowing why. He shook the paper as if he wanted to hurt it. Why did she write such stuff? And why send it to him? What good was it?

He carried it to the desk, ripped out his personal file, and put it away. He filed it with Dran Hamilton's letters. He had no file for the runt's stuff.

When she concluded that she loved Dran, Vaughn wrote and said so abruptly and with thoroughness. His answering telegram made her laugh and cry. It read:

NONSENSE, CHICKEN! ROMANTIC LOVE WRONG DIAGNOSIS. I JUDGE IT A CONVENTIONAL POETIC IMPULSE BETTER CONFINED TO PAPER. A CASE OF VERSE COME VERSE SERVED. TAKE A COLD SHOWER AND GO WRITE YOURSELF A SONNET. BESIDES, WHAT ABOUT MANUEL? HE ARRIVES, INCIDENTALLY, NEW YEAR'S EVE

AND INTENDS MEETING
ME AT YOUR HOUSE.
OKAY?

Dran arrived first, looking expensive and careless and, to Vaughn, completely enchanting. He bounded up the front steps, swung her off her feet and three times around before he kissed her, the way he used to do when they were children. For a long while they could say nothing but commonplaces, though their eyes had other things to suggest.

Dran leaned back in a kitchen chair as if it were a chaise longue and fitted a cigarette to a long ivory holder. "The holder?" he chattered. "Pure affectation. It does me good. Sometimes it makes me laugh at myself, which is healthy, and sometimes it makes me feel fastidious, which is harmless. You look wonderful with your hair down. Never pin it up or cut it again. Manuel's just turned down a commission. He ought to arrive about six, which gives us plenty of time to whirl the wordage. I liked your latest poems. I think I can help you get a collection published. The stuff's still to thin in the wrong places, though. So are you."

Vaughn turned down the gas under the percolator and set out cups. "You do look the successful young author. Oh, Dran, I'm so glad to see you!"

He took her hand, smiled up into her radiant face. "I'm glad too,

chicken. You have me worried there for a while, with that love business."

Vaughn's eyes stopped seeing him for a moment. "I was—silly, I suppose," she whispered.

"Could be," he said cheerfully. "I'll tell you, hon—I like women. Without question there's a woman somewhere on earth that will make me go pitty-pat, quit drinking, write nothing but happy endings, and eat what's given to me instead of what I want. Maybe I've already met her and don't realize it. But one thing I'm sure of is that you're not that woman."

"What makes you so sure?"

"The same thing that makes you sure of it. You had a momentary lapse, it seems, but—come now; do you love me?"

"I wish Manuel would get here."

"Isn't that irrelevant?"

"No."

Then the coffee boiled over and the thread was lost.

They talked about Dran's book until Manuel arrived. The book was a strange one—one of those which captivates or infuriates, with no reader-reactions between the extremes. There were probably far more people who were annoyed by it than not, "Which," said Dran, "is one of the few things the book has in common with its author."

"That remark," laughed Vaughn, "is the first you have

made which sounded the way your picture in *Literary Review* looked. It was awful. The decadent dilettante—the bored and viceful youth.”

“It sells books,” he said. “It’s the only male answer to the busty book-jacket, or breast seller. I call it my frontispiece pose; separate but uplifted.”

“And doubly false,” snapped Vaughn. When he had quieted, she said, “But the book, Dran. There was one thing in there really worth mentioning—between us. The thing the critics liked the least.”

“Oh—the dancer? Yes—they all said she was always present, never seen. Too little character for such a big influence.”

“That’s what I meant,” said Vaughn. “I know and you know—and Manuel? We’ll ask him—that the dancer wasn’t a person at all, but an omnipresent idea, a pressure. Right?”

“Something like that cosmic search theme that keeps pushing you around in your work,” he agreed. “I wonder what Manuel’s counterpart is. It would have to be something he’d turn on a lathe.”

Vaughn smiled. And then there was a heavy tread on the porch, the front door flew open, and the room was full of Manuel. “Hi, Dran. Where’s the run? Come out from under the furniture, you little—oh. There you are. Holy cow,” he bellowed. “Holy

sufferin’ sepoys! You’ve shrunk!”

Dran threw up his hands. “Sepoys. Foreign background. Authentic touch.”

Vaughn came forward and put out a demure hand. “I haven’t shrunk, Manuel. It’s you. You’re thicker and wider than ever.”

He took her hand, squeezed it, apologized when she yelped, rubbed his knuckles into her scalp until she yelped again, and threw himself onto the divan. “Lord, it’s cold. Let’s get going. Do something about this New Year’s Eve

“Can’t we just stay here and talk awhile?” said Vaughn in rumpled petulance.

“What the matter, runt?” Manuel asked in sudden concern, for Vaughn’s eyes were filling.

Dran grinned. “I come in here, ice-cold and intellectual, and kiss the lass soundly. You come flying through the door, Lochinvar, shake hands with her and then proceed to roll her around like a puppy. Like the song says—try a little tenderness.”

“You be quiet!” Vaughn almost shouted.

“Oh, so that’s what you want.” He strode across to Vaughn, brushed aside her protecting arms, and kissed her carefully in the exact center of the forehead. “Consider yourself smootched,” he growled, “and we’ll have no more of this lollygagging. Vaughn, you’re acting like an abandoned woman.”

Vaughn laced her anger with laughter as she said, "Abandoned is right. Now wait while I get my coat."

"I brought something back with me," Manuel said.

The were at a corner table at Enrique's, immersed in the privacy of noise, lights, and people. "What is it?" asked Vaughn. "Something special in costume jewelry?"

"Always want gilding, don't you, lily? Yes, I have the usual cargo. But that's not what I mean."

"Quell your greed," said Dran. "What is it, Manny?"

"It's a . . ." He swizzled his drink. "It's a machine. I don't know what it is."

"You don't—but what does it do? What's it made of?"

"Wire and a casting and a machined tube and ceramics, and I built it myself and I don't know what it does."

"I hate guessing games," said Dran petulantly.

Vaughn touched his arm, "Leave him alone, Dran. Can't you see he's bothered about it?" She turned quickly to the Marine, stroked the ribbons on his chest. "Talk about something else if you want to. What are these for?" she asked solicitously.

Manuel looked down at the ribbons, then thumbbed the catch and removed them. He dropped them

into Vaughn's hand. "For you," he said, his eyes glinting. "As a reward for talking like a hot damned civilian. I won't need 'em any more. My hitch is up; I'm out."

"Why, Manuel?"

"It's . . . I get—spells, sort of." He said it as if he were confessing to leprosy or even body odor. "Trances, like. Nobody knows about it. I wanted to get out from under before the brass wised up."

Vaughn, whose terror of "the ills our flesh is heir to" amounted to a neurosis, gasped and said, "Oh! What is it? Are you sick? What do you think it is? Don't you think you ought to have an examination right away? Where does it hurt? Maybe it's a—"

Dran put an arm around her shoulders and his other hand firmly over her mouth. "Go on, Manny."

"Thanks, Dran. QRM, we call that kind of background noise in the Signal Corps. Shut up, short-change. About those spells . . . everything seems to sort of—recede, like. And then I work. I don't know what I'm doing, but my hands do. That's how I built this thing."

"What sort of a thing is it?"

Manuel scratched his glossy head. "Not a gun, exactly, but something like it. Sort of a solenoid, with a winding like nothing you ever dreamed of, and a condenser set-up to trigger it."

"A gun? What about projectiles?"

"I made some of those too. Hollow cylinders with a mechanical bursting arrangement."

"Filled with what?"

"Filled with nothing. I don't know what they're supposed to hold. Something composed of small particles, or a powder, or something. It wouldn't be an explosive, because there's this mechanical arrangement to scatter the stuff."

"Fuse?"

"Time," Manuel answered. "You can let her go now. I think she's stopped."

Dran said, "Manny, I've got the charge for your projectiles." He raised his hand a fraction of an inch. Vaughn said, "Let me go! Dran, let me go! Manuel, maybe you ate too much of that foreign —"

Dran's hand cut her off again. Manuel said, "Like holding your hand over a faucet with a busted washer, isn't it?"

"More like getting a short circuit in a Klaxon. Vaughn, stop wriggling! Go on, Manny. I might as well tell you, something like it has happened to me. But I'll wait until you've finished. What about the fuse timing?"

"Acid vial. Double acting. There's an impact shield that pops up when a shell is fired, and a rod to be eaten through which starts a watch-movement. That goes for eight days. As for the acid—it'd have to be something really special to chew through

that rod. Even good old Aqua Regia would take months to get through it."

Manuel shook his head. "That's one of the things I don't know," he said unhappily. "That acid, and the charge, and most of all what the whole damned thing is for—those things I don't know."

"I think I've got your acid too," said Dran, shifting his hand a little because Vaughn showed signs of coming up for air. "But where are your specifications? What's the idea of making a rod so thick you can't find an acid to eat through it?"

Manuel threw up his hands. "I don't know, Dran. I know when it's right, that's all. I know I know *before* I rig my lathe or milling machine what I'm after." His face darkened, and his soft voice took on a tone of fury. "I'm sick and tired of getting pushed around. I'm tired of feeling things I can't put a name to. For the first time in my life I can't whip something or get away from it."

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"What *can* I do? Get out of the service, hole up somewhere, finish this work."

"How do you know it won't go on for the rest of your life?"

"I don't know. But I know this. I know what I've done is done right and that when it's finished, that'll be the end of it," said Manuel positively. "Hey—you better

turn her loose. The purple face goes great with the hair, but it's beginning to turn black."

Dran released Vaughn, and just then the bells began to ring.

"Old one—"

The other turned on Torth.

"Get out. Get out and leave me alone. Get out!"

Torth got.

The bells . . .

"Not now," smiled Vaughn.

"Now now. I'll give you rascals the punishment you deserve next year sometime." She reached out her arms, and they came close to her. She kissed Manuel, then Dran, and said, "Happy New Year darlings."

The bells were ringing, and the city spoke with a mighty voice, part hum, part roar, part whistle, part scream, all a unison of joy and hope. "Should auld acHappy Noooo Yearzhz-z-z-zh-h-h..." said the city, and Manuel pulled Vaughn closer (and Dran with her, because Dran was so close to her) and Manuel said "This is it. This is right, the three of us. I quit. Whether I like it or not don't matter. I got it and I'm stuck with it. I . . ."

EUDICHE!

No one said that. No one shouted it out, but for a split second there was a gasping silence in the club, in the floors above and the floors below, as three abstracts coalesced and a great sub-

etheric emanation took place. It was more joyous than all the joy in the city, and a greater voice than that of all the other voices; and it left in a great wave and went rocketing out to the stars. And then someone started to sing again, and the old song shook the buildings.

. . . and never brought to mind . . ."

"It's done," said the old one.

Torth replied caustically. "I appreciate the news. You realize that not one of us on Titan could have missed that signal."

"Eudiche has succeeded," exulted the old one. "A new era for our race . . . on his next transmission we will start the emigration."

"And you had doubts of Eudiche."

"I did—I did. I admit it. But it is of no moment now—he has overcome his defection."

"What is it, this defection?"

"Stop your ceaseless questions and leave me to my joy!"

"Tell me that, decrepit one, and I shall go."

"Very well, Eudiche was imbalanced. He suffered from an overbroadening of the extrapolative faculty. We call it empathy. It need not concern you. It is an alien concept and a strange disease indeed."

Eudiche left, still in three parts, but now one. He stopped at the

railroad station for a heavy footlocker, and at a hotel for a large suitcase. And in the long ride in a taxi, Eudiche thought things out—not piecemeal, not single-mindedly in each single field, but with the magnificent interaction of a multiple mind.

"Is it certain that everything will fit together?" asked the mechanical factor.

"It certainly should. The motivation was the same, the drive was almost identical and the ability in each case was of a high order," said the intellectual.

The aesthetic was quiet, performing its function of matching and balancing.

The mechanical segment had a complimentary thought for the intellectual. "That spore chest is a mechanical miracle for this planet. Wasn't it gruelling, without a full mechanical aptitude to help?"

"The bipeds have wide resources. Once the design is clear, they can make almost anything. The spores themselves have started lines of research on molds, by the way, that will have far-reaching effects."

"And good ones," murmured the aesthetic. "Good ones."

Far away from the city Eudiche paid the driver and the intellectual told him to come back in the morning. And then Eudiche struck off through the icy fields, across a frozen brook, and up a starlit slope, carrying with him the spore case, the projec-

tor, and the projectiles.

It was cold and clear, and the stars competed with one another—and helped one another, too, the aesthetic pointed out: ". . . for every star which can't outshine the others seems to get behind and help another one be bright."

Eudiche worked swiftly and carefully and set up the projector. The spores were loaded into the projectiles, and the projectiles were primed with the acid and set into the gun.

The aesthetic stood apart with the stars, while the mechanical and the intellectual of Eudiche checked the orbital computations and trained the projector. It was exacting work, but there was not a single wasted motion.

The triggering was left to charge for a while, and Eudiche rested. The aesthetic put a hand to the projector—that seeking hand, always, with her, a gesture of earnestness.

"Back to Titan, and may the race multiply and grow great," she intoned. "Search the spaces between the stars and find Titan's path; burst and scatter your blessings at his feet."

The condensers drank and drank until they had their fill and a little over—

Phup! It was like the popping of a cork. Far up, seemingly among the stars, there was a faint golden streak, gone instantly.

"Reload," said the intellectual.

Two worked; the third, by her

presence, guided and balanced and added proportion to each thought, each directive effort. Eudiche waited, presently, for the projector to charge again. "Earth . . ." crooned the aesthetic. "Rich, wide, wonderful earth, rich with true riches, rich in its demonstrations of waste . . . wealthy earth, which can afford to squander thousands upon thousands of square miles in bleak hills on which nothing grows . . . wealthy earth with its sea-sunk acres, its wandering rivers which curiously seek everything of interest, back and forth, back and backwards and seaward again, seeking in the flatlands. And for all its waste it produces magnificently, and magnificently its products are used. Humans are its products, and through the eyes of humans are seen worlds beyond worlds . . . in the dreams of the dullest human are images unimaginable to other species. Through their eyes pour shapes and colors and a hungry hope that has no precedent in the cosmos."

"Empathy," defined the intellectual; "The ability to see through another's eyes, to feel with his fingertips."

"To know fire as the feathers of a Phoenix know it. To know, as a bedded stone, the coolth of brook-water . . ."

