

Science Fantasy



No. 42
VOLUME 14
2/-

Novelettes

**PLANET ON
PROBATION**

J. T. McIntosh

**IMPRINT OF
CHAOS**

John Brunner

Short Stories

DEITIES, INC.

Haugsrud & Smith

**THE
DRYAD-TREE**

**Thomas Burnett
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Scottish author Jim McIntosh has produced many interesting science fiction plot ideas over the years (when he can find time from his many other literary activities) most of them centred around the imponderables facing human colonisation on alien planets. Mainly his characters have to contend with themselves, but in this one, take the climate for instance . . .

PLANET ON PROBATION

BY J. T. McINTOSH

o n e

As Blake crossed the vast sunroom, the group of techneers playing poker in a corner looked up and nodded to him with their usual mixture of susfiance and revility. He nodded back, wondering wryly what he'd do if anyone on Marlar just once treated him as an ordinary human being. Burst into tears, probably.

Susfiance and revility were two words Blake had invented for the suspicion and defiance, resentment and cold civility with which all Habitability Consuls were treated, everywhere. He'd done three worlds in his time, Marlar being the third. And though the worlds and the people on them changed, the susfiance and revility never did.

Everybody knew about the two worlds he'd done already. That didn't help, either.

Habitability Consuls were useless ignorant no-good jumped-up stupid brass-hat bastards but for whom everything would be perfect. Everybody knew that.

Not that there was anything personal about it. If Stephen Blake ceased to be HC and became just an ordinary settler, everybody would probably like him as well as the next man, depending on who the next man was.

He was thirty-two, tall, dark and moderately good-looking, but that didn't help. If HCs were old, they were stuffed shirts who ought to have been put out to pasture years ago. If they were young, they were silly inexperienced kids who didn't have what it took to do a man-sized job. If they were in between, they were both.

Blake closed the glass door on the sunroom behind him and started to walk along the two hundred yards of aggressively naked corridor that led to the east entrance. A girl was coming the other way, a girl in white sundress with a nipped-in waist, a girl he knew—Nancy Taylor. Long ago, when she had just arrived on Marlar and thought she was lucky to be dated by such an important person as the HC himself, he had taken her around for a while.

But soon she'd been told forcibly and often by a lot of people that HCs were useless ignorant no-good jumped-up stupid brass-hat bastards, and that was that.

Blake fancied, however, that she was looking friendlier than usual, and thought she might at least give him a smile since there was no one else around. He smiled at her.

She looked right through him and strode on with her little nose high in the air.

Blake sighed and was about to pass her when an expression of uncertainty crossed her pretty face and she hesitated in mid-stride. A moment later she clutched her stomach convulsively, her knees buckled under her, and she writhed on the floor, moaning, her hands clawing at her belly as if she were trying to tear it out.

Probably she was.

Blake dropped on his knees beside her, taking a knife from his pocket and snapping it open. He cut through her belt, slit the tight dress and struggled with the girdle which gave her her impossible shape.

"Don't do that," he said harshly, pulling her hands away. But when he had torn away the girdle her hands came back to claw at her flesh and he had to fasten them behind her with her belt, knotted.

Still she writhed and moaned.

Blake looked round, but there was nobody else in sight in the corridor. He ran into the nearest room, picked up the phone and dialled the hospital.

"Marlaritis case," he said. "East corridor. Her name's Nancy Taylor. Yes, it looks bad."

He went back and waited until the stretcher arrived. There was nothing to do but make sure Nancy didn't get her hands free.

When she had been borne away Blake carried on along the corridor. Though there was no point in thinking about Nancy he thought about her, of course.

He wondered if it was her first attack. He guessed so, from the way she took it.

Blake himself had had two attacks. By this time it was pretty certain that marlaritis wasn't going to kill him. In Nancy's case whether she lived or died was anybody's guess.

One thing was certain—unless and until she recovered completely, she'd very much want to die.

Blake opened the inner door at the end of the corridor, closed it and opened the outer door.

He reeled in the sudden blast of heat.

Last time he'd been out, an hour earlier, it had been raining, cold, windy. Now there wasn't a breath of air, the temperature was well over a hundred, and the air was so dry he could feel his skin cracking.

That was Marlar—so variable so quickly that by the time you got your snowsuit on it was bathing-costume weather, and if you took your coat off because it was hot you could be soaked to the skin before you could get it on again. That's if it wasn't blown away by a sudden gale.

Marlar—the world Blake as HC had to give a verdict on. A world so promising, so stuffed with mineral wealth that if Blake said it had to be evacuated the 400,000 people on the planet would probably murder him. A world of such savage climatic variation that nothing from Earth could live on it except grass and human beings.

A world of which you could be sure of only one thing—that whatever happened, it wouldn't happen for long.

A world richly fertile, where the fruit and crops were so delicious, so sustaining, so varied that it was no hardship to be a vegetarian.

A world of marlaritis, which was nothing more or less than food poisoning so insidious, so rapid, so agonizing that it could kill in ten minutes, and if it didn't you wished it would.

The trouble was—marlaritis could kill you in ten minutes, but if you were going to recover from it, it was a long, slow, agonizing business.

Blake walked three hundred yards across grass which was already parched and gasping. He entered the cool radio station with relief.

In the outer office Smith looked up. "Oh, it's you," he said, his tone making no secret of the fact that he'd have preferred it to be absolutely anybody else.

Nobody was ever openly, deliberately rude to Blake. Technically he was the most important man in Marlar. He was more important than Romney, the Settlement Commission chief, and far more important than Bachelor, mayor of Larsen City.

But nobody was under Blake's direct orders, and nobody who did give orders on Marlar minded how rude anybody was to Blake. Blake could report to his division of the Settlement Commission that the other division wasn't being very nice to him, and eventually Romney would be reprimanded—provided Blake had made a good enough case.

Everybody stopped just short of giving Blake a good enough case.

"There's my report," said Blake. "Will you send it off, please?"

"Christ, couldn't you make it any longer?" Smith inquired, thumbing the pages.

"I can if you officially request it," said Blake evenly.

"This'll take a month to send," Smith muttered, "and it'll cost about a million dollars."

Blake shrugged. If the report had been short, Smith would have needled him about that, asking him if that was all he'd managed to collect in a month.

"You have my full permission," Blake remarked, "to add a paragraph saying you think it's too long."

"Well, I will," Smith retorted quickly. "We've got a hell of a lot to do here already, and this . . ."

Abruptly he realized he was getting himself into a position which he couldn't defend and from which it would be difficult to retreat.

"Make your addition, please," said Blake smoothly, "and I'll initial the record copy to show it went with my sanction."

Smith hesitated, wondering frantically how to withdraw.

"Phrase it carefully," Blake went on. "On your own figures, it'll cost about four thousand dollars to send."

"Hell, can't you take a joke?" Smith said desperately.

"Try me," Blake invited. "What's the joke?"

With a look of loathing Smith beat an ignominious retreat.

There wasn't much satisfaction for Blake in his victory. Smith's story would be that he'd been officious, unpleasant, humourless and as deliberately offensive as possible.

Blake shrugged, left the radio building and started back across the field. The scene with Smith couldn't make him any more unpopular than he was already, but what he's said in his report could and would.

The HC's report was confidential and nobody, not even Romney, the Chief Bedbug, was supposed to learn what was in it. Nevertheless, within half an hour or so everybody in Larsen City would know that Blake had suspended shipment of new settlers to Marlar.

And when that was known Blake might find it advisable to stay at home for a couple of days.

Going back the way he had come, Blake was thinking not of Smith but of Nancy Taylor.

A nice girl, Nancy, pretty and not too bright. A girl who liked to be liked. She hadn't really brushed him off because he was HC, but because if she didn't other people would be nasty to her. There were a lot of girls like Nancy.

It was lonely being an HC.

Abruptly Blake stopped, stared and whistled softly. After all, HC or not, he was human, male of that ilk.

The girl who had come out to sunbathe since he crossed the field going the other way was a slender golden arrow of rare perfection.

She lay face down, arms stretched out in front of her, her dark head resting on her arms. Long, smooth, golden legs led up to brief red and white trunks, and the rest of her, also

smooth and golden, was undefiled by anything at all. She had untied her red and white bra to acquire an even tan on her back. It was still under her, the tie-strings trailing carelessly on the grass. Beside her, neatly folded, were the red slacks and white shirt she'd worn on her way out.

Blake wondered what would happen if he shouted "Fire!"

There was one easy way to find out. "Fire!" he yelled.

This girl wasn't easily panicked. She turned her head coolly to look at him.

"Well, well," she said, mildly surprised. "If it isn't the Consul himself."

Blake was suddenly embarrassed. For just a moment he had forgotten he was the most unpopular object on Marlar, and in that moment he laid himself wide open. She could be as cruel and cutting as she liked.

"Sit down," the girl invited. "That's it you want to, of course. Anyway, stop blocking the sun."

He sat down on the hot grass. Her face, now that he saw it properly, was surprisingly pretty. Having had a good look at the rest of her he had decided that it was asking too much to expect her to be pretty too.

"You're new," he said.

"No, quite old," she admitted. "Twenty-four. You could do with an overhaul too."

There didn't seem to be anything to say to that.

"I'm Lucille Horrocks," the girl said. "You're Stephen Blake. We're pleased to meet each other. Now that that's over, tell me how you knew I was new?"

"Because you're civil to me. Comparatively civil, anyway."

"I'll stay civil to you—comparatively civil, anyway. You mean I should spit at you because you're an HC?"

"Well, why should you be different?"

"I'm an HC's daughter. Q.E.D."

"Oh," said Blake. He might have guessed that. The only people who'd treat an HC decently would be relatives or friends of another HC.

"Since we're friends now," said Lucille, "and practically related, perhaps you'll do something for me?"

"I might," said Blake. In the warm relief of actually being able to talk on friendly terms with somebody, and a pretty girl at that, he was prepared to promise her almost anything, though it wouldn't do to admit that.

"You'll have to remember that we're great friends and practically related," said Lucille, "and that you've known me for a long time and trust me. Otherwise you won't do it."

"I'll remember all that," said Blake. "Who do you want killed?"

"I only want to know something. Tell me, are you going to give Marlar the okay?"

Blake was disappointed. "You know I can't tell you that," he said.

"Oh, you've forgotten," she said. "You think I'm just anybody. If you trusted me, you could give me some idea of the chances. Unofficially, of course."

What did it matter, Blake said to himself. "Right then, I will. I've just suspended shipment of new settlers, and there's much less than a fifty-fifty chance for Marlar."

Lucille was so startled she sat up for a moment. Before she remembered how she wasn't dressed and dropped face down on the grass again, Blake had a tantalizing glimpse of two impudent little breasts which made up in quality what they lacked in quantity.

"I don't get it," she said, puzzled and worried. "I . . . Do me a favour, will you? Tie me up at the back."

Blake moved close to her and tied the string of her bra. "As tight as that?" he inquired.

"Tighter," she said, "or we'll cease being civil to each other."

She sat up and looked at him thoughtfully. "Much less than a fifty-fifty chance?" she said incredulously. "I picked this world as the best prospect anywhere. And I know something about habitability."

"Did you take out insurance?"

"Naturally."

"How much?"

"A thousand credit premium and half my salary for seven years."

That meant that Blake was going to lose her anything up to fifteen thousand credits. Or a hundred and fifty thousand, if you looked at it another way.

No wonder nobody liked HC's.

t w o

With so many new worlds being colonized, and so many millions of settlers going out to them, a new form of insurance or guarantee or gamble had come into force. Private firms ran it, but the governments of Earth were behind it.

You went to a new colony and you bet the insurance company, in effect, that you'd stay for five years or seven years or whatever it was. If you left before the time was up, you lost everything.

The terms depended, of course, on the status and security of the colony selected. If it was an established colony, long since past its trial period, the terms offered weren't much better than ordinary insurance. They didn't have to be. With Earth as overcrowded as it was now, nobody needed much urging to try the colonies.

But if the colony selected was a new settlement, like Marlar the terms offered were breathtaking.

There were snags, of course. Many snags.

New settlements were always on trial. That's what HCs were for. It was up to them to pass judgment on the worlds which were their responsibility, shine a green light if the way was clear, or switch to red whenever they thought a world ought to be written off.

And the risk that an HC would write off the world concerned was the inventor's risk, not the insurance company's. Which was why the jackpot was so vast.

It was also the main reason for the unpopularity of Habitability Consuls.

"What's your job?" Blake asked.

"Executive stenographer with Bedbug," the girl said absently.

The Settlement Commission, for no known reason, was always referred to as Bedbug, even semi-officially. An executive stenographer would make eighty a week. Half eighty was forty, two thousand a year.

Lucille's policy would pay her at least a hundred and fifty thousand if she was still on Marlar in seven years' time, Blake reckoned.

"Well, it looks as if I become dirt under your feet, too," he said, beginning to get up. "Don't tell anybody I—"

"Don't be a damned fool!" Lucille snapped.

He dropped back on the ground, startled.

"If Marlar has to be evacuated, it isn't your fault," she said. "And I wish you'd give me credit for having the brains to see it."

"Not many people have the brains to see it," Blake said.

She shrugged, still a little irritated. "It's not because they can't see it that they hate you," she said, "it's because they can't do a damn thing about it."

She was no fool, Lucille Horrocks.

It was, of course, quite illogical to hate HCs for doing their job. Nobody could tell right away whether a world was fit for human habitation or not. People had to go and live on it for a time, sometimes a lot of people for a very long time, before it could be stated definitely that the world was safe. That local illnesses were uncommon enough or mild enough not to be a serious problem. That the climate had no serious long-term effects on human beings. That chemical, climatic and radiation differences didn't combine to make human settlers mutate into something different. That the big problems—there were always big problems—weren't incapable of final resolution.

Habitability—after the trial period—was easily determined. Bedbug got a habitability index by turning average life expectation, time spent in hospital, number of accidents, local diseases, incidence of mental disorders, population increase and a few other things into a single factor. Below fifty, habitable. Above fifty, uninhabitable.

Simple.

The snag was that it was close on a hundred years before such a factor could be really accurate. Every new world couldn't be allowed a trial period of a century.

It was up to the HCs to speed up, slow or stop the flow of settlers—even if necessary, evacuate the existing colony.

HCs were working honestly for the well-being of the people on their particular world, but you couldn't get settlers to admit that, or like HCs for doing it. A man who would get a lump sum of two hundred thousand credits merely for staying where he was for four more years, and was suddenly told he wouldn't be allowed to and must lose the seven thousand he had already paid, wasn't going to weep tears of gratitude on the neck of the man who decided the world he was living on wasn't good for his health.

"Where was I wrong?" Lucille demanded. "Why are you going to evacuate Marlar?"

"I didn't say I was going to—"

"I know, I know," she said impatiently. She had temporarily lost her coolness of a couple of minutes ago. "Why do you say there's much less than a fifty-fifty chance?"

"Well," said Blake, "for one thing, the weather's variable."

"I know that," she retorted tartly.

"You don't," Blake told her, "Or you'd have brought out a coat. And you wouldn't be lying out in the open where you could be blown away by a sudden gale. But never mind that," he said hastily, as she was about to follow up that side-issue. "The point is this. Earth has a certain temperature range, and a certain range of violence of reaction. We know Earth's history for a few thousand years. Every thousand years or so something pretty violent happens. Every hundred years we have some kind of weather disaster. And every ten years some storm worse than most kills a few hundred people. See what I'm getting at?"

"No. I must be dumb," said Lucille. "Explain in words of one syllable."

"In words of one syllable," said Blake, "*we've been on this world for five years.*"

There was silence for a few seconds.

"I see," said Lucille thoughtfully. "And since Marlar at its best is like Earth at its worst, you think—"

"I think that on the law of averages it's about time we had some *real* trouble."

"Maybe you've got something here," Lucille admitted. "But surely that isn't an insuperable problem. If we can run stations on the moon and on Jupiter, we can surely build a town that can take anything a world like this can throw at it?"

"We could," said Blake, "but we haven't. Scores of people are injured every day, often seriously, occasionally fatally, because towns here are built more or less like towns on Earth—and worse, because people just won't pay enough attention to precautions. There are plenty of safety regulations. But people just won't obey them."

"Then why don't we—"

Blake was shaking his head. "That isn't the main trouble. If we're forced to evacuate, it won't be on account of the climate or the accidents, it'll be because of marlaritis."

"Marlaritis? But that's only food poisoning."

"When you go back to the Bedbug building," said Blake soberly, "go to the hospital and ask to see Nancy Taylor. That's if she's still alive. Less than half an hour ago she was walking around, as young and healthy and nearly as pretty as you. Now she's—"

"I know about it," said Lucille. "I know it's bad. but surely that problem will be licked any day?"

"That's been said for years now."

"But food poisoning . . . you find the cause, and eliminate it."

"How?" asked Blake patiently.

Lucille seemed at a loss for words, obviously an uncommon experience for her.

"We've found the cause, of course," said Blake. "Poison. In the vegetable produce of Marlar. Now first, get this clear. We've got to live on the vegetable produce of Marlar. We can't import our food, and no Earth crop can stand this climate. Theoretically hydroponics might be the answer, but not in practise. Who would eat sub-standard Terran vegetables in preference to the magnificent Marlar varieties? The second important thing is that *any* edible vegetable produce of Marlar can be poisonous, and we don't know till after somebody's eaten it."

"You mean anything grown on Marlar can be poisonous or not, and there's no way of telling?"

"Not exactly. There's two ways of telling. One is chemical analysis—but we can't analyse every leaf or fruit or seed we eat. The other is the betchels."

"Those little animals that look like squirrels?"

"Yes. They know when plants are poisonous. We don't know how but they do. By chemical analysis, and by testing with the betchels—the only surviving mammal on Marlar, by the way—we can do a certain amount of testing. Enough to enable us to supply perfectly safe food for people in hospitals and very young children. No more."

"But damn it," Lucille exclaimed, "we're not living in the Dark Ages. Surely you can find a quick, sure way of testing for poison—or killing the poison?"

"No," said Blake simply.

"Then surely you can—"

Lucille yelped in shock as snow fell on her hot skin—first a few flakes melted almost to nothing, and then, within seconds,

a blizzard which completely hid the buildings only a hundred yards away.

They wasted no time or breath in speaking. And Lucille, understanding in nothing flat what Blake had meant about the coat, didn't take time to struggle with her shirt and slacks. She seized them and ran.

They had two hundred yards to go to the entrance, and they couldn't have taken more than thirty seconds from the time the first snowflakes fell. Nevertheless, by the time they tumbled inside and closed the outer door, Lucille's two piece was thickly caked with soft snow and she couldn't have been wetter if she'd been swimming all day.

Teeth chattering, she brushed herself off and climbed into her slacks. Blake said nothing.

Suddenly she laughed. "I like you," she said. "You didn't even say 'See what I mean?'"

"My apartment's close by if you want to dry out," said Blake.

"I don't know you well enough for that," she said.

"Well, how about furthering the acquaintance? Can I take you into town tonight?"

She hadn't expected that. She had to think. "If you don't mind it being late," she said with unexpected uncertainty, almost shyness. "I have a sort of date first . . ."

They fixed on the spot.

But Blake didn't see Lucille that night. He waited an hour for her, telling himself bitterly as he gave up at last that any HC who tried to date a girl deserved what he got.

It wasn't until the next day that Blake, still puzzled and disappointed, happened to find out that Lucille's "sort of date" had been with Smith, the radio officer.

Blake called to see Nancy Taylor at the hospital but he left it too late. She had died just before he arrived.

He was sorry then he hadn't phoned first to check, for he hated visiting the hospital. Every time he saw the white walls and smelt the familiar smell, his two attacks of marlaritis came back to him in painful detail.

At least he had got out of here, twice, which was more than Nancy had done.

Dr. Collins, tall, thin, jerky, spoke to him. "It can't go on," said Collins flatly. "It's getting worse all the time. More cases every week. You'll have to do something."

"I?" said Blake. "What?"

"Clear this world, that's what."

Blake stared at him. "Can it be that I have an ally?" he said.

"I don't know about that. If you're hanging on here because you're too weak to say the word to clear out, I'll do it."

"You?" said Blake. "You can't. I'm the HC, unfortunately."

"I said, if you haven't the guts to take the responsibility, I will," said Collins grimly. "Write up something that shifts all the responsibility to the medical staff. Say it's a medical problem, which it is. Say the chief medical officer advises evacuation, which he does. Put it all on me. Write it up any way you like, and I'll sign it."

Blake thought for long seconds. Then he shook his head.

"It's still my problem, not yours."

The doctor, who was probably tired and overwrought, lost his temper at that. "But you don't *do* anything about the problem," he snapped. "I hear you've stopped shipments. That means you won't take responsibility for Marlar, and you won't take responsibility for evacuating it. For God's sake, Blake, if this job's too big for you, resign, go home, or shoot yourself."

"Not an ally," said Blake sadly. "Definitely not an ally."

He turned his back on Collins and walked out of the hospital.

t h r e e

HCs weren't supposed to be anything but inspectors. It wasn't part of their job to try to solve, personally, the problems of the world on which they had to give judgment.

But Blake had always been interested in things that grew, and outside his apartment in the Bedbug building he had a small garden in which he was attempting to solve the problem of marlaritis. There must be an answer. *Somebody* had to find it.

Bitterly as he looked down at his plants, swelling happily in brilliant sunshine, Blake remembered his conversation with Lucille, the conversation interrupted typically by a snowstorm. She was another Nancy Taylor. Like Nancy Taylor, she had been friendly before she knew any better. Like Nancy Taylor, she had learned not to be too friendly with an HC. And maybe

one day she would die, like Nancy Taylor, of the illness from which he could have saved her and Nancy Taylor and everybody else if he'd done the thing which he'd been convinced for months was the only thing to do.

Like Nancy Taylor, like all the rest of them, Lucille didn't believe it could happen to her. She didn't want to be saved.

Well, he just hoped she got marlaritis. That would cut her down to size.

He stared down at the plants in a kind of desperation. Paulia, a red fruit rich in protein which soon made people cease to regret meat. Ferndyn, whose grain made delicious bread. Saratope, a stringy vegetable which looked awful raw or cooked, but tasted marvellous and entirely different depending on the amount and type of cooking it had had. Kolein, less interesting in taste than any of the other Marlar varieties, but the one vegetable grown anywhere which supplied without supplement of any kind, everything necessary to maintain life and health.

These and a score of other varieties grew anywhere on Marlar. They were incredibly tough and adaptable, obviously, or the species would have died out long ago.

Each variety could survive vicious heat, biting cold, flood, gales and the frequent transplanting—to put it mildly—caused by typhoons not merely tearing away the plants themselves, but the soil to which they clung. Any Marlar plant species which had tried to survive by sinking long, strong roots had failed. All those which had survived had done so by being able to withstand not only extremes of temperature and extremes of humidity-aridity, but also being torn frequently from the soil, blown miles away and then dashed to the ground.

These fruits and crops were cultivated now in scores of farms. Both farmers and scientists had done their best to find what made an occasional plant go poisonous, and had had some success, but not enough.

It wasn't that there were poisonous varieties. A particular plant which was clean at one time could be poisonous at another and then clean again. The poisonous condition was in all cases temporary, but that didn't help. Grain that had been gathered stayed clean, or stayed poisoned.

It wasn't the soil. Any variety could be safe anywhere or poisonous anywhere.

It wasn't the weather. In a particular field a thousand plants

would be all right and one all wrong.

It wasn't the rough handling all Marlar's vegetable life got. For in fields protected at enormous expense from the vagaries of the climate, the proportion of poison plants was decidedly higher than usual.

