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# WE, the VENUSIANS

**JOHN RACKHAM**

*terror quest on the misty planet*

First Book Publication





## GREEN MAN'S BURDEN

Anthony Taylor sat watching the wealthy Borden Harper on his multi-vision screen.

"Is there any more news about the—the Greenies?" the interviewer was asking.

"None at all." Harper dropped his voice to a deep sober sincerity. "We keep on trying. But I'm afraid we are just going to have to face the unpleasant fact that the Greenies are nothing more than human-looking animals. . . ."

Anthony could contain his detestation no longer. Snatching the cushion, he rammed it violently into the speaker-grill, wishing he could ram it down Harper's throat. Harper and the other humans on Venus, milking it of its miraculous beans, using the green-skinned natives to cultivate the crop, because that's all they could be trained to do. They had no language, no human-style intelligence, no cultural potential, nothing.

Anthony grabbed up a dummy piano-keyboard savagely. He struck out a crisp-edged series of chords, double handed, up the keyboard. The notes were sharp, precise sounds.

"Not bad . . ." he said, aloud. "For an animal!"

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

### ANTHONY TAYLOR

When he found himself running out of pills, he knew he could no longer pass for human.

### MARTHA MERRILL

She seemed to be a beautiful woman, but how long could she keep up the deception?

### DR. M'GRATH

A psychiatrist of questionable sanity, he held thousands of Venusians under his sway.

### THE OLD MAN

He had the power to wipe out all the human settlements on Venus.

### LOVELY

That was the only name she had, for what use did Greenies have for names?

### BORDEN HARPER

Though he was the richest man on Venus, he really knew very little about the source of his wealth.

WE,  
THE  
VENUSIANS

by  
JOHN RACKHAM

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**THE WATER OF THOUGHT**

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## PART ONE

**T**HE MULTI-VISION screen, a standard installation in all rented rooms, dominated the eye. It was meant to. Anthony Taylor sat watching the slowly changing mosaic of colors, but without seeing them in any real sense. He had just finished a synthetic and tasteless meal in the cafeteria downstairs, and was letting his digestion take care of it, without being consciously aware of that process, either. He had long since learned to ignore insults to his stomach, and suggestions to his eyes, but he couldn't quite ignore appeals to his hearing. Therefore, because the multi-vision set constantly churned out meaningless music and could not be switched off, he had stuffed a foam-filled cushion into the speaker-grills. That served to damp down the offensive noise to the point where he could overlook it.

In his mind he listened to the mighty striding sonorousness of the second movement of Schubert's *Eighth Symphony*, the great "Unfinished." So far as he could discover, no one had ever produced an adequate transcription of it, for piano. He, Anthony Taylor, was determined to do just that.

As the strong, marching, down-striding counter-point beat in his mind, he laid over it, note by careful note, the nearest equivalent he could think of, within the limits imposed by a keyboard and ten agile fingers. It would be a small miracle if he ever developed this exercise to the point where he could write it out and feel satisfied with it. It would be a miracle of much greater dimensions if the work was ever published. It was extremely unlikely that there were more than ten people in the whole of this modern world who would be able to play it, or would even try.

None of these considerations troubled him, at all. This universe of joyous and beautiful sound was *his* world, the only place where he was completely happy and at home. The noise out there, oozing past the cushion, meant not a thing; was as devoid of inspiration as was the sliding, shifting web of color on the screen. Warmed by his inner music, he felt like someone in a snug room, looking out on a chill and miserable winter.

The mosaic faded, giving way to the careful face of a news-reader, and ~~past~~ the muffling cushion came the announcement: "News of the World, to the World, every hour, on the hour, through the magic of multi-vision . . ." The voice was a whisper, a distantly-sensational catalogue of far-away places, strange sins, crimes and pseudo-crises, to be followed by a rapid-fire succession of advertisements in larger-than-life color, with super-impossible claims, and mind-snaring jingles. Anthony let the stream wash over him, completely absorbed in the near-impossible task of conveying the fugal majesty of a full orchestra within the gamut of a keyboard. Again the news-reader, with a quick explosion of color: "I now hand you over to your local station announcer for your own, more intimate look at the news . . ." he said, and the music all ran together in Anthony's head, and collapsed with a squeal. He sat forward, kicked away the cushion, and paid attention.

"Arriving at London Airport this afternoon, his last port-of-call on a round-the-world shopping spree, Mr. Borden Harper, from the fabulous far-off Venus Colony, was interviewed by our man-on-the-spot . . ." The picture gave way to yet another color-explosion, with engine noises and sounds of gale winds, then became a distant view of passengers streaming across an open plain of concrete. Shift, more color,



then a comfortable close-up of a face, tanned and glowing, a strong, smooth, somehow remote face, like that of a patient adult attending to children.

"Nothing special in mind," he said. "Just looking. If I see something I fancy, I'll buy it."

"It must be nice to have so deep a purse."

"It's pleasant, yes. But it's not for myself alone, you understand. I'm shopping for two hundred and fifty other people, my friends, back there."

"Of course. I imagine, Mr. Harper, that millions watching us will envy you and your friends the great wealth, the fabulous luxury, that you enjoy. But it has its dark side, too, doesn't it?"

"That is true. We like it, mind you. Let me not give the impression that we are nostalgic castaways, pining for Mother Earth and the sight of blue sky and stars . . ." Harper shrugged and smiled, tightly, managing to convey just that. "We regard Venus as 'home.' But we are strictly confined to the limits of the domes. A circle one mile across is a world, to us. We do what we can to make it pleasant, but it gets tedious at times. We nibble away at the planet, constantly, but it's slow, uphill work. Venus yields her secrets grudgingly. So we need relaxation, something to keep us occupied. That's what I'm shopping for, something new, a diversion."

"What about the rumors, Mr. Harper, about bean-crop failure?"

"Just rumors. We have our problems, yes, but we'll keep the bean-crop coming just as long as there's a need for it. After all"—his smile grew and became candid—"we depend on it, too. Without the bean-crop, we would be flat broke!"

"How unlikely *that* is," the interviewer permitted himself a chuckle along with the great man, then changed his tone, rapidly. "Is there any more news about the—the Greenies?"

"None at all." Harper dropped his voice to a deep sober sincerity. "We are doing all we can, constantly. We keep on trying. But I'm afraid we are just going to have to face the unpleasant fact that the Greenies are nothing more than human-looking animals."

"It's sad news. They are—completely human-like?"

"Fantastically so. The biologists, anthropologists, and all the other people who study such things consider the Green-

ies one of the biggest problems science has discovered so far. They've had to revise whole areas of their sciences. It was astonishing enough just to discover a race of beings exactly like us, apart from being green, on another planet. That was fifty years ago, and it's history, now. But the greater shock has come since, as we learn that this seemingly-human creature has no measurable I.Q., has no language, no society, no culture, no artifacts, nothing. It's difficult to accept. As I said, we keep trying to 'reach' them, to understand them in some way, but we haven't much hope. They are the way they are, and we just have to accept it . . ."

Anthony could contain his detestation no longer. Snatching the cushion, he rammed it violently into the speaker-grill, wishing he could ram it down Harper's throat as easily. It was all lies, deliberate and vicious lies. It had to be. It was a conspiracy, with Harper and people like him, and money, and gullible "superior" humans, all involved in maintaining it, and he hated them all with a senseless violence that twisted his stomach and brought bitter bile into his throat. He shut his eyes tight, stuffed fingers in his ears, and fought to regain some measure of calm. Music came to his aid, from the recesses of his mind, and he reached for the Barcarolle from Hoffmann as a thirsty man grasps a glass of cool water.

When he could bear to look again, speakers and voices had gone and the screen shimmered with the everlasting swirl of meaningless color-shapes. In the lower right-hand corner a small square glowed into being, enclosing a black space bearing the words, "You are being called." Anthony pulled in a deep breath, steadying himself, then twitched away the muffling cushion once more, pressed the "Accept" switch, and sat back, tightening his eyes as the strip-lights flared in his face. The screen showed to him, now, a long, lean, knowing face, with dark eyes bright under heavy eyebrows and a black lock of curl draped modishly over its forehead. Gregory Hartford was nothing if not "modish." His sideburns were so long and black that he gave the impression of a man peering between the bars of a cage. Switching on a bright smile, he said, "Hi, Tone. Be at the Cellar, tonight, eh?"

"Don't I always, on Fridays?"

"Just making sure, boy. Got a treat for you, tonight. A thrush."

"Not another singer," Anthony protested, helplessly. "You know I don't like vamping to that kind of stuff, Greg. I'm a soloist!"

"The best!" Hartford nodded, with false heartiness. "But this one is genuine, man. Real pipes, and songs from way back before pops. Your kind of stuff. Classical, you'll see. She's Australian."

Anthony, never very fluent, was completely confused now. "Classical," in Gregory Hartford's lexicon, was anything that called for more than three chords. And, since multi-vision covered the whole civilized world, what did it matter that this "thrush" came from Australia? Or maybe she had a pouch? He rescued his mind from such insane byways, manufactured a resigned smile,

"All right, Greg. I suppose I'll manage, somehow."

"That's my boy. It's all bread, isn't it? Be seeing you."

Hartford's face went away, the strip-lights died, and the idiot-color patterns and senseless music came back. Anthony replaced the cushion, put fingers back in his ears, shut his eyes tight, and dismissed Hartford, his agent and manager, the Cellar, the mystery "thrush" and everything connected with that aspect of his life. He thought, instead, about Borden Harper, and Venus, and the Greenies, and the thoughts were personal pangs.

Fifty years ago very few people had known anything about Greenies, and even fewer cared much. They were obscure, and somehow obscene, parodies of humans, green-skinned animals running silent and naked in the steamy hot forest-jungles of an inhospitable planet. Of scientific interest only, until the advent of the "miracle bean."

Nobody knew, now, who had first found the things, which grew in pods, on stunted bushes, out of the slushy swamp. Venus was rich in new and strange flora, and the beans would have had to wait their turn, had it not been for one or two enterprising field-parties reporting back that they had seen the Greenies eating them. The chemists perked up their ears. What was good for Greenies might be good for humans, and a local food supply would save some of the fabulous cost of shipping supplies all the way from Earth. So they investigated the beans, carefully. Now, almost

fifty years later, they were still trying to explain their findings. They could explain, they could measure and show what the bean did, but they couldn't explain how. Once their reports became public, nobody cared much about the "how." The "what" was quite enough to set the public mind afire.

The bean, so the chemists said, supplied two exciting substances. One had the power to mobilize fat. In effect, it made the body withdraw fat from various storage places and move it to the liver, where it was expended as fuel. In short, you ate bean-meal regularly, and you grew slim. Generations of hopeful, wishful and gullible "fatties" had spent millions in chasing many "diets" which had claimed to do just this, and had been defrauded, deluded and disappointed. Now it was hard fact. The second substance out of the bean was a benign antivirus. You ate bean-meal, and you were insured against virus infection of almost any kind. Those were the two substances, and after nearly five decades of hard work, the chemists were no nearer being able to isolate or synthesize either of them than when they began. Only the genuine, Venus-grown beans would work.

Practically overnight, the bean became *The Beauty Bean*, and passed into the loving care of big business. And the Greenies, suddenly, became important. Venus, the whole of Venus outside the shield and armor of a scientifically maintained "dome," was a vicious, strength-sapping, uninviting place, a humid inferno. But that was where the beans grew, and nowhere else. Business wanted beans gathered in large quantities. Business wanted more. It wanted to be able to plant, and grow to order, and harvest, the beans. It wanted a work-force. What more natural than that they should see the Greenies as the obvious answer? Teach them, train them, put them to work, why not?

Anthony shivered as he listed the reasons why not. Much money and effort had gone into the study, and the results were hard. Greenies, for all they looked exactly like humans, were animals, about as intelligent as a dog, perhaps, or a horse, but no more than that. They could be trained to help in cultivating and caring for the bean-bushes, which was something. But it was the absolute limit. Greenies had nothing else, no language, no human-style intelligence, no

cultural potential, nothing. They were just green-skinned animals which looked like men.

Anthony got to his feet, moved to a mirror which hung on the wall, and looked at himself. He saw a face that would have been counted as strong and handsome, by any standards, had it not been for the subtly secretive expression. His jet black hair was glossy with health, his skin clear and warmly tanned. A smile, had he been able to force one, would have shown regular and perfect teeth. The white of his shirt clung to and moulded big shoulders and a deep chest. He looked down at his hands—lean, powerful, competent hands, and then back in the mirror he stared into his own eyes. Steady, gray-blue eyes. Only a close examination would have shown that he was wearing corneal contacts, and no one would have had any reason to guess that those contact-pieces were tinted, deliberately, to produce that gray-blue color. That they were designed to hide the real color beneath . . . a blue so dark and vivid as to be almost purple.

Hide your eyes, he thought, bitterly. Hide. Evade questions, avoid too much publicity. Be sure that no one wonders how it is that you're so nicely sun-tanned, although you seldom see the sun and can't bear it on your skin. Never let anyone suspect that you take . . . that you have to take . . . a tablet of anti-tan every twenty-four hours. Be grateful that millions of other people do, for a reason other than yours, and that chemists are, by profession, discreet people. Hide also the fact that you dare not take so much as a taste of sugar in any form, or even a dash of alcohol in a drink, because it will knock you silly. Hide your true self, Anthony Taylor, so that no one will ever know what you really are.

He turned away from the mirror, stooped and caught up from the floor a long box. Laid on the table and opened, it became a dummy piano-keyboard, with tuned and muted metal pieces under the keys. A poor substitute for the real thing, but better than nothing at all. He sat, spread his hands, and struck out a crisp-edged series of chords, double handed, up the keyboard, let his fingers chase themselves down again in staccato runs and trips. The notes were sharp, precise sounds in the little room.

"Not bad . . ." he said, aloud. "For an animal!"

To reach the Cellar, Anthony had to run, through sleeting rain, from the nearest Underground station, and arrived with his shabby jacket wet through. Only six of the ten tables were occupied, and the figures sitting there were dim shadows in the half-light that was all the place offered. He spared no more than a quick glance at the nearest as he made his way to the far end, by the rostrum, and found a seat. Strip-lights from the stage cut back the gloom a little, here, showing the chips and scratches in the plastic and gilt decor. A smell of coffee and hot cooking-oil drifted from a side-door as the proprietor bellied his way through carrying a tray.

"Hello, Anthony," he hailed, going by. "A coffee, eh?"

"Please!" said Anthony, but his mind was elsewhere. On stage a thin youth with a blur of black beard and a startling mop of hair was trying to coax a lilt from a lute. The Cellar was hung, about the walls, with ancient instruments of many kinds. Anthony had seen them, had believed them to be ornamental, of curiosity value only. This was the first time he had ever seen anyone try to play one of them, and the result was distressing. Not only was the performer unskilled, he was trying to play something utterly unsuited to his instrument.

In a moment the stout proprietor was back, laying a cup before Anthony and putting one down for himself. Then he slumped heavily into a chair.

"Staff!" he growled. "Because it rains, they are late. Because it rains, I have customers more than usual, and early. Did they think of that? No, I tell you. Does anybody think, nowadays? Same answer. Just like that clown up there," he jerked a huge shoulder at the lute-player. "Let me try a tune or two on your lute, Luigi?" he says. A tune! Men had forgotten how to play a lute before he was born. Before I was born, even. Does it worry him? No. "This is just a different kind of guitar," he says."

"But that's true, after all, isn't it?"

"Sure it's true," Luigi Gabrielli shrugged. "But he can't play music on a guitar, either. Nobody plays music, any more. They make just background noises, to go with whatever they want to do."

Anthony did not smile, the way other people did when Luigi Gabrielli poured his ridicule on modern tastes. He

listened, and sympathized. Gabrielli had been, long long ago, a genuine musician, in a real orchestra. Out of his memories, when he could be persuaded to dip into them, Anthony had had many a clue to old masterworks he would never, otherwise, have heard of.

"Was there every any music written for lute?" he wondered, and Luigi shrugged again, gestured with his cup.

"Who knows? It was the *only* popular instrument, up until sixteen fifty. Then it went out, and our kind of musical notation came in, so if there ever was any lute music written down, who could read it, now, eh? Never mind. You let me take your jacket and dry it. That clown up there will give up, soon. Then you play something for me, eh?"

"All right," Anthony shed his wet garment, held it out.

"Listen!" Luigi took the jacket, but his eyes were on the stage. "You hear?" The lute-player had found a melodic line, and was trying to follow it. "That. Go and show that dolt what he is murdering, would you?"

Anthony mounted the two steps to the rostrum, all his cringing nerves gone, now. This was the one territory in which he was master. He tapped the lute-player on a shoulder, and winced at the resultant jangle.

"Come," he said, simply, and led the way back and round a ply-board flat to where a grand piano crouched in the gloom. It was a genuine Steinway that Gabrielli had rescued from a junk room, years before. Now it was in perfect tune and condition, glossy with the loving care Anthony had lavished on it. He sat, settling himself comfortably. The lute-player stared, curiously, and came near enough to touch the glowing woodwork.

"One of the old cabinet jobs," he said. "Pretty good shape, too. I wonder old Luigi doesn't flog it to a museum, and get a portable. Must be worth a bit, to a dealer."

"It's worth more, as a piano. Listen." He laid his right hand on the keyboard. "This is what you were trying to play," and he sketched the melodic line. The lute-player cocked his head.

"You ain't got the beat, chum."

"There is no beat!" Anthony said, sharply. "Beat is for savages, for the unconscious mind. That music you were beating to death was originally created by Verdi, in eigh-

teen fifty, as part of an opera, a story to music. Properly, it calls for a full orchestra."

"You got one of those, too?" the lute-player demanded, scornfully. "What are you, mister, some kind of nut?"

"At least I'm not so crazy as to try to play an instrument four hundred years old that I don't know anything about. I know there are no more orchestras in the world. But there are pianos, and one of the greatest piano-players who ever lived wrote a transcription of that opera piece. The opera was called *Rigoletto*, the pianist was Franz Liszt, and this is the way he wrote it." Anthony put his hands on the keyboard again, sparing a moment to think himself into the mood, to assume the identity of that fabulous, eccentric, flamboyant and cynical old Hungarian genius.

Then he began, meticulously trapping the lilting sounds, the interwoven voices, the competing harmonies, filtering them through his flying fingers. He felt, as Liszt must have felt, an utter absorption in sound, the power to build, mould and control a structure that was at once delicate yet strong, with all the parts fitting together. He built up, he broke apart and scattered recklessly, he caught again and reassembled with dexterous skill, then brought the whole thing to a crashing climax. The following silence seemed thick, saturated with remembered sound.

"Magnificent, Anthony! Just magnificent!" Luigi had come to stand a few feet away and behind, his fat old face aglow with memories.

"Clever stuff," the lute-player shrugged, "but it'll never catch on. It's muddly. Half a dozen tunes all mixed up together. Who wants that?"

"Nobody, now," Luigi sighed. "Put my lute back where you got it, mister. You can't do any good with it." He turned to Anthony, hunching his shoulders in an apologetic gesture. Beyond him, across the empty stage, came Gregory Hartford, leading a girl by the elbow.

"Hi, Luigi! Hi, Tone. Reckoned I'd find you here. Can't leave it alone, can you? This is Martha Merrill. Martha, meet Luigi, who owns this joint. And Tony Taylor. He plays."

Anthony mumbled something, half-rose and sat again, all his defenses in full strength, at once. The girl was medium tall, her hair dark bronze, with metallic glints, her eyes shrouded behind tinted glasses, her teeth brilliantly white



against swarthy skin. Her dress, in white elasto-sparkle, dazzled his eyes as it hugged her generous curves. By any standards, this girl was beautiful.

"I hope you can play my kind of music, Mr. Taylor," she said, and her voice was strong, too, with just the suspicion of vowel flattening. From Australia, Hartford had said.

"I can try," he muttered, and Hartford laughed, snapped his fingers in emphasis.

"You name it, sweetie, and he'll play it. I guarantee you."

Anthony wanted to hit him. Casting a sullen look sideways, he saw Luigi, who creased his fat face in wry sympathy, shrugged and went away. Miss Merrill laid down her bag on an empty carton nearby, put on an uncertain smile, and said, "Do you know this?"

Anthony listened to what she hummed, and his eyes opened wide. His fingers felt for the right pitch, sounded a chord or two, and she stopped. Her smile blazed, suddenly.

"You do know it!"

"Yes. By Schubert . . . 'To Music.' Wait. I'll start it properly for you." He thought a moment, then nodded to himself, touched out the simple but arresting introduction. She came in right on cue,

"*Du holde Kunst, in wieviel grauen Stunden . . .*" she sang, with not a trace of effort, but the whole room was suddenly full of sound. Anthony felt a glow. He had read about and heard of voices like "bells," and had always thought the term an exaggeration. Now he knew it was less than the truth. This was magic, a rich full sound that Wagner would have loved. He kept his contribution tender, delicate, well under hers, appreciating that she was playing her voice like an instrument. As it came to an end, he was too moved to comment at all. Hartford filled the gap.

"What'd I tell you, Tone? Is she a nightingale, or not?"

"Miss Merrill . . ." he fumbled for words, looking up at her, "I never knew singing could be like that. So much . . .!"

"Such a voice!" Luigi had come back, and the glow on his fat face gave Anthony a sudden twinge of jealousy. He'd been the only one to bring that kind of fire, before. Now this strange girl with the bell-voice had done it. But the unworthy thought was gone almost as quickly as it had come. Luigi was almost in tears. "Such a voice," he said, again. "Such a waste. Who wants it, now?"

"But I don't understand," Miss Merrill's smile wavered. "What's wrong, if you like my singing so much?" Luigi shrugged, a great upheaval of his heavy shoulders.

"I cannot pay you, not what you are worth. And nobody else will pay you anything at all. And you must eat. We all must eat."

"You pay Tony ten," Hartford challenged, suspiciously, "and one for me. What's to stop you paying Martha here the same, eh?" He put a hand on her arm, possessively. "Ten for her, one for me, or I take her away, Luigi."

"Take her away then. But where? Tell me, where?"

"There are other dives. Better ones than this."

"And they pay, for real music? Do they?"

"Well . . ." Hartford hesitated, "Not yet, they don't. But they will, when they hear Martha. Man, she's the greatest, if you like that kind of thing. And plenty do!" Anthony, his gaze shuttling from one to the other, caught an odd note in Hartford's voice.

"You mean you didn't like it?" he demanded of his agent, wide-eyed.

"Oh, it's good. Just like your stuff, Tone. Anybody can tell there's class, there. But it's cold, you know what I mean. No zing to it. Still, I can try somewhere else. Come on, Martha honey. I'm sorry, I thought for sure this would be a good place."

"Just a minute," Luigi spread his hands, and smiled. "Let's not to rush too fast, eh? Be my guests, all of you. We eat, and I talk a bit, and you will see why it's no good trying to sell that kind of a voice, not any more. Ay me, that I should say such a thing, but it is true. Come, what will you have, so long as it comes from a plastician?"

At the table, forking a mass of tomato-flavoured strings of paste, Anthony was puzzled, and said so.

"You know your own business best, Luigi," he said, "but I still can't see why you won't hire Miss Merrill."

She sat opposite him, enigmatic in her dark glasses, paying attention to her plate. She had taken off the cape of her dress, and he saw that her arms, her shoulders and neck, and upper swells of her bosom, all were silky-smooth and glowingly tanned. Made in Australia, and very nice, but it wouldn't last long in the coming London winter.

"You were stupid at school, I think," Luigi said, kindly.

"All right, I can't tell you about a piano, either. It's fair. But listen. You too, Greg. We are all friends, why should I lie? This place"—he cast a hand around the dimness—"you think I like it dark, this way? No. But more light costs more money. And I have no more."

"Oh no!" Hartford sneered. "Don't try that story. This place is a small mint. You can't tell me different, either. There's a million little eateries like this, in London, and they all coin the stuff. Don't I know? Don't I sell them gimmicks?"

Luigi smiled, wryly, gestured with a fork. "Look around. Do you see a multi-vision screen? Do you see glow-ads? Do you hear music?"

"That's up to you, isn't it? You could have 'em, if you wanted."

"I have ten tables. I have two staff, one cook, one waitress. And no license. Why? Because, if I put in just two more tables, the law says I must have a license. Then I must have two more staff. I must have multi-vision. It's the law."

"But you get a commission!" Hartford argued, excitedly. "They pay you for that!"

"Sure! And then I get glow-ads, with music, and they pay me for that, too. And I'm rich, like you said. But then I can't have my kind of music any more. Tony, here, couldn't play my piano for me, not in such a noise. You see? So I have only ten tables. I am private. I don't have to have multi-vision and glow-ads. And I don't make much money, either. But I like it this way. I make just enough to be able to afford to pay Tony ten solars to come and play my piano for me three times a week."

"I didn't know," Anthony was distressed as understanding came to him. "You should have said, Luigi. I would have come for nothing, just to play. It's the only piano . . ."

"My ten percent!" Hartford interrupted. "And what would you live on, Tone? National Income hardly pays for rent and grub."

"Mr. Luigi!" Miss Merrill cut into the dispute abruptly. "Why doesn't anybody want real music, any more? It was just like this in Australia, too. Multi-vision everywhere. Pops and commers, jingles and jives, but nobody had any time for the kind of stuff I like. Why not? What's wrong with it?"

"That's a big question, my dear, much bigger than you

know, and I don't know all the answer. But I do know most of it. You would like some coffee?" She nodded and smiled and he made signals. "There is a part of it, the coffee," he said. "They can't make instant tea. To make a good cup of tea you must do several things just so, and then wait. Who wants to wait, any more? Who can be bothered to learn how to do a thing right, even to making tea in a pot?"

"No sugar for me," she waved her hand to stop him as he reached for a bowl of plastic-wrapped lumps.

"You and Tony both. That makes you alike, and different. Everybody else likes sugar, likes sweet stuff. Nothing bitter, or difficult . . . or clever, either." He pulled out a packet to offer to her and she smiled again.

"No cigarettes, either," she said. "I don't smoke, don't drink, and don't touch sugar." Anthony felt a strange chill. He pushed it away at once, knowing it to be ridiculous, but it came back. Surely there were millions of people who didn't smoke, or drink, or take sugar. And many of them with that superb bronze tan. And her eyes were probably green, under the glasses.

"We can go back a long time," Luigi sipped at his cup, made a face and put it down. "To the middle of the last century, if you like. Nineteen-fifty, nineteen-sixty, about then. Talent had begun to die. Nobody knew. It was not a spectacular disease, but a creeping thing, like old age. I have gone to the books, just because I am curious. Music, because I know it best, I can give you details. But it was the same for all creative talent. Sculpture, maybe? Polluted by cheap plastic copies of everything good. The creative sculptors? They struggled, tortured themselves and their materials, wire, glass, paper, anything, to find some new way, some new technique. It was precisely the same with painting. Cheap and perfect copies, so who wants originals? Make them different, new, spectacular, but how? Who will pay, when movies and television saturate the mind with rubbish?"

"Rubbish?" Hartford objected. Luigi shrugged again.

"How would you know any different? For a hundred years, now, it has been like this. With music, as I know. Recordings and broadcasts . . . and poverty-stricken orchestras. La Scala, Milan; The Metropolitan, in America; the

Festival Hall, here in London; in Germany . . . all over Europe, it was the same. Not one major orchestra could live without subsidy from a government, and when a government is the patron of the arts, the arts die. That always happens. And it died, this time, for good. Because there came Telstar, and then total planetary hook-ups, and all the communications ran together into one lump, for efficiency. Efficiency! Pahl!" He picked up his cup again, to rinse a bad taste from his mouth.

"Efficiency means 'I want it now, without having to wait.' Who wants to spend years working, to learn the rules, the discipline? Who wants discipline, anyway? I tell you"—he leaned across to stare at Miss Merrill—"the great ones, like Beethoven, Schubert, Mozart, Wagner . . . they were just channels for music that was real, bigger than them, alive. That is what the discipline is for, to get the 'me' out of the way. I know. I was once a pianist, not so good as Tony, here, but good. Then a violinist. Then a conductor with fine orchestra. But I was too late in my life. The minds are all closed, now. There are no channels left. Now it is all 'me' . . . it is all gimmicks and expressing one's feelings, and release. It stinks!"

"I don't think I quite understand all that," Miss Merrill said, hesitantly. "I know people today don't seem to take the trouble the old ones used to do, but, if you study the old ones, they had a tough time, didn't they?"

"When you sing . . . what is it, you or the music?" Luigi demanded, and she hesitated again. "Which is more important?" he insisted.

"The music, of course."

"Of course!" he threw up his hands. "There you are! Who else, if not Tony, here, would say that, today? Ask Greg. No, let me ask him. What is more important than you, Greg . . . to you?"

"That's a nit question," Hartford snapped, his synthetic grin failing him for the moment. "How can anything be more important than me, to me, hey? You never could talk sense, Luigi."

"Not your kind of sense, no." Luigi smiled, suddenly, dismissing the whole argument. "Never mind. Miss Merrill, I cannot pay you. I wish I could. I'm sorry. Will you do me a big favor, and sing for me, just once more?"

"I'll sing for my supper," she said, smiling, "if he can play it. Or maybe something you have in mind, if I know it?"

"Something, yes!" the old man sat back in his chair, eyes half-shut. "You know, when the Soviets came out into the Western world, became partners with everybody else, they talked a lot about quality, and culture. But who can argue with the masses? Offer them the good and the difficult, and they will take the cheap and the easy. There is something wrong with Man. He can talk about good, but it is always too difficult for him to do, even when it seems easy. You said you didn't understand me, Miss Merrill. I think you will understand this, though. I would like you to sing, for me, 'The Last Rose of Summer.' You know it? Good. And then you come back here and sit by me and listen, while Anthony plays something so different. Both good . . . one good-by-itself, the other good-for-showing-off. Anthony, you know what I mean? From the Transcendental Studies of Liszt . . . Mazepa. . . ?"

Anthony understood perfectly what the old man was getting at, but his attention was caught by Miss Merrill's odd actions. She had taken a sugar-lump from the bowl and peeled it of its wrapper. Now, delicately, she raised it to her tongue for a brief touch, shuddered, put it down, and took a quick mouthful of coffee.

"Shall we go over to the piano, now?" he asked, getting up. She sat a moment, shuddered again, and then got to her feet.

"I'm ready. One extra-special performance, coming up," she said, and he was struck by the new vibrancy in her voice and manner. He could "feel" her by his side as they mounted the two shallow steps and crossed the empty rostrum, through a cone of smoke-filled light, to the ply-board flat which hid the piano.

"Are you all right?" he asked, as she reached for and leaned on the upright batten.

