

Title : Leg. Forst.
Author : Clifford D. Simak
Original copyright year: 1958
Genre : science fiction
Comments : to my knowledge, this is the only available e-text of this book
Source : scanned and OCR-read from a paperback edition with Xerox TextBridge Pro 9.0,
proofread in MS Word 2000.
Date of e-text : February 14, 2000
Prepared by : Anada Sucka

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Leg. Forst.

Clifford D. Simak

When it was time for the postman to have come and gone, old Clyde Packer quit working on his stamps and went into the bathroom to comb his snow-white hair and beard. It was an everlasting bother, but there was no way out of it. He'd he sure to meet some of his neighbors going down and coming back and they were a snoopy lot. He felt sure that they talked about him; not that he cared, of course. And the Widow Foshay, just across the hall, was the worst one of them all.

Before going out, he opened a drawer in the big desk in the middle of the cluttered living room, upon the top of which was piled an indescribable array of litter, and found the tiny box from Unuk al Hay. From the box he took a pinch of leaf and tucked it in his cheek.

He stood for a moment, with the drawer still open, and savored the flavorful satisfaction of the taste within his mouth - not quite like peppermint, nor like whiskey, either, but with some taste akin to both and with some other tang that belonged entirely to itself. It was nothing like another man had ever tasted and he suspected that it might be habit-forming, although PugAlNash had never informed him that it was.

Perhaps, he told himself, even if Pug should so try to inform him, he could not make it out, for the Unukian's idea of how Earth's language should be written, and the grammar thereof, was a wonder to behold and could only be believed by someone who had tried to decipher one of his flowery little notes.

The box, he saw, was nearly empty, and he hoped that the queer, faithful, almost wistful little correspondent would not fail him now. But there was, he told himself, no reason to believe he would; PugAlNash, in a dozen years, had not failed him yet. Regularly another tiny box of leaf arrived when the last one was quite finished, accompanied by a friendly note - and all franked with the newest stamps from Unuk.

Never a day too soon, nor a day too late, but exactly on the dot when the last of the leaf was finished. As if PugAlNash might know, by some form of intelligence quite unknown to Earth, when his friend on Earth ran out of the leaf.

A solid sort, Clyde Packer told himself. Not humanoid, naturally, but a very solid sort.

And he wondered once again what Pug might actually be like. He always had thought of him as little, but he had no idea, of course, whether he was small or large or what form his body took. Unuk was one of those planets where it was impossible for an Earthman to go, and contact and commerce with the planet had been accomplished, as was the case on so many other worlds, by an intermediary people.

And he wondered, too, what Pug did with the cigars that he sent him in exchange for the little boxes of leaf - eat them, smoke them, smell them, roll in them or rub them in his hair? If he had

hair, of course.

He shook his head and closed the door and went out into the hall, being doubly sure that his door was locked behind him. He would not put it past his neighbors, especially the Widow Foshay, to sneak in behind his back.

The hall was empty and he was glad of that. He rang almost stealthily for the elevator, hoping that his luck would hold.

It didn't.

Down the hall came the neighbor from next door. He was the loud and flashy kind, and without any encouragement at all, he'd slap one on the back.

"Good morning, Clyde!" he bellowed happily from afar.

"Good morning, Mr. Morton," Packer replied, somewhat icily. Morton had no right to call him Clyde. No one ever called him Clyde, except sometimes his nephew, Anton Camper, called him Uncle Clyde, although he mostly called him Unk. And Tony, Packer reminded himself, was a worthless piece - always involved in some fancy scheme, always talking big, but without much to show for it. And besides, Tony was crooked - as crooked as a cat.

Like myself, Packer thought, exactly like myself. Not like the most of the rest of them these days, who measured to no more than just loud-talking boobies.

In my day, he told himself with fond remembrance, _I could have skinned them all and they'd never know it until I twitched their hides slick off_.

"How is the stamp business this morning?" yelled Morton, coming up and clapping Packer soundly on the back.

"I must remind you, Mr. Morton, that I am not in the stamp business," Packer told him sharply. "I am interested in stamps and I find it most absorbing and I could highly recommend it -"

"But that is not what I meant," explained Morton, rather taken aback "I didn't mean you dealt in stamps..."

"As a matter of fact, I do," said Packer, "to a limited extent. But not as a regular thing and certainly not as a regular business. There are certain other collectors who are aware of my connections and sometimes seek me out -"

"That's the stuff!" boomed Morton, walloping him on the back again in sheer good fellowship. "If you have the right connections, you get along okay. That works in any line. Now, take mine, for instance..."

The elevator arrived and rescued Packer.

In the lobby, he headed for the desk.

"Good morning, Mr. Packer," said the clerk, handing him some letters. "There is a bag for you and it runs slightly heavy. Do you want me to get someone to help you with it?"