It wasn't transplanting.

It wasn't too much water.

It wasn't too much sun.

The one useful discovery which had been made was that plants did go poisonous when they had things too easy or too tough. Like all living things, the plants of Marlar could reach the end of their tether, when they had taken all they could take and still live. Then, for a short time, they went poisonous.

It was a small, easy change. C_2 into C_5 , N_4 into N_7 , O_8 into O_3 . It was understandable, too, that on a world like Marlar all the vegetable life should take violent change for granted and waste only when it suffered considerably more violence than usual, or considerably less.

However, this discovery, though useful, wasn't enough, didn't eliminate the trouble. Farmers saw to it that their crops didn't have too tough or too easy a time, and the proportion of poisoned produce dropped considerably.

But not enough. It stayed around one-fifth of one per cent.

And the marlaritis death rate went on growing.

One-fifth of one per cent. Such a tiny proportion. Almost negligible, at first sight.

Yet that meant that your five thousandth meal was a meal of poison. Three or four years. And two out of five marlaritis victims died.

The prognosis wasn't good.

Just for something to do, Blake tore a ferndyn plant from the ground and threw it down on a pile of stones. It contracted, rolled to the foot of the pile, and when a tough little root found soil the others darted in the same direction.

Within ten seconds the plant was firmly rooted. Then it straightened itself, spread its leaves and sighed happily, every bit as healthy as it had been before Blake had so rudely disturbed it.

Blake went inside and brought out a betchel, a small, fourlegged animal which looked like a squirrel when its long tail was behind it but more like a turtle when it used the tail for its real purpose, which was protection from the elements

Betchels were more intelligent than turtles, less intelligent than squirrels. They represented the only surviving non-plant life of Marlar, and they were supremely indifferent to the human invaders—rather like cats in their indifference to affairs other than their own.

Fortunately for them, they were inedible.

Blake held the betchel over the ferndyn plant. It wriggled from his grasp, came up under the plant, sniffed it, and bit off a small piece of grain.

Blake picked up the little animal, which didn't mind. It wasn't very interested in the ferndyn plant, and it didn't care one way or the other about being held in captivity.

Somehow the betchels knew. What was poison to human beings was poison to them too, only no betchel ever got marlaritis. They knew what to eat and what to leave alone.

Any plant on Marlar could be safe or poisonous, and only the betchels knew which. The scientists could find out eventually, but not quickly or economically enough for analysis of all food to be possible. And the betchels were long-lived, with a long gestation period, and ate little. There weren't nearly enough of them to make them food-tasters for nearly half a million people.

A small chemical change, that was all. The work of an instant, comparatively speaking, for the plant.

Blake was still staring down at his plants with worried concentration. A simple test, that was all that was needed. A simple, quick, workable, 100 per cent certain test.

Then all they'd have to worry about would be the variable climate of Marlar.

Blake looked up from his plants to see Romney, Chief Bedbug, coming along the side of the building.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," Blake said.

"If you're going to be like that I'm sorry I came," said Romney warily. Romney was a little man who took his responsibilities very seriously.

"Like what?" said Blake.

"Sarcastic. You know damn well I'd only come to see you if I wanted something."

"You're always welcome to drop by socially. Anyway, what do you want?"

"Advice if you've got any. We're running very short of water. You had a lot of drought on Penelope VI, Blake. What did they do about it? What sort of reservoirs did they have?"

"Short of water? We had rain a couple of days ago. And snow yesterday."

Romney evaporated it all with a wave of his pudgy arm. "A drop in the bucket. Dried almost before it fell. What did they do on Penelope VI, Blake?"

"Well, for one thing," said Blake, "the whole system wasn't geared for getting rid of surplus water. I saw the fountains working yesterday—"

"Stopped now," said Romney. "You don't know how serious this is, Blake. I thought you might know of something . . ."

"How to make it rain? That's never been a problem on Marlar before."

"That's just it!" said Romney. "That's exactly it, Blake! This is the first time we've ever been short of water. There's always plenty of water. It rains at least once a day. If you could count on anything, it's that!"

"Now you can't even count on that," said Blake, amused.

"I might have known you'd laugh," said Romney bitterly. "I wasn't asking you to make it rain. We just have to wait for it. The point is, how can we guard against this in future? We haven't got huge tanks. We haven't got—"

"Pipes," said Blake.

"Pipes?" echoed Romney blankly.

"One thing you can be *almost* sure about. If it's dry here it'll be raining in Brownville. Or in New Paris. Or Denton. Pipes are cheap. Instead of making bigger and still bigger reservoirs, link the towns in each area and let them use each other's surplus."

"We'll do that, Blake," said Romney. "Of course, it's obvious . . . Anyway, thanks." He didn't like thanking Blake, especially for suggesting such a simple way out of the difficulty, but he wasn't a bad little man, and Blake had undoubtedly supplied the answer, simple though it was.

"How serious is the present shortage?" Blake asked.

"Tomorrow night we'll be desperate. We're using water like . . . like . . ."

"Like water," said Blake helpfully.

"Well, we're using it, and if it doesn't rain . . . I must say, you don't seem to be taking this very seriously, Blake. It's damned serious."

"All right," said Blake calmly. "Shall we evacuate Marlar?"

Romney jerked as if he'd been shot. "Are you crazy, Blake?"

Blake amended his question. "If we get through this safely, shall we evacuate before something worse happens?"

In the silence as Romney stared at Blake someone else came along the massive blank side of the Bedbug building. It was Henry Bachelor. Now the three most important men on the planet were together, and Blake saw that this drought which he hadn't even noticed must indeed be serious.

"Say, Henry," Romney exclaimed. "Blake's talking about evacuation."

"No need for panic," said Bachelor smoothly. He was a very smooth man, Henry Bachelor.

"It isn't panic," said Blake. "We'll get through this, sure. But will we get through the next crisis, and the next, and the next?"

"In five years," said Bachelor gently, "nothing like this has happened. Maybe it won't happen again for another five years. By that time we'll be ready for it. But I must admit, gentlemen, I'm worried. I'm not sure that the proper preparations have been made. I'm not sure that the proper steps are being taken now by the Settlement Commission staff—"

"What do you want us to do?" asked Blake satirically. "Go out and tell it to rain?"

"That's not a very helpful remark, Blake," said Bachelor chidingly.

"What would be helpful? We're up against weather. Just weather. We can't do much more about it than a caveman on Earth used to do.

"Take a simple thing like a typhoon. Warm air collides with cold air, the warm air shoots up and over, the cold air rushes in and starts twisting like water going down a drain, in different directions north or south of the equator, also like water going down a drain. We know what happens, but can we do anything about it? Not a thing. If we know there's a mountain of hot air that's likely to collide with another mountain of cold air we can guess that there may be a typhoon.

"Here on Marlar the air conditions are so fouled up that we never even know what *might* happen. We never will know. This is nothing compared with what Marlar might do to us tomorrow. Yet if I send in a report saying Marlar's dangerous, you two—"

"I'm wasting my time here," said Romney with dignity. "Thank you for your suggestion, Blake. It was very valuable."

"The most valuable advice you can give to a man sitting in a lion's den is to tell him to get out," Blake observed. "Here you are worried about the water supply. And that's a joke compared with marlaritis."

"Then why don't you close Marlar?" Romney said angrily. "This'll give you your chance. It's what you've been waiting for, isn't it?"

"You Romney," said Blake slowly, "and you, Bachelor, and all the four hundred thousand people on Marlar seem to have a crazy delusion about me. Can't you get it through your thick skulls that I'm doing my damndest against my better judgment *not* to evacuate Marlar?"

They stared at him as though the idea had never occurred to them.

"I know what everybody says," Blake went on. "I closed Penelope VI and I closed Morion and I'm just waiting for a chance to close Marlar. You dumb fools, don't you know I'm bending over backwards not to have to close a third world? Think the Settlement Commission *likes* HCs who evacuate every planet they're sent to? Maybe I should have evacuated Marlar long ago, but if you want to know the truth *I don't dare!*"

There was silence for a few seconds. Then Romney said ungraciously: "Maybe you do have your troubles, Blake."

It was about the most sympathetic thing that had ever been said to Blake as HC.

f o u r

Every crisis on Marlar which came in like a lion was perfectly capable of going out like a lamb.

It rained the next day, of course. And everyone who had thought for a moment that it might not was ashamed of himself for having thought so, and pretended he never had.

Romney called Blake on the phone. "Say, Blake," he said. "I guess there's no need for you to make a report about that little affair yesterday. I just thought . . . I guess for a moment we all lost our heads—there's no need for you to report it, is there?"

"I think there is," said Blake. "It comes under habitability. Suppose it hadn't rained today?"

"Yes, but . . . hell, I didn't need to tell you about it. I just—"

"You were right to tell me about it. Anyway, if Marlar's evacuated, it's more likely to be over marlaritis than rain or drought."

"Oh, we'll lick that any day."

"Have you see Dr. Collins lately? He wants to evacuate."

There was a long, nervous pause. "You keep talking about evacuation, Blake. You're not really thinking—"

"I am really thinking," said Blake sourly.

"I hope you realize you'll be violently opposed, Blake. Nobody else thinks there's a case for evacuation."

"Except Dr. Collins. Who is in charge of the marlaritis cases. Which are increasing—and the ratio of deaths isn't going down either."

"There's a snag in everything, Blake."

"This is more than a snag. I'm beginning to think that letting people stay on Marlar is very nearly murder."

There was silence for a moment, then the click of the receiver being replaced.

Romney didn't want to talk about marlaritis. He didn't want to think about marlaritis.

Drought he could do something about. Nobody had succeeded in doing anything about marlaritis. So the best thing was to ignore it, pretend it didn't exist.

Romney and Bachelor were capable enough men, and certainly intelligent. But like many capable, intelligent men, they lost a great deal of their capability and their judgment became warped when their own interests were strongly involved.

If Marlar developed and grew, both Romney, as Bedbug chief, and Bachelor, as mayor of Larsen City, would grow with it. Every week they became richer and more important and more secure.

On the other hand, if Marlar were evacuated, Bachelor would become at once nothing at all and Romney would revert to the status of a comparatively minor Settlement Commission official.

Blake kept the phone in his hand and called Personnel. "Stenographer, please," he said. "Blake, HC."

For once he found himself talking to an official who didn't let his presumed dislike of Blake's job affect his manner.

"Certainly, sir. Just any stenographer, or is it secret information involved?"

"Well, it's a written report for HQ on Earth," Blake told him.

There was silence for a few seconds. Blake knew the man at the other end was wondering if this meant evacuation. Then his voice came brightly again as he realized it couldn't be evacuation. Blake would send an evacuation order immediately, direct, by radio. He wouldn't have it typed neatly for the next ship to collect on its routine call.

"Very well, Mr. Blake. She'll be along in five minutes."

Somehow it didn't occur to Blake that Lucille Horrocks might be sent. Not until the door opened and she came in.

It wasn't quite fair on Blake. Lucille had known she was going to see him, and had time to decide how to behave. Blake didn't have any such opportunity, and stared blankly at her for five seconds.

"You sent for a stenographer," Lucille reminded him. "If you want time to collect your thoughts, I'll come back in half an hour."

"You didn't keep your promise," Blake said rather foolishly.

"Dates have been broken before," she said, sitting down and opening her notebook.

"I didn't mean that. Maybe you didn't actually promise in so many words, but I thought you were going to give me a fair chance?"

"A fair chance to do what?" Lucille inquired. "No, maybe you'd better not answer that. Was there some dictation?"

"You saw Smith," said Blake, "and you believed what he said without hearing the other side of the story."

With a sigh Lucille closed her book. "Of course he was lying?"

Blake kept himself under control, trying not to let his angry disappointment in her show.

"All right," he said flatly. "Take this. From HC, Marlar, to—"

"Since you mention it," said Lucille, "what was the other side of the story?"

"Lucille," said Blake earnestly, "I'm not trying to defend myself. I'm not making excuses. I'm not asking you for another date. And I'm not sulking. All I'm saying is—I'd have sworn, the last time I saw you, that you knew every story about me was liable to be slanted and that before you decided

I was a heel you'd have found out my side of it. That's all. Now take this."

Lucille tried to speak but he didn't let her.

Smith had been smarting over the exchange that day at the radio station, and the way he'd told it no doubt made Blake out to be the useless ignorant no-good jumped up-stupid brass-hat bastard that everybody knew all HCs were.

But Lucille ought to have known better, unless she was in love with Smith. In which case it didn't matter.

"Later in this report I give my reasons for the evacuation of Marlar," Blake dictated.

Lucille looked up, startled, but took it down automatically.

"The evacuation order has not been given as of above date," said Blake, "although the situation in my opinion already justifies evacuation. I do not believe I am forced yet to give the order.

"Frankly, I am making this report to cover myself. I know I am responsible for four hundred thousand lives. I have already refused to be responsible for any more.

"Marlaritis alone is now killing eight people in a hundred every year. Twenty-one people in a hundred are affected every year. This is, of course, sufficient grounds for evacuation if no effective counter-measure is in sight.

"At the moment no effective counter-measure is in sight. Medical opinion is that Marlar ought immediately to be evacuated."

Lucille jumped at that, but Blake continued to dictate flatly, feelinglessly.

"There is a lesser problem which may, unless effective measures are taken, become as serious as marlaritis.

"Marlar is a rich and valuable world, and one which should be evacuated only as a last resort. Hence my hesitation. But the accident rate, mainly as a result of the extremely variable weather conditions, is high, and the co-operation from the settlers in reducing it is low.

"Marlar is deceptively Earthlike and apparently innocuous a great deal of the time. It is apparently impossible to compel the settlers to treat Marlar as dangerous. The present high accident rate has failed completely to make the colonists take proper precautions. Both individually and in the mass they continue to take chances which in the circumstances can only be described as suicidal.

"Short of keeping the entire personnel of the colony off the surface of the planet, I—"

Lucille threw her book on the floor and jumped to her feet. "That's right, put all the blame on us!" she exclaimed. "Any excuse is better than none. Now it's the accident rate. Why don't you just blame the colonists for having come to Marlar? That's surely their greatest crime?"

Blake raised his eyebrows. "There is a high casualty rate," he said coolly. "People go out and sunbathe alone, like somebody I know—and are carried away by sudden gales. They work on high buildings without proper precautions. They—"

Lucille faced him defiantly. "That's only an excuse and you know it!" she retorted. Blake noticed that when she was angry her bust measurement was fully adequate.

"Must every good reason for evacuating Marlar be an excuse?" he asked.

"Let's put ourselves straight first," she said. "That's an angry defensive report, and you're making it because you're angry on the defensive."

For a moment Blake stared at her in shock. Then he got himself under control. "Lucille, you've got a nerve," he said. "You think that just because you stood me up I'm angry at the whole galaxy."

Two spots of red in her cheeks, Lucille raised her arm quickly as if to hit him. Then she too got control of herself.

"Tell me," she said. "What was your side of the story?"

He told her.

She nodded, not surprised. "I suppose it didn't occur to you that I was quite prepared to believe the truth was something like that?"

He frowned, bewildered. "Then why didn't you come along and give me the chance to explain?"

She turned away from him and lowered her head. "Well, I did believe what Tom Smith said, at first," she admitted. "I didn't want to come out with you. After all, I didn't know you. Maybe you were as unpleasant as Tom made out. Maybe *you* are. I'm beginning to think so."

He took a step forward to seize her shoulders. She spun round, her eyes daring him to touch her. He stopped.

"I didn't come—but I waited by the phone for hours. What did you do? Did you call me to ask if I was ready? No,

you assumed I'd stood you up because you were an HC. You told yourself that any HC who dated a girl deserved all he got. Didn't you?"

Blake was silent. He nodded reluctantly.

"You didn't phone me yesterday either. You sulked. Damn it, Steve, can't you see there's two sides to the troubles HCs have? People don't give them a fair deal, that's true. But the other side is that they become so damned touchy they take everything as an insult . . .

"You're like a coloured man among people who don't like coloured men. Sure, maybe you have things to put up with. But you don't only resent what people say and do, you resent what they think, and what you think they think. First time you saw me you expected me to spit in your eye. When I didn't, you practically fell in love with me. But then, the first time something happened to shake my trust in you and yours in me, you decided right away that I was like all the rest and it was no use trying to explain to me and probably if you phoned me I wouldn't answer—"

"I wonder if you're right," said Blake humbly.

"Of course I'm right! If you'd called me at 10.15 and said—"

"I mean about everything. Do HCs really become psychotic?"

"Of course they do! I told you my father was an HC, didn't I? I knew other HCs. They were all the same. It's an occupation psychosis."

"Read back my report," said Blake.

Lucille picked up her book and read it back.

"It is angry and defensive," Blake admitted. "But, hell, Lucille, what else can I say! It's all true. Including the bit about accidents. And something's got to be done about it."

"You could suggest some modification in working conditions," said Lucille, "without saying that the colonists wouldn't co-operate and it wouldn't work."

"But that's true. They won't co-operate and it won't work."

"All right, why not try it and fix things so that if it does fail it isn't your fault?"

He looked at her for a long moment. "That's a thought," he said.

"You'll do it?"

"Go and type that report."

Lucille stared at him. "I thought . . ."

"Don't think. You're a stenographer."

Lucille shut her mouth tight and turned to the door.

"Don't keep it *too* secret," said Blake casually.

She spun back, her face lighting up. "You mean it's a bluff?"

"It's deadly serious. And that's a secret report."

Lucille frowned, then nodded, understanding.

"And stay angry with me," said Blake.

"I thought," Lucille said softly, "now that we've straightened things out, you might want to . . . ask me out again."

"I might," Blake sighed, "I certainly might. But I can't. You've got to be angry with me over that report."

Lucille came back into the room again. "No," she said. "That won't work."

"Why not?"

She dropped her eyes. "The last couple of days I've . . . well, I've defended you quite a lot. Had quite a bit of trouble over it. If I let this out, people might get the idea—"

"That we've cooked something up between us?" He looked at her with curiosity, and more than curiosity. "You've been defending me, Lucille? Even though . . ."

She blushed faintly. "Oh well," she said inadequately. "Tell you what. Ask for another stenographer this afternoon. I'll make sure it isn't me. Tell her it's a secret report, and you can rely on her to spread the news."

She hesitated. "And . . . there wouldn't be any reason why you shouldn't . . ."

"Lucille," said Blake cordially, "I could kiss you."

"Could you? If I let you, that is."

"I think I could kiss you whether you let me or not."

"Well, I'd be a fool to say you couldn't," Lucille remarked. "Either way."

five

Blake dictated his report to another girl—and after that there was trouble.

He and Lucille were going into a cinema in Larsen City that night when a foot got in Lucille's way and she tripped over it. As Blake bent to help her up, a shoulder crashed against his and he rolled on the ground.

Somebody else helped Lucille up, but he was standing on her skirt at the time.

Blake was getting to his feet when a girl stumbled and fell on top of him. Three or four men, coming gallantly to her rescue, got tangled up and Blake was accidentally kicked two or three times in the ribs.

Meantime a couple of women, exclaiming over the damage to Lucille's skirt, tried to pull it straight and managed to rip it right off her. Deciding not to wait for any more assistance, Lucille prudently ran.

Blake ran too, picking himself up twice when he was tripped.

There wouldn't have been anything they could do about it, but a news photographer happened to be on the spot and the *Larsen City Times* editor was injudicious enough to publish the picture.

It showed Blake on his knees, looking angry, and Lucille in a blouse and lace pants and almost in tears. This broke nobody's heart. But it also showed several identifiable citizens too clearly enjoying the episode.

Blake made Romney take action. Romney, annoyed at being forced to take a hand, vented his annoyance on the people who had been careless enough to make him, and though nobody liked Blake or Lucille any better afterwards, overt action was henceforth out.

Covert action was still in, however. In another cinema Lucille had a lighted cigarette dropped down the front of her dress and suffered nasty burns, and when Blake stood up he found his clothes had been quietly slashed to ribbons. Naturally the culprit or culprits couldn't be found.

Lucille refused to stop going around with Blake simply because this sort of thing was liable to happen. On the contrary, it would probably have made her go on even if she disliked him.

So she wasn't, Blake found, another Nancy Taylor. He couldn't help falling in love with her, and he didn't try.

Since Lucille and Blake now found themselves together at bay before a whole town, the question of living together for mutual protection naturally arose.

"Will you marry me?" Blake asked.

"That's the nicest thing anyone ever said to me," said Lucille. "But if you don't mind, I'd rather wait till this question of Marlar is settled one way or another before I make up my mind."

"Oh," said Blake.

"Meantime," said Lucille composedly, "there's undoubtedly something in what you say. I'm not going to stop seeing you because other people don't like it. But I'm tired of having my pyjamas cut to bits and finding thumb-tacks in my bed at night. Maybe I will move in here with you."

"Oh," said Blake in an entirely different tone.

"Purely for mutual protection," said Lucille quickly. "And the emphasis is on the word purely."

"I see," said Blake. But he didn't mind. He knew what happened when a man and woman decided to live decorously together . . . and it did.

As a bluff, Blake's secret report worked beautifully.

Romney framed orders that anybody who exposed himself suicidally to the elements was to be deported—and since banishment meant loss of insurance, people took notice. About a dozen men and three women in various parts of Marlar were banished, and the accident rate dropped like a stone.

No doubt Romney thought he had scored over Blake. Blake didn't mind, this time. However it had come about, one of the big question marks over Marlar had been removed.

"And you were going to order evacuation," said Lucille derisively.

She was dressed interestingly in nylon lounging pyjamas, the top part of which didn't come anywhere near meeting the bottom part.

"I still am," said Blake, "sooner or later. This helps matters, but it doesn't solve the real problem."

"Damn marlaritis," said Lucille. "Surely—"

"I know you think a ten-year-old child ought to be able to figure out a way to handle the situation. Well, how about figuring one out?"

Lucille was seated on the arm of an armchair, her feet on the seat, brushing her hair. Blake, his mind entirely on business, was rather exasperated to find his body going over and slipping an arm round Lucille's slim, bare waist. He drew it away hastily.

"And while you're doing it," he said, "hide behind a curtain or put on a veil or I won't even hear what you're saying."

Lucille, not heartbroken over her effect on him, went on rushing.

"I went and saw that girl," she said.

"What girl?"

"Nancy Taylor. Before she died. It wasn't nice. I'm not underestimating marlaritis, Steve, it's just . . . Well, let's think. What we want is a way of testing plants for poison, or preventing them becoming poisonous, or an antidote?"

"Yes, but there isn't an antidote."

"You haven't found one."

"I mean there can't be one. Poisons are of four kinds—narcotic, irritant, corrosive, convulsive. The plant poison that causes marlaritis is to some extent all four."

"Vicious stuff," said Lucille, impressed.

"Yes. Hell, Plato was a fool. There's only one thing that a man and woman can profitably discuss, and they shouldn't have to discuss that."

"Remain calm," said Lucille gently. "After we have settled the affairs of a world—we'll see. You were saying?"

"From the narcotic point of view this poison is negligible. The affects aren't serious and could be treated either by an antidote or by an emetic. The plant poison is mainly corrosive and irritant—effects, dry vomiting, wasting, stomach pain and spasms. Though there is some convulsive affect, it isn't serious and only adds to the spasms. In true convulsive poisoning, the patient dies from suffocation or exhaustion. This rarely happens in marlaritis.

"All the same, treatment is almost impossible because there are in effect four poisons working together. We could treat any one of them, but not the lot."

Lucille was suitably impressed. She stopped combing her hair and dropped into the chair. "Throw me one of those little green apples," she said.