"I'm just fine!" she beamed, clutching the panel. "Give me a note, and I'll show you." He shook his head, wonderingly, went to the piano, touched a soft chord, ran through the introduction, and, from his right shoulder, back there, he heard her begin. With her first strong sweet note, he forgot any problems he had ever had. Almost in awe, he nursed out the harmonies to underlie and augment the

throbbing sounds she made, hearing her voice filling the whole room, flooding it with beauty. He knew, too, without looking round, that she was singing with everything, not just her throat, but every nerve and muscle in her whole body. Dimly, in some gestalt of understanding, he knew that this was why she seemed so alive, so vivid. Because she was all of a piece, a completeness. And this, too, was the way he felt when he was playing something especially demanding.

In the hushed silence after she had finished there came a single pop-pop or applause, and then a storm of clapping. Up from his stool in haste, he went to her. "That was magnificent. I've never heard anything like it in all my life," he said. "Just listen to that applause!"

She swayed, unsteadily. He caught her arm, felt a tingle at the touch of her smooth skin. She was shivering like a plucked string.

"Hold on to me. I'll take you back to the table. Can I get you anything? A drink?"

"Just water. I'll be all right." She managed to get down the two steps and to her seat, where she sank down, gratefully. Anthony poured water for her, anxiously, watched her fumble in her hand-bag. She produced a box, popped the lid off, shook out a white tablet, reached for the glass and her hand shook so that she couldn't grasp it properly. In weaving irritation she fumbled off her dark glasses, laid them on the table-top, and reached again. The tablet went on her tongue, the glass came up, she swallowed greedily and shuddered again.

"Hah!" she sighed, and put the glass down. "That's better!" Anthony cast a baffled glance at Luigi, and Greg Hartford, who were just as baffled as he was. Then Miss Merrill became aware of their stares, and laughed. It was a rich gurgling sound, deep in her throat.

"Sorry if I scared you all," she said. "It's not what you're probably thinking. Just sugar. A touch of sugar gets me higher than a kite, and I can sing like crazy when I'm high."

"And this?" Anthony took up the little box.

"Just plain aspirin, mister. See for yourself. Don't ask me why it flattens me out again, it just does." She looked up at him, challengingly, and her eyes were the deepest, dark-

est blue he had ever seen. Almost violet. Almost glowing, in the dimness.

He mumbled something incoherent. He had no memory whatever of stumbling back to the piano. That was lost in the roaring maelstrom of unbelief in his mind. The grinning teeth of the piano keys, staring at him, broke him out of his daze, made him suck in great chestfuls of air.

Martha Merrill was a Greenie. The thought echoed insistently, almost shouted itself inside his head. A Greenie! He put out his hand, blindly, and the resulting discord made him wince. He shoved the ridiculous thought away, stamped it down into silence. It couldn't be true. It was just a fantastic coincidence. It had to be. In the meantime he was supposed to be going to play something. What had Luigi said? Anthony groped for his disorganized memories, painfully. The Transcendental Studies. Mazepa. By Liszt. That was it.

For a moment, and for the very first time in his life, the music eluded him, seemed unimportant. Then the discipline of a life-time exerted its power. The hours, months, years, of soaking himself in everything that went with a piano, took charge. He sat up, memories flooding back, firing his fingers. He began to play, and in the first few seconds, everything else had faded from his mind. He became Franz Liszt, at his best and worst. A brilliant, effective showman, a genius deliberately playing down to the common level. Obvious, vulgar and shallow, flashy stuff, but knowing there wasn't one in the audience listening to him who wouldn't have given an arm to be able to play like that, he conspired with the instrument to insult them all on a level that they hadn't the wit to understand.

Then it was done, and the café crowd rewarded him with a spatter of hand-claps as he went back to the table. The place was a little more crowded, now, and Luigi had gone, to lend a hand in the kitchen. His place was taken by a stranger, in a sweeping silver-gray cloak with a high collar. Anthony dropped into his seat, too emotionally exhausted to give more than a glance that way. He looked to Miss Merrill, and something about her expression jolted him out of his numbness.

"Can you really play piano that well, son . . . or is that your show-off piece?" The voice was crisp, coldly confident,



familiar. Anthony swung his head round, and recognized Borden Harper, the man from Venus.

"You know who this is, Tone?" Hartford's voice was an unbelieving squeak.

"Yes. I know." Anthony hardly recognized his own voice. All his insides shrunk to mouse-size, had crept away into a hole.

"You haven't answered my question, Mr.—Taylor, isn't it? Are you really a pianist, as good as that last piece you played?"

"I can play," Anthony mumbled. "It's the only thing I can do. It's all my life."

"Didn't I just say that, Mr. Harper? Didn't I? Tone is the best. You name it, he'll play it." Harper ignored the squeak, kept his steady eyes on Anthony for a long moment. Then he shifted his gaze to Miss Merrill.

"I heard you sing, too. I ask you the same question. Was it just a show-piece, or are you really a singer?"

"I asked her to sing that last piece, mister." Luigi had come back once more, was standing between Anthony and Miss Merrill. "I don't know you, but I tell you this. You won't find a better pianist than Anthony anywhere in London. I know. I, Luigi Gabrielli, tell you, having heard the best, from fifty years. And the lady? I can just remember old recording of Sutherland, and Callas, and they were no better."

"I'm not speaking of native talent. A voice, a few pieces, that's not important. I'm after repertoire. Suppose"—he shifted to Anthony again—"you're standing up in front of an audience of music-lovers, who are likely to ask for piano works by Beethoven, say, or Chopin, Mozart, Brahms, Scarlatti, could you play them, as well as you just played that Liszt? And you"—he swung back to Miss Merrill—"could you deliver arias from *Aida*, or the *Magic Flute*, or *Lakme*?"

"Why? What do you want?" Anthony found his voice, suddenly, harshly. "What are you after, mister?"

"If you two are as good as I think you are, I want you. Call it my whim, if you like. But I can pay for what I want."

"Now you're talking." Hartford became suddenly fluent. "This is where I come in, Mr. Harper. I own these two. Gregory Hartford, agent and business manager. Let's talk money, eh?"

Harper smiled, a chill, hard-eyed smile. He reached into the pocket of his cloak, withdrew a gold-stamped wallet. Then, frowning, he looked up to where Luigi was still standing, belligerently protective. "Signor Gabrielli, I'm taking away your entertainers," he said, evenly. "Will that compensate for it?" and he thrust out a crackling note. Anthony saw the color. It was unfamiliar. The he heard Luigi gasp, and whisper, "A thousand solars! It is too much. I do not pay them . . ."

"Keep it. Mr. Hartford, I'll deal with you this way. See?" He took a second note, tore it across, offered one half. "Take it. You get the other half when you deliver these two, free of conditions, to my hotel. Here's my card, and the address. Have them there within the hour and there'll be one more like that for you. Give me any talk about contracts and percentages, and you'll get nothing. Fail to deliver them, and I'll break you!"

Hartford gulped, and was silent, staring at the engraving in his hand. Miss Merrill found her voice.

"What are you offering us?" she asked, unsteadily.

"Luxury, fame, publicity, the chance to perform before a discriminating audience, and enough in hard cash to keep you comfortable for the rest of your lives, afterwards. A concert tour, I believe they used to call it."

"You mean . . . you want us to go to Venus, with you, when you go back? To perform for your friends?"

Harper nodded. "Precisely that," he said.

Anthony got to his feet, stood on legs that had gone suddenly rubbery. The cafe was a dim blur, just beyond the edge of vision. His stomach heaved and knotted itself. Bile pushed at the base of his throat, threatening to spew up and out. He was walking, blundering into tables, aiming somehow for the door out to freedom, and escape. Someone clutched at his arm, a shrill voice yammered, and he turned, savagely, and shoved. He saw Hartford's wide-open face recede into blur, stumbling backwards. Then he was out, stumbling up concrete steps into the street, and the rain. Wind-driven ice-spray hit his face, saturated his shirt, ran into his eyes, but he tramped on, unheeding, uncaring that sparse pedestrians abroad in that weather stared at him in wonder and gave him room.

In his mind there was a swirling chaos of dark blue-pur-

ple eyes, and a lean, hard, smiling face, and scattered words. Fame . . . publicity . . . Venus! Touching *that* word was like thinking of evil. Every time it burst in his mind his stomach heaved again, threatening to come up past his tight lips. Then, somehow, he was in darkness, blundering painfully against a rough wall, wrenching his ankle painfully on an unseen curb, stumbling into a road, and staring around. Blurrily, dashing rain from his face, he saw a distant lonely street lamp and weaved toward it, becoming aware that he was chilled, wet to the skin, and lost. How long had he been walking?

Slowly, rational thoughts came back. He put a hand on the rough cold of the lamp standard and stared about. At this time of night, dark side-streets were dangerous. A quick patter of feet made him whirl, fearfully, and then he wrenched to sudden anger as he recognized the shrill voice.

"Tone! What-the-hell Tone! Wait for me, can't you?"

"You!" he shoved away from the lamp and reached for Greg Hartford as he came stumbling and breathless out of the gloom. "You!" and he took the smaller man by the throat. Hartford squeaked like a rabbit and flailed his arms, clawing at that grip.

"Whatsamatter with you, Tone? You gone crazy, or what?"

"You're not taking me back, to him. You're not going to buy and sell me, like an animal."

"Ease down, will you?" Hartford got his fingers under Anthony's and pried them loose enough to be able to talk. "Who's buying and selling? I'm your agent, ain't I? This is a big deal, Tone. The biggest you'll ever see. What d'you want to run away for? Don't you want to be rich?"

"I don't want to be rich, famous or anything. I just want to be left alone to play piano, my way, and mind my own business. And *I don't . . . want . . . to go . . . to . . . Venus!*" He shook Hartford like a wet bundle of rags with each emphasis, almost screaming himself with the urgent need to get the idea through. "Just go away. Leave me alone. Tell him you couldn't find me."

"Wait!" Hartford pleaded. "Leggo a minute. Let's talk sense, Tone. Let go of me, will you?" He got his throat and jacket free, shook himself, swiped the rain from his face. "Look," he said. "Do me a favor, boy. I done plenty for you, in the past. I've treated you right, ain't I? Well then,

just for me, Tone. He gave me a thousand solars, remember? That's more loot than I ever had before in all my life. But I haven't got it yet. I get the rest of it when I produce you, at his hotel. Is that bad? Is that selling you? Is it?"

"I won't go. I don't want to hear about it."

"What's the matter with you? Look, all you have to do is come with me, let me deliver you. That's all. That gets me clear, and the loot in my hand. That's what I want. After that, you can do what you like. You can always say no, can't you? It's up to you, isn't it?"

"I don't want it. I'm not going. I don't want to be famous, a big public figure. I don't want to be rich. I just want to be left alone!"

"Publicity, that's what you're scared of, isn't it?" Hartford's keen senses had not entirely deserted him. "And you think *this* is the way to do it? You're crazy. If Harper doesn't get you, just the way he wants, you'll be the most famous wanted man there ever was, don't you see that?"

The new idea shocked Anthony into acute misery. It was so obvious as to be unarguable. He dropped his grasping hands, and stood, feeling the chill rain seeping through his cheap clothes. Hartford's rat-bright eyes watched, calculatingly.

"It's right, Tone, isn't it?" he said, shrewdly. "You don't use a man like Harper that way, and get off. He's rich, Tone. He could buy London and sell it again, and only use his small change."

"What can I do, Greg?" Anthony's rage had dissolved along with the soaking rain. "What can I do?"

"I think you must be raving mad, anyway, boy, but if you really want to sneak out of this deal, the only way is to stop Harper from wanting you. There's a man who's used to getting what he wants. And he wants you, and the thrush . . . Hold it!" His attitude changed, suddenly, and his lean face tightened as he flashed urgent glances through the gloom. Now Anthony could hear them, too. Shuffling steps, grunts, and the spine-twitching aura of menace. Just out of visibility, figures and approached, perhaps six or seven, threatening shadows.

"Yobs!" Hartford jerked. "Get by the lamp-post, quick!" He moved a hand, and Anthony gasped as a long glittering thing appeared. A knife!

"All right!" Hartford shrilled, into the gloom. "Who's to be first, and slip his guts on the pavement, eh? Come on, come on!" he waved the blade in a slow, professional semi-circle. Over his shoulder he said, breathlessly, "Get close to the lamp, and scream!"

Anthony stumbled backwards until the concrete upright nudged between his shoulder-blades, but he couldn't scream, couldn't even imagine what Hartford meant. He'd heard of yobs, those faceless, light-shunning back-street runners who came out only at night, to rob for enough to live on until the next night. The unusable, under-equipped misfits that any society will throw up, no matter how carefully it may be designed. But why scream? He stared into the gloom, past Hartford, and felt that the menace had halted at sight of that cold blade.

"Scream, dammit!" Hartford whispered. "Oh, never mind, I'll do it myself!" and he put his head back, lean face staring wetly up into the harsh light, and screamed, a high ululation that split the quiet like an obscenity. Drawing breath, he let go again, and Anthony could hear scuffling feet, knew that the creeping shadows had turned tail, were running away.

"Microphone in the lamp, Tone. There's one in every lamp, down the side-streets. Come on, run for it. The cops will be here inside five minutes, and they won't know us from any other yob. Come on."

Back in lighted streets, with the comforting buzz of traffic and the scurrying pedestrians to dodge, Hartford dropped into a fast stroll.

"Was a yob myself, once, Tone. I know the tricks, and the hiding places. You're only a spit and a jump from that life, yourself, you know that? Living on National Income, just enough to buy food and pay rent, and a bit over, from Luigi. You got no tolerance, boy. No leeway. Nothing to fall back on, if you're sick."

Anthony heard him only dimly. He was still grappling with the fact that Hartford had had that knife handy, all the while he was being throttled, but had not drawn it to defend himself. Why not? And where had that murderous impulse come from? Anthony had not raised a hand in anger, nor even thought an aggressive thought, against any one person since leaving school. It had been his nature to retreat, to evade, to go away.

"Know what happens to a job, if they catch him, Tone? Goes to a clinic, that's what. There's something wrong with him, see? So they shove juice through his skull, scramble his brains, shoot him full of drugs, and then teach him to be good and useful, get rid of all his daft ideas and give him to the Human Employment Office. Of course, he's stupid from then on, but there's plenty of jobs for stupid, like waiting on at table, baby-minding, washroom attendants, barbers, valets, maids . . . personal service stuff. You fancy that kind of life, Tone?"

The barbed hook on the end of the sentence speared through Anthony's mental fog, brought him to a shocked halt.

"Me? What d'you mean? I'm not a job!"

"You will be, boy. If you get across Harper. He's putting fame and fortune right in your lap, and you're tossing it back in his face. That is going to make him mad, and it makes you—odd. Queer, get me? So the clinic comes next. Where they make queer people into good people, and take out all those nutty ideas about playing pianos from morning till night for nothing. You, Tone. Think about it. And me. What do you think he'll do to me, if I don't deliver?"

"No! Greg, no!"

"But yes, Tone. Harper can do that. Or society will do it for him, if he makes it big enough."

"What can I do, Greg? What? Tell me. You're smart, you know the tricks. What can I do?" Anthony was hardly coherent. Words never came to him easily. Pictures were much more vivid. Pictures and sounds. One vague horror tugged one way. That was the clinic, undefined, and the death of his music. On the other side lay Venus, equally vague and undefined, equally unthinkable. "What can I do?"

"Hang on. Get in there and keep still." Hartford motioned to the shiny-wet blackness of an auto-cab crouching by the curb. "Costing me a fortune, you are." They had come back to the Cellar, now. "Had that cab waiting ever since you ran away. Now stay there, and I'll get the lady, if she hasn't run off too. That would be just my luck."

Anthony fumbled the door open, climbed in the back and settled, wetly, against the cushions. His little unhappy world of uneasy quiet on the fringe of life had fallen to pieces and he felt naked. What could he do? The door

opened again, and Miss Merrill came in, head down and knees showing, brushing rain from her bronze hair. Anthony saw that the bronze gave way to jet black where the rain had struck.

"Where did you go?" she asked. "What did you want to run off like that for. Mr. Harper was furious."

"Do you actually want to go to Venus?"

"Are you kidding? I'd go anywhere, twice, for the kind of money Harper's got. And for singing!"

"Is that why you sing, for money?"

"Why not. Isn't that what you play a piano for, then?"

He shook himself away from her, turned his nose to the window. The cab bounced as Hartford got in and slammed the door.

"Your jacket, Tone," he said, tossing the warm dry garment across, "and good luck, from Luigi." Then he fed coins into the slot, dialed the destination from Harper's card, and sat back as the cab growled into smooth motion. "This is a crazy night, all right," he said. "Who said 'easy money'? Been thinking about you, Tone. There's only one way to handle it, so far as I can see. Harper wants you. Why, that's his business. But so long as he wants, he's going to get. So the only thing you can do is make him stop wanting, stop fancying you. Like making a fumble or two on the old keys, eh, boy? Hit a few sour notes. Make like an amateur, you know?"

That just had not occurred to Anthony. It couldn't get into his mind now, even though it was plain enough, and obvious. All he had to do was make discordant hash of a piece, where Harper could hear. But the mere thought of it was a pain, was a kind of death. Take away music, his ability to play . . . and there was nothing left. He was still thrusting away the suicidal thought as the cab stopped, and Hartford was scrambling out. Anthony went into a hazy shadow world, divorced from reality, where his body moved and did as it was told without reference to the shriveled thing that his ego had become. Bright lights and warmth, thick sponge underfoot, obsequious attendants and imperious voices impinged on him through a fog.

Someone took his arm, gently but firmly, directing him to an aseptic whiteness with hot scented steam. Deferent hands tugged at his sodden clothes, tearing them despite the

care. Paper-disposals were meant to last a day, or two days, at most. He had been making his last a week. The rain had finished them completely. The shower was good, luxury and clean smells. The towel and the hot-air blast were good, too. Then new, clean, dry clothing, and he returned to reality with sudden urgency, stared into the dull eyes of a uniformed servant.

"My wallet? What have you . . ."

"Your personal effects are on the dressing-table, sir. There was no money. Mr. Harper desired me to inform you that you may have anything you need. A meal, perhaps, and something to drink?"

The servant was male, of indeterminate age, wooden-faced, a nothing. A life, in a uniform, an automaton. Anthony stared, and remembered what Hartford had said. A "Stupid." Cross Harper the wrong way, and that was what they could do to you. Then he thought of something else.

"What time is it?"

"Twenty-two fifteen, sir. Is there anything you want?"

Anthony went across to the dressing table, caught up his wallet, and checked. Identity card; National Income card; one fifty-credit note . . . and, secreted in a pouch in the lining, one foil-wrapped tablet of anti-tan, and an unbroken strip, tight-coiled, holding a dozen. Hiding the torn foil in his palm, he approached the servant again.

"I'd like a drink of something. Fruit-juice, no alcohol. Without sugar. And—" he struggled with embarrassment—"can you get me a packet of anti-tan?"

"I'm sorry, sir. Nothing like that, not in *this* hotel!" The faint emphasis was not lost. Anthony stifled a twinge of terror. Of course they wouldn't, not here. In theory, in open speech, there was no color-bar any more. It would have been impossible, when a tablet of anti-tan a day would bleach the blackest skin to a golden tan. But the bar was still there, on a deeper layer. You could rationalize, on the surface, just as you could buy, from any chemist, the stuff to give you that "pale and interesting look" . . . on the surface. But, deep down inside, no one was deceived. And there could be no anti-tan in this hotel. Naturally.

"Just the drink, then," he said, passing it off. "No sugar, mind." The servant turned away, obediently, and, as he



opened the door, noise flooded through. An irate voice, kept coldly in check. Harper's voice.

"I said a piano. A grand piano, a Steinway. I don't care if you have to go to China for it. I want it, here in my suite, quickly."

Anthony shut the door, turned and put his back to it. Harper was insane, perhaps, but he was getting his own way. And Hartford had suggested a way of escape. The thought, as it came back, hurt just as much as it had the first time. Discords, errors, wrong notes. . . . His eyes fell on a slim bright thing, on the dressing-table . . . stirred memories. He went across, put out his hand to touch the bright chrome-steel "key." It must have puzzled the servant, he thought. A box-spanner is hardly the sort of thing one is likely to carry about. There came a peremptory rap on the door and the click as it opened. Anthony swung to see Harper standing there, head up and alert in his silver-gray cloak.

"Ah, our pianist, clean and wholesome again. What's that?"

Anthony tried to hide the spanner but Harper was much too quick in crossing the floor. "It's a 'key.' For tuning . . . a piano."

"Indeed! You know, Taylor, I had doubts about you. To me, you and Miss Merrill, and one other, represent a hell of a gamble, the longest and slimmest chance any man ever took. So, I had doubts. But this"—he gave back the key—"almost convinces me. I'll have a piano for you, in no time at all. If you can play it as well as I think you can, I'll give it to you, as a present when I'm done with you. Now why do you look like that, eh?" The steel-gray eyes narrowed, bored into Anthony's own as he went back a step. "What are you afraid of, Taylor? That I'll expose you as a fake, a show-off?"

"No!" Anthony threw that back at him, instantly.

"All right, then. All I want from you is that you come with me to Venus. You, the little lady next door, and one more person, who will be here by morning. I want you to come, and perform, for my friends on Venus. You will be treated like royalty. You will be paid more money than you have ever dreamed of. I guarantee you absolutely safe conduct there and back. Put it down in writing and I'll sign it.

I can't speak more fair than that. You think about it." He spun, abruptly, as there came a rumble of noise beyond the door, a discreet knock, and then an inquiring, harassed face.

"Mr. Harper, the piano is here."

"Good! Come on, Taylor, this is your moment. Either you *can* play the thing, and you're the man I want . . . or you can't, you're a fake, and I will see to it that you never touch an instrument of any kind, in public, ever again!" The voice was gentle, but crisp, and deadly serious.

Anthony almost cried out at sight of the piano. It was old. It had been frantically dusted, but the finger-marks of age were not to be so simply disguised. It stood, forlornly, in the middle of a room that was glitteringly modern, functional and soulless. It looked as lost as he felt at that moment. The top groaned as he lifted it, propped it up. Ancient smells of varnish and dust came to his nostrils. He slapped the dusty stool, sat, and felt out a chord . . . and his teeth stood on edge. Harper had moved round to where he could watch Anthony's face.

Now he asked, "Out of kilter, is it?"

"You wanted a piano!" the starch-fronted manager protested. "This is the very best we could get. From an antique dealer. Genuine!"

Harper brushed his interruption away. "Can it be fixed, Taylor?"

"Oh yes. It's just out of tune. Hasn't been touched in years . . ." He ran his fingers delicately up the keyboard, came down again in a cascade of double octaves, listening. "Lovely tone . . . a better one than Luigi's."

"That's all I wanted to know." He waved a dismissing hand at the manager. "Fix it up, Taylor. It's yours."

"Don't you want to hear me play?"

"Oh yes, certainly. But I'm convinced already. I was watching your face. You want to understand a man, you don't listen to what he says, you watch what he does. I'm no musician, Taylor. I know a little. That sounds fine to me, but I could tell it didn't, to you. That's good enough. But you square it up. I'll go and see how Miss Merrill's getting along."

The servant came back with a tall glass, wheeled a table to Anthony's elbow, hovered until Anthony sent him away. Then, gulping the tablet and drowning it with the drink,

which tasted shockingly different from any juice Anthony had previously had, he carried on with the loving detail of adjusting the sounds of strings, matching them to that "standard" which was built into his whole personality. It was a wonderful instrument, solid and strong, with a depth of tone that was a chest-shaking growl in the lower register, and a shrill, pure yelp in the upper strings, with never a chatter or a jangle in the whole range. By the time he had balanced the whole into harmony, all thought of betraying his love had vanished as if it had never been suggested.

Slipping the key back into his pocket, he began sounding chords and trills at random, caught the tail end of an old favorite as it welled up in his mind, and settled down to play it properly. Liszt again—the man who had gained the whispered reputation of being "diabolic" in his own life-time; who had composed deliberately for complexity, so that even Busoni, contemplating some of the works, had said, "The maestro himself would have to rehearse these carefully." This, 'La Campanella,' began with an innocently simple tinkling theme for the right hand, and a steady striding left hand accompaniment. It was meticulous, precise, but pleasing, at first. Then, as the theme ran out, and started all over again, that leaping right hand motif was knotted over on itself and doubled, but just as clean and crisp . . . a swashbuckling conceit. And then, incredibly, the third time doubled in complexity and speed everything that had gone before, while preserving the innocently simple underlying theme, and one wondered how it was possible. It was sheer technical virtuosity for the sake of it, Anthony thought, as if from a distance, watching his hammering, leaping, jumping fingers . . . but good, too!

The great stamping, finishing chords echoed through the room, faded into echoing silence, and he realized he had an audience. Harper stood by a door, smiling like a man who has just won a bet with himself. By him, Martha Merrill stood breathless and agape, her violet eyes huge.

"That was wonderful . . . but nasty, too," she said. "A sort of clever sneer at everyone. Like a genius bragging."

"He was a genius," Anthony mumbled, "and he was showing off. And he was sneering, because people didn't understand him, I suppose."

"Never mind explaining it," Harper came forward. "You

play like that, where we're going, and I'll be satisfied. More than satisfied. Now, my dear, I'd like to hear you sing something . . ."

Anthony slept very little that night, for all the fine room and the comfortable bed. What sleep he did get was torn and smeared with screaming nightmares of staring faces and pointing fingers, and running, frantically, with his hands over his face. Morning found him sore-eyed, with a thick tongue and a foul mouth, and more than ever determined that he would *not* go to Venus.

"Why not?" Harper demanded, across the breakfast table. "Taylor, I don't understand you. There isn't time to have you psycho-ed out of whatever it is that's gnawing at your subconscious, so I'm going to pressure you, one way or another. I get what I want, and I want you. You can face that, and make it easy for yourself, or fight it, and me, and lose. It will be rough on you, but I'm going to have my way."

"Are you afraid of space-flight?" Martha asked. "Is that it? I am, too, but they have tranquils and stuff, for that, don't they, Mr. Harper?"

"They certainly do," Harper nodded, then snapped his head round as an attendant approached him. "What?"

"A Mr. Austin Willers for you, sir."

"Oh, yes, good. Bring him right up here." The attendant went away and Harper swung his steely gaze on Anthony. "Here comes a man," he said, "who has been flying all night to get here, on my say-so. A tenor, your style, Miss Merrill. I heard him in the United States. He has a trick memory and a freak voice. That's the way he has been handling it. And scraping a living in hole-and-corner clubs. Like you, Taylor. He'll be here in a moment. You have that long to make up your mind. I want all three of you, with me, for Venus. All three, or none. It's up to you, Taylor. Throw me down on this and I wash my hands of *all* of you . . . and I leave it to you to explain, to the other two, how they lost the chance-in-a-lifetime, because of you. Here he comes, now, Taylor. The next word is yours. Do you come to Venus with me . . . or not?"

Anthony stared at the stark tragedy of Martha's face, dragged his eyes away and looked to the door, to the tall, gangling, anxious-faced man who stood there, bare-headed

and wondering. And something inside of him shrank to a needle-point ache, then found a hole and hid itself.

"All right," he mumbled. "I'll come."

He sat, alone, in the view-room, looking at nothing. The screens were dead, here. Venus was to be seen from the ventral view-room. That's where the others were. Anthony knew that nemesis was creeping up on him, and the knowledge was enough. He didn't want to sit and look at it. The seat fell away beneath him, momentarily, and he clutched an arm-rest. Someone juggling with the anti-gravs, getting ready to come alongside the satellite-platform. Any minute now the alarms would sound. Venus was out there, somewhere, and getting closer by the minute. The idea hung over him like a weight.

Clang . . . the gong snapped him into a leap of fright. Clang . . . that pitch was chosen to catch the nerves. Clang . . . he scrambled up from his chair, sweating . . . clang . . . into the passage and chrome-railed companionway.

"One minute to course-correction and rendezvous," an impersonal voice warned him. "Passengers will secure to cabins, at once."

At the end of the companionway he almost collided with Martha, and Willers, and that infernal gong began again . . . clang.

"Let me help you," she said, and put a hand . . . clang . . . on his arm. He threw it off, savagely, hardly sane in his . . . clang . . . terror, and the pounding in his skull . . . clang . . .

"Let me alone!" he choked. "Let me alone! If it hadn't been for you . . . clang . . . I wouldn't be here. Damn you!" He was almost speechless with . . . clang . . . with the effort of holding in his fear. There was . . . clang . . . shock on her face. He fended himself away . . . clang . . . from the bulkhead, and Willers grabbed at his arm. CLANG.

"Just a minute!" he growled. "You can't . . . CLANG . . . talk to a lady like that!" Without thinking about it . . . CLANG . . . Anthony balled his fist and flung it . . . CLANG . . . against Willers' jaw, saw him reel. Then he tore loose . . . CLANG . . . and went retching down the passage to his own . . . CLANG . . . cabin. There, sobbing for breath . . . CLANG . . . he slammed the door shut and threw

himself on his . . . *CLANG* . . . bunk. The automatic mechanism sighed and clicked, the side-wall folded down in a comforting grip of sponge-plastic, holding him safely. The steady clanging was far away, now. After a while it stopped. Strange forces and strains tugged him, physically and mentally. He broke through something inside, and went down into a hot darkness of shame and degradation. He wallowed in fear and humiliation until there was no more left of it, until it had all been boiled out of his system, leaving him dully indifferent.

Everything had gone, his interests and curiosities along with his fears and resentment, leaving him curiously light-headed and uncaring. He was distantly aware that the ship had come alongside the orbital satellite, that various items of value were being unloaded, and that he was one of the items. In a far-off-way, that bit of information was almost amusing. If it had mattered, he would have laughed at it, as they waited for the shuttle-rocket to come fire-tailing up from the planet below and get them. He was still microscopically intrigued by the thought as he sat where Harper told him to, and watched, through a port, the surface of the planet reaching up to engulf him.

Willers had an angry red bruise along his left cheek-bone. That planet down there wasn't fleecy white clouds, after all, but a seething, mottled greenish-gray, like some gross glob of yeast. Harper was looking at him oddly. Willers was whispering, but Anthony could hear every word, as if his hearing had been tuned up to maximum response.

"I tell you, he's a hop. Nobody acts that way, normal. And you can see the glassy glitter in his eyes. Doped to the ear-lobes, I'll bet . . ."

Willers was obviously much taken with Martha. And why not? She was very attractive, even if she was . . . Anthony's thought-stream dried up, there. Harper was talking, now, like a tourist-guide, and by some freak of the mind, Anthony heard his "now" words laid over all the mixed-up snippets of information Harper had passed on, in odd moments, during the trip . . . the "then" words. Two streams of ideas, related and intertwined, yet distinct, just as brass, woodwind and strings combine to make one "sound" yet each is distinct.