Phup!

"Reload," said the intellectual.

In its time the second projectile followed, and then a third and a fourth.

"*This is the machine,*" old Torth said to the youngster. "*It was monopolized, long ago, by a caustic old triad who has since died. And may I join him soon, for it troubles me to be so old.*"

"*And what was the machine for?*"

"*One Eudiche was analyzed into his three components and sent to that star there.*"

"*It's a planet.*"

"*Youth knows too much, too young,*" grumbled Torth.

"*And why was Eudiche sent?*"

"*To test the sending; to synthesize himself there; and to prepare for a mass emigration of our kind to that planet.*"

"*He failed?*"

"*He failed. He took over three inhabitants successfully enough, but that was all. He had empathy, you know.*"

The youngster shuddered.

"*No loss.*"

"*No loss,*" repeated Torth.

"*And then the reason for invasion was removed, and no one bothered to use the machine again, and no one will.*"

"*That was when the molds came?*"

"*Yes, the molds. Just as we came out of space so long ago, as crystalline spores, so these molds arrived on Titan. At that time, you know, we possessed all Titans and reproduced faster than they did. We had to expand.*"

"*It is not so now,*" said the youngster with confidence.

"No," said Torth. "Happily, no. The products of the molds—and the molds grow profusely here—worked miracles with the metabolism of our hosts. They reproduce faster and they live longer."

"And will they never overpopulate Titan?"

"Not in our time, not in any predictable time. Titan can support billions of the little creatures, and there are only a few thousand today. The rate of increase is not that great. Just great enough to give us, who are parasites, sufficient hosts."

"And—what happened to Eudiche?"

"He died," said Vaughn. Her voice was shocked, distraught in the cold dawn.

"He had to die," said Dran sorrowfully. "His synthesis was complete in us three. His consistency was as complete. His recognition of the right to life gave him no alternative. He saved his own race on its own terms, and saved—spared, rather—spared us on human terms. He found what we were, and he loved it. Had he stayed here, he and his progeny and his kind would have destroyed the thing he loved. So he died."

The grey light warmed as they started down the hill, and then the dawn came crashing up in one great crescendo of color, obliterating its pink prelude and establishing the theme for the

sun's gaudy entrance. Drunk with its light, three people crossed the frozen brook and came to the edge of the road.

At last Manuel spoke. "What have we got here?"

Dran looked at the satchels, at Vaughn, at Manuel. "What have you got?"

Manuel kicked his foot locker. "I've got the beginnings of a space drive. You've got a whole new direction in biological chemistry. Runt—Oh my God, will you look at that face. I know—poems."

"Poems," she whispered, and smiled. The dawn had not been like that smile.

The taxi came. They loaded their cases in and sat very close together in the back.

"No one of us will ever be greater than any other," Dran said after a time. "We three have a life, not lives. I don't know anything yet about the details of our living, except that they will violate nothing."

Vaughn looked into Manuel's face, and into Dran's. Then she chuckled, "Which means I'll probably marry Joe."

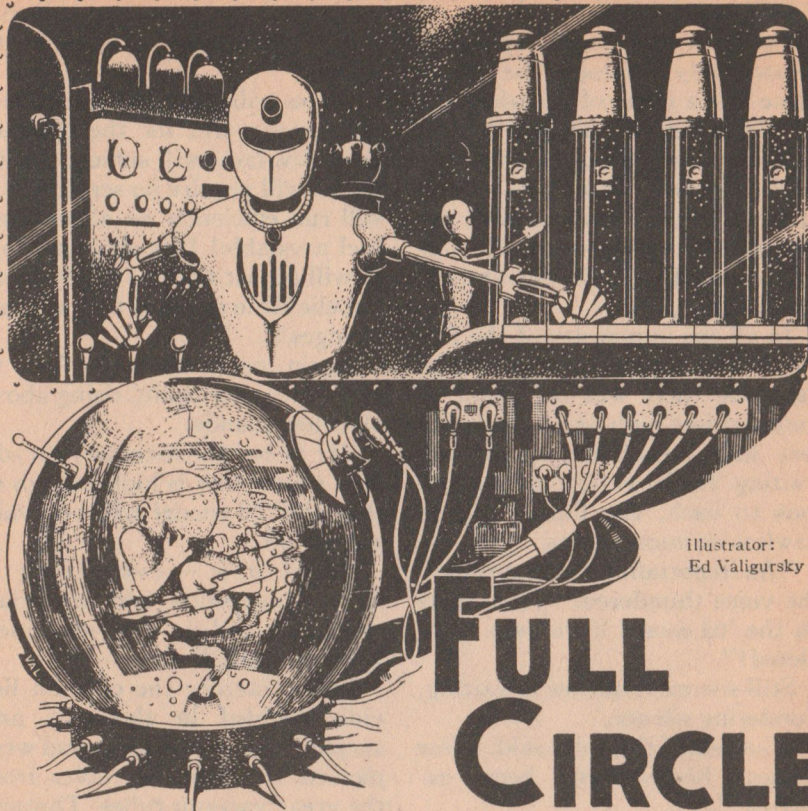
They were very close. Dran again broke the silence. "My next book will be my best. It will have this dedication:

"What Vaughn inspires, I design, and Manuel builds."

And so it came about.

Poor Joe.

The End



illustrator:
Ed Valigursky

FULL CIRCLE

By H. B. Hickey

The ultimate consequence of man's fascination with better and more complicated machines is postulated in this sardonic short-short by one of the more talented and ingenious writers of science-fiction.

Like so many authors, Mr. Hickey turned to writing after a good many false starts in other directions. He sold haberdashery and music lessons, sewing machines and cigars, photographs and radio scripts, before he finally got around to selling editors. He now lives in California with his wife and two sons, where he turns out western-, detective-, and science-fiction with equal facility — and all excellent.

"ATTENTION!"

From a thousand speakers, strategically placed, the voice came like a crash of thunder.

"Attention! Stop work!"

With a sound like earthquakes rumbling and mountains falling and the sweep of tidal waves, the machines ground to a halt. The vats ceased their bubbling and the tubes went dark.

In all the immensity of the factory, mile upon mile of sunlit vastness, there was no sound. A hundred feet high and a thousand feet long, machines reared up, waiting. In the vats, a million gallons to each, the liquids lay in flawless crimson sheets.

"An important announcement!" the voice thundered. **"Final tests on the '63 model have been completed!"**

Still silence, but now a waiting, wondering silence.

"Success!" the voice said. **"Our fondest hopes have been exceeded!"**

Pandemonium. Metal ringing on metal, multiplied a thousand, a million, a million million times, ringing and clashing and echoing until at last the echoes faded away.

"Yes," the voice said, and somewhat hushed now. **"Success. In the year 20,362 we have achieved it."**

"Without fear of exaggeration we may say that not since the dawn of time, not since that legendary and unrecorded day when

we ourselves were created, has there been anything like the '63 model."

"You will soon have the complete story, but for the moment these few facts will suffice: the '63 model will require no servicing! It will run efficiently on almost any fuel available! It is self-repairing! It will adjust automatically to an unbelievable range of temperature changes!"

Again pandemonium. And finally the voice again, rising above all other sounds.

"It is hardly necessary to add that production is high enough so that the '63 model will be available to all."

"And now — everything is ready, blueprints and materials are being fed to the machines. Back to work!"

In the factory the crimson liquids bubbled in the vats and surged through the pipes and were pierced by lightning bolts from the great vacuum tubes. Through the machines and the presses the solids flowed and were rolled and beaten and powdered. And there were all the gases necessary.

Oxygen and hydrogen and chlorine and cobalt and copper and iron and calcium and phosphorus and sodium and potassium; they combined and united and divided and were shattered and remade by million of volts of artificial lightning.

And the machines roared and thundered and rumbled, and the sound was like the day of Creation.

And in Control there was no noise but equal activity. Here a green light indicated what a worker could not see, that Press X-B was rolling the surfacing too thin by a molecule layer. There an orange glow indicated a drop of a millionth of a degree in the temperature of Vat Q-9.

The words went out from Control. "Worker RR-7, up a millionth. Worker V-2, pressure up a micro-volt."

For nothing must go wrong. The '63 model must be perfection.

And in Distribution there was the clatter of smaller machines and the sound of words and words and words. The news must go out. Through all possible channels the news of the '63 model must be distributed.

Everyone must know so that everyone might be prepared.

AT LAST! MODEL '63!

SEE IT! HEAR IT! TEST IT!

NO HOME COMPLETE WITHOUT ONE!

So the news went out. For the first time, within the reach of all! Perfection.

The '63 model. Perfection. The ultimate. Able to do anything and everything better than it had ever

been done before. Perfection.

Self-servicing, self-fueling, self-directing!

Unbelievable, but true! No machine, no robot even, could do what the '63 model could do.

Out of the thunder of Production and the precision of Control and the Channels of Distribution the '63 model came. By the hundreds, the thousands, the millions, they poured out and were tested and lined up and carted away.

And to the showrooms of the world the robots came, in the year 20,362, to stand alone and in groups with their great metal bodies gleaming and their metallic voices hushed, to see the product of the Factory, the '63 model.

Unbelievable that skin so thin and soft could be so durable, that eyes so weak and watery could see so well, that a brain of such inferior materials could function.

But there it was, the '63 model, the Humanoid, and it postured and walked and talked, was truly everything it was claimed to be.

And the signs told the most unbelievable thing of all: that the '63 model could reproduce itself!

By the millions the robots came and saw and marveled at this thing that Robot had made. By the millions they took away with them the '63 model and wondered afresh at the genius of Robot.

But a few, seeing what Robot had created, felt a touch of fear.

From Hugo Gernsback's Amazing Stories for 1932—back in the days when Depression (another kind of doom) still stalked the land—here's a really long and unforgettable "Kelleryarn" in which the Good Doctor brilliantly extrapolates from a single harrowing premise—the possibility that one day civilization might fall not because of fire or sword—but a strange new disease which can turn every piece of metal in the world into fine red rust!

(First of Two Parts)

THE METAL DOOM

DAVID H. KELLER, M.D.

Illustrated by LEO MOREY

FOREWORD

Science Fiction has foretold in a hundred different ways the destruction of present civilization. Mankind has had to fight for existence against gigantic life of unusual and unheard of forms originating not only on our own earth but on other planets. Every conceivable form of physical disaster has wiped out humanity in imagination.

As a matter of historical fact, the human race has survived. Decimated by changes of climate, devoured by gigantic beasts, wiped away by plague and tidal waves men have survived; and this ability to carry on the torch of life and light the dark places with the spark of civilization has been due, more than anything else, to their possessing the psychological trait of adaptability.

There is no doubt that great disasters will sweep over the world in the centuries to come. Perhaps many of these debacles will be composed of elements peculiarly strange to human experience. Man may die by the millions, but ultimately he will adapt himself to the new conditions of life, make a new adjustment and once again show that he is the master of the world.

For it does not matter so much to a man what comes into his life as how he reacts to it. It is believed that always there will be enough persons showing a courageous and intelligent reaction to a world disaster to finally save the existence of the human race and enable it to swing back to normal.

It is this thought that prompts the writing of THE METAL DOOM.

David H. Keller, M.D.

Chapter I The Old Watch

"THIS watch cannot be repaired," bluntly stated the watch expert.

"That is a rather odd statement to make. I thought the firm of Cadawalter and Sons stated they could repair any kind of watch or clock ever made."

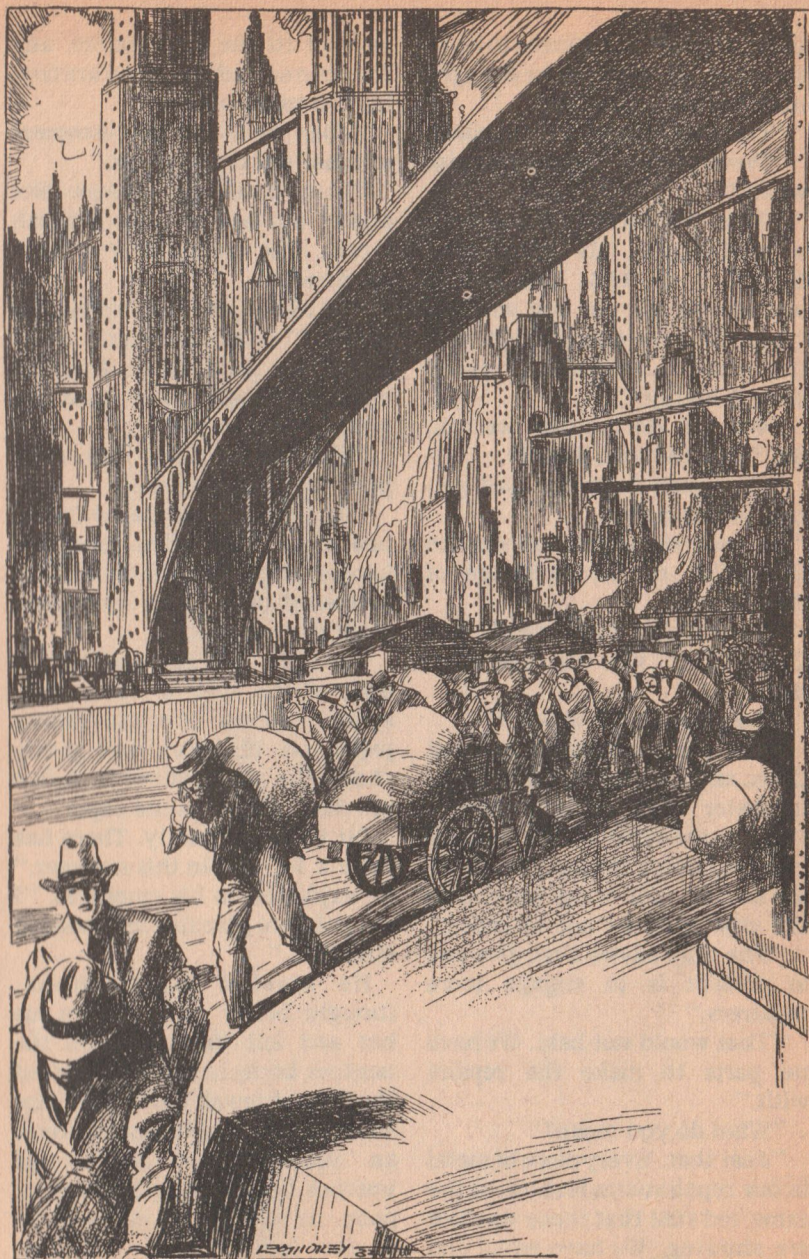
"Exactly what we have advertised for over a century, but this watch is past repairing. Look at it yourself through this magnifying glass."