"After what I've been saying?" Blake marvelled. He picked up one of the apples, which weren't apples at all but the fruit of the awkwardly-named korolyndench tree, and were thus always called apples.

He held it up. "A betchel can tell if this is safe or not. We can't. And there aren't enough betchels. We've tried colour, weight, X-ray, everything we can think of. But there's only two ways to be sure—the betchel, or analysis which takes far too long."

He threw it to her.

"How does a betchel know?" Lucille demanded.

"I wish," said Blake fervently, "we knew."

"Yes, but you must know what it does. Does it smell? Does it feel? Does it lick? Does it listen? Or does it just look?"

"As far as we can tell, it just looks. And there's absolutely no measurable difference between a plant known to be good and another known to be bad."

"I distrust that word 'measurable,'" said Lucille. "The betchels don't measure. If they just look, all they do is see."

"Hell, Lucille, we've photographed plants, shot X-rays through them, measured every dimension, counted the leaves, compared the colours—"

"I'm glad you counted the leaves and compared the colours. That's the kind of thing a betchel might do. Hasn't anyone ever just looked, the way a betchel does?"

"Naturally, but you're missing the point. If there's some significant differences which the betchel can see, we should be able to measure it with something."

Lucille sighed. "There you go again. You won't even consider the possibility that you might be able to see it—like the betchels."

"But I tell you, Lucille, we've torn these plants apart and never found—"

"The betchels don't have to tear them apart."

Not for the first time in human social history, feminine logic made a man so mad he could spit.

"Lucille," Blake said, holding himself rigidly in control, "you're welcome to go out and look at a few million plants if you like. But I can tell you here and now that you won't find the slightest—"

Without warning Lucille keeled over.

Blake was at her side in an instant, praying that she'd fainted, that it was fever, vertigo, anything but marlaritis. When he saw her writhing and jerking, however, his prayers changed.

Make her one of the ones that get better.

Though conscious, Lucille couldn't speak. She writhed and twisted, but unlike most people she had the sense not to claw at her stomach.

This time Blake didn't have to loosen any clothing. It was the first time he had seen a marlaritis victim so nearly naked, and it was a shocking sight. The flesh rippled, crept, knotted

and bubbled as if some disgusting creature inside were trying to force its way out.

He heard moaning and had taken it for granted that it came from Lucille. Now he realized it came from him.

From the first moment a dreadful recollection had burned like a pyre in his mind—once he had wished that Lucille would get marlaritis, just to cut her down to size.

He hadn't really meant it, even then. But he had thought it. And it had happened.

Once more Blake crossed the field to the radio building and dropped a message in front of Smith. Smith took his time about looking at it. The fact that Blake had taken his girl away from him hadn't made Smith love Blake any more.

When he did look down at the message, his eyes popped. It was the evacuation order.

"You can't send this !" he protested.

"No," Blake agreed. "But I can give it to you and you'll send it."

"I won't !" said Smith mutinously. "That's not going out from this station, mister."

Blake waited.

"I won't send it," Smith repeated stubbornly. "You might as well take it away. It not going out."

"Right," said Blake. "Send this instead. On my own responsibility I have refused to send an urgent message from the Habitability Consul. I am not going to send it. Signed, Tom Smith."

There was a long pause. "Go on," said Blake. "I'm waiting."

"I won't send it," said Smith obstinately.

Blake picked up the phone. "Stephen Blake," he said. "Get me Romney."

In the ensuing pause Smith had time, as usual, to realize that he had placed himself in an absolutely impossible position.

He moved uncomfortably. "Give me that message," he said. "If its urgent I'd better get it out right away."

Blake, also as usual, showed no sign of triumph. He used the call to Romney, when it came through, to tell him of his decision.

Romney was silent for a moment. Then he burst out : "You're only doing this because your girl friend's dying."

"She's not dying, I hope," said Blake. "But as you know very well, Romney, I'd make up my mind on this long ago. I haven't been looking for an excuse to clear the planet, I've been searching desperately for any excuse *not* to do it. You did a good job on the accident record. If only you or somebody else could do as good a job on marlaritis—"

"Give us another few weeks."

"You'll have months yet. It'll be a long time before we're all evacuated, and you and I will be among the last to go. But the first ships will be here in two weeks. Make the arrangements, will you?"

He put down the phone. Smith was staring. "Lucille? Lucille has marlaritis?"

Blake nodded.

Smith turned away dully. "Maybe you're right," he muttered. "Maybe you're right. This is a hellish planet."

Blake saw that he had taken Lucille's illness very much as Romney had believed Blake had. It was hard to blame him.

Blake went straight to the hospital. He avoided Dr. Collins, who knew how he felt about Lucille and wasn't unsympathetic, but couldn't help going round with an I-told-you-so expression on his face.

Lucille, though in considerable pain (with marlaritis that went without saying) was conscious.

"I'm not going to die," she said. "People die when they give up, and I'm not going to give up. I'm going to keep you to your promise to make an honest woman of me, Steve."

Blake pressed her hand. There was something in what she said. In his own two attacks, he had wanted to die but hadn't given in to it. He had fought to live. And thinking over the people who had survived marlaritis and the people who had died, it seemed to him that the people who had lived had been the fighters.

But that only made marlaritis like everything else. You couldn't start forming theories on a thing like that, though the temptation was there. The temptation was always there.

"Don't evacuate Marlar," Lucille whispered, "just because I'm here and can't talk you out of it."

"I must," Blake said. He took a deep, shuddering breath. "I've just realized the horror of this place. Everybody should have seen it long ago. There's riches for everybody—money, a high standard of living, every material benefit. But to enjoy

those things, we have to subject those we love to . . ." He looked down at her and shuddered.

"Could we bring up children here?" he demanded. "Knowing the chances are that sooner or later they'll die in agony? If we had three children, one of them would certainly die of marlaritis, eventually. Of the five of us, two would die. Could we do it? Should we do it?"

He knew that this was hardly the kind of thing to be saying to a girl who was perhaps dying of marlaritis herself. But he also knew Lucille. Nothing in this would knock the spirit out of her.

"That's what an HC should consider," he said. "What I should have known a long time ago. Get better, Lucille, and I'll take you away from here."

"No," gasped Lucille. "I'll get better, but you won't take me away from here."

"Would you want your children to be brought up here, Lucille? Do you?"

She was too weak to say much. "I'll get better first. Then I'll argue with you."

s i x

When it became known, as it did almost at once, that Blake had finally ordered evacuation, anger set the world aflame. He had expected this and took care not to subject himself to possible mob violence.

Stones were thrown through the window of the ward in which Lucille was fighting for her life. At first this put Blake in a blind fury.

Presently, however, he realized that it was the best thing that could have happened. There was nothing more likely to make Lucille fight for her life.

Then, unexpectedly, Romney made a public statement. In essence it was what Blake had said to him and Bachelor. Blake was surprised and touched. Asked to confirm the statement, Bachelor said reluctantly yes, he did think Blake had said something like that, but no doubt he was only grandstanding.

The trouble stopped abruptly.

"You see," Lucille whispered on another of his frequent visits to the hospital, "it's just as I told you. You're angry, defensive, expecting to be hurt before you are. If you took

people more into your confidence, you wouldn't have half so much trouble."

There was one day when an important conference on evacuation plans was held. Blake, of course, had to be there—in fact, he had called the meeting. But a message from the hospital sent him running from the room without as much as an apology.

He heard later what happened then. Bachelor raised his eyebrows and said smoothly :

"I think we could impeach Blake for leaving the conference like that. We could try, anyway. We could certainly make things very awkward for him, gentlemen, couldn't we?"

"Don't be a bloody fool," said Romney roughly.

At the hospital there was, naturally, nothing Blake could do.

"She was raving earlier," said Dr. Collins. "Said something about not wanting her children to be cowards."

"It's not a question of being cowards . . ." Blake said automatically, then stopped. "Can I see her?"

"If you like. Blake, that's a wonderful girl. I wouldn't like to be you if you've killed her."

"I haven't killed her," Blake retorted bleakly, "whatever happens. If I'd ordered evacuation the moment I met her, she wouldn't have gone yet. If she does get better, she'll be one of the last to leave Marlar. She'll only leave when she's forced to go."

"Obstinate," said the doctor. "Like you, then. You can go in."

Lucille was half conscious. She knew him, but didn't seem to know whether he'd just arrived or had been there all the time.

"When I had marlaritis," Blake whispered, "I used to think of my dream girl. Only I didn't know her then, so it was hard for me. If it happened now—"

Lucille half laughed, half choked. "You don't think you're my dream boy, do you?" she murmured derisively. "I could have a better dream than you any time."

But she held his hand tightly.

After that she didn't speak for two hours. It seemed like days. Then Dr. Collins came in. "If she's still alive, I guess she's going to stay alive," he said.

"Thank you, doctor," Blake whispered.

"You can thank me only one way. Hurry up the evacuation. She won't die, and you didn't die, but do you know how many I've watched die? Too many."

"Take him away," Lucille whispered. "I want to sleep. I can have a better dream than him any time."

By the time the first two ships arrived, Lucille was up and able to watch them come in to land on the field beside the Bedbug building. She was shockingly thin, and sensitive about it. Told to get plenty of sun, she had done all her sunbathing in private at first, not even letting Blake see her. But since he had told her, quite sincerely, that she looked lovelier than ever, she had started to sunbathe in Blake's little garden, her red and white swimsuit rather loose on her pale, thin body.

Blake stood beside her as the ships landed and they saw Romney go out to meet the captain of the first.

"Beaten," said Lucille bitterly.

"I don't feel it that way."

"I do."

There was quite a crowd on the field now. Romney and the captain started to walk towards Blake.

"Throw me that robe, quick!" said Lucille.

"Why? You look wonderful."

"I look like a particularly unprepossessing beanpole. Give me that robe!"

She wrapped herself in it. As the captain and Romney approached, a squall of wind and rain soaked them without touching Blake and Lucille. Blake couldn't help smiling at the contrast between Romney, who didn't even notice it, and the captain, who jumped as if he'd been shot.

"Send them back," said Lucille urgently.

"Darling, I can't do a thing like that."

Lucille began to kick at a paulia plant. She paused, thinking, then bent and hauled it from the ground.

"Even now," she said, "if we could find out what the betchels see, you could call off the evacuation."

Blake shrugged but didn't answer.

"If I half kill it," said Lucille, "it'll go poisonous?"

"Probably," Blake said. For no good reason he felt very tired.

Lucille dropped the paulia, stamped on it, crushed it with her sharp-heeled sandals, and tore away some of its leaves.

Romney and the captain came up. "This is Captain Thackeray, Blake," said Romney. "Stephen Blake, HC. And Miss Horrocks."

Lucille glanced up briefly from the paulia plant she was torturing. "Hi," she said.

As Blake shook hands with Thackeray, the captain's eyes kept straying to Lucille. She lifted up the plant again, whirled it round her head and dashed it on a stone. Then she stamped on it again.

"Here, I say, steady," objected the captain. It was only a plant, but this brutality seemed needless to him. What made it worse was that between every assault the plant bravely struggled to root itself and drag itself upright. It was almost like seeing a dog being tortured to death.

Lucille looked up again. "What I'm doing to it is nothing to what it did to me," she said grimly, and tore off some more leaves. "Steve, get your betchel, will you?"

Blake went inside. Abandoned so casually by the HC, Thackeray turned a resentful glance from Lucille to Romney and said: "Well, I must say . . . I didn't come here to be treated like a small child who was in the way."

"Where do you usually go?" Lucille asked.

Thackeray might have exploded, but as he looked back at Lucille she smiled at him, and things seemed suddenly very different.

Leaving the paulia to root itself thankfully, Lucille came across to the captain. "Pleased to meet you, Captain Thackeray," she said. "Do sit down."

"I guess I'd better take the captain to my office," said Romney.

But since Lucille had smiled at him, the captain was prepared to think better of her. He had also noticed how pretty she was, and found himself extremely curious about what her figure was like when it wasn't wrapped in a shapeless robe.

"Been sunbathing?" he said pleasantly. "The weather here seems a little uncertain."

"A little," Lucille admitted.

"You don't need to stop for me," said the captain.

"You mean you want to see how I look in a bathing suit?" said Lucille. "Be my guest."

She held open her robe. "Of course, I'm very thin," she said chattily. "I nearly died, and that's why Steve wants to

clear the planet. He doesn't like people nearly dying. But he doesn't really mean to evacuate Marlar."

"Oh, really?" said Thackeray, startled, and blinking at Lucille in her red and white two-piece.

"He means it all right," said Romney lugubriously.

Blake came out with the betchel, which was nearly asleep. He smiled apologetically at Captain Thackeray, who didn't notice. He now had eyes only for Lucille.

Lucille took the little animal and turned to the paulia, which, though battered, was now firmly rooted and straight again.

"You want to test it?" said Blake. "It's too soon. It's hardly had time to go poisonous yet."

"I'll try it anyway," said Lucille, and bent to see if the betchel would eat the paulia. The betchel slid from Lucille's grasp and went up to the plant. Instantly it turned away.

"See that?" said Lucille excitedly.

"It was probably bad anyway," said Blake. "Or the betchel isn't hungry. Probably *was* bad. There hasn't been a real storm for days."

Lucille paid no attention. "The betchel went down on the ground," she said. "I was holding it close enough, but it struggled free so that it could see the plant from the ground."

"Betchels always do that," said Blake.

Instantly Lucille dropped flat on her stomach so that she could look at the plant from the same angle as the betchel.

Thackeray gaped.

"Find anything?" asked Blake, amused.

Without replying, Lucille jumped up, found another paulia plant and moved it beside the one the betchel wouldn't touch. Then she lay flat on her stomach again, her chin on the ground.

Quite calmly she announced: "The stem of this one is lighter against the sky."

Romney jumped.

Blake dropped beside her. "Just an accident," he said.

"We've tested everything. We've—"

"I know," said Lucille. "You've X-rayed them, used fluoroscopes on them, measured them and counted the veins. Did you ever look at them the way a betchel looks at them?"

"She may have something, Blake," said Romney excitedly.

"It's a very slight difference," said Blake. "Any two different plants could look—"

Lucille jabbed her forefinger at the two stems. "Is there, or is there not, a difference?" she demanded.

"Yes, but—"

"Has it been investigated?"

Blake sat up. Lucille sat up too, her face not six inches from his. "No, but—" Blake began.

"You don't want it to mean anything," said Lucille accusingly.

"Of course I do. Anyway, even if you're right—how can we make use of this? Suppose the stems of poison plants *are* lighter against the sky. No test we've ever applied has differentiated between poisoned and non-poisoned plants. We can never be sure . . . This might help, might save more lives, but too many people will still die."

Eyes blazing, Lucille stared at him incredulously. "You don't mean . . . Yes, I guess you do. Steve, I know why people on Marlar don't like you. They're quite right. They've sensed the truth all along—that you want to abandon Marlar."

Blake shook his head impatiently. "The old, old story."

"And a true story. Do you know the truth about yourself, Steve? You're too soft. Far too soft to be an HC. I don't know how you ever got to be one. I can tell you this—you'll never be one again. The Settlement Commission will fire you."

Blake tried to speak but she paid no attention.

"Maybe you had to close Penelope VI. I don't believe it, but maybe you did. Maybe you had to close Morion. I guess you were right about one of them. But I *know* you're wrong about Marlar.

"Steve, you should never have been an HC because when anyone dies here you feel you've killed him. When Nancy Taylor died you thought you'd murdered her. If I'd died you'd have told yourself you'd murdered me.

"An HC has to be tough—my father was tough. He knew something you don't seem to know.

"Back on Earth when North and South America were colonized by the English, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the French and the Dutch, they didn't keep records of how long settlers lived, how many were killed, what proportion died of fire and flood and famine and disease and war and Indian arrows. And even if they had, there was no HC who could tell himself *This is all my fault and I ought to stop this*. If there had

been, and he'd been you, America would never have been colonized. It would have been abandoned like Marlar."

Thackeray was staring open-mouthed. Romney had discreetly turned his back and moved some distance away.

"I wonder if you could be right," Blake mused.

"I not only could be, I am! Once before, a way of cutting the risk of marlaritis was found. But it wasn't enough for you. It was progress, inevitable progress in the right direction, but you weren't satisfied. People were still dying. You were still murdering scores of men and women every day.

"Now it looks like we've found something else. Something that will cut the danger still further. Progress, inevitable progress. Of course it's still not enough for you. You're still not satisfied. People will still die. You'll still be a murderer every day.

"Steve, can't you realize you're here not to say Marlar is safe, but Marlar *will be* safe—and that you could have said that any time these last few months?"

There was a long pause, during which Lucille thought she had lost out.

Then Blake turned to Thackeray. "Sorry, captain," he said. "I guess we're not going after all."

The Settlement Commission wasn't pleased with Blake. HCs were intended specifically to avoid such situations, not create them. He was told, not once but often, how many million credits his vacillation had cost.

But Romney, who spent days on end dancing with glee, put most of that right. He explained how a last-minute discovery had been made, how the scientists had been put on the right track, and how marlaritis cases were decreasing. He pointed out that Marlar would soon be the richest world in the galaxy, including Earth.

There would always be a few cases of marlaritis. It wasn't the sort of thing which could simply be eliminated. But now that the farmers had a hint of a way to test for poison, progress was certain.

Blake and Lucille, who wasn't yet Mrs. Blake but would be any day now, were out again sunning themselves at the identical spot where history had been made, when a crowd appeared marching along the side of the Bedbug building.

By this time Lucille's dimension once more gave her grounds for quiet satisfaction, and it didn't even cross her mind to put on a robe.

As the crowd formed up it became clear they were a deputation, headed by, of all people, Smith the radio operator.

"I don't say we've always seen eye to eye," Smith began, proving himself no liar, and a cheer went up, "and I don't say we've always liked you. We haven't."

Another cheer went up, a cheer of fulsome agreement.

"But the thing is," said Smith, "we think that if you weren't an HC you'd be all right, and considering Marlar soon won't need an HC we thought maybe you'd resign and stay here. With Mrs. Blake, of course. We like her a lot better than we like you."

Everybody cheered again.

"And just to make sure you do," said Smith, "we've got together and—well, this isn't a poor town. We've taken out a pretty big insurance for you both at the best terms we could get, which weren't as good as they used to be, and it's yours if you stay here."

There was another tremendous cheer.

Blake stood up, his hand on Lucille's shoulder.

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks very much. I hate to spoil this magnificent gesture by telling you we meant to stay here anyway."

They cheered once more.

"But the truth is I've put in a delayed resignation. I remain HC here for the next three years—that's just a formality so long as everybody behaves and doesn't get blown away or fall off the top of buildings . . ."

They cheered that too.

" . . . and that my job passes to Romney and there won't be an HC any more."

That, naturally, raised the biggest cheer yet.

"But remember," said Blake, "if anything I don't like happens in the next three years, I'll close this world in nothing flat. It's what I always wanted to do, as you all know . . ."

When they had gone, Blake and Lucille looked at each other. "Seems to be nothing else to do but look at each other," said Blake.

"If you think that," said Lucille tartly, "I'm going back to that radio operator."

—J. T. McIntosh

If you remember with pleasure John Brunner's "Earth Is But A Star" (Science Fantasy No. 29) which was one of the classic stories of 1958, you will equally enjoy his latest 'journey' into a fantasy world where the battle is between chaos and reason.

IMPRINT OF CHAOS

BY JOHN BRUNNER

o n e

He had many names, but one nature, and this unique nature made him subject to certain laws not binding upon ordinary persons. In a compensatory fashion, he was also free from certain other laws more commonly in force.

Still, there was nothing to choose as regards rigidity between his particular set of laws and those others. And one rule by which he had very strictly to abide was that at set seasons he should overlook that portion of the All which had been allotted to him as his individual responsibility.

Accordingly, on the day after the conjunction of four significant planets in that vicinity, he set forth on a journey which was to be at once the same as and yet different from those many which had preceded it.

It had been ordained that at this time, though not at any other time, he should keep to commonplace roads, and with goodwill enough—he was not the kind to rail against necessity—he so arranged his route that it wound and turned and

curved through all those places where he had responsibility, and ended within a short distance of where it had begun. It ended, to be precise, in the city called Ryovora—that place of all places in his domains where people had their heads screwed on the right way.

He did this with an excellent reason. In Ryovora, at the end of his journey, he could be certain beyond reasonable doubt that he could look on his work and feel pleased.

Therefore, on a sunny morning when there were birds singing and few clouds in a sky filled with the scent of flowers, he began to trudge along a dusty road towards his first destination.

That was a great black city upreared around a high tower, which was called by its inhabitants Acromel, the place where honey itself was bitter. It was sometimes a cause of mild astonishment—even to him of the many names and the single nature—that this most difficult of cities should be located within a few hours' walking of Ryovora. Nonetheless . . .

Before him, the road began to zig-zag on the slopes of a hill, between grey-leaved bushes. A local wind raised dust-devils among the bushes and stamped out the footprints of those who had gone before. It was under that hill, he remembered, that he had incarcerated Laprivan of the Yellow Eyes, to whom memories of yesterday were hateful; some small power remained to Laprivan, and he perforce had to use it to wipe yesterday's traces away.

He took his staff in his hand—it was made of light, curdled with a number of interesting forces—and rapped once on an outcrop of bare rock at the side of the pathway. "Laprivan!" he cried. "Laprivan of the Yellow Eyes!"

And the dust-devils ceased their whirling. Resentfully, they sank back to earth, so that the dust of which they were composed again covered the bared roots of the grey-leaved bushes. Most travellers assumed that the leaves were grey from the dust of passage, or from their nature; it was not so.

Laprivan heaved in his underground prison, and the road shook. Cracks wide enough to have swallowed a farm-cart appeared in its surface. From them, a great voice boomed.

"What do you want with me, today of all days? Have you not had enough even now of tormenting me?"

"I do not torment you," was the calm reply. "It is your memory that torments you."

"Leave me be, then," said the great voice sullenly. "Let me go on wiping away that memory."

"As you wish, so be it," the traveller answered, and gestured with his staff. The cracks in the road closed again; the dust-devils re-formed, and when he looked back from the crest of the hill his footsteps had already been expunged.

The road wound on, empty, towards Acromel. For some distance before it actually reached the city it ran contiguous with the river called Metamorphia, a fact known to rather few people, because although it seemed that this was the same river that poured in under the high black battlements of the city, it was not the same, for good and sufficient cause. It was the nature of the river Metamorphia to change the nature of things, and consequently it changed its own nature after flowing a certain distance.

He paused on a stone wall overlooking the dark stream, and meditatively regarded objects that floated past. Some of them had been fishes, perhaps; others were detritus of the banks—leaves, branches, stones. Those which had been stones continued to float, of course; those which had been of a floating nature sank.

He broke a piece of stone from the crumbling parapet of the wall, and cast it down. The change it underwent was not altogether pleasant to witness.

He raised his eyes after a while, and saw that there was a girl on the other bank, who had come forward out of a clump of trees while he was sunk in contemplation. She was extremely beautiful. Moreover, she had taken no pains to hide that fact, for she was dressed exclusively in her long, lovely hair.

"You are also aware of the nature of the river," she said after regarding him for a while.

"I am aware that the nature of the river is to change the nature of things, and that consequently it changes its own nature."

"Come down with me, then, and bathe in it," said the girl.

"Why should you wish your nature changed? You are beautiful."

"I am beautiful!" cried the girl passionately. "But I am without sense!"

"Then you are Lorega of Acromel, and your fame has spread far."

"I am Lorega of Acromel, as you say." She fixed him with her honey-coloured eyes, and shrugged the garb of her hair more closely around her. "And how do men call you?"