Down there, under that writhing scum were three domes,

each a mile in diameter, fifteen miles apart from each other at the corners of an equilateral triangle. Each had capacity for one hundred "residents," in sybaritic comfort. And such was the freakish atmosphere and surface that, apart from arduous physical journeying from one to the other, there was no contact. Each dome was an island universe in itself. That was "Harper-strings," all sweet harmony. "Harper-brass" had sounded a somber note. The domes were under-complement. You could "buy in," if you had enough real money to purchase one threehundredth share of Bu-Bean. But you had to be the right "type," or you'd be wasting your money, and the right "types" were rare. Harper had not been able to define "type" as he used it, but he had mentioned a motto . . . a code . . . in Latin. *Sic utere tuo ut non alienum laedas*—"Be as free as you wish, just so long as you stop short of interference with others, or endangering the general safety." It sounded rational enough.

"Harper-now" was all bright woodwind information. "That atmosphere . . . astronomers wrangled about it . . . probes gave contradictory answers . . . it remained a mystery until manned explorations were able to make physical checks. And then they discovered that it is not, in the usual sense, an atmosphere at all. It's alive!" Willers, and Martha, gave the appropriate gasps of wonder. Anthony listened.

"Yes, it is alive, in constant turbulence, apparently boiling. It's an ever-shifting sea of microscopic fungal spores. Mushroom soup, you might say. The fine spores ride up on thermals, reach sunlight. They grow, clump, multiply, become too heavy to go on floating. They sink down to the surface, just as endless masses of plankton sink into the sea, providing food for fish life, on Earth. A steady, fine rain of food. And light, too. As you will see, it is not gloomy dark, down there, but glowing with light . . . bio-luminescence. And you will find, too, that it is hot, and damp, but quite breathable. In its own way, it's beautiful, what little we know . . ."

"Surely a lot is known, by now?" Willers interrupted.

"Hardly anything," Harper insisted. "In fifty years—a planet almost as big as Earth, and with those conditions—hardly anything is known. One small corner, only. Visibility is nil, except where there are trees. For some not-understood reason, the spore-mist avoids tree masses. Radio is useless,

except for a crude unmodulated beacon-signal effect, which we use for markers only. Any kind of mobility is arduous. The surface is treacherous. Flying is out of the question. Venus is not hospitable, Mr. Willers. She yields her secrets grudgingly."

The view-ports darkened, now, increasing Anthony's sense of unreality. Harper's flow of information had come like pebbles tossed one at a time into a still pool, only where there should have been splashes, each pebble had melted and been absorbed without so much as a ripple. Now the interior of the shuttle-rocket was lit with a brassy glare like the prologue to a thunderstorm as the craft dipped into the swirling mist. An arabesque of golden yellow whipped past, shifting into pearly-blue, then angry red and pearly-blue again.

"Weird stuff," Harper muttered, over the whine of friction. "It's as if there were distinct colonies of various strains, clumping together . . . hence the shifting colors. That's just speculation, though. We don't really know. That's my point, Mr. Willers. It would take generations of biochemists just to study this atmosphere thoroughly."

It was like diving into an insane artist's palette, Anthony mused, presuming the artist had stirred all his pigments together with a fine frenzy, and then set fire to them. And it wasn't real, any of it. It was just a dodge, a trick to stir him out of his very comfortable disengagement, to get him interested, involved . . . and hurt. But he wasn't to be caught like that again.

Then there came the sudden giant squeeze of braking, the tug at the pit of his stomach, and a shudder through the fabric of the shuttle-ship. And then silence, and a leaden-white glare outside.

"Stay where you are," Harper commanded. "It will take a few moments to get the freight-cans clear. You will know when they open the passenger-hatch, because it will become very hot. Don't let it upset you too much; it won't be for long. When I give the word, be ready to follow me down and out, and stick close, in single file. Taylor, you'll follow me. Then Miss Merrill, and then you, Willers . . ."

The lid came off a giant seething cauldron, gushing odorous steam up through the hatch-way. Anthony felt his clothing sag and stick to him, in the space of one gasping



breath. Then he was following Harper, feeling the spurt and drip of sweat from every pore, down a ladder, through an oblong hold in the mist, down a steep ramp, and on to a solid ground. First foot on Venus. It should have been a momentous thing, but all he could think of was the unbelievable heat, and the desperate need to keep Harper's blurred form within sight. Suddenly, darkness loomed up out of the steam . . . another hole in the gray . . . a glare of light, muffled noises, machinery, voices, Martha Merrill jostling him from behind . . . and then a heavy boom of power, and the first breath of comparative coolness.

"The worst is over," Harper said. "We are now within the double-wall of the dome. This is where we keep our outside transporters, and the machinery which maintains our internal atmosphere."

"These walls go all the way up?" Willers asked.

"No. This space is an anchor for the skin of the dome proper."

"Must be thick stuff, to cover a mile circle?"

Most of the mist had cleared, and there was a respectably cool breeze. Anthony saw Harper smiling, heard the satisfaction in his explaining voice.

"No, it's really quite thin. 'Dome' is a misleading term. Think of it as a huge bubble."

"Then what keeps it up?" Willers demanded.

"Just air-pressure." The words came from a squat, muscular man who had approached them out of the gloom. A hard, competent face, Anthony thought, with some of Harper's arrogance, plus a quick impatience. A hard, arrogant body, too, and red hair. This man wore only brief black shorts and soft sandals, and seemed to think that sufficient.

"Air-pressure?" Willers echoed. "But you'd want a hell of a pressure to hold up a bubble half a mile high. How do you breathe?"

"Think again," the stranger advised, with a grin that moved only his mouth. "One tenth of a pound per square inch is all. One tenth of a pound greater than the atmosphere outside. Doesn't sound much, but there are a lot of square inches on the underside of a hemisphere half a mile radius. Total effective pressure adds up to just under three hundred thousand tons. Bord, who are these people? Tourists?"

"Don't ask questions, Barney, not yet." Harper was terse.

He mentioned their names, introduced the stranger as Bernard Lyons, left it at that. To his guests, he said, "In a moment, we shall enter the dome. We call it Prime Base. For many years I have called it home. I want you to feel welcome. I hope your brief stay will be a pleasant one. But I want to warn you: We are not ordinary people, here, and our ways are not ordinary ways. Try to be patient; observe without comment, and save your questions for a later moment. Right now, the first person we want to see is M'Grath. You any idea where he is, Barney?"

"Central Assembly Hall, waiting for you. Where else? Ready to go, now?" Lyons moved across to a great oval door, put his hand on a lever.

"Yes, I think so. Just one more warning," Harper smiled. "It's cold, on the other side. We maintain the internal temperature at a steady twenty-five degrees. Centigrade, that is. Just under eight-five, Fahrenheit?"

"That's not exactly cold," Anthony said, critically, and was amazed at the indifference in his own voice. Harper smiled again.

"Compared with this," he said, "you'll think it chilly, at first." The door-mechanism thrummed, and Harper was right. Anthony shivered as the air-stream leached away the sweat from his body. Then he was shocked out of his indifference as bright sunlight streamed through the doorway. Sunlight, here? He moved forward, lifting his foot high over the lip of the door, and gawked at the sight. Behind him, and to right and left, a great wall of light swept up and away overhead into the "sky." But that was a soft glow, and the "sunlight" was higher still, ahead, and so bright that his eye held back from it. Before him, laid out serenely under the great canopy of light, was a scene that caught at his throat for just a moment.

It was a dream made real. Broad streets, spacious vistas, the gray and white dignity of Greek temples, Roman villas and gingerbread castles . . . all looking exactly as if they had just this minute been soaped, scrubbed and sprayed with perfume and pastel tints. For just one moment, he accepted it all at face value. Then a hard realism he had never before suspected within himself punctured the illusion, and he saw what was really there. Foamed concrete, tinted plastic, chrome and titanium and cunning design . . .

all run together into a magnificent fraud, an escape from the overpowering reality "outside."

"It must have cost a fortune," Martha breathed, and Harper shrugged, not displeased at the comment.

"We like it. We don't count cost, here. What we want, we get, even if we have to have it specially made and imported. The flowers, for instance, all come from Earth. Venus has no flowers."

"And the colored air?" Willers demanded. "You import that, too?"

"No. That's local. Residual traces of spore-mist that gets by the filters. We *could* get rid of it, but why bother? It does no harm and it's pretty. Barney, get a car."

Prompted by some instinct, Anthony looked over his shoulder, to the door they had just left. And he saw his first Greenies. A dozen of them, in threes, were bowed under the weight of a series of alloy cans, flat disc-shaped containers three feet across and a foot thick. Bare feet slapping the concrete, they labored to haul the cans to a waiting flat-car and stack them on it. In charge was a tall, tow-haired man in a brief kilt, with a bored expression, and carrying a coiled whip. Anthony felt suddenly giddy, as he watched.

They were caricatures of men. Naked as animals, so emaciated that their bones threatened to rip the blotchy green skin, their sunken eyes were almost black, and glazed, without life. Wispy black hair patched their skulls, making them seem the more bony and bald. Their efforts to cooperate were clumsy and pitiful, but every time one stumbled, Anthony saw that hanging whip-arm twitch. As they completed their labor, and shambled away, he was able to let out the breath he had been holding. One of those . . . I'm one like that . . . the thought was a scream in his mind. He jerked away, bumped into Martha. Her face showed that she had seen.

"Weren't they awful?" she breathed. "I should be terrified for my life if I ran into one."

"I couldn't help overhearing," Harper put in. "Your fears are quite unnecessary, my dear. They're absolutely harmless. A problem, to us, but nothing for you to worry about." Another flat-car came sliding up, Lyons in control, and Harper waved them all aboard.

"Yes," he sighed, settling into a seat. "They're a problem. We can't keep them alive long enough to be able to train them to anything worthwhile. They won't eat anything we offer them, won't touch anything except sugar, and they go crazy for that. But they don't live long."

"Surely," Anthony was surprised again at his own voice, "surely they eat the famous beans, don't they. Why not feed them those?"

"Are you kidding?" Lyons demanded. "Talk about pearls before swine! We're here to collect and market the beans, not waste them as cattle-food."

"You might as well learn about our cars," Harper interrupted smoothly. "They are all like this, inside the domes. Our floor is aluminium-titanium alloy layered, underneath. The car is powered so that it rides on electro-magnetic fields. Barney, show them how to operate the controls."

The city opened out as they glided nearer. Anthony saw without seeing, his mind's eye full of shambling green monsters. The car sped on, came to a silent halt at the foot of a magnificent flight of white steps outside what was an idealized copy of a Greek temple. Anthony was struck, all at once, by the fact that there was no one about. Was it some special hour, for everyone to be indoors? What was the time, anyway . . . did they have time at all, here?

"We most certainly do," Harper turned, pointed upwards. "Look there. We are now directly under the centerpoint of the dome. Don't look directly at the 'sun,' but just a shade to one side." Up there, suspended in the void, was a ring of numerals around the central light. They glowed in golden fire, and a dark red arrow-head of flame pointed. "It's a projection, from the roof of the Central Hall, and can be seen from any point within the dome. We keep a twenty-four hour cycle, just like Earth. As you can see, it is just on nineteen forty-five."

"Is it always like this?" Martha asked. "No nighttime?"

"Sunset at eight-thirty," Lyons explained. "Pretty spectacular, it is. We have stars, and a moon, too. You'll see. Come on," he led them up the steps and on to a mighty pillared portico fit for a Caesar.

"Where is everybody?" Willers demanded. Harper smiled grimly.

"They will all be sitting beside their visor-screens, eager

to see just what I've brought them from Earth. They are due for a surprise."

"Not just them!" Lyons said, pointedly, and Anthony felt the first small itch of wonder. Harper's single-minded self-assurance was now giving way to nervous tension. The moments ahead were obviously going to be crucial to his scheme, whatever it was. Wondering, Anthony let himself be led along mighty corridors, where all the walls were frescoed, or hung with tapestry and pictures, where there was not a nook or corner but what had a carving of some kind to enhance it. Some of the more famous items he was able to recognize, but most were strange to him. He "guessed" that they were all valuable, and was mildly shaken as Harper halted long enough to explain.

"Reproductions only," he said, waving one hand in an embracing gesture. "We are not squirrels, here. We have them for their intrinsic beauty, not their rarity value, whatever that may be."

They came to the central chamber, a great amphitheatre where tiered seats ran down to a circular space of a hundred feet across. It would have been a fit setting for an empire-shaking debate, or a circus, but was almost vacant now. A great glass-topped table took up only a fraction of the area. A man sat there, quite still, waiting.

"There's M'Grath, now," Harper made for a gangway, was almost running. Anthony felt that sense of urgency grow as he trod down the incline, saw the waiting man put his hand on an instrument-console. Lights glowed, and there were cameras, all pointing into that area. Harper had said "they" would be watching.

The man at the table stood up, impressively. In every sense of the word, he was huge. The top of his completely bald head was six foot three from the ground, and massive, merging without appreciable neck into broad shoulders. From there a loose toga-like garment hung, in capacious folds swelling out over a bulging belly.

"Welcome home, Borden," he said, in a carefully level voice. "You, and your guests."

"Dr. M'Grath . . ." Harper gestured, "Miss Martha Merrill, Austin Willers, Anthony Taylor."

"I'm fat!" M'Grath said, forthrightly. "I say it to save you the embarrassment. I am fat, by choice. It is my way of

emphasizing the fact that I am an individual. I ask you, now, to sit, so that I may sit also."

"Dr. M'Grath is our father-confessor, spiritual guide and general wailing-wall," Harper supplied. "More accurately, our resident psychiatrist."

M'Grath shifted his eyes only. "That explains me to them," he said. "I'm waiting to hear you explain them to me."

"You're the psychiatrist," Harper retorted. "You deal in explanations. I'd rather show, by actions. That way, there can't be any argument."

"Get to the point, Borden. Why have you brought these people here?"

"Let me do it my way, M'Grath. I've had a shock. I'm going to pass it on to you, but I want to prepare you, first. Listen, I've been back to Earth. Nothing's changed, except for the worse. I'm glad to be home again. Get that clear. But . . ." Harper paused, and Anthony wondered just what he was struggling with. "It came by accident. In a cheap smoke-and-spit dive in New York, I heard this man, Willers, doing an impression . . . he was imitating an Italian-type singer, for a gag-routine. In his own words, he has a trick voice and a trick memory. I put him on provisional notice . . . for me . . . because he had given me a hell of a turn. Later, in London, it happened all over again. I heard this girl, a hopeful from the Australian outback, trying to sell herself as a singer, a soprano. I couldn't get her alone at that time, so I followed her, and she led me direct to this man . . . and I heard him playing a piano. And that was enough. I knew what I had to do. I rounded up the three of them, and here they are."

"That much is evident," M'Grath sighed. He leveled his eyes on the guests. Anthony thought he looked like a man carrying a world on his back. "I should explain," he said, carefully, "that Borden Harper is *not* musical. Most of us are, here."

"They heard Ricco singing, and Milly Ko playing, as we came by," Lyons offered. M'Grath sighed again.

"We have a plentitude of singers, of both sexes, and all the pianists we need, already. Borden . . . why did you bring these people?"

"Let's start with you," Harper said deliberately. "You're a pianist, aren't you? As good as any, wouldn't you say?"

"I appreciate your respect for my modesty. Yes, I play. I make no claim to entertain. I play for my pleasure, the kind of music your man here will scarcely have heard of . . . nor would respect if he heard it. I fear you've made a gross error, Borden, if you think I am about to change my tastes."

"You're going to change your mind, though. M'Grath, your piano-playing stinks! Now tell me again that I'm not musical, and I don't know what I'm talking about . . . and then I'll have Mr. Taylor, here, *show* you!"

M'Grath sat quite still, breathing slowly. Then he stirred and one finger beat a slow tap-tap-tap on the table top. "There must be some reason for this personal animus, this attack without provocation."

"Medicine isn't supposed to be pleasant," Harper snapped. "But if it's any good, it should work on everybody. If you're scared to try it, say so, but don't twist it into my problem. It's yours. I'm not attacking you, as a person. I'm challenging your standards. At least, Taylor will do it for me. You understand, Taylor?"

"Yes," Anthony nodded, beginning to catch something of what Harper was trying to do. "I think so . . . but where's the piano? I'm not playing that one we heard, just now."

"Why not?" M'Grath asked, with ponderous gentleness. "Isn't it the kind of piano you're familiar with?" Anthony looked him full in the eye, with a strange belligerence.

"You may like playing a piano out of tune. I don't."

"Out of tune? Oh, fiddle-faddle! An excuse . . ."

"Out of tune!" Anthony said flatly, and M'Grath stared.

"Indeed!" he said, with an edge to his voice. "This nonsense has gone far enough. Come!" He got to his feet with surprising speed, and swept off in an imperious flutter of trailing robes. This gangway led down and aside, into an ante-chamber, a broad room lined with shelves stacked with tape-spools. In one corner was a visor-screen, looking out into the room. Anthony's eye went to the opposite corner, at once.

"I call this my study," M'Grath said. "And this is *my* piano. Now . . . sir, tell me *that* is out of tune!"

Anthony eyed it with respect. Another Steinway, and a thing of rare beauty, in his eyes. But when he spread a

hand, struck a chord, his teeth clicked. He tried another, and shook his head, ruefully.

"Can't you hear it?" he demanded. "Listen . . ." and he struck a single key. "There are three strings, there, all singing together. And arguing . . . can't you hear that?" M'Grath pulled heavy eyebrows down, suspiciously.

"No, I can't. You'll have to be more objective than that."

"That's a start," Harper said. "Go ahead, Taylor. Tune the thing." Anthony groped in the pocket of the fine suit Harper's money had bought for him on Earth, produced the key and damping probe, sat himself at the keyboard. Half of him was keen to minister to the abused instrument, but the other half was confused. Whatever design Harper had in mind was between him and this huge man, and he, Anthony Taylor, was involved merely as an instrument, an extension of the piano itself. That felt wrong. Anthony put the feeling aside, reluctantly, set to work on the strings. Soon engrossed, he could not have said how long it was before he finally looked up in satisfaction, to see an idiot-eye watching him. Cringing from it, he saw another. Cameras had been silently wheeled in, and were now aimed on him, and they were alive. All his habitual hiding reactions stirred him to scramble to his feet and back away.

"All set?" Harper asked, making Anthony whirl, defensively, and then nod, unwilling to trust his voice.

"You are quite satisfied that the instrument is in tune?" M'Grath strode forward, ponderously. "You won't mind if I try it? After all, it is *my* piano!" His open sarcasm was underlined as he rounded the seat and lowered himself without waiting for comment. Anthony watched, fascinated, as he threw back the folds of his robe from his massive forearms, advanced his fingers to the keyboard, and began to play. The room filled with a wild and furious clamor, out of which a melody was barely discernible. Anthony could hardly credit his ears. The fat man was working hard, was intent, his jowly face set in stern concentration. Either he was a consummate actor, or he was under the illusion that he was performing magnificently. Anthony's sense of wrongness grew to an ache as M'Grath brought the piece to its crashing conclusion, sat for a still moment, then looked up.

"Well . . . I won't embarrass you by asking for an opin-



ion, Mr. Taylor, on a piece that you could hardly be expected to know . . .”

“I recognized it,” Anthony interrupted, confusion making his voice louder than intended. “You were trying to play a Chopin Etude, one that used to be called the ‘Revolutionary Study,’ but . . .”

“Trying to play!”

“Look, there’s something wrong, here. You don’t understand . . .”

“I understand this much,” M’Grath thrust out his huge head, angrily. “You have gone beyond the point of excuse. ‘Trying’ to play, indeed! I yield the instrument to you, sir. Perform!”

“In front of these?” Anthony indicated the goggling cameras. “With all your friends watching. You don’t know . . .”

“Perform!” M’Grath thundered. “I cannot imagine what insane scheme Borden had in mind when he brought you here, but it stops, right now, until you have done your worst. And then . . .” he bent a cold eye on Harper. That worthy was grim-faced.

“You go ahead, Taylor,” he ordered. “This is why you’re here. Go on, play, and leave the rest to me.”

Anthony sat, put his fingers silently on the keys, and made a conscious effort to discharge the confusions and chaos in his mind, to replace them with the “mood” of the impassioned exiled patriot, angrily lamenting the sufferings of his homeland . . . and the parallel struck him, all at once. Here he was, a Greenie masquerading as a human, among humans . . . here on his native planet, his home, yet barred off from it far more savagely than Chopin had even been from Poland. The complex chemistry of frustration, fear and fury flowed from his brain, infusing the music-patterns with new fire. He began to play, savagely, with needle-pointed precision, every note a blow of defiance, every thundering harmonic a blast of anger, the strains and shocks of the past days bursting out of their confinement and shaking him with the fury of their release. So thoroughly did he lose himself in his outburst that he was wet and breathless by the time he reached the end, and it was several seconds before he could establish a clear contact with his surroundings. Then, deflatedly, he looked up, at M’Grath.

The big man stood absolutely still, like an idol. So com-

plete was the blank shock on his face that Anthony half-expected to see him totter and fall. Then a great shudder shook that giant frame, and tears came into those flint-gray eyes. M'Grath sighed, a painful sobbing sigh, put up a hand to his face, shuddered again, and looked down to where Anthony sat.

"My God!" he breathed. Then he swung on Harper. "You damned amateur," he said, harshly, "that wasn't therapy. It was surgery. Brutal!"

"But effective, you have to admit that."

"Not if the patient dies, you fool! I'm not thinking of myself, now. I'm thinking of . . ." He made a sudden dart, moving surprisingly fast for one of his bulk, to shut off the cameras. "The damage is probably done, by this time, but we can, at least, spare them the discussion . . ."

Anthony had risen by this time, driven by something which clamored for expression. "It's all right for you two," he said, stumbling over his words in his efforts to express his humiliation. "You know what this is all about. It's some sort of experiment, for you. But what about me? What about us?" He thought, belatedly, of Martha, and Willers, who were standing by, agape and lost. "We're not just animals, you know, to do tricks for your amusement," M'Grath twisted his head sideways, sneering.

"You! I can't be bothered with you just now. Later, perhaps, you shall have your explanation. And your chance to perform. Harper, am I to understand you right? Have our internal faculties become so deformed, so ingrown, that we can't see our poverty? Is that . . . ?" He broke off and swung his heavy head at Lyons, impatiently.

"Barney, make yourself useful, can't you? Get them out of here. Take them away. Entertain them, anything so long as you get them out of my sight."

Mr. Lyons shoved himself away from a wall where he had been leaning, and nodded, cheerfully. "You know," he said, "I'm no music-lover. It's all just a pleasant noise, to me. But I've heard you play that piece a dozen times, and that's the first time I ever knew it had a tune to it!"

"*That* point has already been made, effectively," M'Grath said, in chill tones. "I am still suffering from the demonstration. I must ask that you take that as an excuse for my

poor manners," he swept the guests with an inclusive eye. "Please leave us. Go with Mr. Lyons."

"Did something go wrong?" Willers demanded, as Lyons escorted them back into the amphitheatre-space. "What's this all about, anyway?"

"Don't ask me. Musically, I'm a moron. Me, Bord Harper, and one or two more. Just about everybody else either plays a piano, or sings, or both, but I will say this. I never heard a piano talk like that, before."

"You say everyone plays, or sings?" Anthony caught at that. He had grasped, vaguely, that Harper was exposing M'Grath's conceit, letting the fat man learn, the hard way, that his talent was shoddy. There was, also, the implication that this exposure was taking place before an involved and critical audience. Hence the brutality. But if that whole audience was in the same state of fog as M'Grath, the brutality and the shock would be multiplied. He began to sweat. M'Grath was a psychologist. He was tough. Yet the shock had squeezed tears from him. What might it have done to the others, that unseen audience? What had Harper done?

"I'm scared!" Martha said. "There's something weird about this place. Why is everybody hiding from us? Do we have a plague or something?"

As if it had been a cue, they heard the rapid clatter of feet and a petite, black-haired girl came running down a ramp from the outside upper level. She wore black loose trousers and a brief, unfastened bolero which fluttered in the wind of her hurrying enough to show that there was nothing else underneath. The black stuff was heavily ornamented in gold thread, and her box-cut black hair was held with a single gold band. There was just the suspicion of a slant to her jet-black eyes as she stared at Anthony.

"I'm Milly Ko," she said, breathlessly, "and I want *you!*"

"I don't understand," Anthony hesitated, looking from her to Lyons. "I haven't fixed up anywhere to stay, yet. I don't know what arrangements Mr. Harper has in mind."

"It's all right," Lyons assured, with a grin. "Milly won't eat you. We keep pretty much open house, here. We can always find you, if we want you for something special."

"My hospitality," Milly said, briskly, "is all yours. You can have anything you want. Just ask. But I want you to

come and fix my piano the way you did M'Grath's, and then . . . then I want you to play that Etude again, for me. Will you?"

"I suppose so."

"All right. Come on!" She took his arm and he had to step out to keep pace with her hurry. "You have bags, luggage?"

"Nothing at all," he confessed.

"You won't go back empty-handed, anyway," she told him. "That much is certain. I can see what Borden meant by medicine. As soon as the rest of them have swallowed it they won't be able to do enough for you." She steered him almost at a trot along the corridors and out on the steps. "The other two . . . do they play?"

"Singers," he mumbled. "She's a soprano, he's a tenor."

"That Harper! If they are up to your standard, mister, this little dead-and-alive dome is due to erupt."

At the foot of the steps she hustled him aboard a smaller car and sat beside him, seizing the control-bar. At once the car shot away and spun round, narrowly avoiding two more which were converging on the steps.

"Vultures!" she muttered, putting on a broad smile and sending a mocking wave to a blonde girl in one of the cars. "That's Hilda Craven. A soprano, really, but she likes to fancy herself as a pianist. I'll bet she is livid at missing you."

"Is that right you're all musical amateurs?"

"Amateurs! Yes, I suppose we deserve that, now that you're here. Yes, just about everybody plays, and-or sings. My God, what else is there? We've painted all the pictures, carved all the statues, read and written all the books, played all the games. We swim, we exercise, we compete, we argue, but we know all the answers. We know each other, inside out. There's very little point in anything, any more." The furious rush of the car whipped her bolero out behind her. Her skin was silky smooth, her body lithe, her breasts pointed and as forthright as her manner. Anthony shrank from her, just an inch or two, and she noticed it.

"There's sex, too," she said. "Even that gets stale, especially here. We have no taboos about dress, or chastity, or who sleeps with whom. But it doesn't seem to work.

When you can have everything you want, you don't want anything bad enough to bother."

"Everything?"

"Anything and everything," she said, wryly. "It sounds like Heaven . . . but it works out more like the other place. There's no thrill of achievement, any more, when you can have anything you want, just by wanting. That's why we all turn to music. Not listening to it, but doing it . . . because it needs effort to make your own, and it's never done, never stale."

"That's because you have to put something of yourself into it," he said, and she gave him a quick side-glance. Her expression baffled him, and he suddenly realized it was getting dark. Overhead, the "sunlight" had almost gone, giving way to a silver glow that conveyed a sense of coolness. The red time-arrow stood at twenty-one. Nine P.M.

"We're here," she said, bringing the car to a stop outside a house that was as subtly Japanese as herself in its slant lines and planes. He followed her indoors. "Plenty of rooms," she made sweeping gestures. "Take whatever one you fancy. There's a shower-room at the end of this passage. There'll be a meal ready in about half an hour. Any food fads?"

"Hardly . . . except that I don't take sugar, or alcohol. Please don't go to a lot of trouble."

"It's no trouble." She twisted out of her bolero, threw it aside, then stepped out of her trousers and threw them after the bolero. Then she stepped to a wall, picked a kimono from a hook, slung it over her arm, turned to him, and then noticed his strained expression. "That's something else you'll have to get used to," she said easily. "We don't bother much with clothes, here. They're a damned nuisance, mostly, and what's the point of covering up, when there's no weather, or indulging in status-symbols, when everybody is on the same level?"

She led him into a side-passage. "I'm going to shower, and then make a call or two, to see how the others are taking it. The piano, *my* piano, is this way." They came to a bigger room. "There it is, and I'm ashamed of it, now. To think that M'Grath has the only in-tune piano on Venus!"

"I don't understand that bit." He touched a key or two, winced at the jangle, and turned to her. "Surely you have

pitch-pipes, tuning-forks or any one of a dozen other ways of getting a standard to go by?"

"You *don't* understand, do you?" She shook her head. There was an odd, almost insane glitter in her eyes and anger in the set of her slim body as she stared at him. "We are the Venus Colony." There were capitals in her tone. "We are the richest, the bestest, the most exclusive club there ever has been. Such things as tuning forks, and adjustments are for slobs, for people with humility, people who can conceive of being wrong. Not us!" The savagery in her voice made him shiver. She was baring herself before him in more than body, masochistically exposing the flaws in her values, rending the whole synthetic fabric of the community before his eyes.

He was still uneasy about it as he stood under the shower, with cool, clean water cascading over him, and tried to imagine what it was like for a person to believe himself a skillful, talented musician, and suddenly to find that he is a fumbling ignorant amateur. He saw again the shock it had been for M'Grath, multiplied that by a potential hundred, expanded it into the basis of a whole ethic, for an entire closed colony of people, imagined it suddenly shattered . . . and his mind boggled at the result. He was so engrossed in the size of the problem that he had been rubbing and scratching at a persistent itch for about five minutes before it penetrated his awareness. Then, with a start of sick horror, he realized he was itching all over. He froze, under the stinging spray. The time! How had he missed *that*?

The time, here, was purely arbitrary. How long since he had taken his anti-tan tablet? No way of knowing, at all. He shut the shower off, roughly, seized a towel, went slopping out in search of the room where he had left his clothes.

The itch was painful, now, but it didn't show. He stared at his arms, legs, shoulders, as far as he could see, just to make sure. It didn't show, yet. But he had to have anti-tan, and soon. Martha Merrill! The idea came like deliverance, until he thought it further. *If* she would admit to having any. *If* she had any to spare. And she would run short, too, eventually.

He got to his feet, dried himself, slid into his jacket and

pants and shoes, feeling that dreadful mental fuzziness creeping up on him again. The smell of food touched his nostrils. He followed it, along a corridor and into a big quiet room, austere in Oriental simplicity. Three steps inside the door, he stopped. Milly Ko was there, wrapped in a loose green robe and squatting at a low table. Opposite her sat a little man in a black formal suit, with a white collar and string tie. But what caught Anthony's breath was the slim green girl who stood by Milly's side, as still as a graven image in emerald. Naked as a statue, and as beautiful . . . and as empty of life, her eyes like purple jewels, staring at nothing. On his entry, Milly put out a hand, touched the green girl on the thigh with a dismissing gesture. She moved, silent on bare feet, went away.