But Hubler did as he was told. At last he handed the watch back.

"The entire works seem to be badly rusted," was his short comment.

"Exactly. You must have dropped it in some water."

Hubler put the old watch back



in his pocket, and started to leave the store. At the door he changed his mind and came back.

"Can you rebuild it?" he asked.

"Perhaps, but cannot promise when."

"Then I'll leave it. It has been a good watch. My grandfather bought it in 1851. You saw it was one of the old key winding type. We have always kept it in the best of condition. I really prize it highly."

"We will do the best we can, Sir," said the man wearily.

This watch business was getting on his nerves.

He took the watch and went to the office of the president of the company.

"Here is one more watch, Mr. Cadawalter," was his tired comment.

"Just like all the others?"

"The same condition in all of them, and they are being brought in faster than we can handle them. If the other jewelers in the city are having the same rush we are having, half of the watches in the city must be out of order."

"The only advice I can give you at present is to engage more repairers."

"That would not help. We have no parts to make the repairs with."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. Every piece of metal in our repair rooms is showing the same red rust that these watches are showing. We have wired and

phoned to the wholesalers, and they cannot help us. They are having the same trouble."

"Then try to sell the customers watches out of our stock."

"That would be useless. Not one of our new watches is worth a cent. The works in all of them are done for."

"I'll show you one watch that is O.K.!" cried Cadawalter, as he pulled his own watch from his vest. He looked at it, first angrily, then puzzled.

"The blame thing has stopped!" was his comment.

"Of course," countered the repair man. "The same thing has happened to your watch that has happened or is going to happen to all the watches."

The rich jeweler opened the back of the case of his watch, spread a piece of white writing paper on his desk and gently shook the watch above it. A fine red dust settled on the paper.

"It is the humidity. There has been a lot of rain this summer," he explained to his employee. "I am going to give this my personal attention."

He started to telephone, thought better of it, put on his hat and left the office. In the next six hours he visited twelve of the largest jewelry stores in New York City. All told the same story; an unprecedented number of watches being brought in for repairs, no repairs possible because of the lack of repair material,

and an inability of the manufacturers to furnish new material.

"And let me show you something else," said the last man he visited. "Here is a bar pin, platinum and diamonds. Yesterday it was worth at least fifty thousand dollars. Look at it under the glass. The metal is gone. Go ahead and break it. Have you examined your jewelry? Better. We are keeping this quiet, but I will tell you confidentially that all of our precious metals are just—I hardly know what word to use, but the word that comes to me is something worse than rust—it's *dry rot*."

"That is bad," whispered Cadawalter.

"It is worse than bad. It's bankruptcy."

"Have you tried to explain it?"

"No. It is something that is too new. Take the watch business. Yesterday we were doing our usual business, about a hundred a day in for repairs. This morning so many were brought in that we had to close the window. Our spare parts went bad over night. We found our new watches just as bad. I said to myself, 'If steel goes to pieces this way, what is happening to the other metals?' and it did not take long to find out what was going on in our safes and show cases. The watches just showed the condition early because their parts were so delicate, but even our solid silver looks sick."

Cadawalter closed his eyes as he replied.

"Do you suppose," he asked, as though in a dream, "that the same condition affecting the hair spring of a watch would ultimately affect the suspension cables of a bridge?"

Chapter II The Hubler Home

Paul Hubler, his day's work over, decided to walk home. He often walked, preferring it to the intolerable situations of the subway. This evening he was joined by an unusual number of pedestrians, most of them in an angry mood. The subways were having a great difficulty in keeping to their schedules; watches were out of order, block signal systems refused to work; there were strange breaks in the flow of electrical power. As a result it was thought best to discontinue the entire service until a complete investigation and adjustment could be made.

It was not at all satisfactory to the millions of people who had become dependent on this service. It meant late arrival at the supper table, a complete disarrangement of their evening programmes.

Everything was wrong anyway. The city dweller had become a slave to time. So many minutes for this and so many for that. Arrive at a place at such a time

and leave at such a time. A hundred times a day look at the watch on your wrist or the clock on the tower. How could anyone live when he did not know what time it was?

Paul felt the irritability of the jostling throng, but he did not venture to ask anyone what the trouble was. He just walked home as best he could. He had been rather successful in life and the place he called home was a two-room apartment holding a wife and baby. He smiled as he thought of the baby, almost considered it an adventure in high finance.

In spite of the disaster to his watch he was completely happy as he swung into the main entrance to the apartment house which contained his home. The fact that a thousand other families lived in that identical beehive gave him no particular concern. But what aroused his interest was a crowd of decidedly angry men and women in front of the elevator door.

"I am sorry," cried the starter, for the thirtieth time, "but these elevators are out of order, and there is no telling when they will be running. You will have to walk."

"Up to the thirtieth floor?" yelled a woman.

"That's just your hard luck," retorted a man, breaking away from the group. "I live on the tenth."

Paul Hubler started to walk up

the steps. He lived on the twenty-third floor and even though he was an ardent pedestrian, his muscles ached when he reached that level. He and his wife had lived in this particular apartment over three years and this was the first time he had ever walked up the stairs.

He had a great time in explaining it all to his wife. Ruth Hubler was tired and perhaps a little cross. She was more intent on telling her husband her troubles than in listening to his. The telephone was not working, the electric refrigerator had stopped, the electric stove would not heat. The baby was cross. Nothing but a cold supper could be served, and since the elevator had gone out of commission at noon, she had been unable to go out and buy anything.

Her husband listened to her.

Suddenly it occurred to him what it meant to a woman to live on the twenty-third floor under the conditions of the last eight hours.

"We will move," he announced decisively. "We will go somewhere and live near the ground. It is time to get out of the city anyway. Now that Angelica is walking, we ought to give her a chance. We will move into the country. That is what we saved the gold for."

From the day they married they had been saving gold pieces. Sometimes a twenty-dollar piece was added to the reserve, but

more often a ten or a five. They kept it all in a leather bag, and more than one evening was spent in counting it, arranging it in neat piles.

This evening, without waiting for supper, they opened the leather bag and dumped the gold out on the sittingroom table. The man started to pile it, and the wife helped him. The baby in her high-chair played with a spoon.

"Look at this two and a half piece, Paul," asked the woman. "It seems soft. I can bend it."

And even as she played with it, it broke in two.

At that time Paul Hubler did not realize what it meant. He was not to blame. Brighter men than he failed to solve the puzzle on the first day. But he did know that something was wrong with their gold and that gold in the leather bag represented the savings of some years. He hastily put it back in the bag.

"I am going back to the street," he told his wife, hastily kissing her. "I am going to exchange all this gold for paper money. What happened to one gold piece might happen to all of them, but if we have paper money we have the government back of us."

He worked till midnight feverishly buying paper money with his gold, losing something at every transaction, but at last ridding himself of all his metal money. On his way home he bought a basket and filled it with food. He legs

ached and his brain was tired when he finally reached his apartment at one in the morning. He showed his wife the paper money.

"And it is all worth a hundred cents on the dollar," he explained, "because it has back of it the gold and silver reserve of the nation."

When the Hublers went to bed that night they hoped that everything would be normal the next day. They were sure that during the night the elevators would be repaired, the telephone system put in operation, the electric range and the refrigerator restored to usefulness. They had fully decided to move, but that would take some days. The completeness of the disaster that was slowly overwhelming the nation did not cross the threshold of their consciousness. All they knew was that they had been made most uncomfortable and that by changing their place of residence they might avoid similar occurrences in the future.

Once the morning came it took but a few minutes for Paul and his wife to see that there had been no restoration of service. The telephone was still out of order, the electric servants in their apartment still on strike. There were other petty annoyances. Every safety razor blade in the cabinet was worthless; the kitchen closet was a mess for all the cans had rotted during the night and tomatoes, condensed milk

and sardines made a hopeless mixture.

They ate a cold and unsatisfactory breakfast and then the husband started out to see what could be done in regard to moving. At night he slowly climbed up the flights of stairs, hopeless and puzzled, even if not completely defeated. The day's search had brought him some definite information.

Practically all transportation had come to a standstill. The automobiles in the street were silent; the subways and elevated showed no signs of activity. A pushcart here and there carried the goods of an itinerant merchant.

The sun in the sky silently continued its twenty-four hour journey but accurate time had ceased. Not a clock or watch in the city functioned. There was no communication, except by word of mouth. A nation developed anxiety.

Chapter III The Hublers Move

"If we move," Paul slowly said to his wife, "we will have to go on foot. We will be able to take hardly anything with us. A little bedding and some clothes—and perhaps some books. We will stay here tonight and tomorrow I will try and buy some kind of a wagon or push cart. We can make up a few bundles and start up Fifth

Avenue. If we keep on going long enough, we will reach the country."

"But do we have to go?" asked worried Ruth.

"I believe so. All day I tried to learn what I could. Of course all I could hear were rumors and suspicions. The worst part is the interruption of train service; and the boats have stopped. There is no more food entering the city. There is enough here to feed the people for a week or two, but a lot of it is spoiled like our canned goods. Besides it has to be distributed through the city by hand. We had better get out. We ought to move tonight. Perhaps we can make it if we start. Tomorrow a half a million people may have the same idea; the next day five million. I am tired but . . . would you have the courage to start tonight? Let's do it. It will be cooler traveling in the dark."

"We could use the baby carriage," suggested Ruth.

But one look showed that this was a hopeless idea. The springs were broken and rusted. Three hours later the Hublers left their apartment with three compact bundles and Angelica who was just old enough to realize that there was something unusual going on. As they left the apartment Paul closed the door, but it fell to the floor. The hinges had decayed! He showed it to his wife and commented:

"Looks as though we were not

leaving a minute too soon."

An hour later they were on Fifth Avenue going north. The street was not crowded, but all the people on it were going north and all carried bundles. Evidently a number of people were going to the country.

At midnight Paul Hubler bought a pushcart from an Armenian. He paid exactly one hundred dollars for that two-wheeled wagon and it held together exactly two days, which was a record. In those two days they were able to make twenty miles. The morning of the third day found them out in the country. True it was an artificial country made up largely of estates of rich men, but still it was country. They were tired but vaguely happy; exhausted with their unusual exertions, but satisfied they had taken the correct action. They had been able to buy some food. Chickens had been purchased and broiled over a fire.

Fortunately the weather had been warm. There was no rain. Milk could be bought for Angelica. Under other circumstances it might have been a picnic.

After the pushcart broke down, Paul bought a wheelbarrow. He had to use a good deal of rope, and at last a stick for an axle but it kept on going and was large enough to carry the load. The family was tired, but something kept them going. Paul Hubler had an idea in his head, and that idea

was slowly becoming dominant. He wanted to get as far away from civilization as he could. At last he pushed the wheel barrow up an unused country road into the hill country, and there, on the sixth day he found what he was looking for—an abandoned farm. It probably was part of one of the large estates, purchased by a multimillionaire to round out a corner of his holdings and to be promptly forgotten.

The house was an old log house, the space between the logs chinked with mud; part of the roof had started to collapse, but the fireplace and chimney were in good condition. The forest had grown up to the house and there was a lot of fallen branches on the ground.

A spring gushed out of the rocks in back of the house and gurgled noisily across the field.

"We will live here," announced Paul to his tired wife and crowing baby. Here we have water, a fireplace, wood and a shelter from the storm. I can repair the roof. Somewhere we can find a source of food. Somehow we will survive. Millions of people in the cities will die but we will survive."

"Do you mean that we are going to live here?" asked Ruth.

"Yes. Right here."

"But you always lived in the city!"

"I know. I spent so many hours a day over my bookkeeping and in exchange for that I was given

each week a check. We took that check and bought things, food, light, services, transportation, communication. We paid the rent. Now we will live here, and most of the things we used to pay for will now have for nothing save the sweat of our brow."

Ruth thought of her pleasant, clean, two-room apartment. She remembered the electric stove; the refrigerator, the little washing machine and her electric iron.

"I don't want to live this way!" she cried. "I must have been over-influenced by your arguments. Did we have to leave the city? Surely someone has found out by this time what was the trouble. How about our scientists, our inventors? I don't want to live this way."

Paul took her in his arms, baby and all. He kissed her.

"Some day we may go back to the city," he assured her, as he wiped away her tears. "Some day—but not now."

Chapter IV The New Disease

Meanwhile the nation had not been idle. A thousand scientists, a million technicians, twenty-five million workmen were trying to repair the damage done and find some method of preventing the further destruction of all the metals.

For at the end of the first week it was apparent that some pecu-

liar and new disease was affecting all the metals, not only in the United States but all over the world. The real facts were hard to determine because communication ceased so suddenly, but it was logical to suppose that if a condition affected all steel in one continent it would similarly affect the steel of the world, and that if gold crumbled to nothing in New York, it was doing the same in London and Peking.

Research was active, but lack of communication prevented any concerted effort. The collapse of civilization would have been slower and more orderly had the telephone continued to function. Tremendous differences would have been observed had it been possible to give directions over the radio. But the radio, dependent as it was on metals, broke down as early as the telephone. Thus each scientist fought a lonely fight in his separate laboratory, handicapped by the rapid disintegration of his armamentarium. Glass and porcelain and pottery were unchanged. Everything made of metal rotted, and the finer the piece of metal the more rapid was its decay.

A hundred experts announced a hundred opinions to those who cared to hear them. Some thought it was a rapid form of electrolysis; others favored the theory that another planet had rained bacteria on the earth, which bacteria lived on metals rather than

on organic life. Some advanced thinkers spoke vaguely of a power, like radiant energy, splitting all elements into hydrogen. No one was certain of just what was happening to the metals of the earth, but everyone who had any intelligence was slowly becoming aware of the fact that mankind was slowly losing all benefits derived from the use of metals.

For centuries the advancement of the human race had, to a great extent, depended on the use of metals. Copper, tin, bronze, iron, steel, had been the physical basis on which all progress had been based. Electricity, the great servant of humanity could only serve through channels of metals. The progress of mankind resulted from increasing rapidity of communication and greater ease of transportation and here again metal played a vital part. Muscleman had been replaced by mindman through the use of machines fabricated of metal. Every useful art, every necessary science depended on the use of metals.