"I have many names, and one nature. You may call me Mazda, or anything you please."

"Why have you no single name, if as you claim you have but one nature?"

"The name matters little if the nature does not change."

She laughed scornfully. "You speak in empty but resounding phrases, Mazda! If your nature is unchangeable, then let me see you descend into the water of this river!"

"I did not say that," said the traveller peaceably. "I did not say my nature was unchangeable."

"Then you are a coward. Nonetheless, come down with me and bathe in this river."

"I shall not. And it would be well for you to think on this, Lorega of Acromel: that if you are without sense, your intention to bathe in Metamorphia and thus change your nature is also without sense."

"That is too deep for me," said Lorega unhappily, and a tear stole down her satiny cheek. "I cannot reason as wise persons do. Therefore let me change my nature!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller. And at that moment a great piece of the bank detached itself and fell with a huge splashing in to the water. A wave of this water soaked Lorega from head to foot, and she underwent, as did the earth of the bank the moment it entered the river, changes.

Thoughtfully, the traveller turned to continue his journey towards Acromel. Behind him, the welkin rang with the miserable cries of what had formerly been Lorega. But he was bound by certain laws. He did not look back.

Before the huge black gate of the city, which was a hundred feet high and a hundred feet wide, two men in shabby clothes were fighting with quarterstaves. The traveller leaned on his own staff and watched them batter at each other for fully a quarter of an hour before they both found themselves too weak to continue, and had to stand panting and glaring at one another to recover their breath.

"What is the quarrel between you?" said the traveller then.

"Little man in black, it concerns us, not you," said the nearer of the two. "Go your way in peace."

"Wait!" said the other. "Ask him first if he likewise is bent on the same errand!"

"A good point!" said the first, and raised his great cudgel menacingly towards the traveller. "Speak, you!"

"First I must know what your errand was, before I can say if mine is the same, or not," the traveller pointed out.

"A good point," said the first, who threatened him. "Know that I am Ripil of the village called Masergon—"

"And I," interrupted the other, "am Tolex of the village called Wyve. Last week I set forth from my father's house, he having six other sons older than I—"

"As did I!" Ripil broke in. "Exactly as did I! I am Ripil, stranger—you will have good cause to remember that name."

"All men will!" said Tolex contemptuously. "They will remember your name to laugh at it, and when boys scribble it on walls with charcoal old women will spit on the ground before the wall!"

Ripil scowled at him. "Booby! Possessed of unbelievable effrontery! Go your way before it is too late, and the people of this city hang you in chains before the altar!"

"Your errand, then," said the traveller, just in time to forestall a renewal of the fighting.

Tolex gave him a huge but humourless grin. "Why, it's all so simple! This idiot called Ripil came hither thinking to make his fortune, dethrone Duke Vaul, and claim the hand of Lorega of Acromel—as though a dunderhead village boy could do more than *dream* of such glories."

"And your own errand?"

"Why, I have come to make my fortune and be chosen as heir to Duke Vaul, when naturally *I* shall be given Lorega's hand."

And the traveller, not unexpectedly, burst out laughing. In a moment, Tolex began to laugh also, thinking that it was Ripil's foolishness which had caused the joke, and Ripil, his face black like a storm-cloud, caught up his quarterstaff and began to belabour him anew.

The traveller left them to it, and went forward into the city.

t w o

In this city called Acromel there was a temple, crowning the black tower about which the city clustered like a single onyx on a pillar of agate. In this temple, before the red idol of the god Lacrovas-Pellidin-Agshad-Agshad, Duke Vault yawned behind his hand.

"Take *her*," he said to the chief priest, nodding his large black-bearded head to his left. The priest bowed to the hard slippery floor and signalled his minions. In a moment the consort who had shared Vault's life for fifteen years, and until that moment had also shared his throne, was hanging from the gallows in front of the altar, her life's blood trickling on Agshad's hands outstretched like a cup to receive it.

And still that was not enough.

Duke Vault knitted his brows until his forehead was creased like a field trenched to grow vegetables, and drummed with his thick fingers on the arm of his ebony chair. He looked at the idol.

This way, he saw Agshad, mouth open, eyes closed, hands outstretched and cupped with blood filling them. On the left, Pellidin, who shared Agshad's body but not his head or his limbs, was portrayed wringing the life from three persons of indeterminate sex—indeterminate, because Pellidin's vast hand had compressed their three bodies into a gelatinous mess and left only their legs and arms sticking out like the legs of a beetle. On the right, Lacrovas held a sword in his two hands, and behind, Agshad—the second Agshad—kept his hands clasped together in an attitude of devotion. Duke Vault always preferred to have his throne placed on this side of Agshad.

Below the dais on which his throne was set, priests and acolytes by the hundred, including sacrificers, men expert in every art of human butchery, wove their lines of movement into the correct magical patterns. Their chanting ascended eerily towards the domed roof of the temple, along with the stink of candles made from the fat of those who had hung earlier in the chains before the altar.

But if even his own consort did not suffice, what would?

On impulse, Duke Vault signalled to the second chief priest, and pointed a finger at the chief priest. "Take *him*," he said.

And that was no good, either.

Accordingly, he sent out the temple guard into the city at half an hour past noon of that day, and the guardsmen set about gathering the citizens into the yard before the temple. If it wasn't a matter of quality, reasoned Duke Vault, then it might perhaps be a matter of quantity. The second priest—now, of course, the chief priest by right of succession—had been consulted, and had given it as his considered opinion that a hundred all at once must have the desired effect. Duke Vault, to be on the safe side, had ordained that a thousand should be brought to the temple, and had set carpenters and metalsmiths to work on the chain-jingling gallows to accommodate them.

The temple guardsmen worked with a will, all the better because they feared the lot might fall on them when Duke Vault had used up his supply of ordinary citizens. Among those whom they brought was a small man in black clothing, who seemed to be consumed with uncontrollable laughter.

His laughter, in fact, was so great, that it became infectious. and Duke Vault noticed it as he looked down from his ebony throne across the floor of the temple. He rose to his feet with a bellow.

"Who is that idiot who laughs in the temple?" his bull voice rang out. "This is a serious matter, fellow! Chief priest, fetch him forth and make him stand before me."

In a little while the black-clad traveller was brought, and made to stand on the floor beneath the dais. He bowed willingly enough when the rough hand of a guardsman struck him behind the head, but the merry twinkle did not go from his eyes, and this peculiarity struck Duke Vault at once.

He began to muse about the possibility of sacrificing one who did not take the Quadruple God seriously, and after a while spoke through the tangle of his beard.

"How do men call you, foolish one?" he boomed.

"I have many names, but one nature."

"And are you laughing at these holy matters?"

"No."

"Then are you laughing at me?" thundered the Duke, heaving himself forward on his throne so that the boards of the dais creaked and squealed. His eyes flashed terribly.

"No! I laugh at the foolishness of mankind," said the black-clad traveller.

"And in what way is this foolishness manifest?"

"In every way," the small man said, and told the story of Tolex and Ripil, fighting before the gate of the city.

But Duke Vault did not find this funny at all. He commanded that the temple guard should at once go in search of these two, and fumed while they were brought. When they arrived, however, it was as corpses that they were laid on the temple floor.

"Mighty Duke," said the guardsmen respectfully, bowing their heads as one, and then let their spokesman continue.

"We found these two clasped dying in each other's arms. Each bore one bloody cudgel; each has a broken skull."

"Throw them in to the river," said Duke Vault curtly, and resumed converse with the black-clad traveller.

"Your arrogate to yourself the right to laugh at man's foolishness," he said, and gave a wicked grin. "Then tell me this: are you yourself so wise?"

"Alas, yes," said the traveller. "I have but one nature."

"Then you can do what all my wisest men have failed to do," the Duke said triumphantly. "See you this idol?"

"I could hardly fail to see it. It is a considerable work of—art."

"It is said that a way exists to endow it with life, and that it will set forth to lay waste the enemies of this city. In every way we have tried to bestow life on it; we have given it blood, which is life, from every kind and class of person. Even my consort, who but a few minutes ago sat on this throne at my side, now hangs with her throat gashed on that chain-jingling gallows before the altar. And still the idol will not come to life. We need it, for our enemies are abroad in every corner of the land; from Ryovora to the ends of the earth, they plot our downfall and destruction."

"Some of what you say is true," nodded the traveller.

"Some? Only some? What then is false? Tell me, and it had better be the truth, or else you shall go to join that stupid chief priest who finally tired my patience! You can see what became of him!"

The traveller glanced up and nodded. It was perfectly obvious, what with the second mouth—the red-oozing one—the priest now had in his throat.

"Well, first of all," he said, "there *is* a way to bring the idol to life. And second, yes, it will then bring down the

enemies of the city. But third, they do not hide in far corners of the land. They are here in the city."

"Say you so?" Duke Vault frowned. "You may very well be right, for, knowing what a powerful weapon we wield against them—or will wield, when the idol comes to life—they may well be trying to interfere with our experiments. Good! Go on!"

"Do you wish me to bring the idol to life?"

"Can you do that? Then do it! But remember—if you fail, a worse fate awaits you than my chief priest suffered!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller wearily. All the laughter had gone out of him. With his staff he made a single pass in the air before the altar, and the idol moved.

Agshad in the attitude of devotion did not open his clasped hands. But Lacrovas swung his sword, and Duke Vault's bearded head sprang from his shoulders. Pellidin let fall the three crushed persons from his hand and seized the headless body. That he crushed instead, and the cupped hands of Agshad in the attitude of accepting sacrifice filled with the blood of the Duke, squeezed forth like juice from a ripe fruit.

And after that the idol stepped down from the altar and began to stamp on the priests.

Thoughtfully, having made his escape during the confusion, the traveller took to the road again.

Perhaps there would be nothing worse during this journey than what he had seen in Acromel. Perhaps there would be something a million times worse. It was to establish that that he undertook his journeyings.

In Kanish-Kulya they were fighting a war, and each side was breathing threatenings and slaughter against the other.

"Oh that fire would descend from heaven and eat up our enemies!" cried the Kanishmen.

"Oh that the earth would open and swallow up our enemies!" cried the Kulyamen.

"As you wish," said the traveller, "so be it."

He tapped the ground with his staff, and Fegrim who was pent in a volcano answered that tapping and heaved mightily. Afterwards, when the country was beginning to sprout again—for lava makes fertile soil—men dug up bones and skulls as they prepared the ground for planting.

On the shores of Lake Taxhling, men sat around their canoes swapping lies while they waited for a particular

favourable star to ascend above the horizon. One lied better than all the rest.

But he lied not as his companions lied—to pass the time, to amuse each other harmlessly. He lied to feed a consuming vanity hungrier than all the bellies of all the people in the villages along the shore of Lake Taxhling, who waited day in, day out, with inexhaustible patience for their menfolk to return with their catch.

Said the braggart, "If only I could meet with such another fish as I caught single-handed in Lake Moroho when I was a stripling of fifteen! *Then* you would see the fisherman's art! Alas, there are only piddling fish in Lake Taxhling."

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller, who had accepted the offer of food by their fire. And the next dawn the braggart came home screaming with excitement about the great fish he had caught, as great as the one he had taken in Lake Moroho. His companions crowded round to see it—and they laughed till the mountains rang, because it was smaller than some others they themselves had taken during the night.

"I do not wish him to love me for my beauty or my riches," said the haughty child of a rich merchant in the city called Barbizond, where there was always a rainbow in the sky owing to the presence of a bright being chained inside a thundercloud with fetters of lightning. The girl was beautiful, and rich, and inordinately proud.

"No!" she continually declaimed, discarding suitor after suitor. "I wish to be loved for myself, for my nature!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveller, who had come in the guise of a pilgrim to one of the jousts held for this lady to view her possible future husbands. Twenty-one men had died in the lists that afternoon, and she had thrown her glove in the champion's face and gone to supper.

The next time there were jousts announced, no challenger came, and the girl pulled a face and demanded that more heralds go forth. Her father summoned a hundred heralds. The news went abroad. And personable young men said, "Fight for a stuck-up shrew like her? I have better ways of passing the time!"

At length the truth was brought to her, and she became miserable. She had never been happy. She had only thought she was happy. Little by little, her pride evaporated. And one

day, a young man came to her father's house and found that she was a quiet, submissive, pleasant girl, and married her.

And the journey approached its end. The traveller felt a natural relief that nothing untoward had occurred, as he hastened his footsteps towards the goal and climax of the trip—towards Ryovora, where men were noble and clear-sighted, and made no trouble for him. After this city, he could be assured that his duty was fulfilled.

Not that all was well with the world, by any means. There were enchanters, and ogres, and human problems, remaining yet. Still, all those were getting fewer. One by one, the imprints of the original chaos were fading away, like the footsteps of travellers on the road above where Laprivan of the Yellow Eyes was prisoned.

Then, as the golden and silver towers of Ryovora came to view, he saw that an aura surrounded it as of a brewing storm, and his hope and trust in the people of that city melted away.

three

At the city called Barbizond, where he had been but recently, there was likewise that aura around the city. There, however, it was a good thing and pleasant to look upon, coming as it did from the bright being Sardhin, chained in his cloud. Ryovora was free from such disadvantages as elementals and principalities and powers; the people of Ryovora had always been—until now—creatures of hard sense, practicality and rational thought, giving little trouble to the world and investigating its nature with a certain singleness of purpose.

That something had happened to change this—there was a fact to make the very universe shiver in cold anticipation.

The traveller turned aside, frowning, from the track, and instead of pursuing a straight course into the city, he went across a pleasant-seeming meadow in the midst of which was a mist like the mist of early morning, but more dense. When the grey wisps had closed around him entirely, he dissolved one of the forces which curdled the light he used as a staff, and a clear bright beam cut through the opacity. It had barely sheared the mist when a quiet voice spoke to him.

"Since you know where you are, I know who you are. Come into the castle, and be welcome."

The mist lifted, and the traveller went forward into the courtyard of a castle that reared seemingly to heaven, with great towers that almost pierced the sky. Two dragons chained beside the portcullis bowed their heads fawningly to the traveller; four man-like persons whose bodies were of burnished steel came to escort him—one before, one behind, one at each side—through the gateway and across the yard; twenty heralds sounded a blast from a gallery as he ascended the steps towards the chief tower of the castle.

There was a scent of magic in this air. Echoes of half-forgotten cantrips resounded, incredibly faint, from the stone of the walls. Here and there blue light dripped from a projecting cornice; shadows moved with no one to cast them.

Then a door of oak studded with brass swung open on protesting hinges, giving access to a room across which slanted a thick bar of sunlight from a wide-open window. The sunlight fell on the shrivelled mummy of a mandrake. In jars covered with black cloth, ranged on shelves, were twenty homunculi. A brazier burned, giving off a thick, very pleasant smell like warm honey.

From a table on which heavy books were piled that served also as a perch for a sleepy-looking owl, a man rose to greet the traveller, and spoke, inclining his head.

"It is traditional that no one shall pierce the mist with which I protect my privacy save an invited guest or one who has a single nature. And, the universe being what it is, only one—person—has that single nature. I am the enchanter Manus. Be welcome, sir."

The black-clad traveller bent his head in acknowledgment. A chair was placed for him; he sat in it, disposing his cloak comfortably over the arm. The enchanted Manus took from a cupboard a large flask and two mugs; he poured a few drops of sparkling liquid from the flask into mid-air, muttering words which made the walls hum faintly in response. The drops vanished before they reached the floor, and the enchanter gave a nod of satisfaction and filled the two mugs.

"What is your business, sir?" he said, resuming his own seat after having given his visitor one of the mugs.

"There is an aura about Ryovora," said the traveller. "I wish to ascertain what its cause may be before I enter the city."

Manuus nodded thoughtfully, stroking the wispy grey beard that clung at his sharp chin like a wisp of the mist with which he guarded his privacy.

"You will forgive me mentioning the fact," he said in an apologetic tone, "but it is said somewhere in one of these books—a book, moreover, in which I have come to place some trust—that your nature is single, and also that it is part of your nature not to ask questions without answering them."

"That is so. And I see plainly that you put trust in the book of which you speak. The faceless drinker to whom you poured libation a moment ago is referred to only in that one volume."

There was silence between them for a moment, while each **contemplated the other.**

"Ask your question, then," said the traveller at length. "And I may say that the more involved your question, the simpler and more difficult to understand will my answer be."

"And *vice versa*?" suggested Manuus, his old eyes twinkling.

"Exactly."

"Very well, then. Who are you? Note, please, that I do not ask your name. You have many names."

The traveller smiled. "You are a man of understanding," he said. "That is a good question. So I will answer frankly: I am he to whom was entrusted the task of bringing order out of chaos. For that reason, I have but one nature."

"If your nature was such that you demanded honour in full measure with your worth, all the days of my life would not suffice to do you homage," said Manuus seriously. "Ask now what you would know."

"What's the trouble in Ryovora?"

Maliciously, Manuus made his eyes twinkle again. "I am not bound by your laws, sir. Therefore I will answer in the human style—simply, to simple questions. There is dissatisfaction with the order of things as they are."

"Ask again."

"What is the purpose of your task?"

"When all things have but one nature, they will be subsumed into the Original All. Time will stop. This object is desirable."

Manuus looked thoughtfully at the brazier. "Desirable, perhaps—but appallingly dull. Speak again."

"In what particular respect are the citizens of Ryovora dissatisfied?"

Manuus turned the question over and over in his brilliant mind, seeking a way to milk a further chance to question his distinguished visitor from it. He failed.

"They are displeased that they have no gods," he replied.

Three bolts of lightening sheared the clear blue sky beyond the window; three claps of thunder in succession made the room echo, and startled the sleepy owl into giving three little hops across the great book on which he squatted.

The black-clad traveller sat calmly in his chair, sipping from his mug, but on his face a frown was suddenly written. "Ask a third time," he said, not ceasing to frown.

"Why, this is not altogether necessary," said Manuus in high delight. "But I will ask." He cast his eyes around as though seeking inspiration, and finally lit on the right line of inquiry.

"What was there, before things became as they are now?"

"I will show you," said the traveller, and dipped one fingertip into his mug. He drew forth a drop of liquid in which was entrapped a sparkling bubble. "Regard this bubble," he instructed Manuus. "And see . . ."

In those days, the forces were none of them chained. They raged unchecked through every corner and quarter of the cosmos. Here ruled Laprivan of the Yellow Eyes, capricious, whimsical, and when he stared things melted in frightful agony. There a bright being shed radiance, but the radiance was all-consuming, and that which was solid and dull was flashed into fire. At another place, creatures in number one million fought desperately with one another for the possession of a single grain of dust; the fury of their contesting laid waste whole solar systems.

Once—twice—a third time something burgeoned, which had about it a comforting aura of rationality, of predictability; about this aura, time was created from eternity. Time entails memory, memory entails conscience, conscience entails thought for the future, which is itself implied by the existence of time. Twice the forces of utter chaos raged around this focal point, and swallowed it back into non-existence; then the will of Tuprid and Caschalanva, of

Quorril and Lry, and of an infinite number of elemental beings, reigned once more. But none of them was supreme, because in chaos nothing can endure, nothing can be absolute, nothing sure or certain or reliable.

In that age, suns flashed like fires, burning brightly one instant, ashes the next. On planets under a million suns men and those who thought like men struggled to reduce the chaos to order, and when they thought they had most nearly achieved it chance ordained that all their work should go for nothing, absorbed again into the faceless dark.

"That was not right," said the traveller, and squashed the bubble between his fingertips so that it burst.

"I have seen," said Manus with infinite weariness after a long pause. "But I have not understood."

"Man does not understand chaos. That is why man is man, and not of another nature." The traveller blinked at him. "I wish now to pose my last question; do you grant that I have well and sufficiently answered yours?"

"You have only given me another million question to ask," said Manus, shaking his grey head. "But that also, I suppose, is in the nature of mankind. Ask away."

"You have only given me another million questions to you: enchanter, what is your opinion of a god?"

"I do not know what a god is," said the enchanter. "And I doubt that any man knows, though many may think they do."

"Fair enough," said the black-clad traveller, and rose to depart.

"Have you not even one more question to put to me?" suggested the enchanter with a wan smile.

"No," said the traveller.

Manus gave a shrug and rose also. "Then I can only thank you for having graced my dwelling, sir," he said formally. "Few of my colleagues can have had the honour of receiving you personally."

The traveller gave him a hard, forthright look.

"I have many names, but one nature," he said. "Man has one name, and more than two natures. But the essential two are these: that he shall strive to impose order on chaos, and that he shall strive to take advantage of chaos. You, sir, are not a better enchanter for having received me here, but a

worse one—and, I may say, such people as you are often the greatest allies of the powers who were before me.”

“I object, sir,” said Manuus frostily. “Let it not be said that I oppose you.”

“A third element of man’s nature,” said the traveller, “is this: that she shall not understand what he is doing. Good day to you, Manuus.”

The traveller left Manuus deep in thought, with one elbow on a book in front of him, his chin cupped in his hand, his eyes staring vacantly and contemplatively at the owl on his table. The traveller set forward, towards the gold and silver towers of Ryovora, and there went among the populace, asking questions that any man might have put—and indeed, that many men were at that time putting.

Before the houses of the great merchant-enchanters, who conjured the city’s goods from the far corners of the world, he put his questions; in the market square, in the private houses, in the taverns and theatres and laboratories, he put his questions. And when at length he came to stand upon a high silver tower and look forth over the sleeping city at midnight of that same night, he had reached certain definite conclusions.

The people of Ryovora were dissatisfied. They had struggled through centuries, inquiring of the mute cosmos what its nature and what the nature of man might be, and they were left still hungering.

This hunger, they said, would be assuaged if only they had a god, as did the people of Acromel a few miles away. News had come, of course, that the god of Acromel had caused the death of many citizens, and widespread misery, but they assigned that all to Duke Vaul and to his stupidity. “We are sensible people!” they shouted. “We would know how to treat a god!”

The traveller stood looking out over the placid, sleeping city. Moonlight shone on the roofs of glorious buildings, on the river which ran between them, on the bridges and the homes and the wide, fine roads.

He had asked them, “What is the nature of a god?” and they had said confidently, “We have no god, so how can we know? But if we had one—ah, then we should know!”

The traveller stood wrapped in thought for a long time. At last a quirk of a smile twisted his mouth upwards, and he

put out his hand over the city and said, "As you wish, so be it!"

Then, his task for the moment being accomplished, he departed.

four

To park a car while one goes for a walk in the woods is not uncommon. To return and find that the car is no longer there is not unprecedented. But to return and find that the road itself, on which the car was parked, has likewise vanished, is a different matter again.

Yet to a man who rules himself by the straightforward logic of common sense, this is not an insuperable problem. Bernard Brown was one such, and it was to him that this improbable event occurred.

"Well!" he said, looking at the indisputably grassy surface of the narrow ride between two high hedges where to the best of his recollection—and his memory was a good one—there had shortly before been a tarmac highway. "Well!" he said again, and since there was no obvious alternative sat down on a rock covered with moss and smoked a cigarette in a philosophical manner.

However, no one came by who might enlighten him on the whereabouts of his car, and when the cigarette had reduced to a stub, he dropped it in the grass, ground it out with his foot, and began to walk along the lane between the hedges.

By the straightforward logic of common sense, this was entirely improper; therefore he must have missed his way in the pleasant summer woods, and have returned to the road at the wrong point.

He strolled along jauntily enough, not much worried by the turn of affairs, and whistled as he went. Occasionally the hedges on either side parted after he had gone by, and eyes studied him thoughtfully, but since he did not see them he was not troubled by them.