"You're in time," Milly said, waving. "Sit and eat."

"That green girl," he said, sinking to his knees where she pointed, "you have her as a servant?"

"Hardly. No, I just like having them around, like ornaments. They're pretty, when they're fresh-caught."

"How long—how long do they last?"

"Oh, about a week. You can't feed them, you see. Our food doesn't attract them. Just water, and a little sugar once a day, and they stay." She took a bowl, of wafer-thin china, ladled green steaming stuff into it, passing it across, and he stared at it, suspiciously.

"Is this . . . ?"

"Bean soup? That's right. This must be the one place in the Universe where bean-soup is a prize delicacy. It is, too. That bowlful, back on Earth, would cost you a mint. Try it, you'll never have the chance again, once you leave here."

He tasted, swallowed, and was disappointed. It was indistinguishable from thick bean-soup anywhere. He took a second mouthful, and warmth seemed to explode in his stomach, in a glow that burned all the way out to the tips of his fingers and toes. Then, like a convulsion, sweat burst out on him from every pore.

"There!" she laughed. "That's the way it hits everybody, the first time. We don't often have guests, but I've watched that happen to them over and over. It just shows what an awful state your metabolism is in."

She took up her own bowl and began spooning. He watched her, and hot bitterness swelled up to his tongue.

"For this, you hold the whole of Earth to ransom . . . so that your metabolism can benefit?"

"That is naïve saying." The retort came in a flat snap from Mr. Ko, who did not bother to turn his head. "Beans, like diamonds, have scarcity value only. Too many would destroy market."

"But they are *not* diamonds, they're food, and medicine. If they were plentiful, and cheap, that would benefit everybody."

"Fallacious argument. Please think. Large production not possible, without large expense. But even child can see it is not economic to spend much money in order to make product cheap. Also, bean diet increases life expectancy. On large scale, would destroy Earth economy in many ways. So, shortage is maintained, not by us, but by orders from Earth. We obey, they leave us alone."

"You mean Earth dictates your policy?"

"That's right," Milly put in. "Hari is our economic expert, and I can't explain things the way he could, but it's simple enough. We produce. Earth is the market. God, what would *we* do with beans, if we couldn't sell the things?"

It was one more element to add to his confusion, his sense of utter helplessness, of being in the grip of forces he couldn't control. An animal. A pawn in some game. A nobody. Until Milly led him back to her piano and sat him there.

"Poor man," she said, wryly. "You're lost, aren't you, with all this business? But this is where you shine. This you *can* do."

He ran his fingers over the keys, detecting the dissonances, feeling for his tuning-key, setting to work to correct the jangles. On a different level, there was quite a lot in his own mind which needed remedying. His fingers found and began to play, softly, an intricately delicate piece, the while he seemed to stand a long way off and look at himself, curiously. He had been shocked, shaken, terrified . . . purged. What was left? The fear was almost gone, and most of the anger with it. He had gained a kind of numbness. Was there anything else, under that apathy? He thought there was. There was a smouldering resistance, a stubborn conviction that he was not to be broken. Somehow, he didn't know how,



he was going to hit back, he was going to *be* something more than just a freak talent, a hired performer.

"What's that you're playing?" Milly asked, and he came back to the presently real with a rush. "Bach, isn't it?"

"That's right. A partita, in B flat major. You know it?"

"Never like that. Bach, to me, has always been a perversely difficult and complicated exercise-maker . . . but that, like that, is music. It sings." A distant chime caught her ear, and she clicked her tongue in irritation, went away. In moments she was back, and he hushed his playing at sight of her face. She was angry, and looked all Japanese.

"Harper is going to throw you to the wolves," she said. "He has laid on a snap concert, in half an hour, in the Central. All three of you."

"So?" Anthony failed to see her reason for anger, yet.

"Don't you see? The others have been getting at him. They won't have it that they are inferior, that their standards have slipped. I know how they feel. I didn't like it, either, but I'm a bit more of a realist than most. I know that we have become a sick, perverted in-group, living in a sugary illusion. I didn't know just how bad we were until I heard you, I'll admit that. But the rest of them aren't going to admit it at all. They want to put you three on a platform, and ask you to perform. They'll toss requests at you, at random . . . and God help you if you fail to identify the pieces, and perform them perfectly."

"Violence?" he asked, and she snorted.

"Nothing so crude. But they'll call you out on stuff you've never even heard of, and then laugh you off the platform."

"I don't know whether you're pleased or sorry," he said, studying her. It was hard to tell. She was bubbling with excitement of some kind, but he had no idea just what. For a moment he had the clear conviction that any drastic, dramatic event would attract these strangely out-of-touch people. "Anyway," he got up, towering over her, "I doubt they'll be able to trip me, and if the others have had experiences like mine, the same goes for them." Behind his statement lay miserable years of playing old broken-down pianos in all kinds of hole-and-corner dives, where there were always two or three bleary-eyed individuals who could recall happier days. "I've been asked for some pretty rare pieces, at times. I'm ready, when you like."

"You're a strange man, Anthony," she stared up into his face. "You seem dazed and lost, most of the time, as if you were afraid, almost, but as soon as it's music, you change."

"It's the one thing I know. Are you ready?"

The sense of desperate confidence remained with him all the way to the Central Assembly Palace, not wavering even when he saw the incredibly motley throng which was rapidly gathering. The one thing they had in common, apart from lean health, was the urge to be different. Less than half of them had troubled to wear any clothing at all, and those who had were only half-clothed, or less. His eyes saw, but did not believe. A top-hat, there . . . and another. Scarf and sandals. A fez. A loincloth. Sweatshirt and slacks. An embroidered cloak and high boots alongside bare feet. A nun's habit in shrieking scarlet nodded to a high-school tunic in paper-white transparent veiling. A baby-faced blonde in long black gloves and lorgnette, and nothing else, alongside a man in a violently checked shirt and bowler.

"It could be that Harper's therapy is more effective than mine." He whirled as M'Grath boomed in his ear. "It is sometimes better to cut the knot than to save the string by carefully unraveling it. The cup which cheers is not for you I believe, Mr. Taylor?"

Anthony caught the blast of his breath and shook his head. "No . . . I don't need it," he said. M'Grath took a hearty pull at the pot he held.

"Quite right," he said. "I do. I know what can happen, very soon. It is my duty to bear the slings and arrows of the outraged less-fortunate, but never before have I gone in actual fear. We have anarchy here, Taylor, and there is but a hair-line between that and insanity. Man needs the prop and comfort of others of like mind. You are about to kick that prop away."

"The trouble with this lot," Harper had come up from the other side and was leaning across the piano, "is that they started in at the top, and never had anywhere to go but down."

"I knew it!" M'Grath growled. "You're a saboteur, Borden. You're a self-made man. You hate those who have always had what you had to work for. So you want to smash it all, and just before Harvest, too."

"How close?" Harper demanded. "I've lost track."

"You'll be lucky to last out the hour with your concert."

"Harvest?" Anthony asked, and M'Grath swung on him, waving the pot.

"The gathering of the bean-crop. The time when we justify our existence, Mr. Taylor. A form of catharsis on which we have been relying to preserve our sanity, so far. It has been all the medicine we ever needed."

"You're a kind of doctor, aren't you?" Anthony asked, as his itch nudged him. "You would know . . ." but he had lost M'Grath, now. The big man was waving to Willers and Martha as they made their way down to the central arena. Aside, he said, "Those in brown coveralls, out to the edges, are the off-duty technicians. I had hoped we would be spared humiliation before them. Ah well, we might as well begin." He put up a massive palm for quiet.

"There is no prepared programme. You call it, our guests will try to deliver. What do I hear?"

Anthony sat himself, and Willers came close, to bend over, calling Martha with a jerk of his head. "This is a snap," he whispered. "I've done this a million times. You get a lot of shouting, and you pick out the ones you know. Nothing to it. All right?"

Anthony looked up at him, saw that his anxious look was completely gone, now. For the first time, he felt a kinship with this gangling American. Martha, too, looked ready for anything. The mood was catching. He smiled back at them. "I'll start, then," he said, and stood up to move and stand beside M'Grath. Out of the crowd came a shout of "Scriabin," and he pin-pointed the source, fingered the man who had called, asked him to specify. A tall man in a wild red robe.

"*Flammes Sombre* . . . if you've ever heard of it!"

Anthony nodded, bowed cordially, moved back to the keyboard. It was good start. Tension came into the audience, and utter silence, as he used a moment to think himself into the mood for this darkly exciting piece of complex polymeric polyrhythm . . . allegretto, with the treble in six-eight, against the bass in two-four . . . and he began, carefully, confidently and with jewel-like precision. His conclusion brought an explosive "Bravo!" from the rapt audience. M'Grath was wrong, Anthony thought. It is primitive rhythm which drives men mad. Music, real music, has

charms above the primitive. He wondered if it was an original thought. Martha stepped forward, managed to catch a request for something from *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and he nodded, gave her the introduction. She had absorbed the magic of the moment, too. All her life went into her creation of the woman driven mad by the knowledge that she was expected to marry a man she didn't love . . . and that she had just come from stabbing him to death rather than agree.

Moved as he was by her performance, Anthony couldn't help noticing the sheen of sweat on her face and arms, the more than fervor she put into the music, and a horrible suspicion sneaked into his mind. It festered while Willers felt for and got a demand to produce . . . it would be Ricco Milano, of course . . . the famous lament from *Pagliacci*. Then, as the lanky American was tearing at their heart-strings, a strange rustle spread through the throng, a whisper, and then a mass exodus, on shuffling feet.

"Well I'm damned!" Willers gasped, as he finished. "I never had an audience do that to me before." M'Grath surged forward, heavily unsteady.

"No criticism of you, sir," he mumbled. "The Harvest came sooner than expected. This is the time when we sally forth and garner the products of our industry. This is the one moment not one of us would miss."

"I see. You collect the beans, eh? I'd like to witness that. It will be something to brag about. Can I?"

"Of course, but be quick. Join up with anyone."

"Aren't you going?" Anthony demanded, reaching for Martha's arm, but his question was for M'Grath. "Do you, too, need this catharsis?"

"More than any. Yes, I shall go, as soon as I can shake off this blariness. I have methods. Excuse me . . ."

"Just a minute," Anthony still held Martha's wrist. "You're the doctor, the medicine man. Can you do something for me?" M'Grath looked a heavy-eyed question at him, and he gathered his courage. "I have an itch . . . very bad . . . all over." He felt the sudden twitch in Martha's arm, and knew he had guessed right. "It's nothing to worry about. I know what will fix it, if you can get it for me."

"I have a fairly well stocked medicine chest," M'Grath

nodded, heavily. "I may be able, if it's not too unusual. You know the cause, you say?"

"No, I didn't say that. I know what will fix it. Anti-tan. Can you get me some?" Again Martha's wrist jerked, and she pulled loose. Anthony did not dare look her in the face. He kept his eyes on M'Grath, who was dully silent for a long moment. Alcohol warred with his intelligence.

"Anti-tan? You want me to supply you with anti-tan? I'm afraid that's one drug we neither keep nor have any use for, here. It is all we can do to maintain pinkness, with artificial ultraviolet. We don't need it, you see . . ." His thick voice faded away into mumbling as his wits began to churn. He stared at Anthony, and the light of comprehension grew. With it came an unpleasant hardness. "You—you *need* anti-tan? You're—"

"Never mind what I am. You won't give us any, then?"

"Both of you? Indeed!" M'Grath drew himself up, unsteadily, to his full height. "We have none, and that is the truth. I'm sorry . . . sorry for the pair of you. You hear me? I say I'm sorry!" Try as he might, he couldn't make his voice sound sorry, and, as he swung around and lurched away, his shoulders shook . . . but not with regret. An enemy, Anthony thought, in sinking despair. This will give him payment for humiliation. But what do we do, now? He turned to Martha, met her blazing eyes.

"You have your nerve!" she hissed. "How dare you tell him . . . let him think that, about me? Now he thinks I'm—I'm a Negro, and so do you!"

"No I don't" he said, grimly. "I don't think anything of the kind. But you itch, just as I do. And you take . . . and need . . . anti-tan. How long since you had any? How long? Look, there's no point, any more, in trying to pretend. How long since you last took a tablet!"

"I don't know," she wailed. "I've lost track of the time, in this mad place. I've lost mine, or mislaid it somewhere. I'm always losing it, or running short and having to make a mad dash to the nearest drugstore. And I couldn't ask anybody, could I? Now everybody will know!"

"How long since you first started to itch?" he pressed her, as they made their way restlessly out of the great hall.

"I don't know. It started, I think, when we were getting off the ship, but I thought it was just the heat . . . and then

it kept on. What am I going to do?" Her voice was ragged, now, as full realization crept over her. "What am I going to do?"

"What are *we* going to do?" he rephrased it, and she looked at him, her violet eyes wide and unseeing. She would have to be told, he thought. The truth, which was a thousand times worse than the fears she had now . . . but how to tell her? He caught her arm, suddenly, drew her aside into a room lined with glass cases.

"Tell me," he said, urgently, "just who do you think your parents were? Do you know?" As she hesitated, he pushed the question a bit closer to home. "Did either of them have anything to do with . . . Venus?"

"With Venus?" she was startled out of her shakes, for a moment. "What on Earth are you talking about?"

"You believe either your father or your mother was colored—was dark-skinned, don't you?"

"Must we discuss it? All right, if you must have it, yes. It was my father. I don't know anything about him. Mummy would never talk, she just wouldn't tell me. There! Satisfied? Not but what everybody will know, soon." He had turned away from her, combing his mind for some set of words that would break the truth to her gently. He had read a line on a metal plate three times before it clicked. He looked around, at the others, in dawning comprehension. This was a Hall of Records, of a kind. The metal plates were dated, carried lists of names. He caught her wrist again.

"There ought to be something here," he muttered, reasoning out the sequence, doing simple arithmetic in his mind. Names, honorable degrees in any science you cared to name . . . and so many of them bore the final notice, "L P D"—"Lost, Presumed Dead." A history of Man's struggle to win Venus, all here in memoriam.

"What are you up to, now?" she demanded, angrily.

"You're not colored," he said, abruptly. "No more than I am. At least, not the way you think. Not any color you'd ever imagine."

"Have you gone stark raving mad?"

"I think not!" He was peering at the cases, quickly, until he found the one he wanted, that he knew *had* to be. Then he halted, turned to look at her, and caught his breath.

For the concert, she had chosen a scarlet cape, and the briefest possible skirt in the same color. Against the vivid flame, there could be no mistake. He looked away, at the wall, saw a great mirror.

"I'm not crazy," he said. "Come and see for yourself. Come on!"

He took her by the shoulder, more roughly than he intended, thrust her face to face with the mirror and stood behind her. "See for yourself . . . you're green!"

He watched her, saw her face go blank with shock. Her hand went to her face, shakily, and then to the soft curves of her shoulder and throat.

"Oh no! It can't be. There must be some mistake!"

"No mistake. You're a Greenie, a half-breed Greenie, just as I am."

"It's not true. It's a joke of some kind, something we've eaten," she stared at herself frantically. "It can't be. I don't want to be a Greenie . . . an animal . . . I'm not . . . I won't!" She fought him as he took her arm and led her back to the case where the all-important record was kept.

"Look there," he commanded, harshly, "and then argue." His finger led her eye to a line of graven script that read, laconically: *Dr. T.O. Merrill*. Following that there ran a string of degree credits and then the stark phrase: *Lost in jungle on study-tour; wife and baby daughter returned to Earth.*

"Baby daughter . . . you," Anthony said. "The date is about right, too, isn't it? Isn't it?" She stared, speechlessly, her lips moving as she read the cruel words over again. "You were born right here on Venus. And so was I. Look!" His finger moved, skipped lines, came to rest. *Dr. Eleanor Taylor . . . died in childbirth, in jungle. Dr. R.S. Taylor, husband, returned to Earth with infant son.*

"Infant son . . . me. Dr. Sherwood Taylor was my father. I've known, all the time, that I was a Greenie. That's why I didn't want to come."

She broke and whirled away from him, but he caught her in two steps. "Where will you run to?" he asked, harshly. "You're green, and getting greener every minute. You ran out of drugs a bit sooner than me, but I'll be right there with you in a short while. Greenies . . . both of us."

Her lips were purpling as he looked at her. So were

her nails. In an odd way, the green tint flooding to her skin made her more beautiful than she had ever been. But Green.

"Oh God!" she said, dully, "what are we going to do?"

## PART TWO

"IF WE STAY," he said, suddenly ice-calm, "they'll come back, and find us . . . as Greenies. And you can guess what that will mean. The only other thing is to run for it."

"But where?" She gave back his own question. "Where can we go?"

"Out . . . out there in the jungle. It's our home, after all. This is our native land. If the other Greenies can live out there, we can!"

"But it's jungle! It's hot, and misty, and dangerous. We don't know anything about it. We'll get lost!"

"And we'll be torn to pieces if we stay, Martha. Already we have hit these people in the talent. What do you imagine they will do when they find out what we *really* are?" He could feel her sagging, as he gripped her arm.

"It's hopeless. We can't just run off into the jungle."

"All right!" He let her go with a quick twist of his hand, so that she almost fell. "You stay, and face them. I'm going. . . ."

"No! Anthony, don't leave me. Don't!"

"Make your choice, and be quick. Stay . . . or run with me."

She turned, her eyes sweeping the quiet room, seeking some solution to a thing that had none. He saw her catch a glimpse of herself in the mirror, and blanch at what she saw there. Her hands went to her breasts, and then she held them out, fingers spread, and stared at them as if they were new. But they were her own, and green.



"We don't seem to have any choice, do we?" she whispered, coming towards him. "We can't do anything else."

"None that I can see. All right, come on. Quick!" He led her out of the hall, and the temple. The city, so far as they could see, was deserted. "A car . . . there!" He pointed and ran, had it humming by the time she scrambled up by him. "Cover yourself as much as you can, with that cape, just in case we meet anyone." He set the car skimming, and after a false start, got himself pointed to one of the exit-gates. It was open, he saw, as they swooped close.

"All right, so far." He shut off the power and they got down. "But from here, we're afoot." He led her into the great open door, and the glare-lit compartment inside, made for the outer door, looking hastily for the controls. "Nobody about," he muttered, pressing a button, and jumping as the quick zoom of power came from behind him. Then he saw that the inner door was swinging shut, and cursed his nerves. Got to keep calm, he urged himself. No point in panic, not now. There's a whole world out there. Then he gasped, and heaved for breath, as the outer door cracked and the heat washed in. Martha gripped his arm, frantically.

"We can't go out there," she wailed. "It's dark . . . and hot. . . !"

"We haven't any choice!" he snarled, and put his foot over the coaming. She hung on to him. He turned, savagely. "Come on . . . or let go. . . !" He could see her eyes widen in panic, but she came, stepping high. Three paces from the door they might as well have been in a steam room. He went ahead, putting on a boldness he didn't feel, but as helpless as a blind man, sweat clogging his breath. Then, faintly through the dull white glare, he caught a hint of brightness.

"Searchlights!" he said, remembering the Harvest. "Over that way," and they began to tramp, cautiously, seeing the brightness grow. Then, little by little, it broke apart into several sources, into great milky shafts of light, hanging in mid-air. A great lemon-yellow pillar of fire grew out of the mist. A tree. Then there was another, rose-red glowing. The searchlight glares grew plainer, and they could hear yells, and laughter, and screams. He took her hand.

"We'd better be careful, now," he warned. "Take it very

easy." They edged forward, and came across the bulk of a car, then another, and circled past them. Now he was able to pick out ghostly figures, in the thinning mist, and he could see that they were ranged in orderly fashion, some six or seven feet apart, in between the glare-columns, but on the shaded side of the light. Gripping her hand tight, he moved closer, close enough to see what was going on. "We had better watch this," he muttered, "we might learn a trick or two." Over to the right there was a burst of laughter, the snap of a whip, and a hoarse scream.

Then he caught his breath as a trio of shambling green figures blundered out around the bole of a bright blue giant tree and into the glaring light. Each had cradled in skinny arms a treasure of bean pods. Faces contorted into blindness because of the light, they shambled forward, and a shadow went to meet them, became a white man, in black shorts, with a yellow plastic bag over one shoulder. He put out a rough hand to grab the nearest Greenie by a skinny shoulder, and used his other hand to snatch the pods and stuff them into his bag. The Greenie whimpered, went to pull away, but the man aimed a casual kick at those spindly legs, the Greenie howled and hopped, and the man went on with his plunder.

Anthony shifted his gaze to where a second shadow had moved out, intercepting another of the helpless trio. A female, this time, with a pod in her mouth, as well as full-armed. The man, naked as Adam, slashed the edge of his hand across her throat, so that she gagged and disgorged. Then he, too, began to grab and stuff, while the dazed female stood, trying to swallow, and retching.

The third Greenie had taken fright, had turned to run back into the dark. Anthony groaned as he saw a third shadow step into the harsh glare. With only a twist of cloth about her loins, and a whip twirling in her hand, this was a blonde woman he had never seen before. Setting her feet apart, she brought her arm over, the lash licked out, and the Greenie screamed. Another lashing stroke caught its foot, and the blonde walked up the taut line, reversed the whip-handle, brought the stump-end down with a crack on that patchy-haired skull. Then, calmly, she collected the pods, for her bag.

"Get a good look," Anthony advised, savagely. "See how

they treat the Greenies . . . how they would treat us." He could feel Martha shivering, but he was steady. Indignation could wait. He fixed his attention on the bags. He meant to get one. They were valuable, even to the Greenies. "Wait here," he hissed, "until there's a full bag. Then *we* take it!"

"Why? They aren't worth anything, to us. Not now."

"The Greenies value them. We're going to have to live with Greenies, and like it." More shambling green figures broke from cover, and the Harvest went on. Anthony saw, with sick hate, that the blonde woman seemed fond of her whip, using it at every opportunity. Soon her bag was full.

"Now!" he said, giving Martha a shove. "Here she comes, loaded." His eyes followed her into the gloom. Then he was up to her, seeing her surprise, her quick gasp and attempt to shout, which died as he hit her, a smash on the jaw that jarred his hand and arm right up to the elbow. Ruin my fingering, he thought, crazily, if I were a piano-player any more. He stooped to grab her bag, heard a scuffle at his back and wheeled round. The man in black shorts had trapped Martha, was holding her close and peering. Anthony took two long steps, swung his arm, and lashed out again, enjoying the vicious pain of the blow, as the man sank down without a sound.

"You all right?" he demanded, flexing his fingers. She nodded, stupidly, looking down at the prostrate man. "All right, then. Grab his bag, quick!" He went back to the blonde woman shoved her over with his foot, got her bag, slung it over a shoulder, went to Martha, helped her to shoulder hers. "Now, come on . . . let's get away from here."

"But where?" she wailed, as he plunged off, turning his back on the glare. "Anthony. . . !" He slid, stumbled to one knee, got up again, waited, and she came up, out of the gloom. "I couldn't see you. . . ." she gasped. "Where are we going?"

"How do I know?" he snapped. "Who cares, anyway? We have a whole planet. We just go, and keep on going, that's all."

He took her hand, and they went forward together, slipping and staggering, into the slimy, greasy-wet inferno, into a multicolored nowhere.

Going nowhere. Nowhere to go. The words went round

and round in his mind. Just keep going. Keep going. Until you drop. And then, what? The glowing mist swirled, lazily, round him, ever changing, ever the same. Shreds of shifting color came and went, glowed and passed by, tempting the mind to build figures and phantoms, peopling the silence with a myriad things.

And it was a silence, such as only cloying, sound-swallowing mist can make. His feet made no sound on the spongy slippery moss. Nothing seemed to live or move, out there . . . nothing . . . until he became aware of fugitive touches, now and then, against his ankles. Little things, scurrying away into the safety, making no sound. All he heard was the drum-pounding of the blood in his ears, the rasp of breathing, and the click and chuckle as he swallowed. He moved in a bubble a yard in diameter, and everything else was a dream. He had the softness of Martha's hand in his, and he could see her as a blur, by him, in the haze, as they blundered along together. But all else was insane nightmare. The ground under his feet, spongy and wet, was even, like a table. Now and again he caught his foot in a stunted tangle of something, a bush, possibly, but that was all. No break in the monotony. Nothing. Just walk, and keep walking.

He felt for the bean bag, seeking the fastening, and his fingers skidded on the slimy surface as he tried to get it open. Then, when he had succeeded, he took out a pod, sealed the bag again. A black and yellow thing, about three inches long, banana-shaped. On Earth, this would have kept him in luxury for years. Right now, he had to open it, eat the contents, and be nourished, or it was worthless. He gripped it, squeezed, and it burst open at one end, like a three-cornered mouth. There were four black-and-red beans inside. He shook one into his palm, took a deep breath, and put it into his mouth. He bit on it.

The texture was fibrous and woody, like a nut. The taste was acid-sour, flooding his mouth with saliva. He chewed, cautiously, then swallowed the juice. It stung his throat, sending quick tingles along his arms and legs. He chewed more, reducing the fiber to a pulp, and gulped it. Then he waited. In a moment, his stomach roared at him, making him shudder. But he could feel the dragging weariness and lassitude drop away.

"Here!" he said to Martha, roughly. "Get one of these between your teeth."

"Ugh! It's bitter," she complained, but chewed, obediently. They shared the remaining two, finding them not quite so bitter on the second taste.

"We shan't starve for a bit, anyway," she sniffed, more cheerfully. And they resumed their journey with a lighter step.

"God in Heaven!" he suddenly gasped, as the featureless mist right behind them was rent by a monstrous, gargling scream.

Martha's hand clamped on his like a vice. They swung round, peering into the swirling gray. The hideous noise came again, like the blast of an angry steam-whistle, magnified by a hundred times.

"There," she said, and he could see it, too, a great dark mass, looming up . . . black . . . no, it was green, a dark, glossy, olive green . . . a huge, blunt-snouted thing, weaving and questing, as big and round as a man's waist . . . and stretching back enormously, into the mist.

"It's a snake, or a worm, or something of the kind," he muttered.

"Can it see us?"

"Lord knows. I can't see anything that looks like an eye.

The blunt-pointed snout swung, and came to an uneasy rest, pointing right where they stood. In some awful way, it knew they were there. Then Martha screamed, uncontrollably, as a cluster of lamp-like eyes, glowing purple, opened in a circle about the great head, and stared at them. She flung herself round, and Anthony felt his knees turn to water as he stared over her shoulder into that ring of eyes. Then, from the center, yellowly, a great gaping mouth opened, peeling back, and that gargling scream came again, deafeningly, borne on a hot stench of breath.

The next thing Anthony knew, he was running, senselessly and terrified, from that gaping mouth, and the ring of razor-edged teeth he had seen within it. His breath burned in his throat, and the bean-bag bumped awkwardly across his back, hammering him, as he ran, and slipped, and slithered, skidding down to his knees and scrambling up again, forgetting all else in his blind need to escape the horror. His imagination felt the hot breath of it on his neck, the

shudder of the soggy ground under its ponderous body, and he fled, gasping, sobbing, squandering every last ounce of energy he could find, to get away. Something caught his foot, so that he went sprawling in a heap. Cursing, he fought up to his fee and ran again . . . and the dark ground fell away under him. He fell and slid, scrabbling at the slimy moss, over an edge, into gray nothingness . . . into a smashing blow at his middle, a bursting flame in his head . . . and then, nothing.

He lay in glorious, cool comfort, deliciously at ease, in the quiet of a shady grove, close by a tinkling fountain. At his side knelt a lovely maiden, smiling on him, and every now and then dipping her fingers in the crystal water, to sprinkle the cool drops on his forehead. He was only pretending to sleep, and she, knowing it, was teasing him.

"Come, beloved, open your eyes," she called, but he would not. Somewhere, in the distance, an orchestra was playing the ballet music from Faust . . . and he knew that if he did wake up, something dreadful would happen.

"Awake!" she cried, impatiently, flicking water in his face. He rolled his head aside. "Wake up!" she insisted, in a different kind of voice altogether, and the splash of water was vigorous.

Anthony opened his eyes, and groaned as ache sliced through his daze.

"My head!" he moaned, and tried to sit up, cringing from another knife-slash of pain across his middle. "What the hell . . . ?" Martha sat back on her heels and watched him, anxiously. Fighting the wrench in his stomach, he sat all the way up, looked round. It wasn't a grove at all, but a dark, dim-lit hollow. He saw the distant standing-flame of trees. There was no mist. And no snake-worm.

"What happened?" he mumbled, not daring to open his mouth too wide, in case his stomach revolted. "Where's the thing . . . the snake?"

"Up there, somewhere," she pointed round and up, vaguely. "You went right over a cliff. I thought you were dead."

"Yes, I remember that." He nodded, and then groaned, wishing he had kept his head still. "I was running like hell, thinking it was after me, and then down I went." He frowned, looked at her, searchingly. "How did *you* get here? How did you find me?"

"The snake . . ." She shuddered. "I saw it coming, and you yelled, and I was rooted. I couldn't move, at all. It just came—all mouth and eyes—and I waited, gave up . . . and then it went straight past. Knocked me over. There must have been a mile of it!"

"It certainly was big. What then . . . ?"

"It just went past me. Never saw me at all. And then, when I saw it going by, I knew it was chasing you. So I ran after it."

"And what would you have done, if you'd caught it? My God, do you realize what you're saying?" He stared at her. "Suppose it had caught me, and then waited for you?"

"I never thought of that," she said, blankly. "All I knew was, if I kept after it, I was keeping after you . . . and I daren't lose you. So I ran after it. Then it sort of stopped. And I got scared, then. I thought it must have . . . caught you. So I stood as still as I could. And it coiled back, and went away. And I went along—it leaves a groove, you know—and I fell over the edge. But I landed in some bushes, so it wasn't too bad. Then I found you, all in a tangle, around a little tree-stump. I thought you were dead, at first. Then I saw the water—"

"Water? It wasn't *all* a dream, then. Where?"

"Over there, look!" He twisted round, painfully, and, in the half-light, he saw the oily-rippling edge of a sheet of water that stretched away, a long way, into the gloom.

"I managed to drag you down as far as this. And then I got some water, with my cape, and threw it over you. I'm so glad you're not dead!"

"So am I, for the moment," he said, wryly. "I owe you my life, for what it's worth. I wouldn't have given a snap for it, back there. Let's hope there aren't too many of those about. I fancy we'd be just a couple of bites, for him." He shifted, painfully. "Still, water's something to be glad of. I could do with a big drink." He gathered himself, made the effort, and got to his feet, swaying but managing to keep his balance. He felt her hand on his leg.