In a few parts of the world mankind was still in the stone age, but even here the steel knife was replacing the flint one. During the first weeks of the metal disease no one was able to accurately prophesy what the end was going to be, and even the most brilliant thinkers were unable to communicate their nightmares except to a few scientists in their immediate neighborhood. It was this rapidity

of metal destruction, the immediate effect on communication and transportation, that made the entire period such a dreadful one. The nations broke up into states, the states into small units. Towns organized as best they could into defensive units. Each farmhouse became an isolated fort. It soon became a survival of the strongest, everyone for himself and God help the weak and incompetent.

The last census had shown that sixty percent of the nation's population lived in cities. Within two weeks this sixty percent were trying to move into the country, anywhere, just so they could get food. For years the urbanite had read that there was an overproduction of food, that wheat, potatoes, milk, butter, eggs, were always in abundance. They knew that all their food came from the country. What they did not know was the labor necessary to produce this food, and concerning this they were indifferent. They had money and with this money they bought food sent to the cities from the country.

Now the trains, trucks, boats had ceased to carry the food to the cities. The city men reasoned that the food must still be there, out in the country, so they went out to get it. They had money and they believed that food could still be bought.

It was a peculiar exodus. At the beginning of the debacle, there had been one automobile

for every three of the population. One in a million walked for the pleasure of it; the rest rode. Now the only way to leave the city was on foot. Throughout the entire nation there was neither ship, locomotive, automobile nor airplane, capable of transporting humanity singly or in groups. The railroads were rapidly becoming streaks of red rust, motive machinery was rotting, ships sinking in the harbors.

So the people started to walk out of the cities. As they walked they scattered. For a while they met kindness; their money bought food; the roadside stands did a rushing business. But the demand was greater than the supply and then became a struggle for existence. Those who had food refused to sell it; those who were dying for lack of food tried to steal it. For a month around every farming community wars were waged. With clubs and stones the embittered farmers fought for their right to use their supplies to save their own lives. Except where overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers, the farmers always won the battle. At the end of the month a slow adjustment was begun. The brighter of the city dwellers began to learn how to survive under the new conditions. Here and there they were welcomed by the farm group, and even started in the country life with as much help as possible.

The death rate was high. Just how many of the total population died during that first month of panic will never be known. Years later the revisited cities revealed horrible stories of suffering. Thousands and hundreds of thousand of people never left the city. After all it was their home; they knew no other life; they could not believe that the city was doomed, and so they remained till it was too late.

Others stayed because it was their duty to do so. The policeman on his beat, the doctor in his hospital, the nurse by her patient, the mother by her infant child remained and died on duty. The full tale of heroism will never be told till the day of Ressurrection, but there remained a certain percent of humanity, who died with their faces to the battle rather than yield to the panic that evacuated the cities in surging white-faced mobs.

Thus the cities died. Dependent on metals, they died when metals disappeared. Humanity, changing overnight into the second stone age, lost much of its civilization, and all of its congestion. The psychology of the period was peculiar in that such a large part of man's knowledge became suddenly useless, because he had lost the metal tools whereby that knowledge could be expressed and put into practical use. Man entered the second stone age with the intelligence of a man and the abil-

ity of a child to use that intelligence.

So, in a few months, humanity drifted back into the dawn of time and the beginning of things.

Chapter V Hubler Makes An Ax

The three people started to live in the old log house, and it did not make such an uncomfortable home. A fire was started in the fireplace and never allowed to go out. Potatoes were roasted in the ashes with corn on the cob. An occasional chicken was broiled a piece at a time on the end of a stick, and Angelica became very fond of a nanny goat which had, for no apparent reason adopted the Hubler family. The goat furnished the baby both milk and a playmate.

The days were very busy. Paul was out all the time gathering sticks, breaking them as best he could, and filling one end of the house with a winter's supply of firewood. At other times he was on the roof with branches of pine and mud which he spread over the thin spots in an effort to make the house waterproof. He cleaned out the spring, and tried to make the land around the house look clean and orderly. Every day no matter what else he did, he spent some time throwing stones at a target. He forced Ruth to do the same thing. Then one day he began the collection of piles of

small stones, near the house.

"We may need them," was his only comment.

During this month he did a lot of thinking. It made his wife rather unhappy to have him sit on the floor near her and keep still for some hours on end.

"Why don't you talk to me," she would ask.

"I have to think about this. I want to find out what it all means," was his invariable reply.

Then one night he started to make his ax. There was a hickory stick, split at one end, a stone, flat but rather sharp at one end, and some pieces of wild grapevine. His first attempt was a failure, and to the average man would have been disheartening. He simply tried it again, and finally he found how to wrap the twines of grape vine in such a way that they held the stone. Then he started to use the ax and found at once that there was something wrong with the balance of it. The handle was too long.

It was one thing to saw through a piece of hickory and another to cut it off evenly with pieces of stone. Hubler soon found this out, and reverted to the old method of burning the end in the fire, then pounding off the charred end and burning some more and pounding some more till he had just the required length. At last he showed the ax to Ruth rather proudly. She did not seem

to be too enthusiastic about it.

"What are you going to do with it?" she asked.

He looked at it for some time before he replied.

"It will be a handy thing to kill something with."

"What are you going to kill?"

"Something; anything that needs killing."

After that he spent considerable time every day in swinging the ax around his head and learning to strike with it. In a week he became almost proud of his ability. His muscles were hardening, his co-ordination improving. He made a smaller one for his wife and encouraged her to use it. He even made a little one for Angelica and it was great sport for the three of them to go out in the warm sunshine of the afternoon and practice with the axes.

"We are going to go slowly back into the arts of the stone age," the man explained. "Of course it will take time, but as the need arises, our ability will grow. It will be interesting to watch our development. We know about the sling, the bow and arrow, the long spear and even the catapult, but we have never made them for centuries and naturally have never used them. We do not have to invent these things, we simply have to become proficient in the making of them and then in the use of them. We know the theory, the mechanics—what we must learn is the actual construction.

When I was a boy, I gathered Indian arrow heads. I can tell you a lot about their shapes but right now I cannot tell how they are made or how they are fastened to the shaft. Someone will have to learn all this. Perhaps the time will come when there will be manufacturing centers where nothing but arrows are made.

"But we have to have these things. The man who gets them first and becomes proficient in their use will be at a great advantage over the other men."

"In what way?" asked Ruth, "and why?"

"Because every man may have to fight for his rights?"

"But how about the law? And government?"

"I do not know; but I think that law and government has ceased to exist."

"In other words you are trying to tell me that you are planning to kill—and kill—and, why you never killed a chicken."

"I know; but that does not say I won't kill—if necessary."

Paul was not psychic, but he did a lot of thinking. As a result he developed the habit of carrying his ax with him on his trips to the wood to gather branches. He was out one day experimenting with the ax on some dead wood when he thought he heard a cry. The next second he was sure of it. It was Ruth and she was in trouble. Ax in hand he started to run home. He ran silently, with

sure steps; as he ran he thought to himself that two months before such speed would have winded him; now he was growing tough. He almost jumped around the corner of the house and found what he had expected.

A big man, with ragged clothes and a long beard, had Ruth in his arms trying to kill her. She was scratching, and biting and kicking. Angelica, sitting against the side of the house was just crying.

Paul, almost automatically, swung the ax around and brought the sharp edge of the stone down on the man's head. He was rather surprised to see how easy it was to hit a man like that and how very efficacious it was. The man just grunted and dropped and that was all there was to it.

Ruth started to faint, thought better of it, picked up the little child and started to comfort her.

"Thanks, Paul," she said, simply. "Now I guess I will go and cook something for supper and you can tidy up the yard."

Hubler turned the man over on his back. There was no doubt about the fact that he was dead. So he dragged him over to a little gully and piled a lot of stone over him.

"And that is Number One," he said out loud, "and the rest that come will get the same treatment, and tomorrow I am going to start in earnest to make a bow and some arrows, because the

next man may have a club or an ax and I am not sure how I would do in a real fight. It is one thing to hit a man in the back of the head and another thing to hit him between the eyes. But one thing is sure. So long as I live here I am going to take care of Ruth and Angelica. No tramp or common bum is going to hurt them so long as I can prevent it—and I have a feeling that I can prevent it so long as I am alive."

After supper Ruth took her ax and went to the edge of the woods.

"I am going to learn to throw this ax," she explained to her husband.

"I am going to learn to throw it so it will hit a tree and cut its way into the bark."

"That is the way we used to throw a penknife when I was a boy," commented her husband. "We threw it all different ways in a game called mumble-le-peg."

"This is not a game, and a woman does not always hit what she aims at," replied Ruth, "so you and the baby get out of the way."

For a while she did not even touch the tree. Then she was always able to hit it with some part of her ax. After two hours, just at the end of twilight, she had the satisfaction of seeing the stone edge of the ax sink into the bark.

"I'll do better tomorrow," she

said, "and in a week or two I'll be about perfect."

Later in the evening they sat before the fire. The night was not cold but there was a chill in the air that told of the approaching fall. Angelica was asleep on her fragrant bed of pine needles.

"How do you feel about it all, Paul?" the woman asked.

"Fine as can be."

"I mean about killing that man?"

"It is all right. He had to be killed. Of course, he was the first one, but there always has to be a first one of everything. And if I had not killed him he would have killed me. I have a feeling that I am going to kill more men before things reach normal, and all I want to do is to always feel that I am justified in the killing. I never want to kill just for the pleasure of it."

As he talked he was pushing a sharp stone backward and forward in a line across the handle of the ax.

"What are you doing that for, Paul?"

"That is my tally."

Chapter VI The First Visitor

Two days after that, in the afternoon, the family were out on the edge of the forest practicing throwing the ax. Even Angelica was toddling around throwing little sticks at rocks.

Ruth took careful aim and hit a tree in a perfect throw.

"That is fine," exclaimed a voice, "but I wish you would not pick out a sugar maple to practice on."

Hubler whirled around, ax in hand, ready to fight.

But the young man, smiling, advanced with hands above his head.

"Don't take me too seriously, my dear sir. I have only come to call on you and your wife."

"We do not want any callers. A man called a few days ago and he is under the rocks in the ravine."

"You persist in misunderstanding me. My name is John Stafford. I own a few thousand acres of land around here. In fact, I own this farm, though I never visited it till today; but one of my men told me he had seen smoke from the chimney so I thought I would walk over and see who was here. Have you been here long?"

"We have," answered Ruth. "Ever since we left the city when the metals went to pieces. We came right here, and tried to get along. There is still some money in our pocket and if you tell us what the rent is, we will be glad to pay it and stay. We like it here. We hoped that we could plan our life so we could live here."

"In an age of stone?" asked Stafford.

"That is what it looks like,"

asserted Hubler, slightly smiling, as he looked at his ax. "Would you mind going to the house? We are sorry we cannot offer you something worth while in the shape of food, but the spring water is excellent"

Later on the visitor started the conversation.

"So you folks left New York early?"

"Very early. We were in the first rush, and, as I had a pusheart and later on a wheelbarrow, we made rather good time, inspite of the baby. You see I had always prided myself on being a pedestrian and my ability to walk came in good stead. I reasoned that there were a lot of people behind us and that most of them would stay on the cement roads, so at the first good chance I hit a dirt one and landed here. So far we have only had two visitors, and the first one did not live very long. He was rough with Ruth! You are number two."

"I think," said Stafford, "that you are the kind of people I am looking for. Let me tell you my story. I have always been rich, a manufacturer, but my main interest was in horses and the olden days and ways folks used to do things. People thought I was a fool, and I guess I was. For example, I hated barbed wire. Not an inch of it is on my stock farm. Stone fences and rail fences, but not a bit of metal, not even a nail in them. Same way with my

house. All built of wood, put together with wooden nails. I even had a set of wooden dishes. I collected arrow heads, learned to shoot with a bow. I have as fine a collection of tomahawks as you ever saw. And horses! You ought to see those horses.

"Then the crash came. I was in New York at the time. I waited for a while, longer than you did, just long enough to arrive at an opinion of the seriousness of it all and then I went up the river in a sailboat, though part of the time I had to drift around waiting for the wind. But I arrived before much of the mob came, and then I started to save my place.

"Guess how I did it? Just stood at my front gate and gave away money. I always had a lot of cash in the house and now I gave it away. Every one who came by I told them that I was sorry for them and here was a twenty dollar bill or a ten dollar gold piece and they should go on to the next town. I had my hostlers and house men in back of me with clubs and we were a bad looking lot and so the mob flowed on past my place. Lots of my neighbors had a bad time. Some were killed and some came to my place for safety, but we got by. Not a horse was stolen; not a fence was broken."

"I suppose the money you gave them was worthless," commented Hubler.

"Certainly. I knew it when I gave it to them but they did not.

Of course we don't know for sure, but I think the United States is a thing of the past. Even the state government is gone. But I rule. I am the state. I have fenced in three thousand acres of land and that land I am going to hold, and the things on it are going to stay mine, and I and my friends are going to live on it, in a new stone age, and we are going to work out our salvation and perhaps do a little to save other communities, and anyone who is against us is going to die."

"So you came here because you heard we had squatted on your land and burned some of your wood and killed a stray hen or two?" asked Paul Hubler, tightening his grip on his ax.

The visitor laughed, as he answered:

"No. I came here because I heard there was a man and woman and little baby trying to solve their problems in an intelligent manner. To be honest, we have been watching you for several weeks. I have been pleased with the reports of my men. I think that you are the type of man we are looking for. You are brave, moral, and you have not only imagination but some ability. In our life we need men like you. I am not going to ask you to come and live with us, though some day you may want to, but I do want you to come over and see us and get an idea of our plans. Perhaps we can give you some

supplies to help you over the winter and my men can come over and fix that roof up for you and help build a pen for the goat, and in addition you ought to have a horse.

"You come and see me and talk over plans with me. Let me help you. Then, if the pinch comes and you need more help, you know where to go. It is not so bad now, but when winter comes, these woods will be dangerous for a lone man and his family. I believe there will be gangs of men, hungry and desperate, who will go over the state this winter like packs of wolves. If you were with us, your wife and baby would be safe."

"There is something to that," replied Hubler, thoughtfully.