"No, thank you," Packer said. "I am sure that I can manage."

The clerk hoisted the bag atop the counter and Packer seized it and let it fall to the floor. It was fairly large - it weighed, he judged, thirty pounds or so - and the shipping tag, he saw with a thrill of anticipation, was almost covered with stamps of such high denominations they quite took his breath away.

He looked at the tag and saw that his name and address were printed with painful precision, as if the Earthian alphabet was something entirely incomprehensible to the sender. The return address was a mere jumble of dots and hooks and dashes that made no sense, but seemed somewhat familiar, although Packer at the moment was unable to tell exactly what they were. The stamps, he saw, were Iota Cancri, and he had seen stamps such as them only once before in his entire life. He stood

there, mentally calculating what their worth might be.

He tucked the letters under his arm and picked up the bag. It was heavier than he had expected and he wished momentarily that he had allowed the clerk to find someone to carry it for him. But he had said that he would carry it and he couldn't very well go back and say he'd rather not. After all, he assured himself, he wasn't quite that old and feeble yet.

He reached the elevator and let the bag down and stood facing the grillwork, waiting for the cage.

A birdlike voice sounded from behind him and he shivered at it, for he recognized the voice - it was the Widow Foshay.

"Why, Mr. Packer," said the Widow, gushingly, "how pleasant to find you waiting here."

He turned around. There was nothing else for it; he couldn't just stand there, with his back to her.

"And so loaded down!" the Widow sympathized. "Here, do let me help you."

She snatched the letters from him.

"There," she said triumphantly, "poor man; I can carry these."

He could willingly have choked her, but he smiled instead. It was a somewhat strained and rather ghastly smile, but he did the best he could.

"How lucky for me," he told her, "that you came along. I'd never have made it."

The veiled rebuke was lost on her. She kept on bubbling at him.

"I'm going to make beef broth for lunch," she said, "and I always make too much. Could I ask you in to share it?"

"Impossible," he told her in alarm. "I am very sorry, but this is my busy day. I have all these, you see." And he motioned at the mail she held and the bag he clutched. He whuffled through his whiskers at her like an irate walrus, but she took no notice.

"How exciting and romantic it must be," she gushed, "getting all these letters and bags and packages from all over the galaxy. From such strange places and from so far away. Some day you must explain to me about stamp collecting."

"Madam," he said a bit stiffly, "I've worked with stamps for more than twenty years and I'm just barely beginning to gain an understanding of what it is all about. I would not presume to explain to someone else."

She kept on bubbling.

Damn it all, he thought, _is there no way to quiet the blasted woman?_

Prying old biddy, he told himself, once again whuffling his whiskers at her. She'd spend the next three days running all about and telling everyone in the entire building about her strange encounter with him and what a strange old coot he was. "Getting all those letters from all those alien places," she would say, "and bags and packages as well. You can't tell me that stamps are the only things in which he's interested. There is more to it than that; you can bet your bottom dollar on it."

At his door she reluctantly gave him back his letters.

"You won't reconsider on that broth?" she asked him, "It's more than just ordinary broth. I pride myself on it. A special recipe."

"I'm sorry," he said.

He unlocked his door and started to open it. She remained standing there.

"I'd like to invite you in," he told her, lying like a gentleman, "but I simply can't. The place is a bit upset."

Upset was somewhat of an understatement.

Safely inside, he threaded his way among piles of albums, boxes, bags and storage cases scattered everywhere.

He finally reached the desk and dropped the bag beside it. He leafed through the letters and one was from Dahib and another was from the Lyraen system and the third from Muphrid, while the remaining one was an advertisement from a concern out on Mars.

He sat down in the massive, upholstered chair behind his desk and surveyed the room.

Someday he'd have to get it straightened out, he told himself. Undoubtedly there was a lot of junk he could simply throw away and the rest of it should be boxed and labeled so that he could lay his hands upon it. It might be, as well, a good idea to make out a general inventory sheet so that he'd have some idea what he had and what it might be worth.

Although, he thought, the value of it was not of so great a moment.

He probably should specialize, he thought. That was what most collectors did. The galaxy was much too big to try to collect it all. Even back a couple of thousand years ago when all the collectors had to worry about were the stamps of Earth, the field even then had become so large and so unwieldy and so scattered that specialization had become the thing.

But what would a man specialize in, if he should decide to restrict his interest? Perhaps just the stamps from one particular planet or one specific system? Perhaps only stamps from beyond a certain distance - say, five hundred light-years? Or covers, perhaps? A collection of covers with postmarks and cancellations showing the varying intricacies of letter communication throughout the depths of space, from star to star, could be quite interesting.