"I don't think we'll be able to drink it," she said, unhappily. "It's cramful of little fish-things. Millions of them. And they bite. Look!" She put out her arm for him to see. It was covered, up to the elbow, in red splotches.

"Hell!" he growled. "You shouldn't have done that, not

just to get water to throw over me. I'm going to take a look."

He set off, weavingly, for the water-edge. In the last yard, he sank to his knees and crawled, until he could peer down into it. Then he saw that the oily blackness was illusory. The water was clear, enough so that he could see the bottom, and the masses of hair-like, waving weeds. But, even as he put his head down, there was a sudden flurry, and a shower of darting neon-lights, spearing through the dark. Shifting his weight on to one arm, he dabbled his fingers, and winced as he felt the instant sting of needle-sharp teeth. The water was alive, now, with sparkling flames.

He tried to imagine gulping a mouthful of that, and groaned. A bead of sweat ran from his chin and splashed into the water. Wringing wet with sweat . . . and parched with thirst . . . it didn't seem right, somehow.

"What are we going to do?" she whispered, as he sat back, to think. The pain in his head was abating a little. He rubbed it, feeling the greasiness and slime in his hair. To get clean, cool, and inwardly moist . . . it was a crying urge. There had to be some way.

"You were splashing me," he said. "How?"

"I dropped the edge of my cape in the water, then shook it, to get the fish out. And then I wrung it out, over your face."

"Let me see!" he held out his hand for the cape, to feel it. Plastic, still a vivid red, crimped to give a fleecy feel, and wet. He shook it out, to find that it was an almost perfect square, a yard a side. A cord threaded through it, one third of the way from one edge, made it possible to wear it as a coat, or a cloak with a hood . . . but he saw it only as a spread-out sponge. Setting himself on his knees, he swung the cape out, let it flap into the water, drew it out, shook it, and stood up, to wrap the soaked material around his head. It felt good. He did it again, and had rinsed the worst of the slime from his head and face. Once more, but this time he held the cape high, balled it, and squeezed, sucking greedily at the drops as they fell on his face.

"Best we can do, for the moment." He passed the cloth back to her. "You have a go. It's worth it, just to feel cool and partly clean." She took the cape, did what she had seen him do, and he left her to it. Looking round, he saw



where she had lugged the two bean-bags, and went for them, to bring them to the edge of the water. The effort tied his abused stomach in knots, but he felt better for it, after the twinges had subsided. Next thing, he thought, were his clothes. He was still cumbered by jacket and pants. A quick glance showed him that Martha was busy, still, with her shower-bath. He stripped off the garments, dipped them in the water, shook them vigorously, and they came out much cleaner. Then, as he wrung out most of the water, he argued with himself.

Habit said he should cover himself again, but the tremendous improvement in freedom and comfort made him hesitate. Who was to care, here? Except Martha, of course. He squinted across at her, again, to see that she had peeled off her clothes, too, and was luxuriating in the dribble of water over her nakedness.

"Don't look round," he called, gently. "But I'm having an argument with myself. I don't want to swelter in these silly clothes. Do you mind?" She held still for a moment, with the dripping cape over her head, then brought it down, and turned, facing him.

"I certainly feel better, this way," she said, frankly, "and it can't make any difference to anyone but us."

"All right, then." He rolled his clothes up small, compressing them as hard as he could, so that the water squirted out. "I'm going to pack mine," and he unfastened a bean-bag, got out another pod, and made a space to stuff in his bundle.

"Come and eat"—he waved the pod—"and if you'll rinse out your things, I'll pack them with mine."

She came to sit by him, stretching out her legs. He burst the pod, handed her a bean, took one himself.

"Nice color, green!" he said, stretching his own leg alongside hers.

"Oh don't!" She shuddered. "I think it's awful. Every time I look at it, I just can't believe it's me. I hope they come for us, soon!"

"Who?" he asked, blankly.

"Why . . . somebody from the dome, of course. They're bound to miss us, and send out search parties."

Until she said it, that aspect of the business had not occurred to him. He sat silent, chewing, and thought about

it. It was difficult. All at once, the colonists, and people in general, seemed remote and unreal, as if they belonged to another world. In a way, they did. But there was no getting away from the facts. He and Martha would be missed. But would they send out search-parties? Could they? He thought back to what Harper had said, about the meager amount of exploration that had been done, and how difficult it was. Where would they begin?

"I don't think they'll bother. . . ." The words were on his tongue, but he held them back. "They" would have to bother, wouldn't they? It was that, or provoke a devil of a fuss . . . and that wouldn't suit them, at all. He chewed it over, along with bean-pulp, until he grew tired of it.

"Come on." He got up, feeling the refreshing tingle of the bean-stimulus working against his weariness. "We might as well move on. Can't just sit here."

"Why not?"

"Because . . ." He hesitated, then, "Because we need food. Solid food. The beans are only a stimulant. We can't live on them, alone."

"Oh, very well." She got to her feet, and stood while he helped her get her pack comfortable. Then she slung the red cape over one shoulder. "It can't make much difference, one way or the other, can it?"

He caught up the other bag and flung it into place. Step by heavy step, he tramped on through the half-light, with Martha's hand in his. He lifted his feet, one after the other, stubbornly, slithering and stumbling along, skirting always the uneven edge of the dark water, making wide circles round the more soggy parts, and passing, all the time, the endless series of great fire-trees, of every imaginable color.

He wondered about them, about the rare branches he could see, high up, as they looped away into the overhanging mist. If you could climb one, you'd get up into another world altogether, he mused, a world of branches, leaves, and a gray cloud of light. Possibly fruit, of some kind.

Food! The thought made him look up, and shake his head. If there was food up there, then they would surely starve, for no one could climb those giants without some sort of help. The lowest branches he had seen, so far, were all of twenty feet overhead.

Then Martha fell heavily to her knees, and on her face,

with the heavy pack pinning her down. He bent to help her, and almost fell on his face by her side, in his weariness.

"We're a couple . . . of fools," he gasped, shoving her pack aside, so that she rolled over and began to suck in air, hungrily. "No idea how long . . . this damned twilight . . . no time-sense, at all. . . . Must have been going for hours and hours. . . . We need to sleep, that's the trouble!" He got her arms free of the straps, and she sat up, wiping the ooze from her face.

"Sleep? But where?" she breathed.

"Anywhere." He waved a tired arm. "Help yourself."

"But"—she looked round, fearfully—"one of us will have to keep a look out."

"For what? And to do what?"

"I couldn't just lie down, here, and go to sleep." She shuddered. "I just couldn't, that's all!" Too weary to argue, he shuffled out of his pack, took the red cape, and plodded down to the water to wash. She was close behind him, as it unwilling to let him get more than a yard or two away. He said nothing, giving all his attention to as thorough a wash as possible. Then he gave her the cape, shambled back to the bags, thumped one into the semblance of a pillow, and stretched out, letting the weariness have its way. His last conscious thought was of a pain in his inside . . . an emptiness.

He woke, suddenly and all at one, with the fleeting impression of a hard thump of some kind, quite near. Something falling . . . a footstep . . . what? He kept quite still, becoming aware of cramps and stiffness, a filthy taste in his mouth, and a deadness in his right arm. But no repetition of the thumping noise. He opened his eyes, cautiously, and the first thing he saw was the top of Martha's head, where she had snuggled close, her cheek resting on the crook of his arm. He extricated himself, delicately, sat up, creakingly, and looked around.

Then he saw it. Less than a yard away from his head. A great ovoid, an oversized egg-shape, bigger than his head. It sat there, quite still, and glowed with a red light. He stared at it, waiting for it to move. Or had it fallen? It kept quite still. He gathered his legs beneath him, carefully, and stood up. Still it didn't move. He took a step, then another . . . and put his foot to it, rolled it

over. Now he could see a dimpled base, like a navel of an orange. Greatly daring, he stooped, got the weight of it, and lifted. It was heavy, with a rubbery feel. It was a fruit of some kind, surely? His grumbling stomach overrode his caution. He dug his nails into it, and the rubbery surface broke and peeled back, like an orange, and with a similarly acid-sour smell. He sat down in a squat, began ripping off the thick peel. Inside, the thing was full of needle-pyramid shaped segments . . . yellow . . . with the texture of water-logged sponge. He freed one, looked at it, took a breath, and bit into it. The juice overflowed, dribbling down his chin and on to his chest.

It was good. Squashy banana-lemon . . . that was the nearest he could come to naming flavor. He swallowed, and then woke Martha.

"Don't ask," he said. "Just eat, and be thankful."

They ate, greedily and with gusto, until they could eat no more, and there was still almost a third of it left. He put the almost empty husk aside, and they got up and went on.

The water-edge had suddenly taken a long bend, and the trees were well back, leaving a broad patch of level shoreline, studded with bushes of a kind they had not seen before. It was habit, and caution, which made them steer clear, but Martha did not keep quite clear enough. The swinging end of her cape brushed against the pointed tip of one spiking leaf, and she screeched in sudden terror as the whole leaf sliced down to the ground like a chopping blade, dragging the cape with it. For a moment, she teetered, off-balance, and he grabbed her, frantically. Then she was free of the cape and staggering against him, gasping.

He stared, over her shoulder, at the bush. A little way off he could see another, just like it. A stout center stem, and a mass of outstretched blade-like leaves, like the spokes of a sun-shade. But this one, here, had been triggered by the touch of the cape, and all the blades were down, slicing into the ground.

He pushed her aside, gently, and went as close as he dared, to study it. Those leaves were all about a yard long, slim like swords, and stiff, and they had all snapped down, edge-on, so that the needle-sharp tips were buried in the

soft moss. He tried to imagine what the effect would be, should some small animal blunder into this thing. A touch . . . and down would come the blades . . . and the prey would be sliced like mince-meat. Then, presumably, to decay and form food for the roots. He shivered a little at the thought, and took hold of the edge of the cape, to try to free it. Then something else occurred to him. The plant, if it was a plant, was developed in one direction only, to strike down. Logically, it would resume its outstretched state in a while, provided there was no further stimulus. So he had only to wait, and the blade-leaves would lift up again.

But, suppose he could hold one of those blades—the one which had caught the cape—and hold it down? He got down on his knees, then on his face, and put out both hands, wrapped in the folds of fleece, and pressed firmly on the tip of the leaf. And prepared to wait.

“What are you doing?” she asked. “Come away from there. It’s dangerous. You’ll be hurt.”

“It’s all right,” he said. “Get back, and stay quiet.” He could feel the tip begin to lift, under his fingers, and he pressed down. The real danger was, now, in two things. First, the leaf-blades were like razors, and might cut through the plastic fleece, and second, the vicious plant might just have another trick up its sleeve. That thought made him grin to himself. A plant, with sleeves? Then he was amazed at his own ability to laugh. I’ve never really *lived*, before, he thought. Not like this. All these years, I’ve been shut up inside myself, looking out, afraid.

Now . . . and the leaf-tip began to lift more strongly. He could see the rest of the leaves twitch and lift out of the moss, and the sturdy main stem beginning to bow, stiffly, under the unaccustomed load. He hung on, feeling the cords in his wrists and arms aching as he applied all the pressure he could, at this awkward angle. The whole plant twitched and stirred, strongly, and the leaf he was holding began to bend, like a spring, and quiver. Then there was a splitting crack, and he bumped his face on his arms as the leaf fell limp. The next moment, he had shifted his grip, muffing the cape to give him more purchase, and set to work, tugging and twisting, until he flopped back,

holding the broken thing in his hand, a trailing strip of tendon-like membrane dangling from the inward end.

"Got you!" he said, reversing it, and seizing the thick end. It was sticky with sap, but he didn't mind that. Getting to his feet, he hefted it, swung it, and it felt fine. Now he had a weapon, a three-foot razor-edged blade. Primitive, no doubt, and clumsy, but he felt like ten men with it.

"I'll bet you ripped that cape all to ribbons," she grumbled, retrieving it from the ground and shaking it out. But she was wrong. The tough plastic was unharmed.

"I've got a real weapon, now," he said. "I don't feel helpless any more."

"How can that thing make any difference?" she asked. "Suppose we should meet another of those great worm-snake things? What good would your sticker be, then? And you can't cut anything with it, because there isn't anything to cut. *And it's just something to carry.*"

"I shall be carrying it, not you!" he retorted, stung by her lack of enthusiasm. "Come on, we might as well push on," and he led off ahead, not holding her hand, this time.

His mind was looking ahead, now, wondering what the next thing would be. A little whispering refrain grew in his mind, repeating itself, although he felt sheepish every time he stopped to analyze it. *Anthony Taylor . . . King of the Greenies!* He could hear her squishy footsteps at his back, and her breathing, but he kept on, steadily, peering around, almost in the hope that something, anything, would turn up that he could meet with his new sword . . . just to test it. Then he heard her grunt, and stop, and the slap as her pack hit the ground. He halted, went back.

"What's the use?" she demanded, angrily. "Where's the sense in it? We aren't getting anywhere. For all we know, we may be walking round and round the edge of a pond. I'm fed up, dragging myself along, on and on, and I'm tired. I'm hot. I'm hungry . . ." and she began to cry, standing there, looking into nowhere, her shoulders drooping and the tears creasing through the grime on her face.

"Have a bean . . ." he said, helplessly, and she brushed his hand aside.

"You and your filthy beans!" Her voice cracked with weariness and rage. "You—I believe you *are* a Greenie, after all. You seem to like it, here. I want to go home . . ." and she

crumpled into a sobbing heap by her pack. He stood looking down at her for a moment, then shrugged out of his pack, let it fall by her side. Of course she was tired, and hot, and hungry, and afraid . . . and he couldn't do anything about it at all, except leave her alone for a bit, in the hope that she might get over it. He stuck the sword leaf into the moss, firmly, took up the cape, and went down to the water, selecting an overhanging edge.

He knelt for a moment, watching the seething mass of darting flames under the surface, then he shook out the cape, let it fall into the water, jerked it out, shook it, and wrapped it round his head, feeling the coolness trickle down. Swinging it free again, he paused a moment, to watch. All at once the swarm of tiny fire fish flew apart like splinters in front of an axe-blade as a long blue flame whipped past. *Life is a feast, and every one of us is guest, and dish.* He'd read that, somewhere, long ago. It certainly seemed to be true, here. He swung the cape, holding on to a corner . . . and something flared and leaped, in an arc of blue fire. There was a violent tug at his fingers, almost dragging him in . . . and the cape was gone! He caught just a glimpse of it, disappearing into the dark depths.

"Hell!" he mumbled, staring stupidly at his empty hand. Then, as the full magnitude of the loss came to him, he stood up, feeling sick. He would have to tell Martha, on top of the way she was feeling now. He turned, shrinking from the task, but knowing it had to be done. He took one careful step, to go back to where she was still slumped by the bags . . . and froze in sudden unbelief. She lay still, in the glare of a giant flame-orange tree, and from behind it came a slithering, silent hideousness that made his heart stop and his blood run icy. It made his stomach heave, just to see and be unable to believe. A mass of ropy snake-like things, each as thick as his wrist, each with a gaping, three-cornered mouth at the tip, each seemingly stemming out from a bloated central bladder-like body—all the fifteen-foot members writhing and crawling, so that the eye was baffled as to which way "it" was moving, as a whole. And it was gray-white, like the underbelly of a snail.

Breaking from his sweating horror, he stumbled forward, into a run to get to his sword-leaf. "Martha!" he yelled. "Martha! This way! This way!" Her head lifted at his call,

but the many-snake heard him, too, and its sluggish writhing quickened. Then it made sound, a multi-toned whistling scream. He saw her look back, over her shoulder and up, at the gaping mouths that were so close. And she screamed—a full-lunged, senseless, wrenching scream—and again, her whole body shaken by the absolute surrender to blind terror. Then he was skidding and slithering to a breathless halt, to snatch at the sword-leaf, and on again, madly, leaping over her where she had fallen back, to stand and slash at the hydra-headed nightmare.

He felt the blade bite deep, and the whistling grew to a scream. He slashed again and again, with all the strength he could find . . . and again . . . and spat, blindly, as yellow-green ichor squirted and spouted all over him, his stomach heaving and knotting at the stench, and he went on chopping and slashing until his arms ached and the breath roared burningly in his throat . . . long after the thing was ruptured beyond harm . . . until it was nothing more than a dismembered shambles of feebly twitching yellow-green meat, all around his feet. Then he threw the blade aside, and was sick. Painfully, disgustingly and helplessly retching, the tears burning his eyes, the little refrain came back to mock him in his helplessness. *Anthony Taylor . . . King of the Greenies!*

At last his stomach could throw no more. Shakingly, he straightened up, spat the acid from his mouth, took a shaky breath, and went to where Martha lay still. As best he could, he examined her, and as far as he could tell, she was unmarked. Just a faint. She would come round, in a while. He stood up, and choked on the smell that came from the smears on his own skin. He looked about, found the blade again, staggered down to the water, crouched, and swished it until it was clean, watching the shooting arrows of flame, under the surface.

Water—millions of gallons of it—and he couldn't get any. The King of the Greenies was due to die of thirst, because he couldn't figure out a way. What would a Greenie do, now, he wondered, dully, watching the ceaseless dart and sparkle of the fish. A feast . . . and a dish. An idea struggled to make itself known. He fumbled with it, got to his feet again, went back to where she was still unconscious. Biting back his revulsion, he speared up a



few lumps of the chopped body of the snake-thing on to his blade, went back to the water. Crouching, he gripped a piece, tossed it in . . . waited. Within seconds the dark surface was boiling with activity where the meat had splashed.

"That's me, if I fell in," he muttered, and made haste to splash his hands and face in the deserted water close by the edge, daring to duck his head right under, for a breathless moment. A careful wait, another dripping slice of meat, and he slid his feet in, scooping handfuls of water as far as he could go. He felt better. Not good, but better.

If only there was some way, now, of taking some to where she lay. But, he shrugged, she could come here. He got up again, went back to her. She lay as if asleep, so peacefully that it seemed a pity to disturb her, but the smell was overpowering, now that he had got himself clean, and the moss was alive with little wriggling worms, of all shades of yellow and gold, converging on the minced carcass. Maybe they did eat only dead meat, he thought, and then again, maybe they didn't. She had to be moved. He knelt, took her hand.

"Martha, Martha, wake up!" he called, urgently, and she stirred. "Come on. Wake up!" He patted her cheek, and she smiled, opened her eyes, and sat up.

"I've been asleep!" she said. "I had such a funny dream, Tony. Such a funny dream. Can we go home, now?" She looked at him, expectantly, and her look, her voice, her whole impression, was that of a child of six or seven. He sat on his heels, holding her hand, and gaped, the wheels of his mind grinding to a halt at this shocking change in her.

"Are you all right?" he asked, stupidly, and she smiled again.

"Of course I am, but I'm hot and tired, and I want to go home, now!" Then he knew, saggingly, that this was not Martha Merrill, at all. Something in there had snapped, had failed under the shock, leaving an amiable, half-witted child, blank-faced and docile. His wits circled, aimlessly, like a flight of birds at a gunshot. What to do, now? He realized he was still holding her hand. He squeezed it, reassuringly.

"Can you get up?" he asked, and she laughed, and scrambled to her feet.

"Are we going home, now? Is it far?"

"Not much further," he said, as cheerfully as he could manage. "But I think you should have a wash, and a drink, first. Yes?"

"That'll be nice," she nodded, gravely. "I'm ever so hot and sticky." He took up one pack, indicating the other. She hoisted it, willingly, and followed him to the water-edge. The dismay in his mind was subsiding, now. The damage, whatever it was, was done, and there was no help for it . . . but it might be a blessing in disguise. At least, she didn't seem to be frightened any more.

"You stand just there," he instructed, indicating a spot close to the shallows, "and when I say 'Now,' you step in and splash yourself, very quickly. All right?" She nodded, wide-eyed, got herself ready, and he lobbed another stinking piece of meat into the water. "Now!" he said, and leaned over to help shower her with water as she stood knee-deep. It was grotesque, and yet it was a moment that would live with him as long as he lived—the sight of her kicking and splashing the water over herself, and laughing, delightedly, like a child. "Right. That's enough. Out you come, quick!" he ordered, helping her on to the bank. "Now, we'll have a bean-feast, and then we'll push on."

As they sat and chewed, in silence, he tried to peer out over the water, wondering how far it stretched. It might be just a pond, it might be a lake, or even a sea. Anthony sighed, inwardly, as it was borne in on him just how much he didn't know about his home planet. And no way of ever finding out, now. Unless and until they met up with some natives. . . .

Why hadn't they met any Greenies yet? Surely this would be the sort of place to find them?

"All finished?" he asked. "Let's get back to the trees."

They made their way clear of the edge, and set off again, at a steady tramp, on and on, keeping the water always on their left.

On they went, steadily, through an endless monotony of slithering wetness underfoot, pillars of fire on the right, the dark stretch of the water on the left, on and on, into the heat, the clammy dampness, into what? Where are we going, he wondered, and why?

The questions went round and round in his head like an

idiot chant. With a sudden jerk, he caught himself upright and realized he had been nodding . . . tramping in a doze. He shook his head, angrily, dashing the sweat from his face with the back of his hand. And then Martha was down, on her knees and her head bowed, heavily.

"I'm tired, Tony!" she whimpered, in that little girl voice. "I can't go any more!"

"All right," he said, and felt an enormous wave of weariness sweep over him. "All right. You just settle down, there. I'll get some water, and we will have some more beans . . ." But he was talking to himself. She had fallen asleep.

He dropped his sword-leaf, sank down on his knees, and then slid down flat, turning over to look up into the glowing gray mist, up there. For the very first time, he let the idea of defeat, failure and death become a reality . . . and faced it. This is the way it ends, he thought. Face it. Stop trying to dodge it. Barring a miracle, this was the end. And he still had a choice, either to go on struggling, stupidly, to the very last quiver, or to lie down and accept it, sanely, with what dignity he had left. Anthony Taylor, King of the Greenies . . . A joke, that's what that was. He could see the funny side of it, now.

A small, strange sound had been tapping gently on his ear for some time, trying to make itself known. Now, in the half-world between sleep and waking, he heard it. The chuckle and plash of water. What was so strange about that? There was a damn great lake of it, only a few yards away. And then a splinter of curiosity nagged him, restlessly. He heaved himself to his knees, then to his feet, and went staggering and shambling in the direction of the sound.

Up a gentle rise, so that he had to fall on his knees and crawl to get to the top, and then he looked, blinked his eyes tight to drive away the blurring of fatigue, and looked again.

The splashing was quite loud, now. It came from a tree, at least, it looked something like a tree. But, although it flamed just like all the rest, this one was a mass of rippling, changing color, the waves of glowing light rising and spreading up from its squat hole. And it stood squarely in the middle of a fountain. A veil of falling spray and drops ringed it round like a sparkling curtain. He got to his feet, and went slithering down the slope towards it, nervously because

of the weirdness of it . . . yet eagerly because of the craving in his mouth and throat. Coming close, he put out his hand, into the falling spray . . . and shivered. It was cool! With great daring, he stepped bodily into the downpour, and shivered again, luxuriously, wriggling as the water coursed down over his face, his chest, down the hollow of his back, trickled down his legs. He put his head back, shut his eyes, opened his mouth. The spray was clean, cool, and, to him, like wine. Weariness fell away from him along with the sticky grime and sweat.

Martha, he thought, I must get Martha here! Shaking the wet from his face, he went up the slope at a heavy run, and back to where he had left her. She was still asleep, like a lovely child. He got her arm around his shoulder, and half-carrying her, went back, up that slope and down the other side, scrambling and stumbling, until they were under the cool shower. Holding her by the shoulders, he watched, and waited, saw her shudder, and open her great violet eyes wide.

"It's raining!" she said. Then, as he laughed, she laughed, too, and put up her face to the spray.

He stepped back into the cool water, wondering. This spray, now . . . it had to serve some sort of purpose. There was no sign of it lessening, so the tree must be getting water as fast as it was throwing it away. He moved round the circle until he found the lake, only a few yards away. He stepped clear of the spray enough to see that the downfalling water had cut little pathways in the moss, and was running back into the main body of the lake. It would seem, then, that this tree was drawing water up, from the lake, by its roots, and then just squirting it out, up at the crest, somewhere. But why? And then he remembered the swarming fish-life, and could see, in imagination, the little fire-darting things being sucked in, and digested, in some way.

But what did it matter, anyway? Call it a fountain-tree, and be glad of it. He put his head back and drank. Then he took Martha by the hand, led her clear of the waterfall, to where he had dropped the packs, and made her sit, while he got out another bean-pod. Plenty more of those, he thought, popping it open and handing her a bean. She took and chewed, obediently, and he had a sudden twinge of worry at the utter blankness of her face and eyes. He was

reminded of those other Greenies, back in the dome . . . so long ago, it seemed . . . and they had been dead-eyed, too. Staringly vacant. Was this a part of some inevitable process, part of becoming a Greenie? Would he go like that, in due course, and then be condemned to wander, aimless and pointless, and uncaring in this everlasting twilight?

He pushed the awful thought away, shivering. Not that! Then, as he chewed and pondered, he became aware of something else: the feeling that he was not alone. Thinking back, curiously, he realized that he had not felt "alone," at all, any of the time since they had found this lake. Always, there had been that unspoken conviction that he was "among friends." The idea made him smile, sourly, even as he brought it to the front of his mind and examined it. Among friends? For all he knew to the contrary, there wasn't a friendly heart within hundreds of miles.

And yet, the thought would not go away. It was exactly as if, at any moment, someone might step out from behind one of those trees—that one over there, for instance . . . And he froze, quite still, on the instant, staring.

She was not quite as tall as Martha, and a shade slimmer, perhaps. Her glossy black hair was long, down to her shoulders. But where Martha was pretty, this girl was a poem, a glorious completeness of design and form, curves and lines . . . of sheer, vibrant healthy life. She stood quite still, but it was the breathless stillness of arrested motion, with the promise of darting life in every inch of her stance. Smooth-skinned, quite naked, yet he had never seen anyone look less undressed. Her eyes were wide, the same deep violet as Martha's, and steady on his. Her blush-purple lips were parted in a faint smile, which faded to a frown as she stood, silent. He had the feeling that there was something she had expected him to understand, and was disappointed because he didn't. He moved, cautiously, got to his feet. Martha had not seen. Her head was turned the wrong way, watching the sparkling water.

He stood up, went slowly, step by step, towards this strange vision, as if afraid that some sudden action would startle her away. She stood quite still. Her frown had faded, and the little smile came back, showing white teeth. Then, as if a choir had chanted all at once, he knew she was not alone . . . that there were others with her, many others.

He stopped, and looked round, but he could see no one. Then she moved, for the first time since she had appeared to him. All in one sinuous movement, she twisted, turned and stooped, then swung back and up, facing him, and in her hands was another of the flame-red fruit with the banana-acid pulp. Thrusting it out at arm's length, she let it fall, with the very same thud that had woken him, the first time. He knew, then, that the first one had been put out for him . . . and it was obvious, when he thought of it. If it had fallen from a high tree, it would have burst like a bomb.

So she, and her companions, must have been watching, and trailing, all the time! He looked up from the red fruit, and she was gone. The place was as seemingly deserted as it had always been. The impulse to run, to call out, came and went in two successive heartbeats. He went forward, picked up the fruit, and carried it back to where Martha was sitting. What possible chance did he have of trying to catch her, in this gloom? And what would he do with her, anyway? He sat, and began ripping off the peel, methodically. The natives are friendly, he thought, with a wry grin. So far, at any rate. And if that was a blank-eyed, non-intelligent animal, then he, Anthony Taylor, was a one-legged centipede!

But what was the next move? He fed Martha with segments of the fruit, took some himself, and settled down to think very carefully. A lot would depend on his getting the right answers, here. Assume, first, that "they" had been watching, all along. Yet they had not shown themselves. Why not? Caution, possibly. But they had helped, with food, twice. Friendly? It seemed like it. And wasn't it just possible that this "feeling" he'd had, about going the "right" way was due to them, also? A sort of herd instinct? And they hadn't tried to steal the beans, as they could easily have done.

But, he took the other side. They hadn't helped at all with the spider-snake, or the blade-bush, or any other hazards. Their help, if you could call it that, had been negative, except for the fruit.

"Maybe we've had to prove ourselves," he mumbled. "If we'd been chopped by the bush, caught by the snake-thing, or chewed up by fish, they'd have just written us off as stupid. Maybe we've qualified, now."

"What did you say?" Martha asked, sleepily, and he grunted, settling his shoulders against his pack.

"Nothing. Just talking to myself. You had enough."

"Mmmmm!" she wriggled close to him, her eyes already closed again. He could feel sleep tugging at his own eyes, and this time there was no need to fight it, or feel afraid. The natives were friendly. Just as he was slipping away into comfort, it came to him that he was taking this very much for granted, as if he had "known," all along, that it would be like this.

All at once, out of nothing into full alertness, he was awake, and a tug of urgency made him sit up. Time to be moving . . . as plain as if someone had shouted it. In the same instant he saw a dozen figures, possibly more, moving through the hissing spray from the water-tree. Just a glimpse, and then they were gone, leaving that insistent urge to be moving. He got to his feet, and then he saw the green girl, standing, watching. She turned, moved a step or two, looked back. It couldn't be more plain. He stooped, shook Martha, got her to her feet, took her hand, and started to follow. Around the spraying tree, and then down a shallow gully, to the water-edge. The girl stood, waiting. There, beside her, bobbing on the dark water, was a huge flat shape—a leaf, dark purple and the shape of a spearhead. The main rib, where it had been hacked from its parent tree, was as thick as his wrist, and curled up. From there to the pointed tip, the thing measured some twenty feet, and little more than six feet wide at its broadest. He went close, leading Martha, and the green girl, light-footed, stepped out, on to the thick rib, and crouched, to look up at him.

He saw the whole thing sag, slightly, and curl up. And sweat broke out all over him as he realized what was intended. This . . . was a boat? This flat, frail thing? On that seething water? But the girl kept quite still, one hand holding on to a stump-root. He went along, until he stood about the middle, got out of his pack, stiff-armed the bundle, lowered it, carefully, and the green girl edged back, to balance the weight. He put Martha's pack alongside his, up towards the point, and the leaf sank a little more, the edges curling up. His hand was clammy as he took Martha, led her, obediently, to the edge.

"Step lightly," he muttered, "and squat, by the bags." She

did as he said, without question, settling herself to face the green girl, who was now holding the upsprung edges at the stern end. Taking a deep breath, he stepped in and went down into a crouch, facing the green girl, clutching the edges, watching for her next move. The leaf-edge, in his fingers, had a rim, a thickening, and was flexible, but firm.