"Think it over," urged the visitor. "Let me draw a map for you in this dirt. Here is your road and here is another road and that comes out on the concrete, and then turn to the left and my place is just around the bend of the road. Cannot miss it. Only be careful when you come near to the fences. I have sentries out now and we tell the people to move on or get killed and we mean it. If one of the men says anything to you simply say, '*Better days are coming*' and that will pass you through the lines, but I'll tell the boys to be on the lookout for a man with a pretty baby. We will have to make a bone necklace for that little one."

"Do you really think there is going to be trouble, Mr. Stafford?" whispered Ruth, holding Angelica a little tighter in her arms.

"Positive of it. We have had bad days and worse are on their way. The cities literally vomited their people. For a while the crooks stayed to steal but they soon saw that their plunder would not feed them, so they joined the mob. And the way we have had to treat them is not very nice to think about."

"But I am sure there were some nice people you could have helped," insisted Ruth. "There must have been some nice people who passed your place."

"There were some," agreed Stafford. "In fact I have ten families on my place now. But you would be surprised what a very few there were that I could feel sure of—enough to ask them to join my new republic. It was this way—I had an idea, and if they were ever so nice and did not harmonize with that idea, I simply could not help them."

"What was the idea?" interrupted Hubler.

"You ought to know it from the fact that I have asked you to join me. I am forming a colony; its isolation is just as complete as though it were on a desert island on the Pacific. It is going to be composed of separate families of clean cut young men and women who are intelligent

and courageous and who have imagination. I want every unit to become self-sustaining, but at the same time every man and every woman should be able to contribute something in the way of a specialty that will tend toward the public welfare. For example there must be a doctor who is able to do surgery, an engineer who is able to construct fortifications and help us with our artillery, an expert in agriculture who will advise us in the growing and harvesting of crops. There must be an expert in pottery, someone who can teach the women to harvest the flax and cotton and spin thread and weave cloth. There will have to be a great deal of cottage industry. The time may come when we will be able to have men and women work just at one task, but for the time I want every man and woman to learn to do everything. But above all they have to be brave—have a vision of the future, learn to prepare for that future."

"It sounds interesting," admitted Ruth.

"But it does not explain why you picked us out," added Paul.

"I thought you would see," answered Stafford. "You left the city early. That shows foresight, imagination. You have a quick conception of what was going to happen. You realized that safety lay in isolation, and you saw that most of the people would be afraid to leave the cement roads."

"You came here. The two of you took a deserted farm and broken down house and made a home. You learned to do things. I bet that right now you are sowing seed corn for next year, and you have set aside the winter's firewood. You made your axes and started to learn how to use them. You are taking good care of the baby. The place looks clean. You three are a family. If you never saw anyone for five years you would get along. That all shows you are adaptable. I want you. I wish I had fifty families like your family. Will you join us?"

The man and woman looked at each other. They understood.

"Not just now," answered Hubler. "We have really had a good deal of pleasure out of this experience. We have sort of made a second honeymoon out of it. I think that we would like to stay here this winter—at least try it. Perhaps in the spring we will join you. The baby will be older then and should have the company of other children. Of course, something may happen and then we will be glad to come. It was kind of you to praise us the way you have, and invite us, but just now we want to try things out a little longer."

The visitor rose and stretched himself.

"I will send you some things," he said, "a few things to make you more comfortable, and I will

have my scouts drop in now and then. Any time you change your mind come over and join us."

Chapter VII

News from the North

John Stafford walked down to the road, mounted his horse and was soon around the turn of the road. Paul and Ruth waved a gay good-bye of him and then calling Angela, went into their home.

"That is a nice man," commented Ruth. "I wonder if he is married."

"At least he has an idea of the important part women are going to play in the new world," laughed her husband.

On the way back to his farm Stafford did a lot of thinking, and the end of the thinking was the same as the beginning, and that was the fixed idea that Paul and Ruth and Angelica Hubler would make a valuable addition to the new social order he hoped to establish.

He was a little surprised to find a strange horse hitched to a post in front of his home, and the rider of this horse serenely seated on a chair on the front gallery. The newcomer lost no time in introducing himself.

"I am Andrew Mackson, Mr. Stafford. I am from Vermont, and I am hunting men."

"Do you mean real men, Mr. Mackson?"

"Nothing but that kind."

"I have a number on this farm. What can we do for you?"

"Have you the time to listen to me?"

"Certainly. After that we will have supper. I'll have your horse put up. Looks like a fast animal."

"He is. But I do not want to impose on your hospitality. Still, if you insist, I will stay. Roads are dangerous. I judge you are fond of horses?"

"But part of my life."

"How are you shoeing them nowadays?"

"Oh! Just leather pads securely tied with thongs. On dirt roads I don't worry about shoes. My horses are doing well."

"How about fences?"

"There are lots of stones where I'm from. But let me tell you why I am here. My part of Vermont is just about deserted, but it has more pretty, small farms, than you ever dreamed of, and lots of water power. Just lots of timber; and most of the farms have stone houses on them. I want men and women to come up there and live. I can show them how to build mills to run with water power, and we can grind the grain with mill-stones. I think that some day we can even get some timber out, if we can make a saw with flint teeth. It is nice country up there, and we have worlds of the very thing you need in this new life."

"What's that?"

"Stone. We have stones of every kind and every shape. What ever

you want in the way of stone we have it. Add to that water power and forests, and stone houses already built, and you have a paradise. All we need I have mentioned. We want men and women and children. People with courage and imagination and the determination to do everything in their power to help build up a new civilization. Do you know any that way?"

"That is the kind I am hunting for, Mr. Mackson. You may not know it, but right here is the capital of the new republic. Just as soon as I can find them I am going to put a hundred families here and we are going to work our new life out together and we are going to have a stone age here that will be more worth while than any metal age ever dreamed of being."

"You wouldn't want to spare any of the families you have?"

"Not one. The kind of family I am looking for is scarce."

Mackson drummed on the seat of the empty chair by his side. At last he broke the silence.

"I have just thought of something, Mr. Stafford. Up in Vermont I have an idea of a small unit of people who will form a small commonwealth and be absolutely independent of the rest of the world. Independently you arrived at the same idea. Down in Connecticut I found the beginnings of another unit and the leader there talked the same as we

talked. He wanted to show the world that the Ynakees could do more with stone than had ever been thought of. He asked me to bring my folks down and learn how to really use stone—just as if he could teach a Vermonter anything about stone.

"My idea is this. In the old days of metal and electricity, there were a lot of no-account people; just a lot of them who thought of nothing except their own pleasure and never had an original idea from the day they were born to the day they died. But at the same time here and there all over the states there were worthwhile folk, perhaps descendants of the old pioneers, at least men and women with lots of stone in their backbones—folks who never knew when they were licked.

"Those people here and there are going to work along the same lines. Use all the intelligence they have and work out their own problems in their own way. These colonies are going to be like oases in the desert. The common herd will mill around and finally die out. Perhaps a good many will have to be killed. Finally only the people in the colonies will be left. And then we will have to unite in some way, for mutual defense, if for nothing else. Perhaps we can build a large fort somewhere, so if we care to attack we can use that for a rallying place. I don't want to leave Vermont and you don't want to leave New York

but we might have to, anyhow.

"You mean there might be a war?"

"Certainly."

"Whom with?"

"I do not know; but someone. There are a lot of people in South America, and there is Asia. We will not know for a long time what happened in Asia, but they probably felt the change less there than we did. But, no matter whom we fight, we will have a war, and we might as well get ready. My young men are out every day shooting at a target with their bows and arrows, and we are working at catapults that will throw a twenty-pound stone a hundred yards. We are going to hunt wild pigs this winter with stone-tipped lances, from horseback. Now if you want sport, you try that."

Stafford ignored the sporting side of the conversation and returned to the serious part.

"So you think there might be trouble. I think so, too. In fact I think we will have a little war this winter. There are several gangs of New Yorkers working around here, and they are not pleasant neighbors. When winter comes they are going to be hungry and my people are going to have food. I have been thinking of building a fort, so the women and children will be safe."

"Might be a good idea," commented Mackson, "but I tell you what I think. As soon as winter

comes, at least cold weather, put your men on horseback, and round them up. Give the rascals so many hours to get out and stay out. If they start to fight, exterminate them. After you wipe out a few of the gangs, the others will give you a wide berth. There were some men like those you tell about came down from Montreal, hunting for warmer climate, and believe me, they found it when we started after them. A fort is all right, but if you fight early enough and hard enough, you won't need one."

Chapter VIII

The New Republic

The conversation between the two leaders was interrupted by supper. After that there were more conferences, as a result of which a very important decision was arrived at. The former area of the United States was divided into five parts and only one dividing line was artificial. The parts were 1 and 2, east of the Appalachian and north and south of the old Mason and Dixon line; 3, between the Appalachian and the Mississippi; 4, between the Mississippi and the Rockies, and 5, west of the Rockies. Each of these five parts were to be absolutely independent of the other four but were to unite for defense. Within each part were to be formed a number of separate, independent communities, who would

be in communication and help each other in every way possible. Once a year representatives of the smaller units would meet. Once every five years there would be a meeting at or near St. Louis of five representative of the five republics.

That was the programme formulated during the evening's conference. It avoided all finances, for it was early recognized that money, as a means of exchange, was something that would have to be developed. The exchange of work and the exchange of surplus commodities, the ancient system of barter, for many years would replace money. Within each community each citizen would contribute toward the welfare of the community and in return would be cared for by the community.

One of the men engaged in the conference objected:

"That is socialism, pure and simple. No community, founded on those lines, has ever survived. It does away with personal initiative."

Stafford's argument was brief.

"None of those communities lived in the stone age."

Stafford turned to Mackson:

"You are a pretty good talker, Mr. Mackson. Someone has to carry the message. How would you like to give a few years of your life to the spreading of this political gospel? I will loan you a few of my best men to serve as a bodyguard, and you go out to

the Pacific Coast and see how far you can go in organizing the old U.S.A. along these lines. Someone had to do it. Every place where they have the vision of the future that we have; talk things over and see if you can get them to sign on the dotted line. When you reach the coast, have one of their big men ride back with you, so he can become personally acquainted with the situation in the east. Will you do it?

"That is a big contract, Mr. Stafford."

"But I am asking a big man. Your only reason for refusing would be your honest conviction that your Vermont colony would go to pieces in your absence."

"It wouldn't," the Vermont man was honest enough to admit, "for my brother up there is really a better man than I am."

"Then it is all settled. I have a piece of paper here and a quill pen. I will draw up articles of confederation, and you and I will head the list of signators. You take the paper with you. I have a feeling that in this room we are making history, gentlemen. It may be that some day this paper will rank in importance with the Magna Charta, and the Declaration of Independence. How shall I start it? Something like this:

WE, THE UNDERSIGNED,
LEADERS OF NEW ECO-
NOMIC AND POLITICAL

GROUPS WITHIN THE
BOUNDARIES OF THE UNI-
TED STATES, BUT EXIST-
ING UNDER A NEW STONE
AGE, BROUGHT ABOUT BY
THE METAL DOOM, DO
HEREBY PLEDGE OUR-
SELVES TO THE FORMA-
TION OF A CONFEDERA-
TION OF THESE GROUPS
FOR THE FOLLOWING REA-
SONS:

That was the way the first rough copy started. It was rewritten several times, but at last they had something that satisfied the group of educated men gathered in the great living-room.

Arrangements were made for the little group of men to start west early the next morning. The four men selected to go with Mackson were all experienced horsemen and expert marksmen with the bow and arrow. There was no reason to think that there would be any special danger but it was felt best to be prepared. The five men realized that even with the best of luck it would be more than a year before they returned to their homes. At the same time the novelty of the journey was such that they looked forward to it with a spirit of enthusiasm.

Later on, when communication became better, other colonies claimed that they were the first to originate a plan for a new confederation. They deserve honor

for their originality but as far as historical research is concerned it is practically certain that the honor of priority fell to Stafford and Mackson and it is the paper that Mackson carried to the Pacific Ocean and back to Vermont that is recognized as the greatest paper of the new stone age. The names of signers on it comprise practically all of the great men of the new world, three of the signers later becoming Presidents.

Stafford made the final comment as the meeting adjourned:

"Tell those you meet, Mackson, that this first is a survival of the fittest. Those who cannot be trusted, who are incompetent to learn the new lesson, who hold on to the old ideas of power and riches and the oppression of the poor must be cast out of our communities. If they perish, they perish. We dare not try to save them. The same way with the feeble-minded, the insane and the degenerate. Our society must not save them."

Chapter IX How One Man Died

It is certain that since the discovery of printing, no world disaster had ever been so poorly documented as the period of the *Metal Doom*. Practically overnight there was a more or less complete cessation of the daily press. One day the giant presses of the country were stamping the

news on thousands of tons of pulp paper; the next day those same presses were silenced. One day news was flashed from the Orient to the Occident in the winking of an eye; the next day the telephone, telegraph and wireless had ceased to serve mankind.

Time passed and eventually the scientists had some fairly definite idea of how humanity had reacted to the new conditions under which life had to be lived. An interesting and perhaps partly accurate history could be written, but at the best only the surface of fact would be scratched; most of the reactions can only be guessed at.

One man, however, laboriously wrote his story before he died, and because that story tells the tale of a brave man, and also because it partly explains the final statement of Stafford, it is worth while adding that story to this tale.

At the onset of THE METAL DOOM, humanity was probably as kindly foolish towards its delinquents and abnormals, as it had ever been in any historical epoch. In the United States alone there were over a half million criminals being supported by the taxpayers and another half million abnormals composed of the insane, epileptic, and mentally deficient members of society. Whereas other ages constantly eliminated the unfit, there was, in the United States, a determined

effort to prolong the life of each person as long as possible, irrespective of his ability to provide for himself or the impossibility of improvement of ultimate cure. The highest type of the medical profession believed that the prolongation of a human life even ten minutes was worth the expenditure of every possible scientific effort.

Consequently, the abnormals were placed in special hospitals and there cared for, in such large number, that their maintenance became a most serious problem to the taxpayer. At last as much was spent in the care of the physical defective each year as was spent in all forms of education. Irrespective of the number of hospitals built each year, the demand for more beds always kept ahead of the building programme.