And that was the trouble with it - it all was so interesting. A man could spend three full lifetimes at it and still not reach the end of it,

In twenty years, he told himself, a man could amass a lot of material if he applied himself. And he had applied himself; he had worked hard at it and enjoyed every minute of it, and had become in certain areas, he thought with pride, somewhat of an expert. On occasion he had written articles for the philatelic press, and scarcely a week went by that some man well-known in the field did not drop by for a chat or to seek his aid in a knotty problem.

There was a lot of satisfaction to be found in stamps, he told himself with apologetic smugness. Yes, sir, a great deal of satisfaction.

But the mere collection of material was only one small part of it - a sort of starting point. Greater than all the other facets of it were the contacts that one made. For one had to make contacts - especially out in the farther reaches of the galaxy. Unless one wanted to rely upon the sorry performance of the rascally dealers, who offered only what was easy to obtain, one must establish contacts. Contacts with other collectors who might be willing to trade stamps with one; contacts with lonely men in lonely outposts far out on the rim, where the really exotic material was most likely to turn up, and who would be willing to watch for it and save it and send it on to one at a realistic price; with far-out institutions that made up mixtures and job lots in an attempt to eke out a miserly budget voted by the home communities.

There was a man by the name of Marsh out in the Coonskin system who wanted no more than the latest music tapes from Earth for the material that he sent along. And the valiant priest at the missionary station on barren Agustron who wanted old tobacco tins and empty bottles which, for a most peculiar reason, had high value on that topsy-turvy world. And among the many others, Earthmen and aliens alike, there was always PugAlNash.

Packer rolled the wad of leaf across his tongue, sucking out the last faded dregs of its

tantalizing flavor.

If a man could make a deal for a good-sized shipment of the leaf, he thought, he could make a fortune on it. Packaged in small units, like packs of gum, it would go like hot cakes here on Earth. He had tried to bring up the subject with Pug, but had done no more than confuse and perplex the good Unukian who, for some unfathomable reason, could not conceive of any commerce that went beyond the confines of simple barter to meet the personal needs of the bargaining individuals.

The doorbell chimed and Packer went to answer it.

It was Tony Camper.

"Hi, Uncle Clyde," said Tony breezily.

Packer held the door open grudgingly.

"Since you are here," he said, "you might as well come in."

Tony stepped in and tilted his hat back on his head. He looked the apartment over with an appraising eye.

"Some day, Unk," he said, "you should get this place shoveled out. I don't see how you stand it."

"I manage it quite well," Packer informed him tartly. "Some day I'll get around to straightening up a bit."

"I should hope you do," said Tony.

"My boy," said Packer, with a trace of pride, "I think that I can say, without fear of contradiction, that I have one of the finest collections of out-star stamps that anyone can boast. Some day, when I get them all in albums -"

"You'll never make it, Unk. It'll just keep piling up. It comes in faster than you can sort it out."

He reached out a foot and nudged the bag beside the desk.

"Like this," he said. "This is a new one, isn't it?"

"It just came in," admitted Packer. "Haven't gotten around as yet to figuring out exactly where it's from."

"Well, that is fine," said Tony. "Keep on having fun. You'll outlive us all."

"Sure I will," said Packer testily. "What is it that you want?"

"Not a thing, Unk. Just dropped in to say hello and to remind you you're coming up to Hudson's to spend the weekend with us. Ann insisted that I drop around and nudge you. The kids have been counting the days -"

"I would have remembered it," lied Packer, who had quite forgotten it.

"I could drop around and pick you up. Three this afternoon?"

"No, Tony, don't bother. I'll catch a stratocab. I couldn't leave that early. I have things to do."

"I bet you have," said Tony.

He moved toward the door.

"You won't forget," he cautioned.

"No, of course I won't," snapped Packer.

"Ann would be plenty sore if you did. She's fixing everything you like."

Packer grunted at him.

"Dinner at seven," said Tony cheerfully.

"Sure, Tony. I'll be there."

"See you, Unk," said Tony, and was gone. _Young whippersnapper_, Packer told himself. _Wonder what he's up to now. Always got a new deal cooking, never quite making out on it. Just keeps scraping along._

He stumped back to the desk.

Figures he'll be getting my money when I die, he thought. _The little that I have. Well, I'll fool him. I'll spend every cent of it. I'll manage to live long enough for that._

He sat down and picked up one of the letters, slit it open with his pocketknife and dumped out its contents on the one small bare spot on the desk in front of him,

He snapped on the desk lamp and pulled it close. He bent above the stamps.

Pretty fair lot, he thought. That one there from Rho Geminorum XII, or was it XVI, was a fine example of the modern classic - designed with delicacy and imagination, engraved with loving care and exactitude, laid on paper of the highest quality, printed with the highest technical precision.