Now what, he wondered? There was no sign of an oar, or paddle, and sails would have been ridiculous, in this constant calm. He was miserably aware of the water, no more than three inches away from his fingers, at the edges. The thick end of the rib had curled, now, until it was almost upright. The green girl set her back against it. Then she leaned and reached, her hands apart, grasping the edges, and shoved out against the water. In quick time she pulled herself back, gripped and shoved again, pulled back and shoved, and then did it all over again . . . a three-stroke movement that made a bulge and sent it rippling along towards herself. She kept on doing it: reaching forward and rocking back in three quick shoves, and he saw that the effect was to "squeeze" the frail craft through the water.

They were moving. Already the dark shoreline was out of sight, and only the fading glow of fire-trees remained to tell him where they had been. Squinting round, gingerly, he could make out faint shapes, and the spread of fiery ripples, to show that there were other boats, ahead. Then he brought his attention back to her, noting the rhythm of her movements, and the lift and spring of the flat sheaths of healthy muscle across her shoulders, chest and stomach as she worked. Then he saw, too, the full sheen of sweat on her skin, and roused himself. This was all wrong, that he should crouch, nervously, while she slaved to carry him. He gripped the edges anew, watching her. If he could start that bulge, from where he was, in time to pass it along to her . . . He counted, in his head, her reach and press, and pressed out . . . shifted his grip, pressed, shifted and pressed . . . and his face was close to hers as she reached and took the thrust from him.

She gave him a fleeting smile. He rocked back, falling easily into the swing of it . . . and now he could see the spreading vee of their wake, in lines of liquid fire. Not bad, he told himself, for an animal. And he had a wry moment as he wondered what the colonists would think, if they



could see him, now. It gave him a mild shock to realize just how long ago it seemed since he had thought about "people," at all, and how remote the past had become, like a dream from some other life. But it wasn't long before those idle thoughts were scraped away by the ache. It began in his forearms and fingers, and he concentrated, as he had been taught, at the piano, long ago, on relaxing, on not seizing hold too hard, on using only such muscles as were absolutely necessary. The ache spread to his shoulders, to his chest, and then his stomach, and the great thigh-muscles, more and more insistent as the repeated effort became harder and harder to make. And he was working for breath, too, pulling great gasps down into his lungs over a throat that felt raw and sandy. Shaking the sweat out of his eyes, he could see that the girl was rocking and thrusting steadily, still, her calm face expressionless and withdrawn, her eyes half-closed. She was glossy with sweat, but to all outward appearances she seemed good for hours of this, yet. He set his jaw, grimly, determined not to be outdone by a girl.

Then the stupidity of the thought struck him like a kick in the face. Pride? What the hell was he doing with pride, here? On the instant, he gave one last weary shove, put up his palms and tried to pantomime his fatigue. The girl stopped as he did, gave a small, weary smile, and sagged back against the stern-post, letting herself go absolutely limp. Now he could see that she was breathing just as heavily as he was, and he was glad he hadn't driven himself too far. Slumping into the bottom, he let his head fall on his knees, and his stomach growled at him, reminding him of the bean-bags. They were believed to be precious to the Greenies, weren't they? Now was a time to find out. He squirmed round, gingerly, wincing against the protest of his muscles. Martha was fast asleep, curled up like a kitten. He tugged at a bag, carefully, managed to get a pod free, and wriggled back.

He held it out, touching her gently on a knee. She opened her eyes, and looked at him, but made no other move. Again there was that wondering, puzzled look, as if he was failing to understand. He scratched his head. Then, on an impulse, he popped the pod open, shook out two of the

beans, put one in his mouth and held out the other to her with his finger-tips.

"For you," he said, foolishly. Her eyes widened. That faint twist of a smile crossed her face as she craned forward, bared gleaming white teeth, and took the bean from his fingers with a neat bite. Then she sat back, and chewed, thoughtfully. And then, in a soft, almost hushed voice, she said, distinctly, "Thank you!"

The pod fell from his fingers and the frail boat rocked perilously, at his shocked surprise. "You spoke! You can talk, and English, too."

"Yes," she said, with careful, odd intonation. "I understand this talk. You, also?"

"But of course!" he said, and then caught himself, for there was no "of course" about it. He was as green as she, with nothing to show that he was anything else. How could she be expected to guess?

"This is incredible." He choked and coughed on bean-fragments, gulped them out of the way hurriedly. "How . . . where did you learn? Who taught you?"

"We go on, now," she said, swallowing and putting her hands to the edges.

He shrugged, pushed aside the questions that surged to his mind, and set himself to join her. But there was one thing.

"You have a name? What do I call you?"

"I am called Lov-lee," she said, shaking the long hair back from her face and smiling.

"Lov-lee." He copied her pronunciation, and grinned. I'm with Greenies, he thought, continuing to row. I'm a Greenie . . . I'm accepted. That much is obvious. And, if the rest are like her, then they are intelligent . . . human! Where are we going? How do they find their way? So many questions kept him busy that she had stopped her rowing before he noticed. Then a quick glance over his shoulder showed him that they were gliding into the black mouth of a tunnel at the water-edge. A tangle of vinelike fronds brushed across his back as he bent. He heard Martha mutter, felt her sit up . . . and they were in blackness as tangible as velvet. He could see the twin violet lamps of eyes . . . Lovely's, and then Martha's, as she sat up.

"Keep very still," he warned. "We're in a tunnel. It's all right."

"We're nearly home, now," she whispered, as if she knew.

"I hope you're right," he said, but so softly that she couldn't hear. A few more moments of the blackness, and then there was the growing light of a pearly glow, and they slid out into thick mist, so that he couldn't see anything, not even Lovely, who was no more than a foot away from his face. The boat jarred, gently, and was still. He felt Lovely scramble out, and her touch on his arm. He crouched, gave his hand to Martha, helped her out, warned her to stand still, then passed her a bag, took one himself, and got out, on to wet warm moss. Blurredly, he saw Lovely seize the leaf-boat, to drag it up high out of the water and turn it over. The mist was patchy, tempting the sight one moment, blanketing it the next. Still, if they were to be afoot, they might as well get into harness. He helped Martha into her pack, shrugged into his own, stuck the sword-leaf into a strap fold, and waited. Lovely loomed up, her hand out.

"Come . . . !" she said, simply, and was gone again, into the gray glow.

"Hold on!" he called, keeping his voice as calm as he could. "I've lost you. I can't see a thing." In a moment, she was back, her face close to his in the mist, that puzzled expression in her eyes again.

"You cannot see?"

"Not in this stuff, I can't." And she was gone again, with just the echo of a word. "Stay . . . !" And he peered vainly to try to see where she was. Was this his failure? Was he supposed to be able to see, through this stuff? She could, pretty obviously, but how? Did she have a built-in radar, or X-ray eyes, or what? And, as the moments crept by, he wondered if she had gone off and left them? Just as he was beginning to consider this as a possibility, she was back, a dark shape in the gray.

"Hold," she said, and pushed something into his hand. He seized it, a slim, flexible, cord-like something, and gave it a turn round his knuckles. Off she went again, and the cord came taut, pulling him. He took a better grip on Martha's hand.

"Come on," he said. "We start walking, now." The un-

derfoot was slippery and wet, and, by the feel of it, led slightly up hill. He had the feeling of a slope on either side, as if they were climbing the valley of a little stream. And it seemed hotter than ever, or was that just an illusion, because of the thick soupy mist? He plodded on, heavily, with Martha a gentle drag on his left hand, and that enigmatic cord dangling in front, coming up taut every time he slowed down the least bit. He imagined the slim, lithe green girl striding on ahead, setting this cracking pace, and marveled. She must be every bit as worn as he was, yet she didn't let up. And she was quick in the wit, too. He knew, as positively as if she had shouted it, that she had been surprised by his inability to see in this soupy stuff. It must have been a completely new problem to her. Yet she had met and solved it in a matter of moments.

He felt the thing in his hand, investigating it with his finger-tips. It was a root, or a creeper of some kind. Not a "made" thing, anyway. And that gave him something to think about in real earnest. Intelligent people, anywhere, made things. Tools, weapons, ornaments, clothing, artifacts of some kind . . . didn't they? Or was that just one kind of intelligence? And could you call that boat a "made" thing . . . or not? And, come to think of it, what had *he* ever made?

Onward, still uphill, and steeper now, but no let up in the pace. He urged his weary limbs to keep going, one step after another, feeling Martha as a growing drag, but the girl on the forward end of that cord had sinews like wire and leather, and no idea of the word "rest."

"I'm tired," Martha whimpered. "Can't we stop, now?" But the dangling cord showed no inclination to stop.

"Damn this place," he mumbled. "We've been on the move every blasted minute since we landed . . . going, going, all the time, and never getting anywhere. . . . No sense in it . . ." And he was just in time to check himself from blundering into Lovely, who had stopped, ahead of them. "What now?" he demanded, blearily, as she turned and touched him.

"Now we go down," she said, pantingly. "The path is small, and I cannot be with you. But I will wait, at the bottom." Then she stooped into a crouch, and seemed to vanish into the mist at his feet. The cord in his hand was limp.

"Can we rest, now?" Martha whispered, sagging where she stood. "I'm tired, Tony. I want to rest!"

"All right," he said, backing off a bit. "You squat here and rest, while I investigate."

He slipped out of his pack, holding on to the cord and looping it. It was about nine feet long. Casting it out in front, he followed, cautiously, and went on his knees when it seemed to tug at him. Then his groping hand found an edge, and a blank. He felt down, getting down on his chest. A rough wall-face. A cliff! But where was the path? He swung the cord, felt it touch something. The swirling mist-veil parted a moment, and he saw it, no more than four feet down, and no more than eighteen inches wide, either. He lay still, visualizing it long after the vapor had closed in, and liking it less every minute.

But, he told himself, grimly, the more I think about it, the less I'm going to like it . . . and there isn't any other way but down there. So we might as well get on with it. He coiled up the creeper again, wriggled back to where Martha sat.

"There's a path," he told her. "And it will be all right, if we're very careful. I'll fasten our packs together."

He freed the straps, made a belt of one, buckled it about her waist, made another for himself, linked the remaining two, hauled them tight around the two bags, and took up the creeper. Threading it through the bag-straps, he knotted one end to her belt and the other to his own.

"Now," he said, "we'd better start. Come on." He urged her to her feet, led her cautiously until she reached the edge, made her kneel, and then wriggle backwards, while he held her wrists. To his immense relief, she found firm footing while still breast-high to the edge.

"All right, now. Stay still." He moved along, lowered himself over and got his feet set. The path dipped sharply, as he scrambled along, dragging the bags. "Follow the rope!" he called, and waited until she was close to him. "Now, hang on and keep still again, until I've moved and got set." And so they went, alternately, groping and fumbling, down into the mist. To his relief, what had seemed nightmarish in prospect, became monotony in effect after the first few minutes. In that mist, they lost all sense of height. Their world shrank to a small thing, a bubble in

space, bounded by a rough wall and a jagged path. He shuffled on, half-turned, and his shoulder met solid rock. A dead end. He waited for her, until there was a loop of cord, and gently lowered the bags over the edge, crouching down. They rested on something. He turned, let himself over, groping, and found another ledge, zig-zagging back from the first. Helping her down, he went on again, meeting and parting from her in the mist.

Then, dully, he noticed that they were not parting any more. He could still see her, right out to the full stretch of the cord. The mist was thinning. Again the path broke and doubled back on itself, giving him a moment to look down. There, below and out, was a haze of colors, of blurred glowing lines and patches. Down they went, yard by yard, to see that these were trees, and then there was no mist at all, but a clear, faintly-tinted glow, a haze. The tree-tops came near, until they seemed close enough, almost, to touch, and the down-dropping track, angling to and fro, brought them into a different kind of world from any they had seen, so far. They stood and looked across into a network of fiery beams and struts, branches and great flat leaves . . . and life, running and leaping, crawling and chattering.

They began the trail once more, weary despite the brief rest. They had descended, below the level of the lower branches. The scene had opened out into haze-color distance, and Anthony could see a huge valley, with standing fire-trees, the distant glint of waves on a lake-shore, a dark mossy slope . . . and people. Green people, a great host of them down there.

Straight down, as much as he dared to look over, the foot of the cliff gave on to a gentle slope, about thirty feet or so below, and there were people here, too, a dozen of them, stretched out, resting. He could discern great bundles, net-like, containing various-colored fruits and berries—at least, they looked like berries—all in a pile. He straightened up, thoughtfully. That might be the party they had come with, those mysterious ones in the other boats. Lovely ought to be there, but it was impossible to identify her, at this distance. All at once, he was impatient to be down, but he fought the impulse. This would be a damn silly time to slip, to make a mess of things. He waited for Martha to inch her way close.

"Hang on," he said. "Don't look now, but we have an audience. Keep still a minute while I unfasten this line. I think it will be safe to let the bags drop the rest of the way." He took the two ends of the creeper, slid the bean-bags over the side, let them hang steady, then released them, watching them go down with a slap on the dark green turf. One bounce, and they were still.

"Now"—he gave her a grin—"let's go, with a bit of style!"

"There must be nearly a hundred of them" she gasped. "All watching us!" He went ahead of her, as steadily as he could manage, until the track was no more than a small jump down to the turf. That jump cost him the last bit of starch in his legs and he swayed as he turned to help her down. Then in a silence that he could feel, he led her to where their packs had fallen. He saw the dark hollow of a cave-mouth, and an old man squatting before it. An old green man, his skin still glossy, but his face lined and grooved with the toll-marks of much living, his hair faded until it was the color of antique silver, his great purple eyes broodingly calm.

A girl crouched by his side. Anthony recognized her at once, and was grateful for her smile, but his gaze came back to the old man, and was held there in fascination. Those eyes held nothing of a smile, or welcome, or anything except deep curiosity. And power. Anthony stared, and the ground under his feet suddenly began to tilt and reel. Feeling control slipping away, he tried to speak, but his mouth refused to work, his throat was dry, and the ground came up and hit him in the face.

He was stretched out in the dark, flat on his back. Voices grunted close by. As he came more awake he felt a headache unlike any he had ever known. Just for a moment he had the image of probing fingers that had reached inside his skull, seeking for what they might find. The vision went as quickly as it had come. He stirred, got to his knees, and saw the dimness of the cave-mouth, began crawling towards it over a mossy surface. His hand brushed and fell on a soft bundle, like a plastic sack of some kind, with odd angular objects inside. He groped awhile, then abandoned the thing, whatever it was, and crawled on, out into

the glowing light. The scene outside was changed only in that the gathering of green people had dispersed. The old man sat where he had been, as if he had become part of the picture. And Lovely sat by the old man's knee. Anthony paused in the cave-mouth to listen, but he could make nothing of what they said, and he added this mystery to the growing total of disjointed information about his own people.

For he was more than ever convinced, now, that they were a people. In the past hours he had seen too much to believe otherwise. Now, obviously, he was listening to them speaking their own language. But that girl had spoken English every bit as good as his own, if oddly accented. He moved, crept out of the cave-mouth and stood. The girl turned, smiled, and waved him to come close. The old man's eyes shifted, following him as he went the few steps, and settled down on a knee. Anthony made a bold but natural assumption, and put it into one word.

"Chief?"

For one breathless moment there was no response, then the old face broke into a stare of utter amazement, transforming it entirely from its age-old calm. Those deep eyes blinked and grew wide.

"You, also, speak this tongue?"

"It's the only one I know."

"As I told you," the girl said. "And they were wandering, not knowing, when we found them. Are they not a great wonder?"

"Indeed!" the old man nodded. "The woman also speaks thus? But her eyes are as ours. Yours are not." He looked at Anthony. "Never have I heard of, nor seen, one of our people with eyes of that strange tint. What are you?"

"I wish I knew," Anthony sighed. "There's such a lot I don't know. I feel that I am one of you, and yet I can't be sure. My father was an Earthman. At least, that's what I've always been led to believe. And I don't know how much you understand of what I'm saying, anyway. You know what an Earthman is—a human?"

The girl smiled and said, "Earth is a planet of the Solar System very similar to this one, which the humans call Venus. The humans came here with much difficulty in strange boats to be friendly with us and to teach us, also learn



from us. But this atmosphere"—she pronounced the word with great care, and made a sweeping gesture around and above—"is not good for them. They call it hot, and it makes them quickly tired. Many of them die. We think they will go away when they are all tired."

She said it very simply, like a child reciting a lesson, but her words were enough to churn Anthony's wits into hopeless confusion. The implications, alone, made him reel.

"Who told you all that?"

"It is a true saying?"

"Some of it is, yes. But the rest of it is utterly false. Who told you? Who taught you to talk like this?" He half-knew the answer before the old man spoke, and yet the words were like blows.

"There was a human here. He lived with us. He was a friend, and he taught us to speak his tongue because he could not learn ours. He died."

"Died? When? How long ago?"

"What is long?" the old man asked, his old face calm again now. "This was a great mystery to us, when Doctor spoke of it. Of days and weeks and time. This we do not understand. Before this one was a child, Doctor came." He indicated Lovely with a grave nod. "With him, also, came a woman. His woman. Both were very tired always, but they talked much, and taught us to talk to them. Then the woman began to swell with child, as our women do, and it was a bad thing for her, just as it is with our women. Doctor said we should hunt the bean for her, and we did, because she was good. Always, before that, we had given the bean only to men and women, never to young ones, or any who fall sick, or are with child, because it would be waste, and beans are few. But Doctor told us to crush beans and make juice of them, for the sick and weak. And it was a good thing. Now we do it always. You have brought many beans, in the two bags."

"Oh those!" Anthony had almost forgotten his treasure. "You can have them. Share them out among the rest of the people."

"That is good." Lovely smiled. Anthony returned her smile, but was impatient to hear the rest.

"The human woman had her child, but it was dead," the old man went on. "This happens also with us, many

times. Doctor was angry. Other humans came in a machine, with special things to eat, but the woman was sick in her head, I think. Two of our women were with child. This was one of them—" he nodded to Lovely again. "The other one would have died, because the woman died as she delivered. But Doctor was there, and took the baby and gave it to his woman to care for. Then he gave the child some of the special things to eat, and became pink, like a human. This was a great wonder to us."

"Wait! Wait!" Anthony implored, trying desperately to fill in the gaps in the laconic narrative. "The human woman took a green baby and gave it something to eat that made it white, you say? A boy baby?"

"No. It was a female, like this one."

Anthony was dashed for a moment, but only a moment. Memories flooded back, enough to tell him the rest of it. "The white woman became well enough to be able to leave, to return to the other humans, didn't she?"

"That is right." The old man nodded. "But Doctor stayed with us. He was very sick, and there was not enough space in the machine for him. He stayed. The machine was to come again for him, later. But it did not come. Then, when this one was become a woman, ready for mating, he died."

The picture was so clear, now, that Anthony could have put a name to the shadowy figure of the "Doctor." But the clarity had brought a new confusion. The mention of machines argued some kind of communication with the Domes. But those people back there had insisted that they knew nothing of educated Greenies, had made it quite clear that they knew the green people as animals, nothing more. He struggled for an answer of some kind. Could it be that there were two factions? One the scientific, seeking for reason, and the other the superstitious, shrinking away from these caricature humans? Could that be why the machine had never come back to rescue the lone man? Anthony imagined him stuck here, enduring the heat, waiting and waiting, never knowing what had happened to his wife, and her substitute child, the baby that she had dosed with chemicals to make it white. That would be some variation of anti-tan, of course. A girl-baby, taken back to Earth by a half-demented mother, and allowed to grow up believing

herself colored. As she was, but not the way she had believed.

"What happened to Doctor?" he asked. "To his body, I mean?"

"Scavenger worms!"

"And there nothing left, then? Nothing at all to show that a man lived and died here?"

"Oh yes!" Lovely broke in. "Doctor had a writing. A book. I will get it for you." She scrambled up and stooped to plunge into the cave, returning in just a moment or two with a slimy plastic pouch, smaller than those which held the beans, and clear. As he took it, Anthony could see, dimly, the outline of a black-backed notebook. On opening it he saw, also, that there was a battered briar-wood pipe, gray with fungus, and a plastic lighter. He touched a fiberglass stylus from which the ink had long since departed, and then a very small glassite envelope. It held two spare flints for the lighter, and a coiled lock of golden hair. Anthony touched them all gently. Strange things for a man to treasure and keep in his last moments. He took the notebook and opened it. Only the cover would move, and even it peeled back reluctantly. The rest, the pages of script, were rotted into a solid soggy mass. But the cover was enough. Just inside, the inscription was still legible: *T.O. Merrill*. Anthony closed the book again.

"The girl who was with me?" he asked. "Where is she?"

"She is with our women. She sleeps." The old man frowned very slightly. "There is something wrong with her, in her head. Also with you, but not the same. These are mysteries. You can explain?"

"I can explain this much. This man"—he indicated the pitiful remains—"sent his woman away with a baby of this people. A female baby, as you have said. The girl, she who came with me, is that baby, grown up. Her name, and this name, are the same."

The old man's face was as expressionless as mossy wood. "This is good. She has come home. But you?"

Anthony was puzzled. Surely this old man had the wit to put two and two together and find the answer for himself. Then he recalled his colored contact lenses, and smiled wryly. There was no possible point in keeping them in place any longer. He reached for that small envelope, which would

serve as well as anything for a place to secure the fragile things. Then he touched a finger-tip to his tongue, and then, delicately, to his eyes. For a few moments he had to sit with his eyes shut until the involuntary tears ceased. Then he was able to lift his head . . . and gasp in astonishment.

What had been a dim half-light was now pearly radiance, and all colors were startlingly vivid, seemingly imbued with their own flame. It was as if he had been color-blind before, but could now see with new eyes. Then he caught wide-eyed amazement on the faces of the other two. The expression on Lovely's face, in particular, was a glow that made him suddenly warm and uncomfortable. Then, just as before, it gave way to that fleeting look of disappointment, of something he ought to be, but wasn't.

"Now you are one of us," the old man said. "It is good. You will stay, be with us. This one shall be your woman. She found you."

"Oh now, wait a bit!" Anthony drew back in instant rejection. He saw the glow on her cheek, a gentle flush of purple, and knew it for what it was, but the swiftness of the decision was too much. "Hold on a bit," he repeated. "There's a lot to be sorted out, first."

The old face was bleakly calm, and Anthony wondered how he could ever have believed that expression to be one of understanding. He saw it now as absolutely autocratic, a power that expected no argument, nor would bow to any.

"You are asleep in your head. So, also, is the woman who came with you. This is because you have lived all your life with the humans. This, I know. Doctor, also, was like this. But he was human, an Earth-man. You, and the woman, are of us and like us. We will wake you up."

There was no menace in the tone or the words, but Anthony cringed, inside, from the implications. Whatever it was the old man meant, he didn't like the sound of it one little bit. He got up from his kneel, took a step back, and then something made him look round. Where the scene had been deserted and quite quiet, the mossy slope down to the water and the distant groves of standing trees barren of people, he now saw a host. They were all at a distance, all merely standing and watching, but they were there. And he had seen nothing in the way of a sign or command, but

he knew beyond any doubt that the old man had summoned them. He turned his head back to look at Lovely, and saw her smile, a smile of reassurance.

"Come and sit again," she said. "There is nothing to be afraid of. We wish to help you. I think you are like a small child which has not yet learned how to live properly."

"I suppose that's true," he admitted, "but I don't like the sound of that 'wake up' business. I'm not asleep. There's nothing wrong with me!" He squatted, fighting his nervousness. "I'll admit Martha isn't quite right in her head. I can tell you how that happened, because I was there—"

He broke off, catching his breath as a sudden chill struck him. In the same split-second the old man reached out a long arm to touch him. The peacefully glowing scene dissolved from before his eyes as if a curtain had fallen. He knew that he was under water, several feet down, drowning, gasping for breath, panic-frantic at the knowledge that a myriad needle-toothed carnivorous fishes were within seconds of ripping his flesh to streaming ribbons. He cringed before the first agonizing wave of bites. Strong arms groped and seized him, held firm, lifted. He came up out of the living water, snorting for breath, feeling the scrape and burn of swallowed water, gasping deep and thankful breaths . . . and then, as inexplicably as it had come, the vivid nightmare vanished . . . and he was once again in the tranquility of the little grove, with Lovely on one side, and the old chief on the other.

Even if that had been no more than an illusion, it had been real enough to leave him gasping for breath now. "What was that?" he panted. "What happened?"

"You know quite well. You shared and experienced it."

"But I *don't* know, damn it! You keep assuming things that just are not true!" He fought to overcome his growing sense of helpless frustration, to make himself calm. "I had the illusion of falling into deep water, of not being able to swim, and then being pulled out. It was a trick of some kind. Because I am *here*. I did *not* fall into water. I *can* swim!" He glared at the old man, striving to break that brooding know-all calm. "It was a trick. You did it. I want to know why!"

"I do not know what you mean by 'trick.' One fell into the water and was in danger. We helped him. You also."

"But how? And who was it?"

"You want a name, I think," Lovely murmured. "This is the way of Earth talk, to have names. We do not have such words. The man who was in danger, which you knew about, if you met him you would know him, I think."

Anthony caught back the rejection which came to his lips, and frowned. It was true, what she said, now that he thought back. He would know that man beyond all doubt, because, for a brief moment, he had *been* that man. Again, the implications were enough to spin his mind into stumbling confusion.

"You understand now," the chief murmured, "that it is true, as I told you. You have the strength and power of a man, but you are asleep inside your head. You have learned too much of talking with the mouth, and nothing of touching with the inside."

"That's enough," he muttered, getting to his feet. "Enough. I want to be alone for a bit, to think. You're going too fast for me."

"You are afraid?"

"No, not the way I was before. I'm just all mixed up. I need time to sort things out in my mind." He turned away to walk down the slope and Lovely appeared by his side.

"I will come with you. I am your woman, now."

"That's another thing that goes a bit too fast for me," he protested. "Don't think I'm objecting to you as a person, mind. It's just the idea."

"It is not like this, on Earth?"

"What do you know about Earth? How much did the Doctor tell you? And more than that, how much did you understand?"

They began walking slowly, and she tilted her head on one side in thought before she replied, "Doctor told us much, but only in words. Earth people have only words, like this? Nothing else?"

"What else is there?" His mind refused to make the step that he could see looming ahead. He wanted her to say it for him. "You use words, don't you?"

"Not like this. Words are not true. Listen, this is a word—water." She pointed to the glossy ripples just ahead. "Water—it is just a noise."

They went the last few steps over blue sand. She stepped

ankle-deep into the small surf and kicked a rainbow splash. "This," she said, "is water!"

He had caught her arm, urgently, without thinking. "Careful, you'll be bitten!"

"Not here." She put her hand on his, where it was gripping her arm, and glanced a few yards along, where several small children were splashing in the tiny wavelets. "This water is safe."

He felt foolish, and then acutely aware of the silky skin of her arm, the warm grasp of her hand, and her nearness.

"Water is a something, a feeling, a touching. Not a word. You feel, inside. Just then, you were afraid for me, and now ashamed, and excited. How do you speak that in words?"

He eased his hand out from under hers, struggling with his embarrassment. "How do I say what I'm feeling, you mean?"

"No!" she strode away from him abruptly, straight into the water, and turned again when she was waist-deep. "Now!" she called. "This is how I feel," and in that instant he had the conviction that he was waist deep in cool water. It was no illusion, but a perfectly valid sensation, complete to the gentle swirl of currents past his ankles and toes. And then it was gone, so abruptly that he almost fell. His face must have betrayed his astonishment, for she laughed. Her teeth were like a white flame against the purple of her lips and the glowing green of her face, and he knew, in that moment, that she was the loveliest, the most desirable woman he had ever seen. My woman, he thought, and the thought was like a fire in his veins, magnifying all his fears and confusions a hundred-fold.

On the impulse he waded into the water after her and she laughed again, and bobbed down, right under for a moment, then came up and shook the water from herself like a dog.

As he came near she challenged him gaily, "How do you speak this, in words?"

"I don't know. Lovely, you shared your feelings with me, then."

"Yes." She nodded, smiling.

"Can you also share in my feelings?"

"Sometimes. Just a little bit. When they are very strong, or simple. Mostly I feel just a mix-up, as if you are not

happy. But now it is not like that. You are feeling good, strong for me, that I am your woman. It is very pleasant. I am glad. . . . She paused, and he forgot her as he saw a small company of green people, men and women, marching steadily by the foot of the rock-wall, going in the general direction of the original cave, and, presumably, the old man, the Chief.

In their midst was Martha. Catching sight of him she smiled and waved her hand. "Tony! We're going to play a game. Are you coming with us?"

"I'm coming," he called back, and turned a hard eye on his companion. "What's this game she's talking about? Do you know?"

"I think we will go ahead and talk to the old one, that one you call Chief. He will explain."

She led the way with long rippling strides that took them ahead of the placid marchers. The old man sat exactly as he had been before, as if he was an unchangeable part of the scene.

"We are going to wake her up," he said, as Anthony threw the question at him. "She is all shut up in her head. You, also, but you have started to open. With the woman, it is different. She has known a great fear."

Anthony stared at him, and then guessed. "This woman told you?"

"She let me see. It is almost the same. When you killed the many-snake. There was great fear, and she fled and hid inside her head. Now we will help her to find out that there is no danger any more and she will come out again." If the words were crude and simple, the diagnosis was profound and accurate. Anthony wanted to know how, but the old man shook his head.

"We spoke much of this with Doctor. It is not possible to speak words for feeling-thinking. Doctor said like this—" The old man stretched out his hand and splayed his fingers. "One person is like a finger, but many fingers together make a hand. Hand joins to arm, to brain. Brain is the focus for all, unites all. I am like such a brain. Many people think, one and one and one. Through me, many can think together. This is what I am for. Every tribe has one person like me. A focus. When I am dead, it will be her," and he nodded to Lovely.



"Every tribe? There are many tribes like this?" Anthony asked.

"Very many. Doctor spoke much to us of numbers, and how to count. A tree has many branches, many leaves. All trees spring from the ground and are joined. I am like a tree. I am joined to other trees. But enough, all is ready for the awakening. You will help." He looked round and saw now that Martha stood all alone in the center of a great circle of silent and impassive green people.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Speak to her. Help her to remember that part that she has chosen to forget. We will do the rest." He felt a moment of rebellion.

"You don't know what you're doing. If you wake her up, make her normal again, she'll be worse off than before."