To these prisons and hospitals the metal doom came. The prisons constituted a permanent menace to the new social order. Capital punishment had been almost completely abolished and life imprisonment substituted in its place. Thousands and hundreds of thousands of degenerate criminals were held in restraint only by steel bars and modern firearms. Overnight the firearms became useless. Within a week the steel bars decayed and these criminal frantic with fear, desperate with hunger and menacing from the possibility of complete revenge upon society, hurled them-

seves on a world that was already staggering to its social debacle. Ultimately decent society eliminated these criminals in many a hard fought and bloody battle, but for some years gangs of law violators roamed the forests and swallowed all who came within their clutch.

With the insane and feeble-minded, the problem was a different one. Probably the solution was slightly different in each hospital. Apparently the majority of superintendents felt that all they could do was to liberate their patients and allow them the right to survive if they could.

Dr. Hiram Jones was the medical Director of the Central Pennsylvania State Hospital for the Mentally Defective. His patients were probably lower in intelligence than any similar institution in the United States. There was a larger percentage of idiots and low grade imbeciles. Dr. Jones, in his daily rounds, preached the gospel of loving kindness and the prolongation of every life. He sometimes wondered just why his helpless charges should be allowed to live, but he never wavered from his professional pride in their care. In his more grandiose moments he called them all his children, certainly a large and peculiar family, thirteen hundred idiots and near idiots.

His superior officers was a political appointee, who, when the

crash came, left at once, to take care of himself and his family. Of the one hundred and ninety employees, a large number walked off when they realized the impossibility of caring for their charges under the new condition.

Dr. Jones and ten faithful men and women tried for two days to feed and care for the thirteen hundred patients. During that time Jones went without sleep. At twilight of the second day he had arrived at a decision. He gave orders that all of the little ones should be put to bed. This was not a difficult task. Going to bed and to sleep was something that all in the hospital had done so often that it had become routine.

Sleep and quiet, blessed twin angels, hovered over the hospital, and then Dr. Hiram Jones started to make his last round. He paused at each bed, and with a medicine dropper carefully placed between parted lips five drops of medicine and then on, to the next bed. He worked methodically and quickly, aided by his little band of nurses. At last all of the patients were asleep.

And from that sleep we trust they wakened into a world where all little children are bright and happy and intelligent.

Dr. Hiram Jones said good-bye to his nurses and advised them to do what seemed best to them and then he went to his office. There he lit a tallow candel and finished writing his story. He used

a quill pen he had just made for the purpose. He had written the story of those hard days and now he added an ending as though to justify himself in the eyes of all who would come after him and read.

"AND MY FINAL CONCLUSION WAS THAT IF THESE CHILDREN OF MINE WERE LIBERATED THEY WOULD ALL OF THEM DIE OF STARVATION OR WORSE. SOME MIGHT LIVE FOR WEEKS—LIKE WILD ANIMALS LIVE IN THE WOODS—BUT EVENTUALLY THEY WOULD DIE. IT MAY BE THAT EVEN THE MOST INTELLIGENT OF OUR NATION WILL HAVE A HARD TIME TO SURVIVE, BUT THERE CAN BE NO FUTURE AND NO HOPE FOR THESE POOR THINGS I HAVE CARED FOR THESE LONG YEARS.

"AND SO I AM SENDING THEM HOME. IT IS A HAPPY THOUGHT TO ME THAT THESE CHILDREN HAVE A HOME TO GO TO AND A FATHER WHO IS MORE KIND AND WISE IN HIS DEALING WITH THEM THAN I HAVE BEEN ABLE TO BE. I AM SENDING THEM HOME! AND YET THESE CHILDREN LOVED ME AND TRUSTED ME. "IN DOING THIS DEED

I HAVE SHATTERED TRADITIONS OF A LIFETIME. I DID WHAT SEEMS BEST FOR THEM, BUT TO ME IT WAS A LOSS OF ALL THE BEST IN MY ETHICAL LIFE.

"I CAN ONLY COMPENSATE BY JOINING THEM IN A BETTER WORLD."

So Dr. Jones dropped ten drops of the medicine on his tongue, blew out the candle, and went into the darkness to find his children. Two years later the message was found on his desk with all that remained of a brave man, still seated with his head in his arms.

Chapter X The Right To Live

Winter was approaching. The Hubler family was prepared for it. They had received some help from Stafford, but even without that, they would have done fairly well. They were learning, not only to live the life of pioneers, but in addition to accommodate themselves to the conditions of the new stone age.

Paul had made some traps and every day brought in some fresh meat or some skins. Ruth was learning to make articles of clothing out of the skins. Even Angelica in her play was preparing for the new life. Her dolls were growing up in a non-metallic period.

Every morning Paul would start

out to make a round of his traps. Late afternoon found him back in the house. The entire family was comfortable. They had the necessities of life, though entirely deprived of the luxuries of their former home in New York. They often talked about that city. Now that Hubler was a little more sure of the future he had more time to talk.

"I have often wondered just why men like Stafford did not send expeditions into the city," he said one evening. "There must be a lot of plunder there that would be useful for many years to come. Think of the full storehouses, the department stores, even the private homes, deserted like ours was. Some day when I have a chance I am going to talk about it to him."

"I am afraid that it is all rather mused up," replied his wife. "You remember what happened to our canned goods; and then just as we left our apartment, the faucets started to leak. I believe that the city was flooded. Think of all the water pipes going to pieces. Perhaps by now many of the buildings have fallen down. It was really the steel that held them up toward the sky. I think that some day Mr. Stafford will go to the city, but it seems to me that his idea is to become absolutely independent of the past. Anything we took from the city would only last so long and the time would come when we would have

to learn how to make things or go without, so the sooner we begin the better we will be able to live on."

The next morning Hubler started as usual to make a round of his traps. A light snow had fallen during the night and the woods had turned into fairy land. He determined to make a larger circle than usual in the effort to locate some new hunting grounds up on the mountains. He was four miles from home when he saw smoke.

That was enough for him.

He had never seen smoke in that direction before.

And smoke meant human beings. He wanted to know what kind.

Born and raised in the city, he had behind him a long line of frontier ancestors. His forebears had fought the Indians so often that they had almost turned into Indians themselves. Once Paul Hubler set his feet on the bare ground, he had reverted to type. Call it inherited memory, or any other name, the fact remained that he had become a natural and very efficient woodsman.

So he started to find out where the smoke was coming from.

Two hours later he was motionless on an overhanging shelf of rock. Fifty feet below him was the fire and around that fire were fifty men, escaped from Sing Sing. They had raided a farm, killed a cow, and now were busily engaged in eating it and trying to

keep warm around the fire.

There was no doubt about the fact that they were a menace to society. Paul could hear them talking, the argot of the New York underworld. A lot of the slang he could not understand but he had no difficulty in catching the drift of their conversation. They were tired of living in the forest, and too lazy to build cabins. They had killed and robbed, but now there were no more isolated families, no easy plunder. The winter was going to be cold and long.

And they planned to attack the Stafford farm, kill the men, take possession of the buildings, and add the women to their gang. It was not an unusual plan. Similar collections of degenerates had been doing just that thing ever since the beginning of the *Metal Doom*. The unusual part of it was that they were talking rather loudly and Patil Hubler was on the overhanging rock.

He had heard enough, and left as silently as he had come. Once away from the vicinity he traveled as he had never traveled before. He came to the edge of the wood; he came to the house and found Ruth and Angelica safe, and then, without pausing to tell her the reason for his haste, he told her to put on her wraps and get ready to leave the house.

"We are going to see Stafford," he said. "I have to see him."

It was a long walk. They took turns carrying the little girl. The

road had three inches of snow on it, pulling, dragging at their feet. At last they came to a well-built, wooden fence. A man was slowly walking up and down the crossroads. He walked up to Paul.

"You have to stop, and turn around," he said sharply. "This road is private."

"Better times are coming," answered Hubler.

The man smiled.

"In that case you can go on. Want to see the Boss? He is up at the house. You look tired. Supposed I carry the baby for you to the end of my beat, and then one of my buddies will help you out. You look tired."

"Not so much tired as worried," acknowledged Hubler.

Soon they were being hastily welcomed by Stafford.

"I thought you people had decided we were not good enough for you to associate with," he said with a laugh.

"It was not that, Mr. Stafford," Ruth replied seriously. "We wanted to make a real effort to get along for at least one winter on our own resources, and we could have done it, only Paul became frightened."

"I bet it was something serious, Mrs. Hubler. Your husband does not impress me as a man who would worry over trifles."

The husband told his story. He told it in the greatest detail, not omitting any of the crimes the various members of the criminal

gang had bragged about. He ended with the simple statement:

"I thought you ought to know about it as soon as possible."

"You were right. It looks like a very serious matter. I want to call my advisory group together. We have talked over such a possibility, but so far it has not been a real emergency. I want whatever action we take to be the best thought of not one man, but of all the thinkers in our community."

So, within a short time, Paul Hubler was repeating the story to an earnest group of twenty men, each a specialist in his line of physical or mental endeavor. They listened intently. Then Stafford called on the oldest man of the group, a man who directed the agricultural life of the community. He was highly respected by his fellow workers. He began:

"When I was a young man I had a dog. He was a cross between a collie and a fox hound, and when he reached his growth he was a fairly large dog. Now there were a lot of dogs in that section larger and heavier than my dog, but my dog never lost a fight. When he decided to fight another dog he simply walked up to him and jumped; there was no warning. The other dog was conquered before he realized there was a fight.

"I think we ought to act that way. These men by their own statements have been guilty of murder and worse. They are thinking of killing us, and taking

our property. They even talk of taking our women. There is only one thing to do. Surround them and exterminate them."

"You would not capture them and give them a chance to leave this part of the country?" asked Stafford.

"Absolutely no. We might succeed, but we simply expose others to the same dangers we escape from. It would not be friendly. We did not ask for it, but this has become our problem. Let us settle it."

The old farmer sat down.

The vote taken proved that he had voiced the opinion of all present. Then Stafford said a few words:

"Ever since the beginning of the changes produced by the Metal Doom I have been convinced that there had to be an elimination of the unfit. I hope that we will always take care of our aged, but for the criminal I saw no hope. Our social order is too weak to imprison him and support him in idleness, and at the same time we cannot allow the psychopathic personalities to remain at liberty. They are too dangerous to the decent people in any community. I am sure that at the present time there are lions and tigers in our woods escaped from the various Zoological Gardens of our land. If we found one of them, we would kill it. This band of criminals is a greater menace than as many wild animals. There is nothing to

do except to protect ourselves. We will leave here early in the evening. Hubler can guide us."

Chapter XI The First Killing

It would be impossible in a short narrative to completely cover the entire history of this period of the Second Stone Age, or even to thoroughly describe the changes effected. Other historians, no doubt, would stress portions of the transition which this tale completely omits. What is attempted here is to give a general description of the change in civilization, and especially lay emphasis on the new attitude humanity assumed in dealing with problems of life.

For it is a well recognized fact that the leaders in the new social order early realized that the old solutions of old problems could not be of further use to mankind. Everything had changed, and the change came so suddenly that it was fortunate there were many groups of men who were possessed of sufficient intelligence and imagination to see at once the necessity for the adoption of an entirely new code of social and ethical laws.

The events centering around the first killing showed the wisdom of their attitude toward the new laws of society. For centuries the legal profession had made a game out of the matter of law violation. Once a man was ar-

rested for a crime, a game of legal chess started between two lawyers and the question was not so much an effort to establish the guilt or innocence of the prisoner as to determine which lawyer was the shrewdest. Certain phases became shibboleth, such as EVERY MAN IS INNOCENT TILL PROVEN GUILTY, and that NO MAN CAN TWICE BE PUT IN JEOPARDY OF LIFE OR LIMB FOR THE SAME OFFENCE.

The attitude of the legal profession was deeply appreciated by the criminal of the late electrical age. Irrespective of the blackness or number of his crimes, the arrested criminal asked for every possible consideration from the law, and his lawyers took advantage of every loophole in the law to prevent the administration of justice to the prisoner.

Obviously, all this elaborate legal machiery broke to pieces with the smashing of civilization. There being no jails, there could be no such thing as keeping an accused man behind the bars for several years while his trial was fatally procrastinated till even the ablest witnesses had forgotten what it was all about. There being no money, there could be no more bail, and even straw bonds were an impossibility, for there were no longer any courts.

The partial details of the first killing are given to show the necessity of the act and also to show that the criminal mind had

failed to appreciate the change that had taken place in his treatment. Up to this time, the criminal's chief fear was in being arrested. Now a far greater menace faced him.

It was full moon that December night. Paul Hubler, walking silently through the snow, led a company of sixty silent men. They were armed with bows and arrows, spears and stone axes. All of them were expert archers, and had elm bows and yard-long arrows that would have aroused the envy of Robin Hood save for the fact that all the arrows were flint tipped. The snow was just deep enough and soft enough to deaden the footfalls. Talking had been forbidden.

They came finally to the forsaken home of the Hublers. From here on Paul had to show his woodsmanship. He felt sure that he knew the way for the next four miles. Daylight, the first dawn on the white snow, showed him that he was half a mile from the bandit camp. A thin column of smoke showed in the frosty air. There was a short consultation and then the sixty men split into three groups, each of which approached the smoke from different sides. Stafford and Hubler made for the overhanging shelf of rock where Hubler had first heard of the gangsters' plans.

The fire was blazing and the convicts were eating breakfast. They were talking about their

plans for the day, the capture, plundering and burning of the Stafford properties. They said enough to convince Stafford of their guilt, even if he had not been fully satisfied before.

The weird cry of a hoot owl rang through the wood.

It was answered by other owls.

And then Stafford stood up on the overhanging rock.

"I want you men to listen to me," he said.

The convicts jumped to their feet. Every man seized his club. They were not afraid of one man but they were perplexed at seeing him there. At least they kept still.

"We have your record," continued Stafford. "We know what you have done before today and we know what you were going to do today. We tried you last night and sentenced you."

"Whachermean?" asked one of the leaders, adding a few useless but very powerful obscenities.

Stafford simply put his hands to his mouth, hooted, and the killing began.

From the surrounding wood came the peculiar melody of twanging bowstrings and the swish of arrows cutting the air. The convicts began to fall, clutching at the arrow shafts. Hubler and Stafford had left the rock to join their men.

The surviving criminals tried to find shelter but there was none. They tried to run, but that was

useless, the arrows were swifter. At last only two men were standing against the rock. One was a murderer who had first been a lawyer.

Stafford told his men to take their spears and finish the killing. He led them. In fact he and Hubler walked up to the two unwounded men.