He hunted for his stamp tongs and failed to find them. He opened the desk drawer and rummaged through the tangled rat's nest he found inside it. He got down on his hands and knees and searched beneath the desk.

He didn't find the tongs.

He got back, puffing, into his chair, and sat there angrily.

Always losing tongs, he thought. _I bet this is the twentieth pair I've lost. Just can't keep track of them, damn 'em!_

The door chimed.

"Well, come on in!" Packer yelled in wrath.

A mouse-like little man came in and closed the door gently behind him. He stood timidly just inside, twirling his hat between his hands.

"You Mr. Packer, sir?"

"Yes, sure I am," yelled Packer. "Who did you expect to find here?"

"Well, sir," said the man, advancing a few careful steps into the room, "I am Jason Pickering. You may have heard of me."

"Pickering?" said Packer. "Pickering? Oh, sure, I've heard of you. You're the one who specializes in Polaris."

"That is right," admitted Pickering, mincing just a little. "I am gratified that you -"

"Not at all," said Packer, getting up to shake his hand. "I'm the one who's honored."

He bent and swept two albums and three shoe boxes off a chair. One of the shoe boxes tipped over and a mound of stamps poured out

"Please have a chair, Mr. Pickering," Packer said majestically.

Pickering, his eyes popping slightly, sat down gingerly on the edge of the swept-clean chair.

"My, my," he said, his eyes taking in the litter that filled the apartment, "you seem to have a lot of stuff here. Undoubtedly, however, you can lay your hands on anything you want."

"Not a chance," said Packer, sitting down again. "I have no idea whatsoever what I have."

Pickering tittered. "Then, sir, you may well be in for some wonderful surprises."

"I'm never surprised at anything," said Packer loftily.

"Well, on to business," said Pickering. "I do not mean to waste your time. I was wondering if it were possible you might have Polaris 17b on cover. It's quite an elusive number, even off cover, and I know of not a single instance of one that's tied to cover. But someone was telling me that perhaps you might have one tucked away."

"Let me see, now," said Packer. He leaned back in his chair and leafed catalogue pages rapidly through his mind. And suddenly he had it - Polaris 17b - a tiny stamp, almost a midget stamp, bright blue with a tiny crimson dot in the lower left-hand corner and its design a mass of lacy scrollwork.

"Yes," he said, opening his eyes, "I believe I may have one. I seem to remember, years ago..."

Pickering leaned forward, hardly breathing.

"You mean you actually..."

"I'm sure it's here somewhere," said Packer, waving his hand vaguely at the room.

"If you find it," offered Pickering, "I'll pay ten thousand for it."

"A strip of five," said Packer, "as I remember it. Out of Polaris VII to Betelgeuse XIII by way of - I don't seem to remember by way of where."

"A strip of five!"

"As I remember it. I might be mistaken."

"Fifty thousand," said Pickering, practically frothing at the mouth. "Fifty thousand, if you find it."

Packer yawned. "For only fifty thousand, Mr. Pickering, I wouldn't even look."

"A hundred, then."

"I might think about it."

"You'll start looking right away? You must have some idea."

"Mr. Pickering, it has taken me all of twenty years to pile up all the litter that you see and my memory's not too good. I'd have not the slightest notion where to start."

"Set your price," urged Pickering. "What do you want for it?"

"If I find it," said Packer, "I might consider a quarter million. That is, if I find it."

"You'll look?"

"I'm not sure. Some day I might stumble on it. Some day I'll have to clean up the place. I'll keep an eye out for it."

Pickering stood up stiffly.

"You jest with me," he said.

Packer waved a feeble hand, "I never jest," he said.

Pickering moved toward the door.

Packer heaved himself from the chair. "I'll let you out," he said.

"Never mind. And thank you very much."

Packer eased himself back into the chair and watched the man go out.

He sat there, trying to remember where the Polaris cover might be buried. And finally gave up. It had been so long ago.

He hunted some more for the tongs, but he didn't find them.

He'd have to go out first thing in the morning and buy another pair. Then he remembered that he wouldn't be here in the morning. He'd be up on Hudson's Bay, at Tony's summer place.

It did beat hell, he thought, how he could manage to lose so many tongs.

He sat for a long time, letting himself sink into a sort of suspended state, not quite asleep, nor yet entirely awake, and he thought, quite vaguely and disjointedly, of many curious things.

But mostly about adhesive postage stamps and how, of all the ideas exported by the Earth, the idea of the use of stamps had caught on most quickly and, in the last two thousand years, had spread to the far corners of the galaxy.

It was getting hard, he told himself, to keep track of all the stamps, even of the planets that were issuing stamps. There were new ones popping up all the blessed time. A man must keep everlastingly on his toes to keep tab on all of them.