At length the hedges ended, and with them the trees of the wood, and he emerged on to a rutted track between two ploughed fields. On the near side of one of these fields a man with a kerchief tied round his neck and his legs soiled to the knee with earth was backing up a large and obstreperous horse, harnessed to a cart whose contents were indeterminate but stank incredibly. Politely ignoring the smell, he spoke to the man directly.

"Excuse me—can you tell me the way back to the London road?"

The man considered for a moment. Then he spat in the earth where it was new-turned by his horse's enormous feet, and said bluntly, "No."

Well, that was a fair enough answer. Bernard Brown shrugged and walked on, not yet seriously perturbed.

Again the road passed between hedges, and began to wind so that at any one moment only twenty paces of it before and twenty behind were in clear view. From around a bend ahead a voice could be heard raised in song. The voice was of an indeterminate quality, neither altogether male nor altogether female, and shrilled occasionally on the high notes with a shiver-provoking acidity.

Shortly, the singer came into view. He was a young man, with very yellow hair cut short around his head, and he rode negligently on a gaily caparisoned horse that moved its head in time with the beat of its master's song. His attire was extraordinary, for he wore a shirt of red and yellow and loose breeches of bright green, the colour of a sour apple. He accompanied his singing on a small plucked instrument, the strings of which chirruped like birds.

When he caught sight of Bernard Brown, he stopped singing, let his instrument fall on a baldric to his side, and told his horse to stop. Then he leaned one elbow on the pommel of his saddle and fixed the stranger with bright hard eyes.

"Good morrow, friend," he said with a light tone. "And what are you doing here?"

"I'm trying to find my way back to the London road," said Bernard Brown, lifting his eyebrows in astonishment at the young man's appearance.

"There is no road like that near here," said the young man, and shook his head sorrowfully. "I know that well, for all the roads here are mine."

"Now this is all very well," said Bernard, and gave a smile to show that he was party to the joke. "But while it may amuse you to parade around in this way, it doesn't help me. I've lost my car somehow, through taking a wrong turning in the woods, and I need directions."

The young man drew himself upright and urged his horse forward—and it could be seen now that this was not a young man riding a horse, nor was there in fact a horse being ridden

by a young man, but some sort of confusion of the two, in that the young man's legs were not separated at all from the sides of his mount. They ended in fleshy stalks, uniting with the belly of that part of the composite animal resembling a horse.

"This is extraordinary!" said Bernard to himself, but being mannerly forebore to remark on the combination.

The young man gave him a hard stare, his hand falling to a sharp sword beside his right thigh. "Who are you?" he demanded. "And where are you from, that you do not recognise me?"

Nettled, Bernard rejoined, "Unless you had taken part in a Christmas circus, or been exhibited at the Zoo, I would not presume to recognise you!"

The horse-head and the man-head together reared back in appalled amazement, and the bright sword whined through the air. Discreetly, feeling he had to do with a creature whose mind was as abnormal as its body, Bernard had already stepped out of range when the blade flashed by.

"I am Jorkas!" howled the young man. "Now do you still say you do not know me?"

Alarmed at the composite creature's behaviour, Bernard replied in a tone as civil as could be expected after the attack with the sword, "No, sir, I do not know you, and I may say that your actions give me little cause to wish we had encountered each other earlier."

The man-face of the creature contorted with unbelievable rage, and the sword swung high for a second blow as the horse-body danced three steps towards Bernard. Bernard was on the point of making an inglorious—and probably ill-fated—retreat, when a sudden ringing noise indicated that the blade had struck something very resistant in its downward passage. Indeed, the man-creature was shaking its sword-arm as though it had been numbed all the way to the shoulder.

The thing the sword had struck was a glittering staff, held in the firm grip of a black-clad man who had somehow contrived to approach the two of them without being noticed. This man was now standing, leaning on the staff, and staring at Jorkas with a wry expression.

Jorkas shrugged, sheathed the sword, and took up his instrument again. His horse-legs bore him cantering away

from the lane, and when he was out of sight around the bend his counter-tenor voice was again heard raised in song.

"Thank you, sir," said Bernard, wiping his face and not greatly surprised to find he had been sweating tremendously. "I must say I wasn't expecting to find anything like that in this quiet lane."

The black-clad man smiled, a faraway look in his eyes. "I cannot give you much advice," he said judiciously. "But if you expect both nothing and everything, then you will do well."

"That sounds reasonable," nodded Bernard. "But"—and he pulled his jacket forward by the lapels to settle it more comfortably around his shoulders—"I would far rather know what to expect. Tell me, who or what was that amazing freak?"

"He bears the imprint of chaos, does he not?" said the man in black. "He is left over, so to speak. He is fairly harmless; things have by-passed him, and his power is now small."

It was more the matter-of-fact tone of the other's voice than what he put into words which began now to raise creeping sensations of alarm on Bernard's nape. He said, "But who is he? Has he escaped from some—some fantastic zoo?"

"He has rather endured from a period of absolute confusion," was the reply, which though apparently meaningful served not at all to lessen Bernard's puzzlement. He decided at length to let it pass.

"Can you, then, tell me where the London road lies?" he ventured.

"I can," said the other, and then chuckled. "But it would be of small help to you, since you could not get to it from here. No, listen to me, and I will give you valuable directions, which will eventually bring you where you wish to be."

Since that was the best the black-clad man was willing to offer, Bernard had perforce to nod his acceptance.

"Go forward from here," said his mentor, "until you come to three twisted alder-trees standing alone in a meadow. You will recognise them easily enough. Stand before them and bow your head three times, and then take the path around them. In a little while it will bring you to a city. And whatever you do, do *not* speak with a woman in clothing the colour of blood. Otherwise I cannot answer for the consequences."

"What nonsense!" thought Bernard to himself. But since he had no choice, he thanked the other civilly and went on circumspectly down the lane.

The three alder-trees poked up, white and gnarled, from the grass of the meadow, like the fingers of a skeleton. Bernard hesitated, looking about him. He felt foolish to be going to do what he had been advised to do. Still, no one was watching him—as far as he could see—and in this peculiar district, wherever it might be, the people appeared to be either abnormal or lunatic or both.

He could see no sign at all of a road from here, moreover. And unless he did as he was told, he would have to go back to the place where he had met Jorkas. This was a prospect for which he had no stomach. Accordingly, he bowed his head three times, and was much surprised to find that he was standing on a clearly-defined path. Which, he likewise noticed, led nowhere except *around* the three alders.

Well, the black-clad man had said he should take the path which leads around them. He turned to his left and walked resolutely along the circular path, hopeful of getting somewhere eventually.

At his third turn, when he was feeling truly embarrassed at his own silliness, he looked towards the alder-trees again and saw a very beautiful woman standing among them. She had a face of the most perfect oval shape, skin like mother-of-pearl, and hair blacker than midnight. But she was gowned from shoulders to ankles in a dress that was red like blood.

She spoke to him in a musical voice, sarcastically. "And where do you think you're going, my foolish friend? Did no one ever tell you that walking around in circles is a waste of time? Why not go forward? See!"

She raised her right arm, on which golden bracelets jangled, and when Bernard followed the indicated direction he saw a city clustered around a black enormous tower, the top of which resembled an onyx and the shaft of which resembled a gate.

A strange sort of city! But at least a city, and not a stretch of deserted countryside. He was half-minded to make hastily towards it, and yet felt a strange foreboding. There was an air about that black city . . .

He spoke to the air, to himself, not to the woman in red, and said, "The man who saved me from Jorkas advised me not to speak with a woman in a dress the colour of blood. I

assume this advice extends to not following any suggestion she may make to me." Doggedly he continued his circular progress, while the woman's laughter tinkled irritatingly in his ears, and was rewarded on his next circuit to see that she had gone. Somewhere. Somehow.

Moreover, another city was in sight, and this was not so foreboding. Its towers were of gold and silver, and although an aura hung around it like the presence of an approaching thunderstorm, it still seemed a comparatively familiar and inviting place.

"There, perhaps," reasoned Bernard, "I may escape from this half-insane conglomeration of cryptic non-meaningful remarks, and may even find my way to a place where they know how I can get home."

He struck out across the meadow, and shortly came to a good though dusty road, which brought him straight towards the city with the gold and silver towers. But the atmosphere grew more and more oppressive as he neared it, and he had to whistle to keep up his spirits while he thrust the road behind with feet that now began to ache more than a little.

"So!" said the enchanter Manuus, leaning back in his chair with a chuckle. "So!" he said again, dropping the cover—made of bat's skin as fine and soft as silk—over his scrying glass. "Well, well, well, well, well!"

five

At the head of the council table—which, because the weather was oppressive, he had caused to be set out under the sycamore trees in the Moth Gardens—the Margrave of Ryovora sat, frowning terribly.

Before him, the table stretched almost a hundred feet, in sections that were joined so cleverly the over-arching trees could admire their reflections intact in the polished top. Nothing spoiled the perfection of this table, except the purplish sheen it had acquired from the heavy close air now filling the city.

To right and left of him, ranked in their chairs, sat the nobility of Ryovora, men and women of great individual distinction—the merchant-enchanters, the persons of inquiring mind, the advisers, the thinkers, the creators, all those to whom this city owed its fame and reputation.

The Margrave spoke, not looking at those who listened. "Tell us what has taken place in your quarter of the town, Petrovic."

Petrovic, a dry little man with a withered face like an old apple, coughed apologetically and said, "There are omens. I have cast runes to ascertain their meaning. They have no known meaning. Milk has been soured in the pan four mornings running in my quarter of the town."

"And Ruman?"

Ruman was a man built like an oak-tree, whose thick gnarled hands were twisting restlessly in his lap. He said, "I have slaughtered animals to divine what may be read in their entrails. I agree with Petrovic—these things have no known significance. But two springs under the wall of the city, which have not failed in more centuries than we can discover, are dry this morning."

"And Gostala?"

Gostala was a woman with a queenly bosom and a queenly diadem of white hair plaited around her head. She said, "I have watched the flight of birds each morning for seven mornings, and also at sunset. The results are confused. But a two-headed lamb has been born in a village nearby."

"And Eadwil?"

Eadwil was hardly more than a boy; his chin was innocent of a beard. When he spoke, his voice was like a reed pipe—still, men respected his precocious wisdom. He said, "I have analysed the relative situations of the stars and planets, and am driven to the hypotheses that *either* we know knothing at all *or* some unknown heavenly body is influencing the calculation. A comet, perhaps. But yesterday lightning struck three times out of a clear sky, and—and, Margrave, I'm frightened!"

The Margrave nodded and made a comforting gesture in the air. He said, "But this cannot be the whole story. I move that we—here, now, in full council—ask Him Who Must Know."

Eadwil rose to his feet. He was small, not yet having completed his growth. On his youthful lips trembled a sob, which he stoutly repressed and shaped into words.

"I demand your permission to withdraw, Margrave," he said. "It is well known how Him Who Must Know treats those in—in my condition."

The Margrave coughed and nodded approval of the discreet reference; Eadwil owed some of his precocity to a certain disadvantage in his physical make-up, and the elemental that they were considering found virgins vulnerable to his powers.

"Agreed," he said, and Eadwil departed, sighing with relief.

Before, however, they could proceed to the business before them, there was a rustling sound from far down the table, and a voice spoke like the sighing of wind in bare winter woods.

"Margrave, I suggest otherwise."

The Margrave shifted uncomfortably in his chair. That was Tyllwin who spoke, a figure as gaunt as a scarecrow and as thin as a rake, who sat among them by courtesy because no one knew where he had come from or how old he was, but everyone knew he had many peculiar powers which had never been put to use. Whenever Tyllwin spoke, things happened. The Margrave saw with alarm that several blossoms on the trees had already withered since the utterance of those few words.

"Speak, Tyllwin," he muttered. "Give us the benefit of your unique wisdom."

Tyllwin chuckled, a scratching noise, and the flowers on the whole of one tree turned to fruit and rotted where they hung. Tyllwin's nearest neighbours left their chairs hastily and moved towards the Margrave's end of the table.

Tyllwin's huge round head, like a turnip-ghost, turned to watch them, and a smile curved his dusty lips. He said, "Is it not certain, people of Ryovora, that these things presage an important event?"

The rotten fruits fell, with a squelching sound, and ants hurried from among the roots of the trees to investigate. The company hardly dared do more than nod.

"Then," said Tyllwin, "I suggest we investigate the commotion which is shortly to take place at the main gate."

He fell silent, and a few dead leaves blew across the table. Most of them clustered before Tyllwin's place, and he touched them with a bony hand, making them dissolve. Those watching trembled.

The Margrave was relieved to find that nothing more serious was going to follow Tyllwin's unexpected loquacity. He said with a light heart, "Well? What is the opinion?"

Ruman spoke up, with a glance towards Tyllwin that lasted only half a second after meeting Tyllwin's eyes. He said, "I have not scried any such commotion."

"But you have not scried since yesterday," objected Gostala with feminine practicality.

"True, true. Then I am with Tyllwin."

"Petrovic?" inquired the Margrave, with a glance at that dried-up individual.

"I am aware," said Petrovic doubtfully, "that the people believe all our troubles would be at an end if we had a god, as other cities do. I hope that in this instance they are wrong, as they usually are. Having heard from our neighbours in Acromel how severely they suffer from *their* deity—"

"This is far from the point," interrupted Gostala, tapping the table with a thumb-bone which had once been the property of a man fortunate enough—or unfortunate enough—to be her lover. "I say we do not know. Let us therefore expect both nothing and everything."

"Rational and well spoken!" cried the Margrave approvingly. "Those in favour?"

All present laid their right hands on the table, except Tuc, who had left his hand in the mouth of a dragon beyond an interesting sea of fire far to the north. Even Tyllwin moved with the rest, causing yet more leaves to wither and tremble on the tree that had suffered most since he broke from his impassivity.

"Agreed, then," said the Margrave. "Let us go thither."

The company rose with a bustle and began to walk towards the main gate. The Margrave, however, remained behind a few moments, contemplating Tyllwin, who had not moved.

When the others were at a distance he judged safe, he addressed Tyllwin in a low voice.

"Tyllwin, what is your opinion of a god?"

Tyllwin laughed creakingly. "I have been asked that before," he said. "And I will answer as I did then; I do not know what a god is, and I do not believe that many men do, either."

A branch on the tree above him split with a warning cry, so that the Margrave flung up his hand automatically before his face. When he looked again, Tyllwin was gone.

The commotion at the gates, foreseen by Tyllwin and by no other of the company, had already begun when the stately procession entered the street leading to it. They had come

each after his or her own style: Petrovic walking with his staff called Nitra, from which voices could sometimes be heard when the moon was full; Gostala riding on a creature that breathed only water, and perforce cried aloud in terrible agony at every step; Eadwil on his own young legs, although his feet shone red-hot when he had gone ten paces—this was to do with an enchantment about which no one ever inquired closely; Ruman on the shoulders of a giant ape fettered with brass. The air about them crackled with the struggle between protective conjurations and the oppressive tense aura that enshrouded Ryovora.

In the wide street before the gateway, a crowd had gathered, laughing, shouting, exclaiming with wonderment. In the midst of the crowd, a man in outlandish attire, his face set in a frown of puzzlement, was vainly trying to contend with a hundred questions simultaneously.

The crowd parted to let the nobles by, and at once closed in again, like water around a slow-moving boat.

The Margrave came up behind the rest, panting somewhat, for he was getting fat, and looked the stranger over curiously while the crowd's voices rose to almost a roar and then sank again to a muttering buzz, several times over.

At last, having cast a helpless glance at his companions and received no offers of assistance, he was compelled to address the stranger.

"Sir, who are you and what do you want?"

With the terribly patient air of one dealing with lunatics, the stranger said, "My name is Bernard Brown, and all I want is to get home."

"That is easy enough," said the Margrave in relief. But his mind was getting ahead of itself. If he had stopped to reflect that Tyllwin was interested in this man's arrival, he would not so soon have been optimistic. However, he did not reflect; he addressed a look of inquiry to Petrovic. "Will you oblige?" he said.

Petrovic looked up in the air and down at the ground. He scratched a number of ideograms in the dust with his staff Nitra, and then hastily scuffed them over with his foot. He said flatly, "No."

"Well, if you won't you won't," sighed the Margrave. He appealed to Gostala, who merely shook her queenly head and went on studying Bernard Brown with a speculative expression.

"Eadwil!" cried the Margrave.

The boy, whose face had gone perfectly pale, stammered a few incomprehensible words and burst into tears.

"See! They can't! What did I tell you?" bellowed a bull-like voice from among the crowd, and the Margrave shot a glance at the offender as sharp as a spear.

"Come forth!" he commanded, and with the aid of a number of neighbours in the throng, the man was pushed and shoved to stand before his ruler. He was an insolent-faced fellow with a shock of corn-coloured hair, and wore a leather apron with big pockets in which were the tools of his trade. He seemed to be a locksmith or something of the kind.

"You are—" said the Margrave, and ran through a small formula in his mind. "You are Brim, a locksmith. What did you mean by what you said?"

"What I said, of course!" the fellow retorted, and gave his master an amused look. "Why, anyone could see he's not to be pushed around by mere men!"

"Explain further!" commanded the Margrave.

"Why, 'tes simple as your mind, Margrave." Brim thrust an errant lock of hair back into place with his blunt thumb. "I see it all plain, and so do all of us. Here we've been saying these years past that what's amiss with Ryovora is we haven't got a god like all those towns around the world every where-
ever. And now today, what else do the omens say? Can you tell me *that*?"

He thrust a stubby finger almost in the Margrave's face. The Margrave recoiled and looked at it distastefully, but he was by nature an honest man, so he had to shake his head and admit that although the nobles had speculated long about the possible significance of the recent omens they had not been able to arrive at any conclusion.

"There, mates! What did I tell you?" bellowed Brim, whirling to the crowd. There was an answering yell, and in a moment the situation had turned topsy-turvy. The crowd had closed in on Bernard Brown, unmindful of the dignities of the nobles, and had seized him and was chairing him off down the street, while men, women and children ran and skipped behind him, singing some kind of rhythmic song and laughing like hyenas.

"Well!" said the Margrave in vexation. "This is a most improper and irregular state of affairs!"

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The Margrave had cause to repeat those words, with greater emphasis and an even more sombre expression, the following morning. He sat once more at the head of the great table in the Moth Garden, for the air had become if anything more oppressive than it had been yesterday, and the omens of which reports came seemed to have doubled in number.

"This is extremely aggravating!" said the Margrave testily. "I may say that the entire populace is firmly convinced this stranger is a god, simply because they do not understand anything he says. Accordingly, they have turned me out of my own place—I spent an uncomfortable night here in the Moth Gardens!—and are at work converting it into a temple for this—*character*."

Eadwil gave a reminiscent smile. "Moreover," he said, "all those persons who have voyaged extensively are being consulted on the correct manner in which to pay homage to a god. Brim the locksmith, around whom this ferment seems to be boiling, has travelled to Acromel and is enthusiastic for human sacrifice; there is a group of women who in their youth were captives in Barbizond and wish to hold daily single combats before the altar; a man who formerly fished Lake Taxhling declares that the correct method of adopting the god is to burn down the city twice a year and rebuild it, as the fisherfolk do with their reed-hut villages . . ."

Petrovic shook his withered head and said, "No good will come of this."

"Has anyone knowledge of Tyllwin's whereabouts?" inquired the Margrave, for the gaunt one's place stood empty today.

A shudder went down the table, and those present shook their heads, not without a sigh of relief.

"Well then, let us proceed to a decision," said the Margrave. He shifted in his chair; his night in the open, although the weather was warm, had left him feeling bruised all over.

"The first point to establish," said Gostala sensibly, "is whether or not this Bernard Brown is a god at all."

"Agreed!" came a chorus in reply.

Ruman snorted and thumped the table with a ham-like fist. "And how, pray, do we intend to set about that?" he inquired with honey-sweet sarcasm. "For we are all sure of

one thing only—that we do not know what a god is. Was it not for that reason we never had gods in the old days?”

“I fear very much,” said the Margrave heavily, “that the days of rational thought in Ryovora may be finished. It would seem that the people insist on treating Bernard Brown as a god anyway. Unless we can arrive at conclusive disproof life in Ryovora is doomed to become most uncomfortable.”

“Hah!” said Gostala without mirth.

“I have a constructive suggestion,” ventured Eadwil. “A god is reputed to have knowledge and power beyond those men can command. Let us therefore interrogate Bernard Brown on the most recondite and esoteric of our arts; let us challenge him then, before the people, if he fails to answer well, so that it may be seen his powers are small compared to our own.”

“The suggestion is rational,” sighed the Margrave. “But as I said, I greatly fear the days of rational thought in our city are numbered. However, if there is no better idea . . . ?”

None was forthcoming. Accordingly, the company betook itself to the newly converted temple, that had formerly been the palace of the Margrave.

They found Bernard Brown, much worried, to judge by his appearance, seated on a large silver and ebony throne on an enormous altar. Before the altar the townspeople were coming and going with gifts—their most prized possessions were heaped there now, from their inherited silverware to their newest garments. Around the throne itself, on the altar, were piles of luscious fruit and choice cuts of meat, together with bottles of delicious wine. Bernard Brown was sucking at one of the fruits and attempting to question the people. But the people would not answer him; they merely listened respectfully and then went and wrote down what he had said, with a view to creating a canon of mystical precepts from it.

The newcomers paused in the great hall to look at what had been done, and Eadwil spoke under his breath to the Margrave.

“Tyllwin has been here!” he said.

“You are right,” nodded the Margrave. “I can scent his power in the air. Now what interest has *he* in this matter?”

He advanced towards the altar. Taking his stand some ten feet away—because of the piled-up gifts—he raised his voice and addressed the putative god.

"Sir! We are come to determine whether or not you are a god, as the people of Ryovora hold."

Bernard Brown gave a worried nod. "So I was advised," he said carefully. "And I have been warned not to deny the possibility. Since meeting with Jorkas on the way here, I have acquired a healthy respect for the advice I am given in this lunatic world. But being an honest man, and never having had any idea that I might be a god, I cannot agree to the suggestion either."

The Margrave exchanged a puzzled glance with Eadwil and then with Ruman, who snorted characteristically and called to the man on the altar.

"Are we to take it, then, that you believe it *possible* you are a god?"

"I don't know what to believe," said Bernard unhappily. "Until yesterday, I had always thought I was a perfectly ordinary man, but certainly I am not ordinary in this world, wherever and whatever it may be."

"What do you mean?" said Ruman indignantly. "This is a reputable and respectable city! Or was, until you chose to intrude on its traditional calm existence."

"I chose nothing of the sort," said Bernard apologetically. "All I ask is to be allowed to go home."

"This does not sound like the speech of a god, certainly," the Margrave muttered to Eadwil, who nodded.

"Sir," he said to Bernard, "we wish to know your powers. Are you acquainted with the Book of Universal Shame, and can you conjure from it?"

By now, the townspeople had ceased their going and coming before the altar, and were gathering in silence to listen to this inquiry. It was plain that many of them were unconvinced, and were presumably propitiating Bernard only out of a desire to insure themselves against his actually turning out to be a god. They followed the interrogation with some attention.

"I never heard of it," said Bernard miserably.

"Nor of the Book of Three Red Elephants? Nor of the Casket of Disbelief?"

Bernard shook his head.

Eadwil turned to the Margrave. "It is most unlikely that he is a god," he said, and smiled.

Then in their turn Petrovic, Gostala and Ruman questioned Bernard about the most esoteric wisdom known to them—which meant the most esoteric wisdom known to man, for the enchanters of Ryovora had at least a nodding acquaintance with the uttermost reaches of their art. Some few surpassed them, such as Manuus, but those enchanters were far beyond the commerce of everyday human life, and chose to exist alone with their powers, not intruding on mundane affairs.