"You can't do a thing like this and get away with it," blustered the lawyer. Time had gone backward with him; once again he was in the electrical age, bluffing, twisting, squirming, making use of every legality to evade punishment. "Don't you know this is murder? If we are guilty, why not arrest us and give us a trial? You say we are criminals? Why, you have broken every law there ever was during the last ten minutes."

"Sure thing!" echoed the other man. "You can't do a thing like this. You'll pay for this. Just wait till I get a lawyer."

"We are going to kill you," said Stafford, quietly.

"You can't do it!" yelled the lawyer.

"Can't we?" asked the leader, plunging his spear in, just below the ribs.

Hubler made his kill without comment.

A man came up and touched Stafford on the shoulder.

"All the men are down, Boss, but some of them are just wounded."

"Finish them," was Stafford's whispered order.

"We will leave them where they fell," he said to Hubler. In years to come this place will be visited and those who come will feel that something happened here."

"Something did happen," replied Hubler. "This marks the beginning of a new justice."

Back the men of the community went. Back through the snow. White faced and cold and shivering they went back through the snow.

"I never killed a man before," said Stafford.

"I have," replied Hubler. "I killed a man once who was trying to hurt Ruth. I never did before, but I am going to keep on killing anyone who tries to hurt Ruth or my baby."

"Are you sure it was right? Perhaps we should have given them a chance to fight?"

"They had the same chance to fight that they gave all their victims."

"But that man spoke about law?"

"Mr. Stafford. All the law that man knew is dead."

Back in the community the sixty men were welcomed by their women and children. There was rejoicing over the fact that none had been killed, none even injured. A special dinner was served, and some speeches made after dinner. Not a word was said about the affair of the early morn-

ing; it was not even hinted at.

The Hublers were assigned a comfortable bedroom. Angelica was put to bed under a Galloway fur laprobe, which she pretended changed her into a bear. She growled and tried to bite her father.

But at last she decided to change back into a little child.

"I love you, Angelica," said her father, "and I am glad you are a little girl instead of a little boy."

"Thank you," said Angelica, and went to sleep.

Ruth and Paul sat before the fire. Ruth whispered:

"Do you know what the night is, Paul? This is Christmas Eve. Centuries ago, on this night, Christ was born in Bethlehem. He came to bring love and peace to the world."

The man shut his eyes. Once again he saw the look of astonishment on the face of the gangster as he felt the stone spear strike him. He looked around the room and seemed to see the dead, stretched on the ground, with here and there blotches of red on the snow.

He held Ruth closer, as he whispered back:

"I wish Christ had been born on some other day."

Chapter XII

The First Christmas

During the night some of the women had decorated the main

hall of the Stafford house. The Christmas programme had long been provided for. There were to be gifts for all the little ones, toys and dolls carved out of wood and bone, and decorated with bits of lace and old dresses, sewed with bone needles.

All of the little community were to eat Christmas dinner together. There was no instrumental music, but all knew the old carols and pleasure and happiness were welcomed guests. The women were happy, the children merry and the men—the men were just a little more serious than seemed to be appropriate.

The food was excellent, meat roasted over the flame, bread cooked in the brick oven, vegetables boiled in earthen pots, all served on china plates and eaten with wooden spoons. There was milk for the little children.

After the dinner there were speeches in plenty, with jokes and laughter. Life was different, but human nature was very much the same as it had been. Irrespective of changes, life had been kind to those who had sought and obtained the shelter of the Stafford colony.

There were a thousand unanswered questions, ten thousand unsolved problems, but for the minute these were forgotten in the effort to be happy. Just for a minute and then the tide turned.

One of the sentries rushed in and whispered to Stafford. He

beckoned a half dozen men with his eyes and walked out of the banquet hall. Out on the front gallery of the house they waited for him, two wild-eyed men leaning against the railing in their exhaustion.

"We have come to warn you," they said. After that, one did the talking, the other falling to the floor and dying there from his wounds. There is a mob of crooks sweeping this way. They are killing and burning everything in their path. They have horses, and they are fast. They heard of your place and swear to eat Christmas dinner here. They killed our wives and burnt our homes."

"How many?" asked Stafford.

"Over a hundred."

"Where from?"

"Up the Hudson."

"Good. Go in and eat. Sorry about your friend. Ring the alarm! Call all the men in."

"Fortunately most of them are here, Mr. Stafford," one of the sentinels replied.

"That's true. It's Christmas. Keep the women inside and we will go out to do our talking. No use worrying them."

Seventy men were all there were in the colony. Stafford did not waste time. He called the names of twenty of them.

"You stay here in the house and guard the women," he ordered, "and the rest of you get your arms and horses ready. We ride to the North Fence. This affair is

not going to be a slaughter, it's going to be a fight."

The only argument came from the twenty selected to remain. Paul Hubler was one of them.

"It's not right," he told Stafford. "I ought to go with you."

"You stay. It is all arranged. If anything happens to me you have to help save the colony."

The fifty men never went back to the house. There were no farewells said. They simply went to the stables, saddled their horses, arranged their weapons and rode away.

At every window faces pressed against the glass, women's faces and the faces of little children.

The fifty rode at a gallop to the North Fence. No time to spare. Doom was faster than the feet of horses. But when they came to the fence, no enemy was in sight.

Stafford called out the names of twenty of his best horsemen:

"Leave your bows and arrows here. Take all the horses up to the maple grove. Tie thirty and leave your spears there. Be ready to mount and charge when the time comes. If they break through, come anyway. The thirty of us will stay here and hold them. I do not want one of them to die on our land. We will kill what we can but you have to mop up."

The place was well selected for a battle. The stone fence ran for several miles on both sides of the road. It was bull strong,

stallion high and pig tight. It came up squarely on both sides of the road, and across the road there was a gate. But it was not part of Stafford's plan to close the gate. A closed gate was a warning, an open gate an invitation.

The day passed, and then the sun turned into a red ball of fire. The rouged sky looked angry and cold. Then the riders came into view, a motley, sordid group, laden with plunder and their souls charged with a hundred crimes. They were bad men, not brave, but men who would fight like rats if caught in a trap.

The North Fence looked like one more stone fence to them. They came on at a slow trot. Their horses had been badly cared for, poorly fed, and savagely ridden.

The leaders were almost through the gate when ten men sprang forward and plunged their lances with the fury of desperation into horses and men.

In a minute of time the passage was blocked with a mass of kicking horses and cursing men.

Ant the ten men kept on stabbing with their lances tipped with six inches of sharp flint, stabbing at everything that moved, drawing their lances back and replunging them. Not for nothing had daily practice been held at this use of the spear.

Simultaneously the remaining twenty archers stood up behind

the fence and started to shoot. This was archery with a vengeance, not shooting at a mass, but each arrow deliberately aimed at a man. Not a sound from one side of the fence except the grunts of the lancers as they lunged forward and the twanging of the bows as the arrows sped.

Half of the horses were down.

And then the mounted men charged from the shelter of the maple trees. At the beating thunder of galloping hoofs the bandits still horsed, turned, and Stafford realizing that the fight at the best would be unequal, knowing that soon the arrows would be gone, cursed his stupidity in sending away the thirty horses.

But down along the outside of the fence they came, bridles tied together, two men leading them, and Stafford, with a cheer, ordered his men to mount.

Now the enemy was caught between the hammer and the anvil. They fought. They had to. Armed with clubs they did their best to save their lives and kill. But here were no isolated farmers, overwhelmed by numbers. Opposed to them were picked men on splendid horses, men who had for months been training in the use of the stone ax. Soon the fight had turned into a flight, and the flight into a deadly ending.

Stafford's men came back. That is most of them came back. Five were killed. During the next twenty-four hours three more died.

Stafford sat on his panting horse as his men gathered around him. He looked at them, and then asked:

"Are they all dead?"

"We think so."

"Make sure. Kill the wounded horses; take your ropes and open the gate. We will leave our injured men here under guard till we can send the carts for them. I thank you, my friends, for what you have done this day. I feel that it has taught us a lesson. The day for our splendid isolation is passed."

Later on a man rode up to him.

"Boss, the job is finished. We have no prisoners. But we want to take our dead back with us and the wounded men want to go back. They think they can stand the ride better than staying here and waiting for the carts to come for them."

"How are you going to take our dead?" Stafford replied.

"Please, sir, we thought we would take turns carrying them in our arms. The women would not like it, their women, if we left them here, even for a little while."

Stafford started to cry. Poor fellow! There was no woman waiting for him to come back, dead or alive; he hated to face the other women and tell them the news. He waved assent, spoke to his horse and started the trek toward home.

And the hundred men scattered

over the meadows, faces turned toward the growing moon, thought, if they thought at all, that life had played them a scurvy trick.

Once home, every attention was paid to the wounded. After all was done that could be done, the solitary physician took Hubler and Stafford to one side.

"Three of them are going to die," he whispered. "We might save them if we had the instruments, but they all disappeared with the rest of the metals and the stone makeshifts are not much use."

"It cannot be helped," replied Stafford dully. "Tell their women as kindly as you can and—have you any morphine to give them? I do not want them to suffer."

"I have some. You know I asked you to organize an expedition to some city, to see if we could get some drugs, and surgical supplies."

"I know. My fault. I never realized that it might end in a fight to the death. I will, trust me, do the best I can. Right now, I must confer with my advisers and then sleep."

Six of them met in Stafford's office an hour later. Hubler was one of the six.

"Today's affair convinced me," said Stafford, "that we have underestimated the size of this job. In the space of twelve hours we met and destroyed about one hun-

dred and fifty desperate bandits operating in two gangs. Their code of morals is entirely different from ours. Today we were successful. Tomorrow we may fail. We know nothing about what is going on in the world beyond us. We have lived a life of smug contentment, in a world of dreams. If a thousand men had come up to the stone fence they would be in this house now and we would be looking at the moon, like the men we killed. This place made a wonderful stock farm, but I feel it has its limitations as a place to defend against an army. I am not discouraged but I am anxious for the future. This morning we had seventy men. Tonight sixty-five, and the doctor says three more will die tomorrow. What is to be done?"

"Build a fort," replied Hubler. "And tell the world to come and take us. Stop being idealists and dreamers and develop an army of our own. Have other groups join us; and then we can defend ourselves."

Chapter XIII Fort Telephone

They all went to bed that night rather exhausted from the unusual events of the previous twenty-four hours. The next morning the council of war was begun.

As a rather delicate compliment, Paul Hubler was called upon to open the discussion.

"Because he has imagination," explained Stafford.

"And that kept me most of the night," replied Hubler. "Seriously speaking, I was restless and when I did sleep, I dreamed rather horrible things. It was all because I was sure we were in for a bad time.

"We have learned something about it. Naturally we made some mistakes, but they can be corrected.

"The first thing we have to have is a fort. They largely went out of fashion during the World War, but now, without artillery, in the age of Stone, it seems they would be very useful. I never saw a fort, never helped to build one, but it seems we will need a lot of timber and a lot of stone. Both stone and timber are going to be hard to get without metal tools, but there are a lot of old stone houses around here, and any number of telephone poles. Let us select a hill, and it has to have a living spring on it. Tear down some houses and build four or five towers with little windows in them. Run a ditch around the hill connecting the towers and in that ditch set up the telephone poles touching each other and tied together with ropes. Fill in the ditch, tamp it, and stiffen the poles in the rear with stone and dirt. Have platforms made for the archers.

"Inside the fort have little houses built for the various fam-

ilies. Build store houses. Have enough fodder to keep cattle. Build reservoirs for water. Establish ammunition piles of stone and stores of arrows. Build catapults to throw large stones; train men to aim them and estimate distances.

"But that is just one fort. Try and have our neighbors build another one twenty miles away. Have beacons of wood on mountain tops ready to fire as danger signals. Find out who our allies are and how much we can depend on them. Consider every group of men our enemies till they prove that they are decent people. Learn to fight against overwhelming odds and keep on fighting.

"I believe that for a while all our effort should be spent in perfecting our defenses. The greatest luxury we can look for is safety for our women and children. On them depend the security of our future decades. Instead of spending time trying to build looms, and manufacture earthen pots, we should send to the cities and bring back everything we need. Time enough twenty years from now to learn how to spin and weave—now we must spend our time in perfecting means of security.

"In the first Stone Age, prolonging of the life of the individual and securing the perpetuity of the race were the two great objects of life. In the second Stone Age we must not lose sight

of this. Culture, ethics, past education, the fine arts, sciences, all must bow for the time to the securing of safety for the men who are worth while and breeding and rearing of worthwhile children.

"You ask me what I think? My answer is to start tomorrow and build a fort, and when that fort is built start filling it with necessities of life from the cities. It is going to be the work of months. When it is finished will be time enough to talk about the luxuries of life, the culture of the past."

"I think that some of us ought to go on with our special work," said a man who had been a writer of books. "For several months I have been writing a history of this period. I want to go on with it."

"What is the use of a history if there is no one left alive to read it?" countered Hubler.

At this point Stafford took the floor.

"I think Hubler has said all there is to say. We are barbarians living in a stone age and we might as well admit it. We know a lot more than the men of the first Stone Age but I am not sure that our superior intellect makes us better able to cope with the prob-

lems that face us. But one thing is sure. We have to save the worthwhile people; the race has to go on. It may be conceit on my part, but I feel that we are better fitted to make the future race worthwhile than were the men we killed today. I think we ought to build this fort. We can have our architect draw plans for it and I think I know the very place to put it. And we will all get to work. There is a little colony ten miles below us. I will go down there and ask them to join us in building the fort and they can share it with us in time of danger. We will build it along the lines Hubler suggested and we will call the place Fort Telephone.

"I am sold on the proposition. I do not want to force any of you to it, but you must see that it is the sensible thing to do. If any of you differ with us, you can leave the colony. It may be easier to wave a quill pen than to wrangle with a telephone pole but in the long run the telephone poles will help us live longer.

"For this era is going to be long in stabilizing. It is going to be the survival of the fittest. It is a test of courage. We will build Fort Telephone."

(To be continued)

Don't Miss

FRANK HERBERT'S NEW NOVEL SANTAROGA BARRIER

in the October AMAZING

(Continued from page 69)

the tree-folk, who did not see much of what happened. Which makes the present story valuable as new light on an old, old truth.

Hok saw that Rmanth was at least six times more angry than when they had met last. The arrow in his tongue had evidently broken off or worked its way out, though pink-tinted foam flecked Rmanth's great protruding tusks. The arrow in his nostril still remained, and his ugly snout was swollen and sore. His eyes remained cold and cunning, but as Hok came near they lighted with a pale glow of recognition.