There were some funny stamps, he thought. Like the ones from Menkalinen that used smells to spell out their values. Not five cent stamps or five dollar stamps or hundred dollar stamps, but one stamp that smelled something like a pasture rose for the local mail and another stamp that had the odor of ripe old cheese for the system mail and yet another with a stink that could knock out a human at forty paces distance for the interstellar service. And the Algeiban issues that shifted into colors beyond the range of human vision - and worst of all, with the values based on that very shift of color. And that famous classic issue put out, quite illegally, of course, by the Leonidian pirates who had used, instead of paper, the well-tanned, thin-scraped hides of human victims who had fallen into their clutches.

He sat nodding in the chair, listening to a clock hidden somewhere behind the litter of the room, ticking loudly in the silence.

It made a good life, he told himself, a very satisfactory life. Twenty years ago when Myra had died and he had sold his interest in the export company, he'd been ready to curl up and end it all, ready to write off his life as one already lived. But today, he thought, he was more absorbed in stamps than he'd ever been in the export business and it was a blessing - that was what it was, a blessing.

He sat there and thought kindly of his stamps, which had rescued him from the deep wells of loneliness, which had given back his life and almost made him young again.

And then he fell asleep.

The door chimes wakened him and he stumbled to the door, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

The Widow Foshay stood in the hall, with a small kettle in her hands. She held it out to him.

"I thought, poor man, he will enjoy this," she said. "It's some of the beef broth that I made. And I always make so much. It's so hard to cook for one."

Packer took the kettle.

"It was kind of you," he mumbled.

She looked at him sharply.

"You are sick," she said.

She stepped through the door, forcing him to step back, forcing her way in.

"Not sick," he protested limply. "I fell asleep, that's all. There's nothing wrong with-me."

She reached out a pudgy hand and held it on his forehead.

"You have a fever," she declared. "You are burning..."

"There's nothing wrong with me," he bellowed. "I tell you, I just fell asleep, is all."

She turned and hustled out into the room, threading her way among the piled-up litter. Watching her, he thought: My God, she finally got into the place! How can I throw her out?

"You come over here and sit right down," she ordered him. "I don't suppose you have a thermometer."

He shook his head, defeated.

"Never had any need of one," he said. "Been healthy all my life."

She screamed and jumped and whirled around and headed for the door at an awkward gallop. She stumbled across a pile of boxes and fell flat upon her face, then scrambled, screeching, to her feet and shot out of the door.

Packer slammed the door behind her and stood looking, with some fascination, at the kettle in his hand. Despite all the ruckus, he'd spilled not a single drop.

But what had caused the widow...

Then he saw it - a tiny mouse running on the floor. He hoisted the kettle in a grave salute.

"Thanks, my friend," he said.

He made his way to the table in the dining room and found a place where he could put down the kettle.

Mice, he thought. There had been times when he had suspected that he had them - nibbled cheese on the kitchen shelf, scurryings in the night - and he had worried some about them making nests in the material he had stacked all about the place.

But mice had a good side to them, too, he thought.

He looked at his watch and it was almost five o'clock and he had an hour or so before he had to catch a cab and he realized now that somehow he had managed to miss lunch. So he'd have some of the broth and while he was doing that he'd look over the material that was in the bag.

He lifted some of the piled-up boxes off the table and set them on the floor so he had some room to empty the contents of the bag.

He went to the kitchen and got a spoon and sampled the broth. It was more than passing good. It was still warm and he had no doubt that the kettle might do the finish of the table top no good, but that was something one need not worry over.

He hauled the bag over to the table and puzzled out the strangeness of the return address. It was the new script they'd started using a few years back out in the Bootes system and it was from a rather shady gentle-being from one of the Cygnian stars who appreciated, every now and then, a case of the finest Scotch.

Packer, hefting the bag, made a mental note to ship him two, at least.

He opened up the bag and upended it and a mound of covers flowed out on the table.

Packer tossed the bag into a corner and sat down contentedly. He sipped at the broth and began going slowly through the pile of covers. They were, by and large, magnificent. Someone had taken the trouble to try to segregate them according to systems of their origin and had arranged them in little packets, held in place by rubber bands.

There was a packet from Rasalhague and another from Cheleb and from Nunki and Kaus Borealis and from many other places.

And there was a packet of others he did not recognize at all. It was a fairly good-sized packet with twenty-five or thirty covers in it and all the envelopes, he saw, were franked with the same stamps - little yellow fellows that had no discernible markings on them - just squares of yellow paper, rather thick and rough. He ran his thumb across one and he got the sense of crumbling, as if the paper were soft and chalky and were abrading beneath the pressure of his thumb.

Fascinated, he pulled one envelope from beneath the rubber band and tossed the rest of the packet to one side.