To each inquiry, Bernard was forced to reply in the negative, and in the watching crowd some people began to look significantly at Brim the locksmith, who grew more and more flustered and annoyed. At last, when Ruman had completed his questioning, this Brim strode forward and faced the altar challengingly, hands on hips, head thrown back to look into Bernard's face.

"Let's have it straight!" he bellowed. "Are you or are you not a god?"

"I ——— I was advised not to deny it," said Bernard tentatively, and the Margrave clapped his hand to his forehead.

"Fool that I am!" he exclaimed, and thrust Brim to one side, ignoring the man's complaint. "It was Tyllwin who advised you to say thus, was it not?"

"I don't suppose it can do much harm to say who it was," Bernard decided reflectively. "Uh—no. It was a very charming elderly gentleman with a wispy white beard, who was here a little before you arrived."

"Manuus!" exclaimed several persons together, and the Margrave whirled to face his noble companions.

"How many of us had seen Tyllwin before yesterday?" he demanded.

"Why—" began three or four speakers together, and then fell silent with expressions of amazement.

"Exactly!" snapped the Margrave. "He was there, and some enchantment persuaded us that he was there by right and custom. But I for one now realise that I have no knowledge of Tyllwin. Well! So Manuus is behind all this! We must go to him and tell him that we will not permit him to meddle in Ryovora's affairs. If he chose to live among us as a responsible citizen, that would be a different cauldron of spells. But as it is, we will respect his privacy only if he respects ours."

There was a shuffling of feet. With juvenile dignity, Eadwil spoke up. "Margrave, I regret that I will not face Manus in this matter. My powers are inadequate. I hate to shelter behind my youth—but."

And he took his leave.

One by one, shame-facedly, the others of the company followed his example, until the Margrave was left by himself, and the townspeople, having gathered from these events only that the nobles had failed to disprove Bernard's divinity, hastily set about their self-imposed task again.

"A fine lot we breed in Ryovora!" exclaimed the Margrave scornfully. The scorn was to quiet his own forebodings; he was less of an enchanter than many who served as his aides, but nonetheless he was a resolute man, and accordingly he summoned his train and set forth to beard Manus in his castle.

The mists parted in a way that implied he was expected, and having left his train standing huddled together in the great yard, he ascended to Manus's study with determined steps. There the enchanter greeted him cordially and made him welcome.

But the Margrave was uncomfortable in this place of unusual forces, and came to the point as quickly as manners would permit. He said firmly, when he had the chance, "Sir, you know my business, since you are Tyllwin's master."

"Correction," the enchanter said blandly. "I am Tyllwin. I have certain other natures besides my own—a trait which I share with all other persons save one."

The Margrave made an appropriate sign at the mention of him who has many names but one nature, and pressed on with what he had to say.

"We will not tolerate it, Sir," he declared. "For centuries we in Ryovora have striven to create a tradition of calm rationality, and to rely upon hard sense. This petty trick of intruding a so-called god like a gaming piece into our affairs is hardly worthy of a person of your distinction."

"I agree," said Manus. "And you may therefrom deduce it is none of my doing."

"What?"

"In this matter," the enchanter continued, ignoring the exclamation, "you and I are on the same side, Margrave. It will interest you to know that he of whom we were speaking

a moment ago—he whose nature is single—was sitting in that chair only two days ago.”

The Margrave shivered, and said respectfully, “Sir, your powers are beyond imagining!”

“Oh, it was not at my bidding, you may be sure of that!” Manuus answered with a thin chuckle. “Rather the reverse!”

“Then I will take leave of you,” the Margrave said, rising and bowing. “For if this matter is *his* concern, I will do nothing to interfere.”

Manuus shook his head, his eyes twinkling. “I am afraid you have no choice, Margrave,” he said. “Whether you like it or not, you and I are on the same side in this matter.”

So the Margrave departed, feeling strangely perturbed, and when he had gone Manuus fell to ceremonies of a kind that had not been performed for several millennia, and strange phenomena attended them. There was a storm on peaceful Lake Taxhling; in Barbizond, three madmen ran screaming through the streets; on a hill near Acromel, dust-devils ceased their whirling. Last, but not least, several persons in Ryovora itself saw visions of a disturbing nature, and went hastily to the newly designated temple to place yet more offerings on the floor near the altar and to consult the already sizeable record of Bernard’s sayings.

Studying them, they found no comfort.

seven

And thus the matter was to remain for another day. The Margrave, making as was his custom the best of a bad job, called up an obliging spirit and had a pavilion built in the Moth Gardens to serve as a temporary replacement for his palace; there he sat, swearing mightily, far into the night, while he wondered what he could do to get out of the forced alliance into which Manuus had dragged him unknowingly.

Those other nobles of Ryovora who were most skilled in the art met to discuss in low tones over their wine the matter of divinity as against humanity; they remained unconvinced by either the insistence of the populace, led by Brim, or the evidence which their interrogation of Bernard Brown had provided. It seemed unlikely, they allowed, that this person was a god; nonetheless, Manuus had great powers, and so

perhaps it was conceivable he had entered into a jest against Ryovora, and had indeed conjured a god up for them . . .

As for the populace who had listened to Brim, they likewise made no decision one way or the other. Still, they had been longing for a god of some sort for a considerable while; indisputably *someone* strange had come among them, preceded by complicated omens, and it was deemed advisable to act as if a god were among them until the matter could be settled.

So the night passed; and of those many who spent it restlessly, not least suffered Bernard Brown, couched uncomfortably on a heap of gorgeous offerings of velvet and satin.

It had been centuries since another city had marched against Ryovora; this reputation which guarded them, so the citizens deduced, had been an excellent defence. Men said that in Ryovora of all cities people had their heads screwed on right. Their ability to plan and reason carefully foredoomed any attack to failure.

Therefore it was with some astonishment and disbelief that a sleepy watchman gazed across the surrounding country in the direction of Acromel as dawn was breaking, and saw a red idol a hundred feet tall striding with enormous yells over the fields.

This idol, the watchman realised, could be none other than the Quadruple God of Acromel.

Around the idol's monstrous feet were fetters of riveted steel; before and behind, men went with great blazing torches on poles fifty feet long, prodding and driving the idol when it made to turn aside. Sometimes the thing's yelling howled into a ridiculous falsetto when a torch made contact with its blood-coloured limbs, and men had to scatter and flee from the blows of eight gigantic fists. But they returned, and it became plain to see that they now well understood the actions of their idol, and could drive it like a maddened bull because its rage made it unthinking.

The watchman shouted an alarm, that spread through the streets of Ryovora like flood-waters through a burst dam, and men, women and children leapt from sleep to go hither and thither in uncomprehending futility.

One by one the nobles were summoned, and assembled on the ramparts in an impressive band; thousand by thousand

the common people seized makeshift weapons—knives, scythes, axes—and numbered off into centuries to prepare for battle.

Then they waited tensely while the sun cleared the horizon, and the Quadruple God with his black-armoured forces, driven by the long cumbersome torches on poles, came to take station before the city walls.

At a sign from one who seemed to be the leader, the torch-wielders compelled the god to halt, and he stood screaming empty threats at the unresponsive sky. Then this man who seemed the leader advanced to stand on a small knoll and looked insolently at the nobles of Ryovora on the ramparts.

"Greetings!" he called merrily. "News has come to us in Acromel that you have been fortunate enough to acquire a god these past few days! Well, as it happens, we in Acromel have been fortunate in more ways than one—we have lost Duke Vaul, who had for many years oppressed us, and we have gained power over the Quadruple God." The man gestured over his shoulder at the misshapen red idol.

"It seems to us," the man went on, "that our god is very foolish, although extremely strong. It is said that your god is weak, but extremely wise. We have not been able to make head or tail of these cryptic sayings he has uttered lately. Nonetheless, we wish to try conclusions and thus determine if brute strength in a god is a quality superior to sageness. I await your answer, friends! Failing this trial, we shall of course drive the Quadruple God into Ryovora, and since he overtops all but your highest towers, I think that would be a great misfortune for the city."

He bowed with a flourish of his right hand, and descended from the knoll on which he had stood to speak.

The Margrave, frowning so deeply it seemed that a plough-share must have crossed his forehead, called the nobles into conference on the ramparts, and spoke worriedly of what he had heard from Manus.

The other nobles received the news with dismay, and some were of opinion that if he who has many names and but one nature was taking a hand, it was not for men—even skilled enchanters—to interfere. Others poured scorn on this faint-hearted attitude, among them Ruman, whose bull laugh echoed around the walls.

"Never!" he boomed. "Some magic is of an order that will bind even gods, and I have a little knowledge of this magic. Go, fetch me a black goat and a white pigeon, and a mirror cracked from edge to edge, and I will try conclusions with the Quadruple Idiot yonder!"

So it was ordained, and Ruman withdrew into a large black cloud with his goat, his pigeon and his mirror, and what he did there brought about thunderclaps.

But eventually the cloud blew away, and there was no sign of Ruman.

"This is ridiculous!" said Gostala with feminine directness, and Petrovic nodded his old dried-up head.

"I agree," he rasped. "Goats, forsooth! Pigeons! Mirrors! Claptrap, all of it. Now I came prepared, Margrave—I have here a phial containing the blood of an unborn child, and I also have knowledge. This is all I require."

Then Petrovic set about his task, and did what he had to do in the sight of all, which was most disturbing. The Margrave, trying not to watch, wished Petrovic had concealed himself as Ruman had done.

Yet the business failed, and Petrovic returned to them at last speaking in a tongue no one could understand, and burst into tears when he realised what had transpired. The great red idol still fumed and howled before the city walls.

"Igoroth!" said Gostala in exasperation. "Dumedinnis! and likewise Algoreson!"

Three odd-looking gentlemen—one in blue, one in white, one in green—walked through a nearby wall and stood before her. None of them was entirely normal in appearance, but it was hard to say where they differed from ordinary people.

"Get rid of that—object," said Gostala forcefully.

The three peculiar personages looked at her, then at each other, then at her again. Premeditatedly, they shook their heads, and departed, taking her with them.

The Margrave hastily hurled a protective charm about the city, to guard against a re-appearance of the three who had been there, and bit his lip in worry. This was a bad business altogether, and the worst fears he had carried away from his meeting with Manus were being overfulfilled.

"These are indeed magics to bind a god," said Eadwil, his young face white and strained because his feet were shining red-hot—he had walked from his dwelling when the news of the attack was brought. "But they are not magics to bind

one such as Manuus. Margrave, I think Tyllwin will be found in the vicinity."

"You are a true citizen of Ryovora," said the Margrave with enthusiasm. "This is clear reasoning."

He walked forward to the battlements and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Tyllwin!" he bellowed towards the Acromel party. "Tyllwin!"

Acres of grass turned brown and died, and songbirds who had been chanting in the trees nearby fell stiffly from their perches. And from the black-armoured company the gaunt figure of Tyllwin was borne forward on the back of a brawny slave.

"You desire speech with me, Margrave?" said the scarecrow of a man.

"So this is your doing!" said the Margrave disgustedly.

Tyllwin's thin chuckle carried clearly to his ears, causing dogs to howl. "Why, yes, Margrave! Did I not say that you and I were on the same side in this matter? It is in our common interest that this pretended god be brought down! Admit frankly that the god in your palace is not to your taste. I feel it incumbent upon us to show his fallibility by matching him with this perfectly genuine god from Acromel."

"And for this reason you have destroyed three of the leading enchanters of my city!" bellowed the Margrave. "Why could you not have left us to deal with the matter ourselves?"

Tyllwin's voice was suddenly as serious as doom. "Because," he said, "he whose nature is single has a hand in the affair."

"I will not voluntarily oppose him," said the Margrave heavily.

"No question of voluntarism is involved," said Tyllwin, and fell silent. A horse neighed into the quietness, and the neigh became a scream of agony.

The Margrave looked helplessly at Eadwil, who shook his head. "Against Manuus, which of us can stand?" he said. "And moreover, the matter is out of our hands. Look down into the streets. They have gone to fetch their god, supplicating him for protection."

Indeed, in the broad street leading to the main gate, there was a pressing throng of townsfolk, and among them a figure in outlandish attire who was crying out for aid and receiving none. Brim the locksmith could be seen grasping his elbow,

hurrying him along as best he could, and occasional voices rang out distinct above the general uproar.

"Save us! Defeat the enemy god! We have no hope except in you!"

"Poor foolish man!" said the Margrave softly, under his breath. "Well, nothing will convince them otherwise than that this is indeed a god they are so treating. Until he is laid low by the Quadruple One."

Eadwil mustered a ghost of a smile. "I wonder," he said. "Remember, he whose nature is single takes great interest in the affair."

So the leaders of the crowd opened the gate, and poured on to an open level space where they could confront the menacing array of troops from Acromel. On seeing these armoured ranks, many of them felt qualms and tried to draw back, but the press was too great, and at length the crowd—in number three or four thousand—simmered and seethed but stood still.

Urging his god forward, but sweating, Brim the locksmith made his way to the front of the crowd. "There!" he bel-lowed, throwing up his arm to indicate the hideous red idol ahead. "That's all you have to contend with! Hark at him howling! Why, already he fears your mere presence!"

"I must go down," said the Margrave in low tones. "I have no stomach to stand and watch the poor fool mas-sacred."

"I will come also," said Eadwil. And accordingly they descended together to the gate. To muttered threats from the crowd, saying that if these nobles were going to interfere out of spite they would get short shrift, they elbowed their way to Bernard's place. The heat of Eadwil's glowing feet helped to clear the way for them.

At length the Margrave was face to face with Bernard Brown, and cast on him a look full of sympathy.

"This is none of my doing," he said in apologetic tones. "It seems that the people of Ryovora, so long reputed sensible, have finally taken leave of their senses."

Bernard Brown blinked unhappily at him, and nodded. "I think you are right, sir," he said. "Especially since this galumphing monstrosity is plainly nothing more than an overgrown child."

"A — what?" said the Margrave, and Eadwil was seen to be grinning almost from ear to ear.

"An overgrown child," repeated Bernard patiently. "Why, he howls and strikes out and breaks things at random—this is not the action of an intelligent, adult personality! I think we have here a case of arrested development, and what I would propose . . ."

e i g h t

Wave upon wave of laughter rang out around the walls of Ryovora, and at once the people, led by the Margrave, set about implementing Bernard's plan. Eadwil stood a little apart, his lips set in a smile that now bid fair to become permanent.

Meanwhile, the sky grew to full brightness, and the sun hoisted itself towards the meridian. Among the ranks of those from Acromel, a certain impatience became manifest. The long torches which served to goad the idol were withdrawn one by one, soaked in fresh pitch, and re-lit; the chains which held his sixteen limbs were anchored firmly to posts hammered into the ground, so that the teams of men with horses that weighted the chains down could rest for a while; but in the comings and goings of the people, impatience was unmistakable.

At long last, towards mid-day, he who had previously addressed the citizens of Ryovora again ascended his knoll and called to the Margrave. Sweating from his work, hands filthy, his rich sleeves turned back above his elbows, the Margrave went on to the ramparts again.

"Margrave! Our patience is small! Time wastes, and we desire to know the end of this affair!"

The Margrave looked down at the street below the wall, where work was proceeding apace on Bernard Brown's suggestion. From down there, Eadwil raised an arm in signal that all was now ready.

"Good!" said the Margrave in satisfaction, and called to the man from Acromel.

"Our city's god is prepared to meet yours!"

The man from Acromel at once spun on his heel and called to those responsible for loosing the Quadruple God's chains. And from the front of the crowd before the gate, hesitantly, Bernard Brown walked out towards the enemy troops.

A great gust of laughter ascended, and the joy of the men from Acromel resounded in cries of scorn. But Bernard Brown kept on walking towards the Quadruple God.

And the Quadruple God was not looking at him.

Behind the approaching man, behind the ramparts of the city, another figure was appearing—a figure so monstrous, so bloated, so huge that the Quadruple God seemed a mere ant by comparison. This figure had a head with teeth twenty feet long in its gash of a mouth; it had arms like a hundred barrels, it had legs that were planted on either side of a tall building.

This figure was growing. It was rising as though from the depths of the earth, and all four heads of the Quadruple God were striving to fasten their eyes on it together.

Gracefully, considering its incredible bulk, the bloated figure raised its arms in a menacing posture. From the camp of the men of Acromel, the naked eye could not discern the fine silk cords controlling the thing's motions.

And then this creature of inflated wineskins, of waxed fabric filled with hot air, spoke with the massed voices of all the citizens of Ryovora, a voice like the crashing of a waterfall.

"Go away!" said the figure with terrible emphasis. And the Quadruple God burst his chains, stamped on the torch-bearers, and fled.

Only once was his panicky progress interrupted before he regained the familiar safety of his temple at Acromel, on the far horizon. That was when a gaunt and scarecrow-like figure appeared in his path, crying in a voice that though thin and reedy caused cracks to appear in the surface of the earth, and strange colours to muddy the clear blue of the sky.

The Quadruple God stamped on this figure with three of his eight huge feet, and left nothing but a thing like a crushed insect to mark the ground.

Triumphantly, the people of Ryovora went forward in the wake of the people of Acromel, and with their improvised weapons wreaked considerable havoc among the laggards as they beat a retreat. Among them went Brim the locksmith, yelling praise of his own perceptiveness in seeing that Bernard was indeed a mighty god.

But certain other citizens of the town turned aside from the pursuit of the fleeing attackers, and surrounded Brim in a hostile manner. "Nonsense!" they said very firmly. "If we

had not been lured by fools like you away from our habitual trust in common sense, we should have seen what he saw and done what he instructed us to do, anyway."

Then they set about Brim with meticulous thoroughness, and impressed the extent of his stupidity upon him—in such a way that it was likely to be impressed permanently. That attended to, they returned with satisfaction to the city. It was noticed that by that time the aura of grey depression which had pervaded the atmosphere these many weeks past had dissipated; the cause for rejoicing which this gave them also made them forget altogether about Bernard Brown.

The Margrave and his nobles assembled again in the Moth Garden, and the people began to bring forth the offerings they had set around the altar to feast on them and deck themselves in gaudy ceremonial attire. Nonetheless, there were still problems to occupy the nobles, and Eadwil spoke of the most pressing when they were met together.

He said, "I think, sirs and ladies, that the time for enchantments is passing."

The Margrave nodded. So did several others. Some of them looked at the place which had—very briefly—been Tyllwin's.

"For regard it this way," said Eadwil thoughtfully. "In its way, enchantment and magic and all this art, it is only a survival of that chaos which we know reigned before time began. But the imprint of chaos is fading from the world. The confusion which causes stone idols to walk, elementals to be personified in storm-clouds, spirits to speak from water or fire, is gradually succumbing to that same hard sense on which we in Ryovora traditionally rely."

"Well spoken!" said the Margrave approvingly. Eadwil gave him a sidelong glance and concluded thus.

"Manuus is—was—whether as Tyllwin or himself, a master of chaos. So are we all in lesser degree. But the greatest master of all has proved to be a simple stranger without any acquaintance with esoteric arts. Colleagues, magic is of the past. Rationality and logic will rule the future." He cast his eyes towards his feet. "My feet, I may say, have not burned since I arrived at this conclusion. And I think I shall forthwith take steps to set right the other disadvantage consequent upon my command of magic. Excuse me."

And with a light step he departed in the wake of a saucy-eyed girl who was bearing fruit from the garden to the feast the people were preparing.

Another who was in the garden was a black-clad traveller, whose face twitched into a satisfied smile when he heard Eadwil's words. He did not need to wait longer or listen more.

On that same knoll from which the leader of Acromel's forces had addressed the Margrave, Bernard Brown sat with his chin in his hands, staring gloomily at nothing. His distracted worrying was interrupted at length by the presence of one who was not a stranger, who stood before him leaning on an interesting kind of staff.

"I've seen you before," said Bernard slowly. "Who are you?"

The black-clad man chuckled. "He to whom the task was given of bringing order out of chaos in the universe," he replied. "And who are you?"

"I'm not sure that I know any longer," said Bernard after a pause. "I thought I was Bernard Brown until recently, and that I was rather an ordinary kind of person. But these past few days people have been telling me so often that I'm a god that I've almost been convinced of the idea."

The black-clad one clucked with his tongue. "I'm afraid that isn't true at all," he said. "So—since I was responsible for getting you into all this—I'd better explain."

He sat down companionably alongside Bernard on the knoll, and gestured in the air with his staff. A short distance away, in a pleasant meadow, some clinging ground mist cleared to reveal the ruins of a castle, smoking quietly.

"An enchanter called Manuus dwelt there," he said. "A man with—so to speak—a vested interest in the chaos which was formerly the state of the whole universe. This sort of chaos."

He gestured again, and out of a hill a mile or two this side of distant Acromel a *thing* with yellow eyes peered briefly. What could be seen in this thing's eyes defied description. It made Bernard shudder with amazement and dismay.

"Well—where am I?" he demanded. "Or is it a question of—*when* am I?"

"Neither," said the black-clad one, and chuckled again. "We are speaking of a borderland between chaos, existing in

eternity, and reason, existing in time. At this moment, the balance is uncertain, but it is tipping, bit by bit. You have been quite invaluable in tipping it past a crucial point."

"I don't understand," said Bernard helplessly.

"No matter. If you did understand the nature of chaos, men being what they are, you would certainly be conceited enough to wish to control it. This in fact is what those enchanters seek to do, but they try to control chaos with chaos, and the result is inevitable disaster. And naturally, to control chaos with reason is to impose lasting order on it. This implies in turn that sooner or later chaos will reign no longer."

Bernard's face showed sudden understanding. "I see!" he exclaimed. "In other words, these magicians or whatever are torn between two mutually exclusive desires—to *control* this chaos, and to *preserve* it."

"You get the point exactly. Control diminishes chaos, and diminishing chaos reduces the power gained from controlling it."

"But—what have I done?"

"Well . . ." The black-clad one chuckled again; he was really very pleasant, reflected Bernard. "There was dissatisfaction in that city Ryovora, where I have for long been aware the people had their heads screwed on right. They felt they had to have a god. So I gave them one—of a kind. And after all that, they realised that their god had done for them nothing at all they could not have achieved by using their heads."

"I was scared silly," said Bernard.

"But you kept your head, and refused to let mere size overawe you. The universe is a big place, and there are many corners of it where chaos on a sizeable scale still obtains. This, then, is a valuable attitude to inculcate."

Bernard was silent for a while. At last he shook his head and sighed. "I suppose I'm really dreaming," he said. "I can't believe a word of what you say."

"Congratulations, and thank you," said the black-clad one drily. "For you to say that is an earnest of my eventual success. Sometimes it seems a very long way away."

"What will—if this is the right way to put it—what will happen then?"

"I don't know," said his companion. "Why should I? I'll have finished my appointed job. And since you have finished yours now . . ."

When he was alone, the black-clad traveller stood leaning on his staff of curdled light, staring at the wreckage of Manuus's castle.

Chaos.

He decreed it out of existence. Since Manuus no longer ruled the ruin, no longer held it tenaciously in being, it vanished. In its place, the meadow grew green and orderly.

The traveller wished that Bernard had not asked his last question. It was discomfiting. And sometimes he wished that he would not inevitably have to find out its answer.

Yet it was not his nature—and his nature was single—to undo anything he had done. Therefore, inexorably, he was approaching that ultimate moment.

He shrugged, and then there was nothing but the grassy knoll green and tidy in the afternoon sunlight, while people made merry in Ryovora.