"What do you want?" the old man asked woodenly. "If she remains like this, who will care for and protect her, find food for her? You?" Again the words were simple and profoundly significant. In that moment Anthony knew that he was in the jaws of a trap from which there was no escape. He could barely hope to survive in this alien environment. It was out of the question for him to support anyone else, let alone someone as helpless as Martha was in her state. But—and it was a great "but" in his mind—if she were restored to normal awareness, and found herself in the midst of a horde of Greenies . . . He shivered at the thought. The old man's stare was as flat as a brick wall. Unwillingly, Anthony made his way into the center of the circle, and took Martha by the hand.

"Let's sit down, shall we?" he said. "And let's talk. I want to see how much you can remember. Will you? It's a kind of game." She nodded and squatted on the turf, tucking up her long legs. It was a shocking experience to see her like this, a beautiful mature woman, but with the wide-eyed stare of a child. He mentioned names. Austin Willers. Borden Harper. There was no flicker of recognition at all. Nothing. He shifted in time, tried another approach. Yes, she recalled coming down the cliff-walk, the mist, and a vague something about a boat, a water-tree.

"That was ever so nice!" she laughed. "I liked that. It was cool!" Over her shoulder Anthony caught the old man's eye, his grave nod. On the instant he could "feel"

again the pleasant sensation of the cool shower. He sensed that all the silent crowd were joined with him and Martha. It was an odd feeling. He approached the next effort cautiously.

"What happened just before that, before we found the water-tree?"

"I don't know." She wrinkled her pretty brow. "I was asleep, I think."

"Feel sleepy now. Remember the little frog-lizard? And then when I went to wash, with the red cape? And then . . ." In his own mind the hideous memory of that foul crawling thing was very vivid. She seemed to catch it. She jerked upright, like a doll on strings, and screamed mindlessly, senselessly, pointing. Again and again the crazed screams erupted from her throat and the scalding strength of her fear washed over him, hurting, wrenching at his stomach. Much as he ached to reject the pictures which came to his mind, they came nevertheless—the hissing, the crazy slashing and chopping, the evil stench. He seized her hand, felt it clenching and shivering in his, and she went on screaming, over and over, like a mechanical thing. Sweat sprang out all over her body until she glistened. And then the tide began to ebb. The screams weakened, died away, became gasping silence. She sat, staring at nothing, shivering.

"It's all right," he soothed. "All right. All over. Finished."

"It was a nightmare. Wasn't it?"

"No, Martha. It was real. But it's done and finished with. I killed the thing. You're all right now, all safe."

"Where is it?" She still stared at vacancy, still shivering.

"All gone. Some of it I threw in the water. The rest, why we just left it. That was a long way back and a long time ago."

"I can still smell it."

"No you can't. That's just imagination." Her hand slipped out of his suddenly and she swung to stare at him. Then her stare licked round the circle of silent watchers, and he "felt" her mind snap shut so violently that it was a blow.

"Greenies!" She came up to her knees and then a crouch. "Greenies! Hundreds of them!" She started to run, so abruptly that he barely managed to catch her arm. She flung off his clutch instantly but staggered into a sprawl and he dived, catching her by the ankle to bring her flat on her face.

"Hold still! There's nothing to be afraid of. These are friends!"

"Let me go!" She kicked her leg and scabbled at the moss.

"Don't be a fool! You've been here a long while, perfectly safe. I tell you, these people are our friends!"

"Let me go . . . !"

"You've been cared for, fed, looked after and restored to sanity by these people. Don't ruin it all, now."

All at once she went quite still, face down. He relaxed his clutch, and on the instant she was free and away, up on her feet and running like a deer, straight between two stolid green men and down the slope.

"Martha!" he yelled. "Stop!" And then some of his rage spilled over on the mute audience. "Why the hell don't you help? Do something!" He bit off the rest as he saw no response, and started running after her down to the water-edge. She had plunged in up to her waist and was wading. He skirted the shore to keep abreast of her.

"Be sensible!" he called pleadingly. "There's no danger, nothing to run away from. At least give me a chance to explain."

He saw her turn and come wading out again. He waited for her. She came directly towards him and he extended his hand in reassurance. Her face was blank until she was close.

"Greenie!" She spat it at him, bringing her hand across and down, her fingers splayed like talons. Half-blinded, tears flooding his eyes, he reeled back and felt her brush past. By the time he could see again she was well away up the slope, making for distant bushes. A snatched glance showed him he was still not getting any help from the silent crowd. He ran. He didn't want to. He had no idea what he would do if and when he caught her. He wished vainly for the moral courage to stand, to just let her run, let her decide her own fate. But he ran, just the same.

Freakishly, the mist-veil that covered the land, lifted aside long enough to let him see her and, looming up out of the swirl to her left, a truck, a great headlamp-eyed monster, hopeless-wheels churning at the moss. She ran forward, arms waving, shouting, but the truck snorted past within feet of her, totally indifferent. She spun to pursue

it. He saw it duck sidewall-deep into swampy ooze, the wheels completely disappearing, and then it righted itself and surged competently on. The glowing mist swept down just as he saw her plunge after, and lurch to a stop, hip-deep in ooze.

"Marthal" he yelled, running crazily, "lie down flat and swim it!"

"Keep away from me!" she screeched instantly. Mud sucked at his feet. In two more steps he was up to his knees and sinking.

"Lie down!" he shouted again.

"Keep away, you Greeniel" she screamed. "Keep off!"

He heard her thrashing about. Taking his own advice he threw himself forward and began a desperate swimming action, ploughing through the sucking ooze, spitting it out of his mouth and straining always to keep in touch with her. By perverse instinct she had thrown a wall around her thoughts and he could no longer "feel" her. But he heard her laugh. Or screech. He couldn't be sure which. He had no breath to spare for calling out. He squirmed on by painful inches, spreading his arms to feel, to grope, trying to touch her. He kept on, even after she had stopped thrashing about, after she had fallen dreadfully silent.

Then he "felt" the keen wrench of her agony as she breathed water instead of air, as she choked . . . and died, not all at once as he had imagined it would be, but little by little, the way a crowd breaks up and disperses, as the multitude of complex interdependent processes which go to make up living faltered one by one and became still.

Then, when all was still and silent, and there was only a great hollow echo in his mind, he floundered round and dragged himself to where he could feel solid resistance under his elbows. Then he heaved himself up out of the slime, crawled out on to the wet warmth of moss, and lay there, empty.

At last, like an automaton he lurched to his feet and began to walk back. Because he could think of nothing else to do. Ten steps and he fell heavily to his knees. Brainless effort got him up to his feet again. Two more steps, and he fell once more, flat on his face, numbly surprised that he had felt no bump, had felt nothing, could feel noth-

ing now except stupid comfort. Why not just leave it at that? Why bother with more?

He let go his last finger-nail of effort and slumped mindlessly. Then the darkness of his thoughts flooded with a vision of the quiet valley, the bright glow and color, the placidly moving green people. And Lovely, who seemed to be looking at him, holding out her arms. A pleasant dream. He let himself slip into it.

He woke in the dark, muzzily aware of pleasure only a breath away, of a gentle caressing warmth that was more than just a physical touch. Half-remembered thoughts rippled and spun, not quite in focus. Vague memories of a long and staggering walk through mist, with the strength of many to uphold him, and security wrapping him round . . . the security which held him now, at this moment. Security and contentment. The thought suddenly snagged like a hang-nail, hurting. He stirred, and a warm thought soothed him at once. He knew instantly who it was and rejected her so violently that she squirmed away from him in the dark and sat up, the violet moons of her eyes glowing reproachfully at him.

"You were happy then," she said. "Now you are angry again. Is it better to be angry, or sad, always?"

"I will not"—he said it very distinctly, convincing himself—"be an animal. I will not relapse into blind and stupid contentment, uncaring. I will *not!*" Which was fine to say, and she gave no argument, but it left him facing a blank against which all his righteous resentment seethed in vain. He felt the weight of unrighted wrongs bearing down, the burn of injustice, the nagging urge to *do* something. But what?

She kept a discreet distance, patiently, and began to hum a snatch of melody.

"Where did you hear that music?" he demanded, dreading her answer.

"What is 'music'? Doctor did not tell us that word."

"You mean . . . you *have* no music? No singing? You were singing, just then. That, what you were doing, making sounds without speech with your voice, that is music. Where did you hear it?"

"When the other woman died, and you were very

sad, many voices shouted in your mind, all together. And many other sounds, too. I heard, because I was listening for you, because I am your woman. I heard. No other person on Venus has ever heard such things, this which you call music."

"No one? Ever?"

"None," she said, and where he would have doubted anyone else, he knew that she spoke true. That was a secondary implication, that with a people who exchanged "thought-feelings" as freely as this, what one of them knew, all would know. So they had no music, his people. It was a mind-staggering thought. And a valuable one, too.

"You liked it?"

"It was very wonderful. More than anything I have ever known. A great mystery. You can do that many-sound again, in your mind?"

"As often as I like. And others." He danced a dainty Mozart minuet for her, and sensed her instant rapture. It gave him a feeling of power, and he knew it to be real. Music hath charms, he thought, and a small spark of jubilation began to glow in him, walled with caution, but alight.

"It was wonderful," she whispered. "I have never known anything like such feelings. Colors and sounds and patterns, so beautiful. I am so glad I am your woman." He seized on that, too, with instant ruthlessness.

"What does that mean, that you will do things for me?"

"For you, anything. What you want, I want."

"Good!" The fire began to burn in him now, threatening his caution. "Tell me, what the old man does . . . you can do it? You can reach out and be in touch with others, other chiefs of other tribes?"

"What he does, I can do. When he dies, that will be my function."

"All right!" He stirred, got to his knees, pointed his head to the glow that was the mouth of the cave. "Come on. You and I are going to see the old man. I want to tell him a thing or two, and I need your help."

The old green man was still sitting where he had been, as impassive as a sun-dial. Anthony squatted before him, ordering his thoughts.

"I've got some very important information for you," he

said. "I want you to listen carefully, and then pass it on to all the people. Understand?"

"I will hear, first. How important?"

"This much. The humans have told you false. One did, at least. They come here to take over your planet. They destroy you, slowly at first, but more and more. In the end, all green people will die. They must be stopped. We must fight them, now!"

The old face twisted into a ghost of a grin. "You say this like a child afraid of shadows, using strange words. What is 'take over'? And how, if it was true that humans are dangerous, do we stop them? What is 'fight'?"

"Humans are friends," Lovely murmured, at his elbow. "Doctor said so. Also, when you went away to earth, they cared well for you. How can you say they are false?"

Anthony had expected something like this. To the old man he gave a thin smile. "Friends? Doctor told you, I'm sure, how friends behave, among humans. How they shake hands?" And he offered his right hand. The old man kept his faintly derisive smile, and put out his own hand in response. It felt leathery but firm in Anthony's grip. He took a good secure hold, and put on just a bit of pressure. The old man's grin faded. He tried to pull his hand away, but Anthony held on, increasing the pressure very slowly.

"You are hurting my hand."

"Yes." Anthony nodded, meeting the old eyes quite openly. "My hand is strong. It has done much work, much training. I can crush your hand to a pulp, old one. What can you do about it?" And he increased his grip-pressure, very slowly. He had no real desire to hurt this impassive old man, but it was the only immediate way he could devise to make his point, so he proceeded slowly, giving the chief time to reason his way through what was an entirely novel situation to him.

"Why do you seek to injure me?"

"That's my business. What are you going to do about it?"

The old face twitched, eyes shifting, seeking some answer. The grip went on increasing. Lovely stirred, hesitating but unable to hold herself.

"You must not do this thing!"

"You keep quiet. I'll ask when I want you. Let *him* handle it."

The grip went on increasing. Anthony knew the old man must be in very real distress now, although his face showed little of it. He would have given much to be able to see into that old mind, but he dared not even try. Instead he squeezed harder. And harder. And then, all at once, it was as if an enormous yet invisible vice closed in on him. In three dimensions it shut in on his arms and legs, his body, his heart, lungs and throat, a great and strangling pressure. Instant panic bloomed in him, but he fought it off. To move his head a fraction was a labor, but he made it, to mumble to Lovely, "Now! Now I need your help. What he does, you can do. Help me!" For a drawn-out moment the peaceful scene blurred in his vision and the black night of death was close as she hesitated in bewilderment. Then he felt the constricting pressure ease off, and saw the old man's face stiffen, saw sweat break out on him. Around the three, all in utter silence, there grew a tension that was unseen yet palpable enough to lean on. Even though he had been hoping for and expecting something like this, Anthony was awed by the sheer power that crackled round him. He relaxed his crushing grip.

"That will do," he gasped. "It's enough. Stop!" The tension disappeared like a burst bubble. He was drenched with sweat and laboring for breath. The old man stared at him, nostrils flaring.

"You play with things you do not understand. That is dangerous."

"On the contrary, I understand very well. You were threatened. You took action. That is what I meant by fighting. You *can* fight. You can do this to animals. She did it, when we came over the water in the boat."

"No," she contradicted. "It was not the same. All I did was to make our sea-brother take a different path, away from us."

"You could do that to humans, too. Or crush them, as he would have crushed me. That's what I want."

Now the old man's eyes shifted to Lovely. "Why did you do what you did, for him. This power, the gathering, is not for that! If you try it again, others will shut themselves off from you and you will have nothing."



Before she could reply Anthony staked his all on a gamble. Reaching out, he took her wrist. "Give him this. Give it also to all the people of this tribe," and in his mind he built up the blaring fanfare of trumpets from the Prelude to the second act of *Lohengrin*, the most arrogant burst of music he could think of at short notice, Wagner at his defiant best. He saw the old man's eyes open very wide, and all the rest of him freeze utterly still.

"That is why," he murmured, when it was done. "I, too, have power. Try this, for contrast." And he "played" the sugary-sweet *Barcarolle* from Hoffmann, giving it overtones of sybaritic delight that Offenbach might have envied. He saw that Lovely's eyes were closed in rapture, that way out on the fringes of the glade the green people were standing as if hypnotized. Then, when his mind was silent again, he met the old man's eyes.

"Because of that," he said, "she will do as I wish. For that, so will all the people do what I wish. It is a great power."

Instantly, with no need for words, he knew the old man was against him. He knew that countless centuries of traditional and unquestioning belief refused to be overthrown. He knew that the fight was only just begun, that he had yet to win this old man to his cause. A house divided must fall, he thought. It was something, just to have shown this old man that force existed and could be used. It was something to have shaken him with a new kind of persuasion. But Anthony felt, instinctively, that he was doomed to failure unless he could bring this old man—and all the other old men—over to his side. And that prompted a question, something he needed to know.

"Doctor taught you many things, human things. Did he teach you to count?" He held up a hand to illustrate. "I have five fingers. Do you know what that means?"

The chief sneered and stirred. "We learned this thing, and the words. Ten of ten is a hundred. Ten of hundreds is a thousand. And so on. Hundred of thousands. Millions. Because Doctor wished to know how many people we were. This was important to him, although he never said what it was good for. Earth people have many curious ways. But they are not a danger."

"I'll get to that in a minute, I hope. Wanted to estimate

the total population, did he? And you were able to count and tell him? How many?"

Anthony expected a large figure, a meaningless figure, but he reeled as the old man said, "Three hundreds of millions!" It was pointless to argue the figure. Even if the old man was out by a factor of ten, it was still a number to bewilder the mind.

"You mean adults, like us?"

"We do not count children," the chief said scornfully.

"And you're in touch with all of them?"

"Of course!"

Of course. It was devastatingly simple for the old man, but enough to fill Anthony's mind with fog. A fraction of a percentage of that vast horde would be more than enough to wipe out the human colony, to tramp the domes flat and to stamp into oblivion all their works. Just a fraction, if he could get them, appeal to them, stir them up, set them marching. But could he, up against the old men?

"With so many, and the humans are few hundreds, why do you permit them to remain?"

"They do no harm."

"But this is your planet. They're interlopers. They have a world of their own!"

"They do no harm! Three small enclosures is nothing!" The old man began to show signs of boredom. Anthony felt the flame of his resolve flicker and dwindle among so many immense concepts.

"What about your people?" he demanded. "Your brothers? The humans make slaves of them, treat them as animals, beating, flogging, poisoning, making them work, killing them. Don't you care about that?"

"This is false!"

"You mean you don't know? You don't know that your own people, *my* people, are being exploited and killed, like brainless animals?" Lovely put a gentle hand on his arm. He turned angrily to her.

"A tree bears much fruit," she said. "Some of it, not much, may be bad. It rots, withers, and falls from the tree. Do you expect the tree to stoop and pick it up again?" It took several seconds for the ruthless commonsense of what she had said to sink in. Those green people who fell prey to the human population of the domes . . . were defectives?

The urge to deny it died on his tongue. This people knew far more about mental deficiency than he would ever know. He had to accept their statement, sour as it was. The flame flickered lower as he searched desperately for a lever to move their indifference.

"The humans take away great quantities of your beans," he said. And in that instant, with that simple statement, he knew he had won. The battle was by no means over, but he had his lever. Their stiff masks of outrage told him all he needed, even if he had not been able to "feel" the horror in them.

"You know this?" The old man's face was as bleak as weathered copper ore. "You know it, for sure?"

"I know this. Long ago the first humans discovered the bean and took some back to Earth. There it was found to have many wonderful properties, and now they prize it greatly. To them it gives youth, health and new life. In their need for it they made the domes, put the people there." He whirled on Lovely. "You were watching as I ran after the woman Martha. You saw, through me, the strange machine which passed? In that were humans. They were looking for the bean plants. Those they find, they take up by the roots and transport to the area near the domes, and plant them. There they have much space, full of bean-plants. Because they do not know properly how to care for and protect the plants, they capture those of our people that you call 'rotten,' but who are still clever enough to do this work."

"But even the spoiled-brain ones will pick and eat," the old man argued. "Even a brainless animal will do this."

"Oh yes, they do. At least, they get all ready to do it, when the time of ripening comes. But then the humans leave their domes, come out into this atmosphere, which they hate and which is too hot for them—as Doctor must have told you—and they snatch the ripe beans from the hands of those who gather. They whip and flog and beat, to make them yield. And then they collect vast quantities of beans, in bags, and—you saw the bags which we brought." He waited for that to sink in. "You saw! Martha and myself took a bag each away from the humans who had, in turn, taken the beans away from your brainless ones."

That was why we had to run away, because we were only two against many."

"You say they make the bean grow in great quantities?"

"Oh yes. They gather the young plants and make them grow to yield a crop. Then the plants die, but they go out and collect more, in their machines. And they will go on doing this, because the beans are greatly prized by the other humans, on Earth. On Earth there are five thousands of millions of humans . . ." He let the words drift into silence.

The old man made an utterly indescribable sound, but there was no need to translate it. The meaning was clear.

"We must stop them. You are right. It must stop. But how? You will tell me how."

They squatted silently on the surf, wrapped in a halo of pearly mist. *Just we two*, Anthony thought, *but behind us a thousand, or a million if necessary*. It was a strangely comforting thought. In rare moments of stillness like this, he was able to dwell on the rapid transformation that had come in his fortunes. From all points within a grand circle roughly one hundred miles in radius and centered on the domes, green people were on the march. A slowly plodding, steady swarm of them, continually in touch, occasionally inspired by melodies, they moved in on the unsuspecting human colony. Anthony had found a common factor between his own people and humans on the level of emotional reaction to music. March melodies, whether from *Tannhäuser*, *Aida*, or Schubert's *Marche Militaire*, or even the fiercely nationalistic *Marseillaise*, all evoked a similar response. He couldn't be sure whether the charm was in the non-verbal reaction to rhythm, or, as he suspected, due to the fact that he was transmitting, all unwittingly, his own sentiments along with the music. Whichever it was, it worked, and the sense of masterful power was intoxicating. But now he was more intent on something quite different.

Lovely squatted by his side, as silent as he, but her attention was cast away to a distant point. On his instruction she had spun a web of close espionage, searching with a thousand eyes and ears, and now they had netted the fish they sought. She stirred.

"It comes nearer, coming this way. Soon we will be able to hear it for ourselves. Shall I try, now?"

"All right," he agreed. "I'm sorry I can't help. Wish I could."

She hushed him with a gentle touch, understanding quite well. This was a moment to make him realize his ignorance. He knew that she was reaching out, trying to sense the humans who were within the swamp-car which was rolling their way. Although the very act itself was meaninglessly foreign to him, he could see readily that there had to be a difference between this, and her ability to contact and influence the sub-intelligent responses of some animal. Animals she had known all her life. A roaring thing of metal and power-drives, with glaring lights, porthole eyes, churning wheels and possible weapons was so totally alien to her as to make it a nightmare to visualize. How much more difficult then to reach through that to the minds of the men inside? She snorted a quick breath, and gripped his arm again.

"It is no good. I can feel nothing but confusion. Two men, I think. Or perhaps three. I cannot even be sure of that. It is useless."

"Never mind. We expected snags, remember. We'll just have to try our second-string trick. Call up the worm."

She nodded, a wavering jade figure in the mist, and he sharpened his ears, getting ready to run. This tactic could be dangerous. Far away over there—he could manage *that* much by himself—a quick-footed knot of green men were coaxing and taunting a giant worm, like the one that had scared the life out of him before, on the plain. Into its vegetable-mind they were insinuating the suggestion that there was a large and delicious source of food somewhere quite near. Tantalizingly near. Now, under the direction of their "chief," that intuition would become strong, and the worm would plunge off, seeking to fill its great maw.

He heard the distant gargling bellow, and the growing boom of the swamp-car's engines, simultaneously, from different sides. Beneath him, the damp moss trembled to the heaving approach of a gigantic body. He kept quite still, trying to sense the thing coming. He got a blurred feeling of hunger, of great urgency, and eagerness. Then, out of the mist the huge head loomed up, ringed with violet lamp-eyes. He knew a madly irrelevant moment of wonder,

that with eyes all round its mouth, this thing would never know whether it was the right way up or not. If it had a "right" way up. But it certainly knew which way it was going. Eighty feet of it rustled by him, almost in touching distance, the massive leather-plated barrel of its body all of nine feet thick. And then he saw the swamp-car, dark and roaring, its goggle-eyes spearing twin beams of light.

Caught by the hard tension of the moment he forgot entirely the dizzy confusion of seeing with his own eyes, and sensing through the little band of people with him, both together, the fractionated feeling of being in several places at once. Leaping up, he plunged after that voracious great thing, saw its blunt head rear and strike massively, at the car, and heard the dull thump of the impact. The worm-head bounced, drew back. A hideous scream blasted the mist as it swung round for another try, the slow curves of its body rippling round into a trapping circle. There came sharp dagger-flames and the spit-crack of a turret-weapon. Anthony fell flat, shouting a warning, knowing that the others had hit the moss as fast as his own reflexes had taken him. Head up, he watched, saw the weapon stammer again and saw large chunks of meat exploding from the worm's carcass.

Some kind of fragmentation projectiles, he guessed, but there was no need to guess about something much more immediate. One of the drawbacks of empathy was its two-way effect. He could "feel" those great tearing wounds, even as the worm felt them . . . dimly, because its sensory capacity was slight, but he felt them, and groaned at the pain of them, just the same. The huge head lifted and flailed down again, flat on the top of the car, hammering it into the soft surface. Then the gouged body flowed massively over the car, beating it deeper down, the blunt tail adding a final hammer-blow as it went over. Back around came the head, insensate now with pain and all-important hunger, and arrowed down, gouging into the soft earth, burrowing under the car, heaving it into the air. Anthony spared a shivering thought for the humans inside as the vehicle lifted and slammed back, upside down, crashing into the soggy surface. The weapon was silent.

Somehow, Lovely was at his side, touching his arm. "Inside," she said, "they are dead, now." And he snatched at

his instant anger, remembering that for her, unconsciousness equalled death. He wanted live specimens. If they were only unconscious, that would do.

"Have them call off the worm," he said. "And six or seven will have to help upturn that car and get them out of there."

The combined strength of many arms rocked the hapless vehicle, got it swaying, heaved it over. Irrelevancies touched him again. Without training, these people could work in perfect co-ordination instantly, every man knowing exactly what to do, and what all the others were doing. Such potential was breath-taking. He thrust the thought away as he saw the armored access-doors. How could he open those, with bare hands? His violent urgency abated in the need for rational thought. There must be some way to open them from outside.

*I'm beginning to think like a savage animal*, he thought, and the thought chilled him. In a moment he had the trick of it, found levers and handles and heaved them. The car lay on its side. Through the opening door he could look in and down. Glaring light made him squint. Seat-cushions, shiny with plastic, made a tumbled confusion. Scratch-pads, scribbled sheets, a package of cigarettes, a flask of something, all in a dismal heap against the far wall. In the driving cockpit was one man, and strapped in the control-seat of the turret-weapon was another. No more. Only two, hanging from their straps, but breathing. And bleeding. He saw it all in one frantically urgent study. Then he flung the door wide and dropped down inside. Lovely was right after him, catlike and wide-eyed.

"They're not dead, only stunned when the car went right over. Help me undo these straps . . . No, have the gang tip this thing further, all the way upright. Yes?" She nodded gravely, and he felt the vehicle lurch.

It was still a trifle alien to him to have orders passed without so much as a sound, but his rapport was growing with every effort. The man at the gun was bleeding from a simple skull-wound, but the driver was in worse case. By appearance, he had tried to push his face through his console-panel, despite his safety-harness.

*Two black eyes and a broken nose, and associated bruises and strains*, Anthony thought, and then wondered how he

could be so instantly sure. The car came down on its hopeless wheels with a thump.

"They're coming round. Now's your chance to work on them."

"I am trying," she murmured. "It is difficult, like speaking words that have no meaning. A confusion." He stepped clear, as far as the small confines of the car would allow, and watched. Both men wore the minimum of shorts, and sandals. One was sandy-haired, the other dark, both about thirty. He knew them to be the technician grade, and wondered, for the first time, just what *they* thought about this fairy-land of their wealthy employers. Where did they stand in the question of exploitation? He noted, belatedly, that each man wore a gun-belt, and was wryly amused at the thinking behind that. Imagine plunging out into the mist to tackle a worm, with that thing!

Then the man in the weapon-chair snorted, groaned, and lifted his head, shook the black hair out of his eyes, stared round. Even as he saw the two green figures his hand went back, down and up, all in one fast movement, and Anthony reached for the wrist holding that gun. He did it without thought, by sheer reflex, knowing that death stared him right in the eye, only a finger-pressure away. Without bothering to know how, he wrenched that wrist up and away.

The weapon went off, in that metal confinement, sounding like a bomb, but the bullet flattened itself vainly on the ceiling. Deafened, frightened, and suddenly savage in his new-found power, Anthony applied a "squeeze" and the black-haired man stiffened, his face purpling, eyes bulging, locked in an invisible grip. Then, staggeringly, Anthony felt the power wane and weaken. It was a distinct sensation of ebbing strength.

"No!" Lovely said distinctly. "You must not kill!"

"You saw what he was going to do to me! And then you, after that, you may be sure. Why shouldn't he be killed?"

"I do not know any why. I only know it is wrong to kill like this."

For a futile second he raged against her sudden awkwardness. "What I want, you want. Remember, you said this?"



"I said it. But not now." Her jaw was stubborn. "It is wrong to kill."

Frustration boiled in him, then it went as suddenly as it had come. This was no time to argue with her naïve moral sense, or to wonder whether empathy had anything to do with her stubborn refusal to lend him power. His wits, hardened by many trials, found the way to turn this impasse to his own wishes. He eyed the black-haired man grimly.

"You heard what the lady said? And she is a lady, even if she's green, and naked, don't forget that. She just saved your life. For the moment, that is. Drop the weapon. You too!" He spun on the sandy-haired man, who was beginning to stir in his seat. "You might as well know what you're up against. There's only two of us here, but there are as many thousands as you care to name outside and all round, so don't try anything stupid."

The man in the driver's seat groaned, put hands to his face to feel, very delicately, of his wounds.

"I've got 'em," he mumbled. "A couple of Greenies talking English."

"It's no illusion! We're real. She objects to having you killed, but she couldn't stop me from tossing the pair of you outside, and letting you try to walk back to base. And that would be the same thing, wouldn't it?"

"What d'you want?" the black-haired one asked. "Who the hell are you, anyway? No, shut up, Hoby, this is real. I've seen this one before somewhere. Look, my name's Shaw. Mike Shaw. That wreck there is Hoby Wilson. Now who the hell are you? And can we have that door shut, because this heat is cooking us. No tricks, this is straight." Anthony smiled without mirth, and pushed the armored door closed. He heard the air-conditioning plant humming, felt the temperature begin to fall immediately. Lovely shivered, but it was with pleasure rather than trepidation.

"No tricks," he echoed. "Metal walls make no difference to us. I am Anthony Taylor . . ." He hesitated and then, without any uncertainty at all, he added, "King of the Greenies!"

Shaw started, and stared. "Taylor? Not the missing piano-player? That Taylor? But you were—you are . . . Weren't you a white man, a human?"

"Was I? Does the color of the skin make so much difference? Yes, I was as white and human as you. Now I'm a Greenie. That ought to make you think a bit. And while you're thinking, there's this to add. Where do you stand? What's your attitude?"

"What d'you mean? How do I feel about Greenies?" Shaw rubbed his sore head and frowned. "I've no hard feelings one way or the other. They look like people to me, but the biologists reckon they're not. Me, I'm an electronics technician. Who ever asks my opinions on that kind of thing?"

"You must be nuts," Wilson snarled. "This is just a trick, a glorified talking parrot. Everybody knows Greenies are just dumb animals! You've seen plenty of 'em! What's the matter with you, gone soft in the head?"

Anthony had swiveled his gaze to Wilson and so missed Lovely's gesture, her pointing finger, her blazing scorn.

"I can touch your mind," she said. "It is a crawling thing, sick with ills and fears, a smell! We have people like this, too, but we do not accept them as whole. We judge them defective. You too, I think."

Wilson twisted his blood-stained face into a bare-teeth menace, dragging at his gun exactly as Shaw had done. Anthony felt her pressure strike him as if he shared in the fringe of it. Wilson got the whole of it, the full impact of her wrath, and his struggling figure seemed to wilt and sag in the driver's seat.

"Hey! Hold up!" Shaw cried. "You said it was wrong to kill, remember?" And Lovely's accusative finger drooped. She took in a deep breath.

"You are right. I can feel you, too, but you are not as he is. And this has troubled me. Anthony . . ." She shifted her worried violet eyes to him. "This I have been thinking ever since you said we must strike, and drive out the humans from our planet. Just as we are not all the strong, so it must be with humans. Not all are bad."

Anthony sighed. "There is no time now to explain this to you properly. There is truth in what you say, but it is not as simple as you think."