He shambled to his desk and dug frantically in the drawer and came back with a glass. He held it above the stamp and peered through it and he had been right - there were no markings on the stamp. It was a mere yellow square of paper that was rather thick and pebbly, as if it were made up of tiny grains of sand.

He straightened up and spooned broth into his mouth and frantically flipped the pages of his mental catalogue, but he got no clue. So far as he could recall, he'd never seen or heard of that particular stamp before.

He examined the postmarks with the glass and some of them he could recognize and there were others that he couldn't, but that made no difference, for he could look them up, at a later time, in one of the postmark and cancellation handbooks. He got the distinct impression, however, that the planet, or planets, of origin must lie Libra-ward, for all the postmarks he could recognize trended in that direction.

He laid the glass away and turned his full attention to the broth, being careful of his whiskers. Whiskers, he reminded himself, were no excuse for one to be a sloppy eater.

The spoon turned in his hand at that very moment and some of the broth spilled down his beard and some splattered on the table, but the most of it landed on the cover with the yellow stamp.

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and tried to wipe the cover clean, but it wouldn't wipe. The envelope was soggy and the stamp was ruined with the grease and he said a few choice cusswords, directed at his clumsiness.

Then he took the dripping cover by one corner and hunted until he found the wastebasket and dropped the cover in it.

He was glad to get back from the weekend at Hudson's Bay.

Tony was a fool, he thought, to sink so much money in such a fancy place. He had no more prospects than rabbit and his high-pressure deals always seemed to peter out, but he still went on talking big and hung onto that expensive summer place. Maybe, Packer thought, that was the way to do it these days; maybe if you could fool someone into thinking you were big, you might have better chance of getting into something big. Maybe that was the way it worked, but he didn't know.

He stopped in the lobby to pick up his mail, hoping there might be a package from PugAlNash. In the excitement of leaving for the weekend, he'd forgotten to take along the box of leaf and three days without it had impressed upon him how much he had come to rely upon it. Remembering how

low his supply was getting he became a little jittery to think that more might not be forthcoming.

There was a batch of letters, but no box from Pug.

And he might have known, he told himself, that there wouldn't be, for the box never came until he was entirely out. At first, he recalled, he wondered by what prophetic insight Pug might have known when the leaf was gone, how he could have gauged the shipping time to have it arrive exactly when there was need of it. By now he no longer thought about it, for it was one of those unbelievable things it does no good to think about.

"Glad to have you back," the clerk told him cheerfully. "You had a good weekend, Mr. Packer?"

"Tolerable," growled Packer, grumpily, heading for the elevator.

Before he reached it, he was apprehended by Elmer Lang, the manager of the building.

"Mr. Packer," he whinnied, "I'd like to talk to you."

"Well, go ahead and talk."

"It's about the mice, Mr. Packer."

"What mice?"

"Mrs. Foshay tells me there are mice in your apartment."

Packer drew himself up to the fullness of his rather dumpy height.

"They are your mice, Lang," he said. "You get rid of them."

Lang wrung his hands. "But how can I, Mr. Packer? It's the way you keep your place. All that litter in there. You've got to clean it up."

"That litter, I'll have you know, sir, is probably one of the most unique stamp collections in the entire galaxy. I've gotten behind a little in keeping it together, true, but I will not have you call it litter."

"I could have Miles, the caretaker, help you get it straightened out."

"I tell you, sir," said Packer, "the only one who could help me is one trained in philately. Does your caretaker happen to be -"

"But, Mr. Packer," Lang pleaded, "all that paper and all those boxes are nesting places for them. I can do nothing about the mice unless I can get in there and get some of it cleared away."

"Cleared away!" exploded Packer. "Do you realize, sir, what you are talking of? Somewhere hidden in that vast stock of material, is a certain cover - to you, sir, an envelope with stamps and postmarks on it - for which I have been offered a quarter million dollars if I ever turn it up. And that is one small piece of all the material I have there. I ask you, Lang, is that the sort of stuff that you clear away?"

"But, Mr. Packer, I cannot allow it to go on. I must insist -"

The elevator arrived and Packer stalked into it haughtily, leaving the manager standing in the lobby, twisting at his hands.

Packer whuffled his moustache at the operator.

"Busybody," he said, "What was that, sir?"

"Mrs. Foshay, my man. She's a busybody."

"I do believe," said the operator' judiciously, "that you may be entirely right."

Packer hoped the corridor would be empty and it was. He unlocked his door and stepped inside.

A bubbling noise stopped him in his tracks.

He stood listening, unbelieving, just a little frightened.

The bubbling noise went on and on.

He stepped cautiously out into the room and as he did he saw it.

The wastebasket beside the desk was full of a bubbling yellow stuff that in several places had run down the sides and formed puddles on the floor.

Packer stalked the basket, half prepared to turn and run.