—John Brunner

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The small spaceship glided easily over the icy peaks, dipped into the richly verdant valley, hovered momentarily and then touched down gently in a small fig tree-lined glade. For several minutes the ship was still, its featureless surface reflecting a sun soon to be hidden by the blue-white crags.

Finally an opening appeared in the globular craft and its single occupant stepped out. He looked remarkably out of place attired in bowler hat and severely tailored blue flannel suit. He stood for a moment surveying the sky, the surrounding peaks and the encroaching fig trees, then directed his gaze to the temple-like building a hundred yards away. A broad path of ebony stones, beginning just beyond the glade where the ship rested, led to the front of the massive white structure.

The man turned, reached into the ship and produced a worn and very large brief case. Tucking it under one arm, he started for the black walkway. Behind him the door of the spaceship closed silently. And quite suddenly it was deep dusk as the last crescent of sun disappeared behind the snow-capped mountains.

At closer view the edges of the wide stone path were lined with a haphazard array of palmentoes, pine trees and statuary. Bowler hat did not vary his sedate pace as he noted the ornamental shambles, but the flicker of expression that spread from the corners of his mouth and settled in his eyes could have been mild amusement, or paternal condescension.

Neither his manner nor expression changed when, upon reaching the flight of steps leading to the heavy brass-studded main door of the marble structure, ferocious shrieks and the clattering of metal greeted him from the dark recesses on either side of the doorway. Two huge Griffins, straining at the ends of their restraining chains, fanning furiously with great wings and lashing mightily with serpent tails, barred the man's way.

He paused, squinted at the beasts in the semi-darkness, then began to ascend the steps. The Griffins stopped their threshing, became silent and shrank back, clearing a passage. The man turned and smiled at the monsters as he reached the massive door and pounded three times with the ornate knocker.

The three knocks resounded ponderously, as if the entire building was one huge drum. When the last reverberations died away the silence was complete. Even the light breeze which had been rustling the assorted flora in the informal garden flanking the black walk was strangely stilled.

Long moments passed and then a small port in the large door slid open to reveal a pair of dimly visible eyes.

"Who are you, and why do you come here?" inquired a voice that belonged to the eyes.

The man shrugged wryly and shifted the heavy brief case. "I am Donnray Four, Deputy Director of Sector Eight, and I have come with offers of employment for your people." His inflection of the last word was somewhat odd, but only to one very familiar with his normal speech patterns.

The port clicked shut. A minute passed and the Griffins stirred, their chitinous tails rasping on the worn stone of the steps. Then the door opened widely and a young-looking male being of perfection in form and inhuman beauty stood in the opening. He was dressed lightly in a thin robe, sandals and jaunty headpiece. The sandals and hat were winged. In the crook of his left arm rested a tortoise.

"You may enter," he said. "I am called Hermes and have been appointed your proctor."

The door closed behind them as Hermes led the way toward the centre of the room. It was cavernous, stretching into dimness on all sides. They stopped before a tremendous table piled with platters and cups and dominated by a golden horn.

Ringling the table was a jumbled profusion of daises, divans, benches and couches. A trio of massive thrones on a broad platform a short distance beyond the littered table dominated the scene. The room was mostly still, except for a muted tittering coming from the far corners as Donnray looked at the age-encrusted chairs of state. The light was not good, for it seemed to come largely from three well-used fireplaces set against the far walls and from several pale nimbi floating at random overhead.

"Welcome, Donnray," said a bearded individual occupying the central throne. "We are about to sup and you will be our guest." The sonorous tones rolled through the great hall in majestic fashion. "I am Zeus," continued the speaker. "This is Juggernaut on my right and Odin on my left. We constitute the supreme Council for this era."

"My lords," said Donnray, bowing politely, "your hospitality is most generous and I am highly honored by the opportunity of this meeting."

"That is as it should be," rumbled Juggernaut. "But let us eat. We can talk later."

Odin clapped his hands and a horde of gnomes, fairies and leprechauns converged upon the table to make a great clatter among the plates and goblets. Two wizened elves, dragging and pushing a small table, appeared before Donnray and Hermes, then scampered off to return in a moment with two stools. The elves examined the newcomer curiously, winked at one another and then trotted off.

"We will sit here," Hermes said to Donnray.

Donnray sat, placing the brief case between his feet. The bowler hat stayed on his head.

The meal was served throughout the great hall by the swarm of fairies, leprechauns and gnomes. They heaped platters and plates with an endless variety of fruits and meats which poured from the golden horn. Mugs and goblets were filled with spiced red wine from bottomless flagons.

Donnray ate and drank lightly—little more than polite tasting to satisfy his curiosity. Between small bites and delicate sips he surveyed the garish scene about him. The great room

was sprinkled lavishly with an assortment of gods and goddesses from the barbaric to the urbane and from the fully clothed state to one of complete undress. Donnray smiled in satisfaction—satisfaction at the number of gods present and at the thinly veiled interest they were showing in him. He nodded politely to a group of leaf-clad individuals that had caught his eye and then turned his attention to the young god seated beside him.

Hermes was finishing his meal. He had placed the tortoise on their small table and was hand feeding it choice bits of white meat. The reptile pushed itself up by its front legs with neck extended to the limit to snap and gulp down the tasty morsels. When Hermes finished it moved over in front of the visitor, settled itself with legs drawn in, hand extended, and regarded him stonily with beady eyes.

A hush spread slowly through the hall and all eyes turned toward Donnray. Several fairies hurriedly flitted off with the dirty dishes from the throne platform as Zeus combed stray crumbs out of his long beard with bony fingers. At last he spoke.

"Hermes, introduce our guest to all assembled here. We will then listen to what he has to say."

Hermes and Donnray, heads together bowler to wings, held a short conference and then the messenger of the gods rose to his feet, strode forward and leaped effortlessly to the top of the banquet table. He swaggered up and down the length of the board, sandal and cap wings aquiver, evidently enjoying his moment of importance.

"My lords, fellow gods, and lesser deities," Hermes began. "I have been appointed proctor of our guest, a mortal." There was dead silence as he looked around, seemingly seeking a point of dissent.

"Since we seldom receive guests," he said, resuming his pacing, "it is my duty to introduce this mortal—"

"Oh, for the love of Valhalla," roared Odin. "Cut the formalities and get on with it!"

"Yes, my lord."

Hermes stopped his pacing and the six pair of wings stopped fluttering and stiffened into immobility.

"Our guest is called Donnray Lineage Four," Hermes said quietly. "He comes from a far star with an offer of employment to all retired gods. He will now explain in detail."

Hermes finished his little speech with his back squarely toward Odin. As he leaped to the floor the great hall buzzed with a myriad of voices.

Donnray, in response to Hermes' gesture, mounted the table, slowly made a complete pivot and then stopped, facing the three thrones. He stood easily, with manifest dignity, but also with just the proper touch of humility.

Donnray Lineage Four, as Deputy Director of Sector Eight for Deities, Inc., knew his facts well enough: he had presented them in the field dozens of times under varying circumstances. The point was that each presentation was a unique problem. Many new factors were involved to such an elastic degree that mechanical computers were useless. The Field Agent had to look his prospects in the eye and get the feel of the situation. Donnray could feel this one—it could easily turn into a severe challenge.

"My lords and ladies," he began, and was immediately greeted by a high-pitched titter from a "lady" stretched nonchalantly on a divan to his left. Juggernaut glared at the female. She became silent, sat upright and attempted to increase the hiding power of her sketchy garments. Donnray went on, ignoring the interruption.

"The universe is vast," he said, "and distance has such little meaning I can tell you only that I come from a civilization based in a stellar system unknown to this portion of the galaxy. But this is of little importance.

"The important thing is that I serve a governmental branch interested in the development of primitive, godless worlds. In short, most noble gods and goddesses, I have come to recruit unemployed deities for service on these life-spawning worlds."

Donnray paused and thought to himself that he really ought to revise his opening speech. It was almost phrase for phrase the same as the one he had made to the spherical entities on *Uomm* 24 just a short two hundred years ago. However, it had worked very well then and, after all, as the old saying had it, there was nothing to be gained by changing teleporters in the middle of an etheric stream. The room buzzed with conversation and several leprechauns moved closer to gape at him.

"You say," said Odin, leaning far forward on his throne, "you say you are from another civilization. Is it far advanced?"

"More so than any other in this galaxy," answered Donnray.

"Do you make obeisance to private or public gods?" Odin demanded.

"No, noble god, we do not," replied Donnray, an anticipatory twinkle playing in his grey eyes.

Odin leaned back slowly. "Then why," he asked coldly, "are you trying to lure us away from our comfortable heaven of retirement?"

An angry murmur began to spread throughout the assembly and the nimbi halted their aimless meanderings to dart into position above Donnray as if to expose him to a more critical scrutiny.

"Because gods should be gods," said Donnray, raising his voice above the growing undertones, "I offer you worlds populated with waiting worshippers. New and virile kingdoms are yours for the asking." He purposely held back the most telling argument. It would not be news to any of the major deities, and making a point of it at this stage of the negotiations would only serve to focus sharp resentment upon him. Nevertheless, Donnray knew that the fearful incubus of extinction hovered darkly in his hosts. Even the gods must die when the last hope of worshippers is gone.

Silence. All eyes were focussed on the guest and he could make a good guess at what most were thinking. Without a substantial group of followers to fear and worship them, the gods had been stripped of much of their prowess. They were remembering the good old days when lowly humans trembled at their slightest whims and hastened to make peace with the all-powerful ones.

Donnray allowed them a few more moments of sweet reflection and then continued:

"Your point concerning my civilization and its lack of gods is quite apt. However, my organization provides gods for new worlds that have no native gods. The need is great. Gods are essential to the development of primitive civilizations in that they provide a buffer against the unknown. You are needed on new frontiers, and I can show you the way."

He stood firm and silent. This, he knew, was a turning point. He would now either be tossed out or asked for more details.

Zeus frowned portentously and then turned in whispered conference first to Juggernaut and then to Odin. The hall was filled with a silent tension as its occupants strained forward.

"We rule," Zeus rumbled, "that your proposition merits further study. A committee consisting of Jupiter, Ishtar and Bishamonten is hereby appointed to study the details." He paused in a vain attempt to suppress a sonorous belch, then went on, somewhat peevishly: "But first, let us drink. Bacchus, look to your flagons! Let the wine flow!"

Donnray inclined his head in the direction of the Supreme Council and then rejoined Hermes at their small table. They were soon served with wine, Bacchus himself pouring for the unusual guest.

"Drink deep," said Bacchus, his red, round face beaming. "And save me a world with rich soil and warm sun where the grapes will grow with abandon." He sloshed a little wine on the head of Hermes' tortoise as he waddled off.

"A good sort, really," observed Hermes, "but a bit preoccupied with his grapes and wines."

Donnray smiled politely and said, "Please tell me something about the committee members with whom I shall be working."

The youthful god glanced around, began stroking the brightly patterned shell of the tortoise and finally said, "It is a tolerable committee. Jupiter may prove to be a bit lofty, and Ishtar is a mite on the sexy side. Bishamonten is almost wholly inoffensive—he was the Japanese god of Riches, until high taxes put him out of business."

Donnray bent down and retrieved the heavy brief case.

"I'd just as soon get started, if I'm not rushing things too much."

"Not at all. I'll get them together and we'll all retire to one of the alcoves at the rear. Hi, Atlas," Hermes called to a passing god. "Be a good chap and escort our guest to the Nero nook while I round up the committee."

A tremendous figure, muscles bulging and rippling with every movement, stopped and looked with unconcealed interest. "Sure thing," he said. "This way, Donnray." And he led off across the crowded floor, Donnray trailing with the brief case.

When they reached one of a series of booth-like rooms set against the rear wall of the great hall Atlas barged in, flushing a small covey of brilliantly-winged fairies.

"You wait in here," Atlas said to Donnray, "and the others will join you soon."

The central area of the alcove was taken up by the usual broad table. A continuous couch was set against three sides of the room. Fine silks made a low ceiling and the walls above the couch were festooned with gourds containing a variety of flowers. Donnray went to the rear of the enclosure, placed his case on the table and sat facing the entrance.

A number of lesser deities who had gathered outside to peer and whisper, suddenly dispersed. Then Hermes was ushering the committee into the nook.

Jupiter, with regal bearing, entered first. He nodded curtly to Donnray and seated himself immediately. Ishtar was next, glittering in a gold-encrusted skirt and tall headpiece. Her magnificent breasts were completely bare. She smiled warmly at Donnray and moved around to seat herself very close to him. The last to enter was Bishamonten in his floor-length oriental gown. He bowed low at the introduction.

Two fairies whisked in with a tray of brimming goblets and a plate of small pastries. Jupiter picked one from the plate and looked at it in disgust. "Chinese fortune cookies again," he snorted. "Someone should keep Chang Hsien from meddling with the Horn of Plenty."

Hermes settled himself in one corner and broke apart a cookie, tossing the bits to his tortoise. He opened the folded rice paper and read aloud: "You are going on a long journey." He grinned, Jupiter took a sip of wine, and Bishamonten laughed with his eyes. Ishtar moved a bit closer to Donnray who made a production of opening his brief case and then edged away slightly to take the pressure off. The tortoise finished the last scrap of cookie and looked up for more.

"Perhaps the best way to get started," began Donnray, "would be to give you a general outline of the steps involved if you do decide to relocate."

"Please do," said Ishtar huskily. "I can hardly wait." She swung about so that her knee brushed his thigh. "Details simply fascinate me," she purred.

"We can do without your sexual innuendos, you Babylonian harlot," said Jupiter icily. "Let the mortal proceed."

The fire in Ishtar's eyes might well have consumed any lesser entity, but Jupiter's glacial regard dampened the flames and she finally settled back with a petulant flounce that re-emphasized her most obvious charms.

Donnray fumbled uncertainly at the clasp on his brief case and decided he'd better start his explanation without further delay. He touched again on the major points outlined earlier in the great hall and went on to describe the mechanics of the recruiting procedure ; completion of preliminary application blanks, transportation to the staging area where physical and mental aptitude tests would be administered, and final shipment to the selected worlds.

"These blanks," said Donnray, passing around legal-size sheets, "are the initial application forms to be completed here. Each god filling out one of these will be entitled to an examination at the staging area for possible placement."

The committee and Hermes studied the forms.

"Simple enough," said Jupiter, tossing the paper on the table, "but you sound as if there may be some question about the matter of placement, as you so glibly term it. We are gods, not itinerant fruit pickers."

"Quite true, mighty Jupiter," Donnray smiled pleasantly. "The further examination at the staging area is to protect you. Every precaution is taken to avoid selection of a world that would be to a god's distaste. There are many worlds, so that the chance of rejection is small." He looked candidly into Jupiter's eyes and added, "But it has happened."

Ishtar twined the fingers of one hand in her long, black hair, looking at Donnray through half-closed eyes. "Tell me more about the physical examination, my mortal. Will you be there?"

"The examinations, both physical and mental, are largely routine—to insure compatibility with a new environment. They are not a basis for arbitrary rejection." Donnray looked at Ishtar and tried to make his smile impersonal. "But no, my goddess, I will not be there. I have duties elsewhere."

Ishtar's regal features settled into a pout and Jupiter harumphed warningly before speaking.

"We seem to have small choice in the matter of our final destination." He glared sternly at Donnray.

"Oh, I'm sorry if I have given you that impression. The tests will merely place you into a classification from which a large number of worlds may be selected. The final choice will be up to you."

Donnray prepared to set the hook. He reached into his brief case, brought out a handful of folders and spread them on the table.

"Here is literature describing in some detail just a few of the representative worlds currently available and waiting for their quota of deities."

The committee picked through the brochures, visibly impressed by the three-dimensional colour illustrations showing a wide climatic variety of earth-type planets.

Bishamonten looked up happily from a folder depicting a world studded with islands and snow-capped volcanic cones. "Our friend, the water nymphs and such," he said slowly, a frown spreading from the corners of his almond-shaped eyes. "Our little friends, what of them?"

"The same proposition applies," said Donnray. "However they will be transported and examined separately from the proper gods such as yourself."

"Of course," agreed Bishamonten.

"And further," Donnray continued, "you may request the assignment to your new world of any of the lesser deities you may require."

"Quite satisfactory, quite satisfactory," nodded Bishamonten.

Donnray felt a subtle warmth spreading along his right side and knew without looking that Ishtar was moving closer. He hoped the meeting would adjourn before Jupiter noticed, for he was not altogether sure of his own special protective devices if he got caught in the crossfire. Jupiter, however, was engrossed in his own special doubt. He scowled at Donnray and demanded, "What happens if I should not like my new world after I get there?"

"You may request, within a reasonable length of time, reassignment or return to point of origin," Donnray explained. He was sure that this was the blustering god's last objection. The surface was stern but he could sense within a growing desire for the splendours and powers due a proper god; a condition that could be fully attained only when the god was recognized as a proper deity. Jupiter was but one of thousands toppled from lofty heights by Guttenberg, the Wright brothers, Einstein, et al.

The committee withdrew—Ishtar reluctantly—to confer with the Supreme Council. Hermes remained with Donnray and they passed the time by feeding the tortoise more Chinese fortune cookies.

Bishamonten at last returned to lead Donnray through the crowded hall to the cleared area before the three thrones. There was a profound silence as the Supreme Council solemnly regarded the mortal visitor.

Then Zeus leaned forward and spoke. "Donnray, the council has deliberated and as yet we can give you no clear verdict. We are divided on your proposal and pronouncement cannot be given until there is agreement between us. Personally, I am in favour of your offer, but—" and he turned his glacial regard toward Juggernaut who returned the look with stony indifference, "—my opinion does not prevail. We still have to consider a report from the chairman of one of our committees who has not yet made an appearance."

Donnray bowed his head in assent, keeping his face impassive to mask the inward dismay. He thought furiously during the small silence as the assembly waited for his reply. "May I be permitted to take some preliminary applications on a qualified basis?" he asked.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Odin from the throne on the right.

"If the decision of the council is against my proposal," Donnray replied, "any applications will be without meaning. However, I feel sure that your final decision will be favourable, and by taking applications now we will have lost no time during the interim."

"To Moloch with such quibbling," roared Juggernaut. "Throw the intruder through the outer door."

Zeus stiffened in anger, but Odin touched his arm and leaned over to whisper in his ear. Zeus finally nodded and lifted his arm to silence Juggernaut who was about to shout again.

"It is the consensus of the majority of this council that Deputy Director Donnray may interview such of our group as wish to apply. In the meantime, pending a final verdict, Donnray is to continue as our guest with the full courtesies due him a such."

Juggernaut squirmed on his throne but said nothing.

Zeus rose and, with a gesture of finality, said, "The deliberations are tabled for the time being. Director Donnray, you will be informed when the next conference is to be held."

Donnray smiled, bowed and blandly thanked the Supreme Council.

However, it was a worried Deputy Director who some hours later sought out Hermes. The messenger god looked up from a favourite occupation, feeding his tortoise, and raised his eyebrows knowingly. "I thought you might be along pretty soon."

"Look, Hermes," said Donnray, "I've been sitting in that overcushioned nook for three hours without more than one or two minor dieties even coming in to look at my prospectus. You're supposed to be my proctor and I need some help—or information, anyway."

"Ask away, my friend," said Hermes. "But I have no influence with the council."

Donnray winced as a tinkle of silvery laughter came faintly from the hall.

"Didn't Ishtar sign up?" asked Hermes slyly.

"Please," Donnray held up his hand, "she is most persistent. I had to get away from that room for awhile."

Hermes chuckled and stroked the tortoise.

"This chairman that Zeus mentioned," said Donnray, "who is he and what is the nature of the committee he heads?"

Hermes' gay face grew sombre. "The Atomic Holocaust Committee. Loki is the chairman."

"Go on," said Donnray.

"The Holocaust Committee, which means Loki—the other members are decorative freizes—believes that the present civilization will destroy itself through atomic warfare. The survivors will soon forget their present knowledge and rapidly turn to the old ways again."

"I see," said Donnray. "Which means that these survivors will also turn to the old gods once more."

Hermes nodded. "The concept has some merit and a certain amount of appeal to many of us."

"Nonsense," said Donnray briskly. "A false assumption. I know the answer, the right answer."

Hermes smiled sadly at him. "Surely you jest."

"I'm not in the habit of joking about such profound errors, friend Hermes," said Donnray warmly. "I've faced this situation more times than I care to mention, and I assure you that Earth is done with the old gods forever. You face sure extinction by remaining here." He resettled the bowler hat on his head at a jaunty angle. "I'll show master Loki up as a misinformed bungler."

Hermes brightened. "If you can prove that to me I'll help you even if it means pulling Juggernaut's long nose. How that slob was ever elected to the Supreme Council anyway is beyond me. And Loki! That father of lies! That four flusher! I'll dance on his buttocks—I'll—"

"Hold it," commanded Donnray. "We've got to get down to business. Now, here is what I want you to do. Find out when Loki makes his report, and just as soon as he's through request an audience for me before the Supreme Council. Say that I am aware of the Holocaust Committee and that in the interests of fair play and of truth that I request the opportunity of stating my case."

"Loki and Juggernaut will be furious," said Hermes gleefully.

"I want to get my word in as quickly as possible before the Council gets a chance to formulate a decision based on Loki's report. Also, I would suggest that you have a few trusted friends spread a bit of doubt, with some casual words, about how much Loki's information can be trusted. You know—"

"Do I!" crowed Hermes. "Just leave it to me."

The two heads, one a golden crown of perfect malehood, the other slightly greying and topped with a natty bowler, bent closer to each other in conspiratorial accord.

The great hall was tense and filled with waiting deities who were unusually silent as they watched the central figures before the throne dais. Even the nimbi had halted their aimless patterns of movement to cluster directly over Donnray's head.

Loki, a handsome blonde giant, his facial perfection marred by an overlay of cynicism, faced Donnray. He looked assured, his gaze raking Donnray with an insolent disdain that was almost physical.

"So this is the strange mortal who would bid with his cheapjack ways for the services of the gods." Loki guffawed, the sound booming into reverberating echoes around the huge room.

Donnray waited calmly, not even looking at his adversary. He addressed Zeus when he could be sure his voice would be heard by all.

"Have I your permission, mighty Zeus, to state my case?"

Juggernaut sneered and winked at Loki. Zeus stroked his beard and replied, "Proceed, Donnray."

"Thank you, my lord. I will be as brief as possible.

"I am aware of the Atomic Holocaust Committee and its purpose, which is to observe and report the final struggle of civilization. I am also aware of another of its purposes—unstated, which is to encourage the outbreak of atomic war and so hasten the end of modern technology so that the gods may take over when barbarism once again descends on Earth."

There was a concerted gasp from the assembly at these bold statements. Juggernaut turned black with anger and half rose from his throne. Zeus restrained him, but turned an angry face to Donnray. "Your accusations are ill-advised, mortal. We are not on trial here and you risk instant destruction with such a speech. Be warned!"

Donnray bowed respectfully and replied, "My lord Zeus, I do not accuse you or the Supreme Council, or even the general assembly of gods and goddesses here in the hall. My words are directed specifically to the Holocaust Committee and its chairman. You have but to look at them, in your infinite wisdom, to know that it is the truth I speak."

As if on cue, all eyes, including those of Zeus, swung to the small group headed by Loki. Only the master of deceit himself was able to put on an air of injured innocence. The rest of the committee glared sullenly at their accuser. Loki, sensing the way things were going, strode forward.