"Just a minute," Shaw interrupted. "You have to be kidding! Drive us out, away from Venus? How the blazes do you reckon to do that? No offense intended, believe

me, but you're naked, and defenseless. You're just sitting up and begging for trouble if the big boys in the domes as much as suspect any such move. Like I said, I'm not taking sides in this, but if you started wiping out humans, then I would have to object, like it or not."

"What's more," Wilson sneered, getting over his moment of fear. "Even if you did knock out the domes, and all the people in them, how long d'you think it would be before Earth struck back, eh? And then where would you be, mister?"

Anthony stared at him, at Shaw, and then swung his gaze round to Lovely. He could see and feel her bewilderment. He sighed. "It's true. If we struck at the colony, if we inflicted damage, even the few who do not believe that green people are animals would be swung over to the desire for revenge." As he said it, he sensed that she didn't know the meaning of the word. "Revenge means, quite simply, if you hit me I will hit you afterwards, only harder. Don't try to understand, just accept that."

"You mean they don't know about revenge?" Shaw was frankly incredulous.

"Do you think they'd have stood by and let their own people be abused like animals, otherwise? They—I mean 'we'—believe that any adult person should bear his own responsibilities, that co-operation is the right way. . . . Oh, what's the use?"

"Is it true that you collect our bean-plants and take them away, to grow, and then take the beans away to Earth?" Lovely's voice was stern.

"I'd be a fool to deny it." Shaw jerked his thumb to the rear of the car, indicating a sizeable pile of immature plants, each sealed in a plastic sack. She stared at them, feelings churning. Her evident distress triggered a desperate idea in Anthony's mind. To Wilson in the driving-seat he said, "Start up. Head for Dome One. Prime Base, as you call it."

"Drop dead, Greenie!"

"You're a fool. More guts than brains. Once more, start up, or I'll toss you out and let you walk home. And she won't object to that, because to her it would be no hardship at all. It wouldn't be killing, in her terms."

"Go ahead and toss me out," Wilson snarled. "Where

would that get you? He can't handle this thing. You'd be stuck just the same."

Anthony smiled, with no humor at all. "Now you're taking me for a fool. If Shaw can't drive this thing he's more stupid than I take him for. I can drive it myself, come to that. You're still being deceived by the color of my skin, but that's your problem. Make up your mind, quick!"

"Don't be a damn fool, or a hero, Hoby. Get going. What's to lose?" Shaw swung round in his seat and got up, oddly awkward. "You can have my seat," he offered, and Lovely smiled at the gesture, making him turn delicate pink. She accepted, settling herself on the resilient cushions and savoring the new sensation. Motors coughed and hummed into life as Wilson settled down to his job with a bad grace. Anthony, balancing himself against the pitching of the floor, went to look over his shoulder.

"I can also read a marker-beacon," he murmured. "Just in case you had any more crazy notions. That thing . . ." and he jabbed his finger at it as it pulsed and died on the panel. "See you follow it!" He went back to sit by Shaw on the padded side-seat.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Shaw caressed his bruised head and scowled in sympathy. "Like I said, I don't want to take sides, but it's no more than fair to warn you that you're heading into a bomb, going back to the domes. If you are Taylor, you've been missing a hell of a long time, and there's been seventeen different kinds of panic-call about you, and the dame. The top committee is fit to do murder, and not fussy about whom they pick."

Anthony hid his chagrin. This was an aspect he had overlooked in his nebulous plans. He had so long been accustomed to think of himself as a nonentity that it had never occurred to him he would be missed, or that the missing would be an occasion for uproar. The germ of a notion tried to get rooted in his mind but was swamped by the thought that this was just one more complication to the deadlock.

"Deadlock!" He said it aloud. Shaw eyed him curiously, and Anthony smiled a sour smile. "My people have been abused, exploited, treated as animals and worse. And yet, if we try to take action to correct the mistaken impression

it will immediately be construed as a threat, a menace. I don't want that. None of us wants it."

"What *do* you want, anyway?"

"Immediately? That the present state of affairs should stop, that the green people be accepted as equals. Different in many ways, but equal. This is *our* planet!"

"I wish you luck." Shaw sounded sincere but troubled. "I can't see how you're going to do it. You're bothering me, even, just sitting there and talking like a white man, when I can see you're not. Maybe if I shut my eyes it would be different. I could be wrong, but my guess is the only way you will do it is by force. That's something we humans understand."

"And the result? You know what would be the outcome of that, only too well."

"Dead right," Shaw muttered, his eyes going appreciatively to Lovely, and flicking away again every time she rewarded him with a smile. "One thing we humans are very good at, and that's force. Look, I'd better move up front with Hoby, keep an eye on him. I don't want to know what scheme you're planning. It's better that way, I reckon."

As he staggered away, Anthony leaned across to her to murmur, "The others are still in touch?"

"Yes. They follow. What are you thinking?"

"It would be better if you didn't know until I've worked it out more. In the meantime there's something that can be done." And he put his head close to hers to explain exactly what he wanted. Lurching along in the powerful car, surrounded by the sophistication of human technology, it was eerie to realize that as fast as he could formulate the designs, hundreds of thousands of distant green people were responding, moving, preparing to carry out his wishes.

Her eyes widened as she absorbed what he was saying. "It is so huge?" she wondered. "And yet so easily destroyed as you say? That no more than a breath holds it up?"

"Like a bubble on the surface of water." he nodded. "Natural forces like this are understood by humans, and used by them. This car, the cool feeling, the lights, all are natural things which the humans have taken and used for their own wishes."

"They are wonderful beings. I am glad we will not be

against them. This is 'cool,' this feeling of being in water, but dry?"

"Right. You like it?" He watched her face, and could share her pleasure in this utterly foreign but exciting sensation. "Inside the domes it is like this all the time. On Earth, most of the places on Earth, it is like this, also. That is one of the reasons why Earth people wear clothing, and why they dislike our climate."

"Cool. Dry. Clothing. So many new and exciting things the humans have. And we have so little."

He frowned at that, his memory telling him of the sad fate of the primitive savage who learns to yearn for the superficial sparkle of civilized life. But, he corrected himself quickly, these people were not primitive, not mentally. And they did have something, something very valuable to certain other people.

The car roared on, dipping and plunging, tearing blindly through the pearly mist, warned of obstructions by its sonar, and led as if on a string by the beacon-marker. Anthony schooled himself to be patient, to avoid worrying about troubles before they came. From time to time he set himself to "play" selected pieces of music for the unseen and ant-like throng out there. They liked marching melodies and dancing rhythms, and no performer was ever so eagerly listened to, or so keenly aware of audience reaction.

After a while Shaw took over at the controls to let Wilson come back and sit and light a smoke for himself. His face was a gruesome sight, what with the puffing around his eyes from the blow, dried streaks of blood, and the gobs of antiseptic and soothing jelly Shaw had smeared on him as temporary medication. He was in pain, too, as Anthony could tell without having to make the effort to "contact" him.

"Should be sighting the dome in about an hour," he growled. "You'll get yours then, Greenie. That's what I'm waiting for. You'll get yours."

"Why do you hate us so much?" Lovely asked, and the simple question seemed to infuriate the injured man.

"Damned uppity animals trying to act like humans. You've got the edge right now, all right, but just wait till we get in!" His senseless anger was an ugly thing, but it prompted Anthony to reflect again on his tentative plans.

He went to sit by Shaw. "You've probably guessed that I'm planning to get into the dome," he murmured. "And I'm going to. But where will that leave you? Will you raise the alarm? I can't expect you to try to pass us in."

Shaw frowned at his instrument board, struggling with a decision. "You want a hell of a lot of trust from me, Taylor. I don't know. You could fasten us up with something, give us an alibi in case you flop. I reckon you will. Flop, I mean. But suppose you do rope us, and then go ahead and slaughter a couple hundred humans? How am I going to feel, afterwards?"

"I'm sorry for you. I can't help, except to say that it is not my intention to kill anyone unless I am compelled to."

"Doesn't every revolutionary say that?"

"I suppose so," Anthony sighed. It was true. This was a revolution. But if he had any say in the matter, it was going to be different from all the others that had ever been known.

He left Shaw and went to the rear of the vehicle, searching among the equipment for enough stout plastic line to serve. Then he nodded to Lovely, who had been watching him. By this time the need for detailed explanation between them was slight. Wilson never had chance to make a sound. Only his eyes betrayed his rage, and fear, as the invisible bonds held him long enough for Anthony to rope him securely. Then the car was run to a halt long enough to make Shaw similarly helpless, and Anthony took over the controls. The marker pulse was very strong now, flooding the whole of the indicator quadrant with each beat, and the sonar picture was plain. In a little while the milky headlights gave back a reflection that could only be an artificial surface, a huge plane of smoothness, rearing up.

"This is it," Anthony breathed, and Lovely crouched by his side to peer through the viewfinder screen. She was shivering, and for the first time in his experiences with her, the rapport was broken. She had shut herself off from him. Intuition told him why. She was afraid. It was one thing to contemplate this alien environment from a distance, but something quite other to be confronted by the reality of it. She was afraid!

He wasted no time in reproach, or anger. Instead, with pressing urgency, he asked her, "When you hunt, out in

the mist among dangers, do you ever try to make yourself unseen, to make suggestions in the mind of the animal threatening you such that it cannot see you?"

The question caught her attention away from the picture of out there, made her pretty brow wrinkle in thought. "What does this mean? How can it not see what is there?"

"You made the worm think it was pursuing food. You made it see what was not there. Can you not do the same now? We will be going inside, to pass among many humans. You know how to touch them, now. Can you make them *not* see us?"

She rejected the idea at once, as he could tell by her face. Snatching a glance ahead, and at the panel, he knew there was an entrance-lock quite close now. Once again desperation drove him to inspirations he would never have contemplated in saner moments.

"Never mind," he said. "Leave it to me. Just give me the power, as I need it, and let me channel it."

He cut the motor to a crawl, and then to a stop as he saw the entrance-port begin to cycle open in response to the built-in signal from the car.

"Come on, out," he said, "and follow me. Do as I do. You are a white human woman, returning from a short journey. Think that. Believe it. Believe it strongly!"

He scrambled out into the suddenly oppressive heat and headed for the slowly-opening door, knowing that she was at his heels. In his mind, as strongly assured as he could make it, was a personal image of himself as he had been the last time he had gone in by such a door. White, human, clothed, and with a white woman. Believe it! he ordered himself. Believe it, project it, assume that everyone within eye-shot accepts it! He strode into the space between the walls, into the harsh glare and the grumble of busy machinery. A small knot of technicians some distance away gave him an indifferently curious glance and returned to their work. He bit down on a sudden elation. It worked, but it had to be kept working. He took her hand, halting her for a moment.

"See this," he urged. "See it well, and pass it to the others." In brief gestures, augmented with mental pictures, still struggling to maintain the illusion of human appearance, he explained to her the double-wall arrangement and the



purpose of the machines, gave her a clear mental image of the great ballooning wall of plastic which rose from this space. Not so far away now a horde of green people, each armed with a razor-edged sword-leaf, absorbed the information as fast as it was passed, and began to arrange themselves in a certain order. Smothering his doubts, Anthony led her now to the inner door.

"Do not be distracted by anything that you see. Just follow. Do as I do, and do not break the flow of power, whatever happens."

She seized his hand. "Anthony . . . I am afraid. It is so huge!"

"I know. Be afraid all you want, there's no shame in that. But believe in me; believe that you have every right to be here; believe that everything is going to be fine; believe! Remember that three hundred million of your people are depending on you, and through you and me, at this moment."

The door hummed open and he stepped over the sill, leading her in. He felt again that sudden shiver as the cool dry atmosphere leached away the thin film of moisture from his skin. Then he heard her gasp, and felt sympathy. The first look at this fairyland had shaken him. How much more would it stagger her, who had never known anything remotely resembling it?

"It is so beautiful," she breathed. "So beautiful. And real? It is not a sleeping-picture?"

"A dream, you mean?" It had never occurred to him to think that she dreamed, and the small astonishment threatened his mental control for a moment. Then he put it aside for some other time. "This is another thing Earth people do. They take dreams and try to make them real. But they seldom succeed so well as this." He left it at that, not wishing to point up the fact that this sweet-cake-and-icing picture was more illusion than anything else. He led her to a nearby floater and was handing her aboard when a startled roar made him swing round, stomach knotting in sudden panic.

"Hey! Taylor! Where the hell have you been?" It was the forthright and red-headed Barney Lyons, staring-eyed and indignant. Anthony met his eye, torn between elation at this confirmation of the effectiveness of his illusion, and sinking

chagrin that of all the many people in this dome they had to run right into someone who knew them. Them? Lyons came close, nodded to Lovely.

"Am I glad to see you two safe! And is there going to be one hell of a stink about this! No, never mind the explanations right now. Just hang on." He climbed up on the floater beside Anthony. "I'm taking you to Bord Harper, right away. And M'Grath. This, I want to see!" He spun the car and sent it skimming along a wide lane, a route Anthony recognized only too well.

He felt Lovely's clutch on his arm and put his hand on hers in reassurance. "He believes me to be as I was," he whispered. "And is taking you for the woman who was with me before. Don't bother about it now. I had not meant it this way, but it is all to the good. Is the other operation all ready?"

"Not yet," she breathed, "but very soon now."

"Good! Just be confident. All is going to come out fine. You'll see."

He heard Lyons mumbling into a communicator, but he was much more engrossed in trying to guess just what awaited them as they slid to a halt before the great central assembly building. As they reached the top of the great flight of stairs he cast a quick glance backward and saw the first wave of scurrying float-cars in hot pursuit.

M'Grath was as massive, and as thunderously impassive, as ever. By his side Borden Harper stood angrily, containing himself with an obvious effort. He repeated the question Lyons had asked, as the trio hurried down the ramp-stairs to the central amphitheater.

"Where the hell have you two been? You'll have to bear with my language, Miss Merrill, but I feel it's justified. Talk, Taylor. Four weeks ago, in the middle of Harvest, you vanished. We turned the entire colony inside out to look for you. We've had cars out combing the local area, even though we knew it was pretty futile. We've had the damnedest communications from home. Your colleague, Willers, shipped out three days ago, and what he'll say when he reaches Earth I shudder to think. So, by God, you're going to talk, and it had better be good, or you'll regret the day you ever were born. That I can promise you."

"I've done that a few times already," Anthony said, feeling a sudden wave of savage elation, a surge of confidence. "Your threat doesn't scare me one bit, Harper. Nor anything else you can do. Not anything!"

"One moment!" M'Grath put a massive hand on Harper's arm to still his angry retort. "I sense something different about our errant piano-player, a new arrogance. What did you find, out there, Taylor?"

"What have I found? Myself. And three hundred million green people. Not animals, Harper. People! People who know why you're here, what you're doing and why. Work it out for yourself how they feel about it. I'm saying no more now. I see you've sent out a call, and that the crowd is gathering. When I do talk, it will be to all of them, not just you."

"You're out of your mind," Harper snarled. "You couldn't have lasted a day out there, not on your own. Somebody put you up to this. Somebody's using you as a tool!" He swiveled his gaze to Lovely. "Are you in on this too, Miss Merrill?"

"She is with me in everything," Anthony said, taking her hand.

"Call it my conceit," M'Grath rumbled, "but I pride myself I can detect the sound of sincerity, and that, while no guarantee of accuracy, should give us reason to pause and be cautious. The figure intrigues me, too. Three hundred million! Taylor, are you saying that you have succeeded where our best scientists have failed, that you can communicate with these sub-human—"

"Your *best* scientists?" Anthony interrupted, raising his voice over the growing hubbub of the gathering crowd as they settled around the tiered seats of the great hall. "Biologists, perhaps? But you're a psychologist. You should be aware that even the cleverest scientist cannot communicate with an imbecile, an idiot, or a mental defective. How would an alien judge human beings, if all he ever met were the inmates of an institution for the sub-normal?"

M'Grath's jowly face grew a sudden perplexity and he would have spoken, but Harper was too impatient to wait. "Whoever's using you to drive a wedge in between us is due for a big shock," he said. "I know only too well just how the majority of people back home hate our guts—"

how they'd like to see us broken. And this little stunt hasn't helped any. But we've got a card to play, the sensible ones among us. We'll find out just who cooked up this notion, and smash him. And Earth will have to lump it. Because without us—no beans!"

Anthony felt Lovely's hand twitch in his. All unwittingly, Harper had said the one thing needed to make her determination assert itself again. He turned to see that the auditorium was almost full, that there were more here than there had been for his music recital, so long ago it seemed. This time none of them wanted to view by device. They wanted to see this in person. Even the sober-clad technical staff had come in droves.

Harper stepped to the fore, raising his hands. "You've all heard, that's obvious. Here are the precious couple all the fuss was about. Safe and sound. Unharméd. I assume that, like me, you are all glad nothing has happened to them. But, getting that out of the way, you'll want to know just what did happen? I think I know. I think this was a put-up job by somebody, or some group, right here in our midst. Somebody with funny ideas about shaking up the present arrangements. That's what I think. If that turns out to be true, we'll know what to do, I reckon." He paused to smile savagely at the many-voiced growl of anger that grew out of the crowd. Anthony pressed the trembling fingers that lay in his own.

"Now, as never before," he whispered, "I need your belief, your trust, your power. Just give it, all of it, and let me channel it as I decide."

"There will be no killing?"

"No. That I promise. Some may die of fright or folly. For them, I cannot be responsible. But there will be no killing."

"All right!" Harper waved a hand. "Let's hear what they have to say, first of all. Let's play this thing fair. Taylor, you have the floor."

Anthony went forward two paces, leading Lovely with him. To Harper, he said quietly, "I presume the other domes are watching this? By land-lines of some kind?"

"You can bet on it. You've got your audience. It had better be good!" Harper said, stepping away to one side.

Anthony turned to face the eager throng. "I am Anthony Taylor," he said, "King of the Greenies."

And this time he knew it to be true, sincere, and it made him feel curiously humble. The words fell into a silence, then exploded into a great shout of derisive laughter, underneath which was a distinct note of savagery. He waited for quiet.

"The green people have no concept of 'kingship,' or of any other kind of ruler, in your sense," he said, sweeping them with a curious gaze. "But they *do* have co-operation. And they do have, at last, a supreme spokesman—myself. I think they will overlook my use of the word 'king.' I speak for them!"

"You're as green as they are," some wag shouted, "if you believe that!"

"Quite true. I am as green as they are. As you can see!"

And he cast off the illusion that had wrapped him and Lovely with false appearances. It was surprisingly difficult to do, to strip himself, physically, mentally, figuratively—and irrevocably—before that hostile throng of eyes. He was surprised and ashamed to find that, far away at the back of his mind, he had clung to a fragment of insane hope that he would one day be white again. To pull that out and throw it away was like losing a tooth. But he did it.

In the stunned silence he turned to look at the girl by his side, and was struck by the change in her. The transformation was as delightful as it was unexpected. In this dry and cool atmosphere her skin had lost its sheen, its oily sleekness. Now it had a peach-bloom glow of radiance like velvet and silk in delicate combination. There was an added lift, a buoyancy in her shape, too, and her long black hair that had been heavy and clinging was now a dark lustrous cloud about her glowing face. Where she had been lovely before, she was ten times more so now.

It was just a glance, but it helped to bear in on him the difference that could come to his people, the transformation that could happen to all of them, given the right circumstances. The knowledge stiffened him against the sullen roar of the frightened mob, for that's what it was, now. He put up a hand.

"I am green. I speak for all the other green people. You will do well to listen, before it is too late." The implied

threat got him silence. "I am here to tell you that your time on Venus is almost done."

He saw Harper start forward furiously, and raised a hand, pointed a finger. Harper stopped as if he had run into a wall. His face purpled as he fought to move. The audience hushed in astonishment. M'Grath tramped forward—and was frozen in exactly the same fashion. Barney Lyons, quick to learn, kept still of his own accord. The death hush in the audience held for ten seconds then snapped into a roar of outrage.

Anthony turned and spread his hands—and there was stillness and silence, immediately. "I'm not going to explain. There's no need. I hold you all helpless. Just me, because I speak with the voice, and the power, of three hundred million green people like myself. Now you will listen, and those who are watching within the other domes will do well to listen, too, because what I have to say includes them.

"I am green. I was born on this planet. All my life I have known I was green. Never have I believed myself an animal. I *knew* different. Now I know that this is also true of my brothers, out there. The green people you have met, the only ones you know anything about, have been defectives, the castoffs and failures, the only ones stupid enough to be caught by your drugs and temptations. The rest have kept away, have ignored you, have not wanted to know anything about you.

"What does it matter to them that you have taken up a small area of their planet? That you have built yourselves a phoney fairy-land to hide in? What do they care about Earth? Or Earth-people? Why should they? They were quite happy to ignore your puny miracles, your tawdry empire, until I told them of something else that you do. I told them. Hold *me* responsible. I told them that you have been, that you are, and that you will go on, stealing away their bean-plants. You uproot them, wherever you find them. You force-grow and strip them, and then uproot more. You ship the beans back to Earth. As of this moment your deprivations have taken but a tiny fraction of the whole, but you will go on, like a creeping disease, a blight. And know this, that the bean is not just a fancy food to my people. It is life and death to them. When they learned, from me, that you were stealing away their life-needs, it was then

they decided the time had come to remove you. That time is now!"

He could feel their combined resentment, their anger. This clutch that he held on them was his own making, for the first time. Lovely supplied the raw force, the gathered energy of thousands, but he was channeling it, and he felt what his victims felt. He knew, beyond all doubt, that he could not kill by this method, that he couldn't even hurt without being hurt himself. That was the hidden snag in this gamble.

"It would be pointless if you all spoke," he declared. "I will release one to speak for you."

He glanced at Harper and shook his head. He chose M'Grath. "You can talk," he said. "Don't waste it in argument."

"Admirable advice," M'Grath grunted. "I'd give a lot to know how you spread the invisible glue I seem to be steeped in. But, man, you must be insane! You can't hope to get away with this. Naked savages, regardless of how many or how intelligent, can't hope to win against technology!"

"I expected that argument. I've arranged a display that might convince you otherwise."

He made a tiny gesture to Lovely, who nodded in return. In another place a silent, waiting line of green people, perched high on an anchor wall, spaced a meticulous arm's-reach apart, moved as one. Razor-edged sword-leaves bit into tough plastic, through one layer and then the second. Blades moved from left to right, slits joined up with each other. The precious cool dry air gushed out in a gasping gale. The green figures dropped silently down over the pyramided ranks of their brethren and vanished into the mist. Anthony faced M'Grath, quite steadily.

"I have just destroyed Dome Two," he said. "The plastic balloon has been slit completely around, at wall level. I've pulled your house down about your ears, M'Grath. One of them, at any rate. Ring up and find out!"

Confirmation was obvious on the fat man's gray face as he came back to the platform. The audience knew without need of speech, and writhed in their prisoned silence. Anthony felt their instinctive fear giving way to equally instinctive rage and resistance.

"It will take some hours for the envelope to collapse all

the way. Enough time for the inmates to protect themselves. No one need be hurt. In fact, given time, the whole thing can be put up again. But that is just a small sample, M'Grath, of what we *can* do."

"You caught us unawares, that time. Next time—"

"What next time? What can you do against a silent enemy who can do this—" and Anthony put a throttling squeeze on the fat man's throat without lifting so much as a finger himself. "Must I say it again? Three hundred million. And this is *our* planet. What I am doing, they can do also, any and all of them, at any time. Men in atmosphere suits, with guns, can fight this?" He let M'Grath choke awhile, and then released him, to watch him heave for breath and massage his throat.

"You preach an effective sermon. I'll take your word for it. I'll even agree that you have made a point. But I'm not all men, Taylor. If you know anything at all, you must know that mankind has never been ruled by cold reason, or commonsense, that there is no such thing as a hopeless cause, to the average man. Throw us off this planet—as I admit you *can* do, and have every right to do—but whatever the ethic, there will be the bloodiest outcry ever, from Earth. Mankind will come back in force. Perhaps to fail, to die by the millions, but no reasoning I know will stop them. Tell a man he can't, and he'll die trying to prove you wrong!"

"I know," Anthony sighed. "I was a man, once." He reached for Lovely's hand, drew her near to him. "You have her to thank that I saw this a long time ago. This is one of your primitive savages, M'Grath, one of the people I can speak for. She will do anything I ask, except kill."

He turned to the crowd again, raised his voice. "I grew up on Earth. I wanted to wipe out the lot of you, when I realized just what you were doing. That's the way I was taught to think, as a man. Hit back! But my people taught me something else. It is better to work together, to co-operate—as brothers."

"How can we co-operate with you?" M'Grath demanded. "What have we to exchange? On what level can we possibly meet?"

"I've been thinking about that, but perhaps Lovely can tell you." He smiled to her and she blushed.



For the first time since entering the dome she ventured to speak aloud. "This is cool, and dry, and a bright light. These things I have never know before. They are good things."

M'Grath regarded her thoughtfully. "Succinctly put, my dear. But you are only one. How do you know the rest of your people would approve such strange things?"

"What I feel, all feel, all know. And it is good!"

"Good God!" M'Grath swung his wide eyes on Anthony. "Does she know what she's saying? That you have some form of total telempathy?"

"It's quite true. Complete community of emotion-feeling-experience. It shook me when I found out. It's not on a verbal level, of course."

"No? No, of course. That's education, personal-trained response. Obvious! Good heavens! Do you realize what this will do to all our accepted theories of mental processes?" M'Grath caught himself suddenly. "But it is out of the question. We cannot possibly provide controlled environment such as this over the whole planet. If that's the kind of co-operation you want, we're stopped before we start."

Anthony felt an urgent prickling at the fringe of his attention, a struggling for notice, out there. "Who?" he asked, lifting the blanket of restraint, and an eager-eyed man broke forward from the ranks of the technicians.

"Never mind who I am," he said urgently. "There are others who will back what I say. We can modify this climate. This is something we've thought about for a long while among ourselves. It wouldn't be too tough. The plans have all been worked over a dozen times. Humidity is the main thing, and there are a dozen ways to lick that, to reduce evaporation from open water surfaces. And there are just as many ways to lick the fungus dust, too. Enzymes, clotting-agents, precipitants, all sorts of things. It would take time, sure! And money. But it could be done."

"Why hasn't it been done, then?"

"Don't ask me. The ideas have been submitted several times, but they got shelved, passed-over. I guess somebody didn't want to know, wanted things to stay the way they are. You can guess."

"Thank you." Anthony turned his stare on Harper, lifting the restraint. "Let's hear you on this. Is it true?"

"Why should *we* waste time and money making the

whole damn planet fit for any snot-nose to live on?" Harper snarled. "If your damned Greenies want it so much, why don't they do it for themselves? And don't think you're on top, Taylor. You might fool M'Grath with a bit of jargon, but not me. You daren't lay a finger on us, and you know it!"

M'Grath sucked in a breath, but Anthony halted him before he could speak. He turned to Barney Lyons, who had kept a discreet silence so far.

"I believe you have ways of seeing, from here, what is happening outside, outside the hall, I mean. Have you?"

"Yeah, sure. We can scan any part of the interior from here, and throw it on that screen there. That what you want?" He stepped to a console at one side of the central area. "Where d'you want to look?"

"A main entrance. Any one, or all, just as you like."

Lyons touched a switch that dimmed the lights a trifle, and the screen glowed into life. And the aghast humans moaned with one collective voice as they saw what the cameras revealed. Green people, no matter which view Lyons shifted to, there were green people, thronging in silent march. Thousands of them, filling the broad avenues, casting appreciative glances up and around, but moving steadily forward.

"And those are but a very tiny fraction," Anthony said. "Just a few. At a thought from me they would cut down this dome, too. With no effort at all they could stamp this fairy-land of yours into oblivion. And what would they lose, Harper? They were happy and contented before you came. If I gave the word they would obliterate all sign of you. It wouldn't take long. And then they would vanish back into the mist where they have been all this time, where you never knew they were, and where you'd never find them again. As for your punitive expedition"—he eyed M'Grath—"you have your point, but how would Earth people exact vengeance on an enemy they couldn't find? It's a big planet. And *would* they? Would they arise in wrath to avenge the elimination of a group of parasitic and selfish exploiters? After all, you have exploited humanity just as much as you have *my* people."

"Hey! Not all of us!" came a cry from the audience, to be joined by others, into a clamor.

"There's your answer, Harper. Do you want me to take a vote on it?" He turned back to the restive audience. "You're all free to speak, just as you feel. What do you want to do—stay here and fight that?" He gestured to the marching hordes, and then to the first flow of green people emerging into the hall where they were. "Or run home back to Earth and tell them that you were kicked out? Or do you want to stay, and help, and co-operate with us?"

"How can we co-operate?" M'Grath demanded, through a swelling hubbub of argument. "It will take years to transform the climate, and a fantastic amount of money, men and material. That's not co-operation. That's bleeding us of our resources. Altruism can go only so far. What do we get out of it? What's in it for us?"

The sentiment found many echoes. Even Harper regained calm enough to agree with it.

"A deal is a deal, Taylor. I'm damned if you'll twist my arm, but I might do a deal with you. Honorable terms of some kind."

"What could be easier?" Anthony met him with a level stare. "You can bring us medicine, physical knowledge. We can give you knowledge about the mind. But there's one thing above all that we can do together. Show us how to make two beans grow where only one grew before. It's that simple. Give us the agricultural know-how, the science, and we'll do the growing. And we share the crop. That way nobody loses."

Harper's face betrayed, without any call for mental powers, that he gagged on the thought of losing his comfortable monopoly. In the audience there were a handful who shared his resentment. But by far the majority let it be known in no uncertain terms that they liked the proposition. Harper had to yield.

"Have it your way," he growled. "You've called the tune. On your head comes the responsibility for passing on the tricks, the know-how, the training of all these—" and he flung his arm in a sweep to encompass the pressing crowd of green people. "We can deliver. How do we know you can keep up your end, and pass the skills along in a proper manner?"

"Nothing simpler." Anthony smiled, a great sense of relief flooding him. He took Lovely's hand again, saw her eyes

glow with understanding. "You said I called the tune. Let me show you how appropriate that was."

He raised an arm, and got silence in a moment. It was an intently expectant silence, as something of the immense power he wielded communicated itself even to the awed humans. This was a treasured fancy, something he had dreamed of for a long time. And he knew that all over the planet, far and wide, breaths were being held now.

To M'Grath he murmured, "This is the most expressive piece I could think of, for a moment such as this. Listen!" And he brought his hand down in a gesture.

With a unanimity no human choir could hope to copy, the assembled green people raised their voices in a great shouting sound, the electrifying "Hallelujah Chorus" from Handel's *Messiah*. Hardly had they roared into the third bar when there was a rustle, and Anthony saw the human audience scrambling to its feet, and joining in lustily. Now his dream was complete, and he, too, sang "Hallelujah" along with the rest.

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