But nothing happened. The yellowness in the basket simply kept on bubbling.

It was a rather thick and gooey mess, not frothy, and the bubbling was no more than a noise that it was making, for in the strict sense of the word, he saw, it was not bubbling.

Packer sidled closer and thrust out a hand toward the basket. It did not snap at him. It paid no attention to him.

He poked a finger at it and the stuff was fairly solid and slightly warm and he got the distinct impression that it was alive.

And immediately he thought of the broth-soaked cover he had thrown in the basket. It was not so unusual that he should think of it, for the yellow of the brew within the basket was the exact color of the stamp upon the cover,

He walked around the desk and dropped the mail he'd picked up in the lobby. He sat down ponderously in the massive office chair.

So a stamp had come to life, he thought, and that certainly was a queer one. But no more queer, perhaps, than the properties of many other stamps, for while Earth had exported the idea of their use, a number of peculiar adaptations of the idea had evolved.

And now, he thought a little limply, you have to get this mess in the basket out of here before Lang comes busting in.

He worried a bit about what Lang had said about cleaning up the place and he got slightly sore about it, for he paid good money for these diggings and he paid promptly in advance and he was never any bother. And besides, he'd been here for twenty years, and Lang should consider that.

He finally got up from the chair and lumbered around the desk. He bent and grasped the wastebasket, being careful to miss the places where the yellow goo had run down the sides, He tried to lift it and the basket did not move. He tugged as hard as he could pull and the basket stayed exactly where it was. He squared off and aimed a kick at it and the basket didn't budge.

He stood off a ways and glared at it, with his whiskers bristling. As if he didn't have all the trouble that he needed, without this basket deal! Somehow or other, he was going to have to get the apartment straightened out and get rid of the mice, He should be looking for the Polaris cover. And he'd lost or mislaid his tongs and would have to waste his time going out to get another pair.

But first of all, he'd have to get this basket out of here. Somehow it had become stuck to the floor - maybe some of the yellow goo had run underneath the edge of it and dried. Maybe if he had a pinch bar or some sort of lever that he could jab beneath it, he could pry it loose.

From the basket the yellow stuff made merry bubbling noises at him.

He clapped his hat back on his head and went out and slammed and locked the door behind him.

It was a fine summer day and he walked around a little, trying to run his many problems through his mind, but no matter what he thought of, he always came back to the basket brimming

with the yellow mess and he knew he'd never be able to get started on any of the other tasks until he got rid of it.

So he hunted up a hardware store and bought a good-sized pinch bar and headed back for the apartment house. The bar, he knew, might mark up the floor somewhat, but if he could get under the edge of the basket with a bar that size he was sure that he could pry it loose,

In the lobby, Lang descended on him.

"Mr. Packer," he said sternly, "where are you going with that bar?"

"I went out and bought it to exterminate the mice."

"But, Mr. Packer -"

"You want to get rid of those mice, don't you?"

"Why, certainly I do."

"It's a desperate situation," Packer told him gravely, "and one that may require very desperate measures."

"But that bar!"

"I'll exercise my best discretion," Packer promised him. "I shall hit them easy."

He went up the elevator with the bar. The sight of Lang's discomfiture made him feel a little better and he managed to whistle a snatch of tune as he went down the hall.

As he fumbled with the key, he heard the sound of rustling coming from beyond the door and he felt a chill go through him, for the rustlings were of a furtive sort and they sounded ominous,

Good Lord, he thought, _there can't be that many mice in there!_

He grasped the bar more firmly and unlocked the door and pushed it open.

The inside of the place was a storm of paper.

He stepped in quickly and slammed the door behind him to keep the blowing paper from swooping out into the hall.

Must have left a window open, he thought. But he knew he had not, and even if he had, it was quiet outside. There was not a breath of breeze.

And what was happening inside the apartment was more than just a breeze.

He stood with his back against the door and watched what was going on and shifted his grip on the bar so that it made a better club.

The apartment was filled with a sleet of flying paper and a barrage of packets and a snowstorm of dancing stamps. There were open boxes standing on the floor and the paper and the stamps and packets were drifting down and chunking into these, and along the wall were other boxes, very neatly piled - and that was entirely wrong, for there had been nothing neat about the place when he had left it less than two hours before.

But even as he watched, the activity slacked off. There was less stuff flying through the air and some of the boxes were closed by unseen hands and then flew off, all by themselves, to stack themselves with the other boxes.

Poltergeists! he thought in terror, his mind scrambling back frantically over all that he had ever thought or read or heard to grasp some explanation.

Then it was done and over.

There was nothing flying through the air. All the boxes had been stacked. Everything was

still.

Packer stepped out into the room and stared in slackjawed amazement.