"The mortal lies, Lord Zeus. Permit me to stop his blackguarding tongue before he—"

Zeus raised a mighty arm and Loki froze in midstride. "Silence. I will go into the matter later. In the meantime we shall hear the mortal out." He addressed Donnray again. "It is true that the committee headed by Loki was formed to observe and report on the progress of the final global war. Of the aiding or taking sides in such a struggle to hasten the matter, I know not, nor will I permit such unwarranted intervention. Such an action is against our own Prime Directives." Zeus paused, eyes glowing balefully as he turned to look at Juggernaut who squirmed on his throne and looked ahead stonily. Odin wore a look of honest puzzlement.

Then Zeus looked at Donnray and said, "You may proceed without interruption." His tremendous left arm was raised, fist clasp the flickering blue terror of a thunderbolt. The sight left no doubt in the minds of the spectators that he meant to have order in the room. As a belated gesture he snapped a disdainful finger and Loki came out of his stasis. The

discomfited chairman edged nervously back to his cohorts who were trying to melt into the crowd on one side of the throne area.

Hermes, who was still standing next to Donnray, gave a whispered "Phew" of exhaled relief, and then stiffened as he felt the mental impact of Donnray's thought.

"Relax, Hermes—things are going right, now."

Hermes flashed back in the instant of silence: "*A telepath! You are more than a mortal, then!*"

"Just part of my racial heritage. But enough of that, here I go."

The mental interchange had taken but a second and passed unnoticed as Donnray resumed speaking.

"My lord Zeus, members of the Supreme Council, Gods and goddesses, I will pass by the statements I have just made, for the moment. The whole work of the committee, stated and concealed, is valueless. A race that has developed space travel will not be destroyed by atomic warfare. Such a race cannot regress to primitive status—to a point where forgotten gods would be needed again."

Zeus stiffened and, forgetting his own edict against interruption, said, "That is an unsupported statement, Donnray. I find it hard to believe."

"I realise, my lord Zeus, that such words fall bluntly and without tact. However, you have but to look into my mind to know that I am sincere." He paused and met Zeus' awesome gaze with calmness as he opened his mind to him. After a moment Zeus sat back, his stern face relaxed into a new expression of friendliness.

"There has never been one case in recorded history throughout the Galaxy," continued Donnray, "of any civilization reaching the point of space travel and then turning back to a primitive way of life. True, many civilizations have risen and fallen a number of times, but never after they have crossed the threshold of flight to other worlds." He turned suddenly to face Loki. He wore a look of implacable sternness that partook of the aura of Zeus himself.

Loki found it hard to face the impact of those chilling grey eyes and his gaze slid away.

"You, Loki," Donnray intoned, "were surely aware of the missile development and the attendant achievement of a manned rocket to Earth's moon."

"Purely military tactics for the purpose of atomic warfare," Loki attempted to bluster.

"Not so," Donnray pressed on. "The colony that was set up on the moon is staffed chiefly with civilian scientific personnel."

Zeus turned his chilling regard on Loki. "We were not informed of this colony." The statement was an indictment.

In the charged silence that followed, the erstwhile committee members widened the distance between themselves and their chairman. Loki stared at the floor.

Donnray turned to Hermes and said clearly, "Hermes, please read the transcript of that last news flash you picked up a short time ago. I ask your pardon, my lords and ladies, but I recently provided Hermes with a small, universal band receiver as a personal gift for his many kindnesses to me and as a symbol of his duties as messenger to the gods."

Hermes caressed the small glittering case fastened to his girdle and cleared his throat proudly.

"We interrupt this programme to give you this most important bulletin," Hermes recited, loud and clear. "Word has just been received from Space Headquarters at the Moon Colony that the preliminary survey party has landed on Mars. The landing was made without injury to personnel or damage to the ship. We will continue to break in as further details are cleared from Muroc base. We now resume our broadcast featuring those merry lunar madcaps, the Crater Brothers, who will—" He stopped and smiled sheepishly as Zeus stared at him.

Zeus continued to stare unbelievably at Hermes, then shook his head. "There will be no living with him now." He conferred briefly with a subdued Juggernaut and a still bewildered Odin and then leaned forward. "The verdict is unanimous. It is hereby decreed that all gods, goddesses, and lesser entities, according to their own dictates, may apply for transfers."

A great wave of cheering swept the hall and Donnray bowed again and again. Hermes raised his arm in the time honoured salute of the victorious gladiator and strode airily around the cleared area in front of the three thrones, all of the wings on his helmet and sandals fluttering vigorously. The assorted elves and sprites rushed about with flagons and wine jars and Donnray found himself pledged on all sides with brimming goblets.

The next two days were hectic ones for the Deputy Director of Sector Eight of Deities, Inc. The pile of preliminary applications grew rapidly as Donnray conducted short interviews. He set up an office in the once-named "Nero Nook," but which now bore the jocular sign, "Immigration Office."

It was exhausting work, for gods tend to have names and personalities which can be a burden. There was Frigga, an over-bearing, over-bosomed female ; Huitzilopochtli, war god of the Aztecs ; Priapus, the garden god, decidedly reluctant to forsake his private playground bordering the black walk, but driven on by the horticultural possibilities of a virgin planet ; the Valkyries, signing up en masse with the provision that they go with Odin.

And there was Vulcan, Juno, Prometheus, Isis, Adonis, and the beautiful Venus. There was also Robin Hood and Davy Crockett, the latter deified through an electronic communication device, then dethroned by a score of invincible lawmen operating a mite farther to the west.

And then the gnomes, leprechauns and fairies were signed up in droves. Business was so good that Donnray had to make a trip to his spaceship in the glade to pick up more application forms.

Then it was finally over ; two hundred and forty-nine full fledged gods and one thousand and seventy-seven lesser deities—ninety percent of the total population of the Retired Gods' Home—had signed on the line for employment on other worlds. Donnray looked at the tally with satisfaction and made another trip over the black walk to his ship. He contacted sector headquarters and arranged for transportation.

When he returned to the great hall and announced that the transports would arrive the next morning, this news touched off a festive banquet. The gods were pleased at the early departure—pleased at the prospect of regaining lost power—but somewhat uneasy about leaving Earth, their agelong home. Fears were soon forgotten, however, as Bacchus began to dominate the festivities with his brimming flagons.

The celebration lasted until the three transports arrived—one for the proper gods and two for the lesser deities. Donnray directed the embarkation of the suddenly stilled and sober throng as a few of the stay-at-homes wandered about waving feebly.

He turned to Hermes who lingered at the embarkation point. "Well, old friend, we come to the parting of the ways."

Hermes looked momentarily saddened. "Will I not see you again, Donnray?"

"Quite possibly, Hermes. I do get around. I'll look you up sometime in the next hundred years or so. In fact, that's a promise."

Hermes was startled. "You live so long, then? What strange entities do you spring from, anyway?"

"Oh, we're mortals right enough but our lifespan averages out somewhat longer than the mortals of Earth."

Hermes shook his head in wonderment, caressing the tortoise in his arms. "What happened to Ishtar?" he asked impishly.

Donnray made a wry face. "That was a bit sticky. I finally got her off my neck by promising her a world where the men are all handsome and virile and the women, numerically less and rather plain. It took some doing."

"Hey, there goes Loki! I never thought he'd sign up."

Donnray shrugged. "We try to please. There are a couple of worlds where the dominate race is evolving from the serpent. Loki should be reasonably happy with all the intrigue and trickery they have shown themselves capable of already."

He clapped Hermes on the shoulder. "You're the last in line, my friend. Thank you for everything. I'll look you up one of these years—that's a solemn promise."

Hermes glided up the waiting ramp and the locks closed on his distant figure. The transports lifted silently and slipped over the surrounding mountains, carrying cargoes of irritation, inspiration, fear, and determination-producing seeds to be planted in the hotbeds of primitive civilizations.

Donnray stood for a moment amid the exotic flora and statuary, picked several low-hanging pomegranates, shouldered a small cask of Bacchus' parting gift and went to his ship. He set up the co-ordinates for home. Even the prospect of his five wives and thirty-six assorted children looked attractive. And if that got too hectic he was due for a vacation. Counting accumulated leave and postponements, he might squeeze out a short holiday of five years. Better than nothing.

—LeRoy B. Haugsrud and Dale R. Smith

A first story to our pages by a new American writer—and a fantasy plot that conjures nostalgic memories of the defunct Unknown Worlds

THE DRYAD-TREE

BY THOMAS BURNETT SWANN

“What a beautiful orange tree !” Mari said. Tall, luxuriantly foliated, it rose beside the one-storey white house like an amiable green genie.

“I have a special affection for that tree,” John said. “I used to climb it when I was a child and pretend it was a battleship.” John was an encyclopedia salesman. He travelled, and it was on one of his trips north that he had married Mari. She was having her first visit to his Florida home, which they were now to share with each other.

“A battleship ?” she repeated. “But the branches look so alive to be metal !”

“Oh, I outgrew the ship stage soon enough,” he explained. And then, as if afraid that she would question him further, he said : “Now, Mari, how about some refreshment ?”

While he went inside to make limeade, she pulled a lawn-chair under the shade of the orange tree. Almost at once the sun was shining directly in her face. She looked up at the tree, puzzled. It seemed incredible that the sun could have moved so quickly. The sun had *not* moved, she saw. A space had opened in the branches over head.

"Trying to get a tan?" John smiled when he came back with the limeade. "Come on over here in the shade."

She moved beside him. When he left her to take their glasses in the house, she found herself once again drenched by sunlight. Her ivory skin, embarrassingly subject to freckles, began to burn.

It was a little thing for the tree to deny her shade, but she was infuriated when, the next day, it began to pelt her with oranges. She could hardly walk out the front door without being hit by falling fruit. When she complained to John, he laughed and said that she must have angered a squirrel, or perhaps the fruit was overripe and had fallen by itself. She searched in vain for squirrels, and the fruit which struck her was more often green and hard than overripe, but she tried to convince herself that John was right. The night of the Autumn Dance, however—

It was to be the dance of the season. A newcomer in town, she had met almost no one. John was away much of the time and there few chances for her to make friends, since they had no neighbours for half a mile. The dance was her opportunity. Petite and pretty, with hair the colour of sunflowers, she could, on occasion, more than merely decorate; she could coruscate. The Autumn Dance, she intended, would be such an occasion.

"That's John's bride," she could hear his old friends murmur. "She makes the local girls look like fishwives!"

Such fancies had brightened the rainy afternoon before the dance. Fortunately, the rain stopped after supper and the sky cleared. She looked at the moon through a window as she stepped into her evening dress and thought that they could not have had a more luminous evening for the dance. Her gown was an Italian creation which she had bought on her honeymoon. The Flower Gown it was called, a composite of a hundred red cloth hibiscus flowers. She arranged a real hibiscus in her hair and dabbed a final touch of rouge on her cheeks.

"You look like a model," John said appreciatively. "I'll go ahead and get the car out so you won't have to walk in the wet."

She opened the front door and held out her hand to make sure there was no water dripping from the orange tree. Not a drop. She stepped under the branches.

"All ready, dear?" John called as he pulled the car up beside the tree.

"All ready," she answered gayly.

Suddenly there was a sinister stirring over her head and water poured onto her hair and ran down her shoulders. She felt her elaborately arranged curls go limp. The hibiscus drooped over her ear. The Flower-Gown clung damply, stickily to her body. She fled into the house with John behind her.

"But you can wear another dress," he comforted.

"I haven't another dress that's suitable," she wailed. "Anyway, my hair is ruined and so is my disposition. That tree will have to go."

"Don't be silly, Mari," he said. "It wasn't the tree's fault."

"Of course it was. She waited until I was right underneath and then she showered me." She expected him to protest that it was absurd to speak of the tree as feminine, yet that was how she felt about her, and she was in no mood to mince words.

"She never bothered *me*," he said.

"*She*," Mari cried. "Then you knew all along!"

"As a matter of fact, she was brought over from Italy," he said. "We have an old family story that she's a Dryad-tree. I don't say I *believe* the story, but I've always thought of her as a woman. When I was a youngster, I named her Chloe."

"Did you play in her branches when you grew up? We must chop her down at once."

"Suppose she really is a Dryad?"

"If she *is* a Dryad, that's all the more reason for getting rid of her. I don't intend to maintain a *menage a trois*."

"Calm yourself, Mari," he said. "If you don't like her, you can use the back door."

"You mean she stays?"

"I mean she stays." How handsome he looked! A mature Peter Pan with unmanageable hair the colour of hickory nuts. The Dryad had excellent taste.

The next morning, Mari decided to do some reading. "Dryad," she read in John's classical dictionary (he sold dictionaries along with encyclopedias). "A female deity among the ancient Greeks and Romans who was believed to inhabit a tree. Dryads frequently became enamored of mortal men."

Everything was clear at last. Chloe was enamored of John. During the years when he was growing up, he had given her his full attention. Now that she had to share him, she was

jealous. Just how jealous Mari did not know, but she had no intention of waiting to find out. She would retaliate at once.

John travelled every other week. She waited until he was two hundred miles out of town and then she summoned a gardener recommended by one of her few acquaintances.

"Heathcliffe," she said. "I want you to prune that orange tree. *Every leaf.*"

Heathcliffe shook his black head in protest.

"No arguments," she said. She had made up a story which she intended to repeat to John: a tree surgeon had warned of an insidious plant disease which could be avoided only by trimming the leaves. Reluctantly Heathcliffe went to work, while Mari watched with pleasure. She was exacting the cruelest revenge possible under the circumstances. She did not dare have Chloe chopped down, but she *could* deface her. What woman likes to be displayed in public without clothes, make-up, hair, and eye-lashes? How she would cringe when John saw her denuded of fruit and leaves! She well might wither and die, and Mari could blame the disease for everything.

She went to meet John the next week as his car pulled up the drive. She took only time to kiss him before she began to account for what had happened to his tree.

"And the tree-surgeon said the leaves simply *had* to go," she said. "They were harbouring little weevily things which would have got into the trunk."

All the while she talked, John was looking at Chloe. When she finished, he walked over to his tree and patted her on the trunk as if she were a pet dog who had lost her fur.

Not a word passed between them at lunch. John's eyes looked accusations and his silence spoke them, but he did not accuse her openly. After lunch he went outside and squeezed a kind of salve into Chloe's wounds. Afterwards, though her shade was quite gone, he set a chair in the usual place and pretended that she was unchanged.

The next morning he said to Mari: "I'm going away on another trip. If the *tree-surgeon* performs any more operations while I'm gone, I expect I'll have to get rid of him." He looked like an anarchist about to explode a bomb.

In the face of John's ultimatum, Mari had no intention of molesting Chloe further. But the tree decided to press her advantage.

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There was another rain-storm. Mari, alone in the house, lit a fire and sat down with a science fiction novel. The thunder of the elements made a good background for the story. Like the dangers in a book, she thought, the wind and lightning could not harm her ; indeed, their long-distance fury could be enjoyed.

Then there was a flash of lightning behind the house and she heard a limb fall onto the roof. In the space of a minute there was another flash and the lights went out. Simultaneously wind and rain swept down the chimney and the fire flickered low on the grate. She was frightened. She crouched in her chair, wishing heartily for John.

Now lightning began to strike around the house so quickly that she seemed to be encircled by a ring of fire. She fell onto the floor holding her ears to shut out the sound of thunder, and she wished for an extra pair of hands to keep the glare from her eyes. The closest bolt yet struck the back porch and dislodged dishes in the kitchen. Balls of fire danced through the living room and a clock fell from the mantle and shattered with a tremendous din of metal, glass, and china. The ruined works began to chime with incongruous sweetness.

Suddenly she realized that there was a pattern in the strikes. Lightning does not strike half a dozen times in a small radius unless something draws it there. What attracts lightning ? Rods and towers and tall trees—tall trees ? Of course ! Chloe was using the storm to get rid of her. What could be more final than electrocution ?

Time was short. John had taken the car. She could never hope to escape on foot. There was only one refuge. She ran out the front door and threw her arms around Chloe. The tree could not strike Mari with lightning without injury to herself, and, already leafless, Chloe could ill afford to lose her limbs. She might of course, be capable of mischief more devilish, but Mari had to take that chance.

She clung to Chloe as tightly as if the tree were a lover. "Please, Chloe," she begged. "Please leave me alone. I'm sorry I had your leaves cut off."

Was it the storm that made the tree shiver in her embrace, the stirring of the wind or the vibrations of the thunder ? At any rate, the lightning began to strike at a reassuring distance and the thunder no longer deafened. Mari waited until the rain had stopped and the moon had risen through the clouds before she

returned to the house. She did not bother to clean up the ruins of the clock or the dishes in the kitchen ; she just lit a candle and found her way to bed, where, chilled and tired but unspeakably grateful, she fell asleep.

Chloe had failed to destroy her. She recalled the curious sensation of feeling the tree shudder in her arms. It might, of course, have been a shudder of hatred. But suppose it was an unwilling response to the closeness of her embrace ? The classical dictionary had said that Dryads frequently loved mortal men, but surely they were capable of other kinds of love than sensual. Perhaps Chloe had an overwhelming need for affection, whether it was given by a man, a woman, or a child. She had turned to John when, as a boy, he had climbed among her branches. When he grew up, she continued to love him and dreaded losing out to his new wife. What would happen, she wondered, if *I* tried to become her friend ? Would she not, perhaps, forget her grudge against me ?

The next morning she surveyed the stubbed branches which she had helped to ruin ; they were beginning to put forth greenery. She caressed a sprout as if it were the rarest of flowers.

"What a lovely green," she said. Then she looked up at the branches. "I want us to be friends, Chloe. Do you think we can be ?"

The tree gave no sign. Mari must first prove her changed intentions, and that was exactly what she set about to do.

When John returned from his latest trip, he was amazed at the transformation in Chloe. Mari had watered her faithfully and fed her just enough fertilizer to nourish the roots without burning them. She had set up a bird-feeding platform in her branches, and cardinals, thrushes, and humming birds congregated as if she were the lushest tree in the yard. Chloe looked like a maiden who was recovering from typhoid fever. Bloom showed everywhere, with the promise of a new beauty to equal or surpass the old. John was suspicious at first ; he suspected another plot, an attempt perhaps to burn up the tree's roots with too hearty a dose of fertilizer. But gradually Mari convinced him of her good intentions.

The days passed and Chloe had as yet shown no sign that Mari was forgiven ; on the other hand, she had worked no recent mischief. It was almost Christmas now, and neighbours were placing wreaths in their windows and Santa Clauses in

their yards. Mari ransacked the attic and found an immense box of ornaments which John's parents had bought when he was a child. Many of them bore Swiss or German trademarks and they were made with a love and precision rarely lavished on toys today. She carried the box outdoors and began to decorate Chloe.

On her highest branch she placed not a star nor an angel, which seemed a bit too Christian for a Roman Dryad, but a little wooden Pan, with goat-legs and a reed pipe. He looked down onto the lower branches with a wise, kindly expression, and she could almost imagine that he was piping them into life. From Pan to the lowermost branches, the strung popcorn and gingerbread men and electric lights made like snow-drops. She hung deer and bears and rabbits on twigs, and hid elves in not-too-secret recesses. Finally she set the chalets of a miniature Swiss village around Chloe's foot and sprinkled silver-blue dust over everything so that tree and village would glisten with cheerful winter.

People who passed the house began to stop their cars. If there were children, Mari invited them to pluck gingerbread men off Chloe's branches. Not a child so much as touched the tree unless he asked permission. Then his fingers would move lightly, caressingly, as if he half expected the gingerbread men to tremble beneath his touch.

When darkness came, she lit Chloe with electric lights, and the tree shone with a red, blue, and green radiance which was breathtaking. Artificial, yes, but what women does not use artifice? Mari placed her hand on the trunk and felt the familiar shudder, but stronger than on the night of the storm. She threw her arms around Chloe, this time not in fear but affection.

It was spring, and John and Mari sat drinking limeade in the yard, under Chloe's orange-laden branches.

"That darn tree," he said. "Not a particle of shade since you had had her leaves trimmed."

"But John," she said. "That was months ago. She's grown them all back. I have plenty of shade."

"I never did like the tree," he grumbled. "Don't you think we ought to have her cut down?"

"Chloe stays as long as I do," she cried indignantly.

"I had better get used to the back door," John grinned.

Editorial . . .

I have just finished reading a very fine baker's dozen occult tales devoted to the Devil in *Best Black Magic Stories* (Faber and Faber, London, 16/-) edited by that discerning Scottish author John Keir Cross and highly commend the book to all the hardy stalwarts who constantly bemoan the demise of the macabre short story in modern publishing. Mr. Cross's approach to his subject has been by way of 'ancient and modern writers' and a fascinating job he has done with his selection.

Among the moderns he has John Collier's "The Lady On The Grey," ; Ted Sturgeon's "A Way of Thinking," ; Dennis Wheatley's "The Snake," ; John Wyndham's "More Spinned Against . . ." ; and Ray Bradbury's "Homecoming," while the leavening of older "masters" is upheld by M. R. James's "Casting the Runes," ; Richard Barham's "A Room in Leyden," ; "The Haunted and the Haunters," by Lord Lytton, and that shuddery piece of J. K. Huysman's "The Black Mass." There are other stories by Margaret Irwin, D. K. Broster, R. Ellis Roberts and Mr. Cross himself.

The stories themselves brought back nostalgic memories of the heyday of *Weird Tales* in the 1930's when it was under the editorship of Farnsworth Wright and the many great writers of the off-trail and macabre he introduced to the the reading public : Lovecraft, Howard, Derleth, Wandrei, Clark Ashton Smith, Keller—and from whose pages rose such notables as Bradbury, Williamson, Hamilton, Bloch, Leiber, Catherine Moore and many other modern writers whose names appear regularly in the science fiction magazines.

It also reminded me that there are no longer any magazines devoted to the weird and macabre being published either in Great Britain or USA, a sad but true state of affairs ; that if such magazines have failed there is apparently no reading public for such stories. The paradox is that at the moment there are far more collections of weird stories being published in bound or paper form than there has been at any time during the past ten years. Proving that on both sides of the Atlantic there is still a reading audience tucked away somewhere. In fact, there always has been for over one hundred years

(John Keir Cross's earliest selections are the Barham, 1840 and the Lytton 1859).

Is today's sustained interest in macabre stories an offshoot of the spate of Horror movies with which we are being deluged? I doubt it. Even in this enlightened scientific age modern Man (and woman) still has a tendency to look over his shoulder on a dark night *just in case*.

However, much as I personally deplore the passing of the weird story magazines, there is no intention of moving *Science Fantasy* towards that medium. Ten years ago, when this magazine was first published, no-one quite knew which way the story trail would lead—leaning towards science fiction, fantasy or weird fiction, or a mixture of each. From the material submitted *Science Fantasy* began to build a personality of its own, ignoring the weird (we were flooded with ghost stories at one time) and concentrating on an overlapping policy of off-trail s-f and fantasy.

That the policy was the correct one is proved by the fact that we are still publishing (in fact we are now the only magazine of its kind in the world) and that this magazine continues to pick up reprint credits year after year. Four years out of five *Science Fantasy* has been represented in Dell's *S-F: Year's Best*—the latest story to be chosen for this year's selection by Judith Merril is Jim Ballard's "The Sound Sweep," from our January issue (No. 39). This factor intrigues me immensely when considering that our monthly companion, *New Worlds Science Fiction*, which won a Hugo Award at the 15th World S-F Convention in London in 1957, has never done better than Honorable Mentions.

Many other stories from our pages appear in various collections, especially those by Brian W. Aldiss. Basically, anthologies and short story collections are chosen from previously published material *in magazine form* (rare indeed is the all-new collection written especially for a new publication).

On the law of averages *Science Fantasy* is due for still further credits in the foreseeable future.

John Carnell

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