"You know me, then," Hok said. "What have we to say and do to each other?"

Rmanth replied by action, a bolting direct charge.

Tree-thickets sprouted between the two, but Rmanth clove and ploughed among them like a bull among reeds. His explosion into attack was so sudden, so unwarned, so swift, that Hok's side-ward leap saved him barely in time. As it was, the bristly flank

Horatius, won his fame by killing a boar "that wasted fields and slaughtered men."

Such super-swine are described as unthinkable huge and strong, clumsy but swift, with fierce and voracious natures that made them a menace to whole communities and districts. Not even the European wild boar, wicked fighter though it is, could approximate such character and performance. It becomes increasingly sure that Ramath, the boar of Eurymanthis, and those others, trace back to tales of the now extinct *Dinoceras*. — Ed.

of the beast touched him lightly as it drove by. Rmanth, missing that first opportunity to finish this maddening enemy, turned as nimbly as a wild horse, head writhed around on the huge shoulders and horrid fangs gaping for a crushing bite.

Hok hurriedly conquered an instinctive urge to spring clear—such a spring would only have mixed him up in the brush, and Rmanth's second pounce would have captured him. The part of wisdom was to come close, and Hok did so. He placed one hand against Rmanth's great quivering haunch, the other hand grasping his bow-stave. As the big brute spun to snap at him, Hok followed the haunches around. Rmanth could not get quite close enough to seize him. As the two of them circled, Hok saw a way into the open, and took it at once. He slipped around and behind a big tree. Rmanth, charging violently after, smote that tree heavily. Hok laughed, then headed toward the slope which he had traveled the day before.

Rmanth's thick head must have buzzed from that impact against the tree. He stood swaying his muzzle experimentally, planting his forefeet widely. Hok had done all his maneuverings with an arrow laid ready across his bow, held in place with his left forefinger. Now he had time to draw it fully and send it singing at Rmanth's face.

As before, he aimed at the eye. This time his aim was not spoiled. The shaft drove deep into one cold, wicked orb, and Rmanth rose suddenly to his massive hind-quarters, an upright colossus, pawing the air and voicing a horrible cry of pain. Such a cry has been imagined only once by modern man and the imaginer was both a scholar and a master of fantasy.* Hok clinched forever his right to his reputation of stout-heartedness. He laughed a second time.

"An arrow in your other eye, and you'll be at my mercy!" said he, reaching over his shoulder for another shaft in his quiver.

But there was not another shaft in his quiver.

The battlings with the Stymphs, his knocking of the milknut from an assailant's hand, the hurried destruction of Krol's gaudy snake had used up his store of shafts. If Rmanth was half-blinded, Hok was wholly without missiles. He felt a cold wave of dismay for a moment, but only for a moment.

"Perhaps I was not fair to think of hacking and prodding a helpless enemy to death," he reflected. "This makes a more even battle of it. At any rate, Rmanth has forgotten that Soko will be

* . . . something between bellowing and whistling, with a kind of sneeze in the middle . . . and when you've once heard it you'll be *quite* content."
—Lewis Carroll, in *THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS*.—Ed.

filling the water gourds. Let me play with him further. Here he comes!"

And here he came, in another of his mighty bursts of power, swift and resistless as an updriving avalanche.

Hok dared wait longer this time, for Rmanth must charge up the hill. He had quickly returned his bow to its shoulder loop, and now took a stout grip on his axe. As the gasping form-fringed maw, from which lolled that inflamed tongue, was almost upon him, he sprang aside as before and chopped at the remaining good eye of Rmanth. Missing, he struck the gray hide of the cheek. His heavy flint rebounded like a hailstone from a hut-roof. Hok turned and ran, leaping from side to side to confuse his enemy, and paused near the great sloping trail down which dying mammoths were wont to slide themselves. A carrion stench assailed his nostrils, and he remembered his original quarrel with Rmanth.

"You ate my prey," he accused the lumbering hulk, which turned stubbornly to pursue him further. "Gragru I trapped, wounded, and chased. He was mine. He recognized my victory, but you lolled below here and gorged yourself on my hunting. You owe me meat, Rmanth, and I intend to collect the debt."

His voice, as usual, maddened the elephant-pig. When Hok began to scale the slope backward,

Rmanth breasted the climb with great driving digs of his massive feet and legs.

But now the advantage was with Hok. Lighter, neater-footed, he could move faster on the ascent than could this mighty murderer. Indeed, he could probably gain the snow-lipped plain above and escape entirely. But he did not forget his promise to Soko's people. Victory, not flight, was what he must achieve.

"Come near, Rmanth," he invited, moving backward and upward. "I want a fair chance at you."

Rmanth complied, surging up the slanting trail with a sudden new muster of energy. Hok braced himself and smote with his axe at Rmanth's nose. Right between the two forward horns his blade struck, and again Rmanth yelled in furious pain. But the blow only bruised that heavy hide, did not lay it fully open. Rmanth faltered, and Hok retreated once more.

"This nightmare cannot be wounded," he reflected aloud, "At least not in the side or head or muzzle, like an honest beast. What then? The neck, as with a bull?"*

* The sturdiest of animals can be dealt with by attacking the spine through the name of the neck. Most familiar of such attacks is probably the sword-thrust of the matador in a Spanish bullfight. The bull is induced to lower his head bringing into reach a vulnerable spot the size of one's open palm at juncture of neck and

But there was no way to get to Rmanth's neck. He did not charge with head down, like a stag or bison or rhinoceros, but with nose up and mouth open, like a beast of prey. Hok wished that he had a spear, stout and long. It might serve his turn. But he had only the axe, and it must not fail him. He continued his retirement, along the trail he remembered from his previous descent.

So for some time, and for considerable rise in altitude. Then, suddenly, Rmanth was not crowding Hok any longer. Hok paused and grimaced his defiance.

"Tired?" he jeered. "Or afraid?"

Plainly it was the latter, but Rmanth's fear was not for Hok. He turned his one good eye this way and that, looking up into the sky that at this point was not very misty. He sniffed, and wrinkled a very ugly gray lip that reminded Hok of Krol.

Then Hok remembered. "Oh, yes, the Stymphs. Krol told me that you did not venture far enough from the shelter of the trees for them to reach you. But think no more about them, Rmanth. I killed most of them.

shoulders. Elephant and rhinoceros also can be killed by a proper stab there, since the spinal cord is close to the surface, for all the thick, hard hide. Scientists think that the down-pointing front teeth of the sabre-tooth tiger—extinct, or very rare, in Hok's time—were designed by nature for just such a mode of killing.—Ed.

Those who lived have flown away. Perhaps the snow will destroy them—they seem to think it a kinder neighbor than Hok.”

He moved boldly into an open space on the slope. Rmanth snorted and wheezed, seeming to wait for sure doom to overtake the audacious human. Then he squinted skyward again, was plainly reassured and finally followed Hok upward.

“Well done, elephant-pig!” Hok applauded. “This is between you and me. No Stymph will cheat the conqueror.”

More ascent, man and beast toiling into less tropical belts. Hok found himself backing into a ferny thicket. It was here that—yes, wadded into a fork was his bundle of winter clothing.

As he found it, it seemed that he found also a plan, left here like the clothes against his need. He felt like shouting out one of his laughs, but smothered it lest Rmanth be placed on guard. Instead he seized and shook out the big lion skin that was his main protection against blizzards. Its shaggy expanse was blond and bright, like his own hair.

“See, Rmanth,” he roared, “I run no more! Catch this!”

He flung the pelt right into Rmanth’s face.

Next moment those mighty fangs had closed upon the fur. The horrid head bore its prize to earth, holding it there as if to worry it. His neck was stooped,

the thick skin stretched taut. . . Hok hurled himself forward in a charge.

Before Rmanth was aware that the hide in his jaws was empty, Hok had sprung and planted a moccasin upon his nose, between those forward horns. Rmanth emitted a whistling grunt and tossed upward, as a bull tosses. Hok felt himself flipped into the air, and for a moment he soared over the neck-nape, the very position he hoped for.

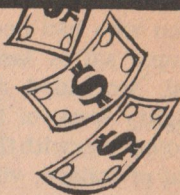
Down slammed his axe, even as he hurtled. It struck hard, square, and true across the spine of Rmanth, back of the shallow skull. Hok’s arms tingled with the back-snap of that effort, and his body was flung sidewise by it.

But Rmanth was down, stunned or smashed. He floundered to his knees. Hok ran to him, dagger out. A thrust, a powerful dragging slash, and the thick hide was torn open. Once more the axe rose and fell. The exposed spinal vertebrae broke beneath the impact with a sound like a tree splitting on a frosty night.

Rmanth relaxed, and abruptly rolled down slope, as dead mammoths were wont to roll. Hok saved his last breath, forbearing to shout his usual signal of victory. Snatching up his crumpled lion-skin cloak, he dashed swiftly downward in pursuit of that big lump of flesh he had killed.

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Chapter XII

The Feast and the Farewell

Those men, women and children who had been Soko's tree-people sat at last on the solid soil, stockaded about with the mighty trees of the jungle, and roofed over with the impenetrable mat of foliage, vines and mould that had once been their floor and footing. They sat in a circle near the brink of the stream, and in the circle's center was a cheerful cooking-fire of Hok's making. The air was heavy with the smell of roast meat.

There had been enough of Rmanth for all, and more than enough. Once Hok had found Soko and shown him the carcass, it had been possible, though not easy, to coax the other men down to ground level. And it had taken all the muscle of the tribe, tugging wearily on tough vine-strands, to drag Rmanth to the waterside. After that, it was an additional labor, with much blunting of bone knives, to flay away his great armor of hide. But when the great wealth of red meat was exposed, and Hok had instructed the most apt of the tribe in the cooking thereof—ah, after that it was a fulfillment of the most ancient dreams about paradise and plenty.

Three or four tribesmen were toasting last delectable morsels on green twigs in the outlying beds of coals. More of them lolled and even slept in heavy surfeit,

assured that no great trampling foe would overtake and destroy them. The children, whom no amount of gorging could quiet down, were skipping and chattering in the immeorial game of tag. To one side sat Soko, on a boulder that was caught between gnarled roots, and his pose was that of a benevolent ruler.

A comely young woman of his people was applying a fresh dressing of astringent herbs and leaves to the wound Krol had made the night before. Grandly Soko affected not to notice the twinges of pain or the attractions of the attendant. He spoke with becoming gravity to Hok, who lounged near with his back against a tree, his big flint axe cuddled crosswise on his lap.

"There is much more meat than my people will ever finish," Soko observed.

"Build fires of green wood, that will make thick smoke," Hok directed. "In that smoke hang thin slices of the meat that is left. It will be dried and preserved so as to keep for a long time, and make other meals for your tribe."

Soko eyes Hok's bow, which leaned against the tree beside him. "That dart-caster of yours is a wonderful weapon," he observed. "I have drawn two shafts, still good, from Rmanth's body. If I can make a bow like it—"

"Take this one," said Hok generously, and passed it over. "I

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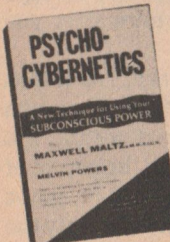
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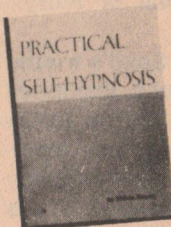
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"We will keep coals from that cooking fire," said Soko.

"Do more than that," Hok urged. "You have seen my firesticks and how I used them. Make some for yourself, that the fire may be brought to you when you need it." He peered around him. "See, Soko, there are outcroppings of hard rock near and far. I see granite, a bit of jasper, and here and there good flints. Use those to make tools and weapons instead of bone or ivory."

The dressing of Soko's wound was completed. Soko dismissed the young woman with a lordly gesture, but watched her appreciatively as she demurely departed. Then he turned back to his guest. His smile took from his face the strange beast-look that clung to the wide loose lips and chinless jaw.

"Hok," he said, "we shall never forget these wonders you have done for us, and which you have taught us to do for ourselves. In future times, when you deign to come again—"

"But I shall not come again," Hok told him.


Soko looked surprised and hurt. Hok continued:

"You and I are friends, Soko. It is our nature to be friendly, unless someone proves himself an enemy. But your people and my people are too different. There would be arguments and difficulties between them, and then fights and trouble. When I leave here, it will be forever. I shall not tell at once what I have seen. What I tell later will be only part of the truth. Because I think you and your kind will be better off untroubled and unknown in this valley."

Soko nodded slowly, his eyes thoughtful. "I had been counting on your help from time to time," he confessed. "Perhaps experience will help me, though. What shall we do here after you are gone?"

"Be full of mystery," said Hok sententiously. "The Stymphs seem to have flown away, but their reputation will linger over your home. I judge that game does not prowl near, and only the mammoth knows the valley—to dive into it and die. If ever a hunter of my sort comes near, it will be the veriest accident.

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He rose, and so did Soko. They shook hands.

“You depart now, at only the beginning of things?” Soko suggested.

“The adventure and the battle, at least, are at an end,” Hok reminded him. “I am tormented by a sickness of the mind, Soko, which some call curiosity. It feeds on strife, travel and adventure. And so I go home to

the northward, to find if my people do not know of such things to comfort me. Goodbye, Soko. I wish you joy of your Ancient Land.”

He picked up his furs and his axe, and strode away toward the trail up the slope. Behind him he heard Soko’s people lifting a happy noise that was probably their method of singing.

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* Again referring to the Greek myths, there is the tale of how Hercules came close to the garden of the Hesperides, a fruitful paradise guarded by dragons. Now we know the source of that story. —Ed.

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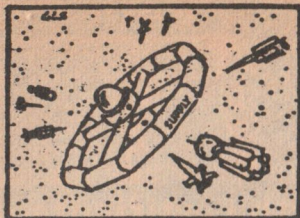
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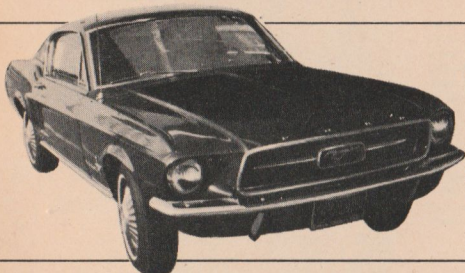
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