The desk and the tables shone. The drapes hung straight and clean. The carpeting looked as if it might be new. Chairs and small tables and lamps and other things, long forgotten, buried all these years beneath the accumulation of his collection, stood revealed and shining - dusted, cleaned and polished.

And in the middle of all this righteous order stood the wastebasket, bubbling happily.

Packer dropped the bar and headed for the desk.

In front of him a window flapped open and he heard a swish and the bar went past him, flying for the window. It went out the window and slashed through the foliage of a tree, then the window closed and he lost sight of it.

Packer took off his hat and tossed it on the desk.

Immediately his hat lifted from the desk and sailed for a closet door. The closet door swung open and the hat ducked in. The door closed gently on it.

Packer whuffed through his whiskers, He got out his handkerchief and mopped a glistening brow.

"Funny goings-on," he said to himself.

Slowly, cautiously, he checked the place. All the boxes were stacked along one wall, three deep and piled from floor to ceiling. Three filing cabinets stood along another wall and he rubbed his eyes at that, for he had forgotten that there were three of them - for years he'd thought that he had only two. And all the rest of the place was neat and clean and it fairly gleamed.

He walked from room to room and everywhere it was the same.

In the kitchen the pots and pans were all in place and the dishes stacked primly in the cupboard. The stove and refrigerator had been wiped clean and there were no dirty dishes and that was a bit surprising for he was sure there had been. Mrs. Foshay's kettle, with the broth emptied out of it and scrubbed until it shone, stood on the kitchen table.

He went back to the desk and the top of it was clear except for several items laid out, as if for his attention:

Ten dead mice.

Eight pairs of stamp tongs.

The packet of covers with the strange yellow stamps.

Two - not one - but two covers, one bearing a strip of four and the other a strip of five Polaris 17b.

Packer sat down heavily in his chair and stared at the items on the desk.

How in the world, he wondered - how had it come about? What was going on?

He peeked around the desk edge at the bubbling basket and it seemed to chortle at him.

It was, he told himself, it must be the basket - or, rather, the stuff within the basket. Nothing else had been changed, no other factor had been added. The only thing new and different in the apartment was the basket of yellow gook.

He picked up the packet of covers with the yellow stamps affixed and opened the drawer to find a glass. The drawer was arranged with startling neatness and there were five glasses lying in a row. He chose the strongest one.

Beneath the glass the surface of the stamps became a field made up of tiny ball-like particles, unlike the grains of sand which the weaker glass he had used before had shown.

He bent above the desk, with his eye glued to the glass, and he knew that what he was looking at were spores.

Encysted, lifeless, they still would carry life within them, and that had been what had happened here. He'd spilled the broth upon the stamp and the spores had come to life - a strange alien community of life that settled within the basket.

He put the glass back in the drawer and rose. He gathered up the dead mice carefully by their tails. He carried them to the incinerator shaft and let them drop.

He crossed the room to the bookcases and the books were arranged in order and in sequence and there, finally, were books that he'd lost years ago and hunted ever since. There were long rows of stamp catalogs, the set of handbooks on galactic cancellations, the massive list of postmarks, the galactic travel guides, the long row of weird language dictionaries, indispensable in alien stamp identification, and a number of technical works on philatelic subjects.

From the bookcase he moved to the piled-up boxes. One of them he lifted down. It was filled with covers, with glassine envelopes of loose stamps, with sheets, with blocks and strips. He dug through the contents avidly, with wonder mounting in him.

All the stamps, all the covers, were from the Thuban system.

He closed the box and bent to lift it back. It didn't wait for him. It lifted by itself and fitted itself in place.

He looked at three more boxes. One contained, exclusively, material from Korephoros, and another material from Antares and the third from Dschubba. Not only had the litter been picked up and boxed and piled into some order, but the material itself had been roughly classified...

He went back to the chair and sat down a little weakly. It was too much, he thought, for a man to take.

The spores had fed upon the broth and had come to life, and within the basket was an alien life form or a community of life forms. And they possessed a passion for orderliness and a zest for work and an ability to channel that zest into useful channels.

And what was more, the things within the basket did what a man wanted done.

It had straightened up the apartment, it had classified the stamps and covers, it had killed the mice, it had located the Polaris covers and had found the missing tongs.

And how had it known that he wanted these things done? Read his mind, perhaps?

He shivered at the thought, but the fact remained that it had done absolutely nothing except bubble merrily away until he had returned. It had done nothing, perhaps, because it did not know what to do - until he had somehow told it what to do. For as soon as he had returned, it had found out what to do and did it.

The door chimed and he got up to answer. It was Tony.

"Hi, Unk," he said. "You forgot your pajamas and I brought them back. You left them on the bed and forgot to pack them."

He held out a package and it wasn't until then that he saw the room.

"Unk!" he yelled. "What happened? You got the place cleaned up!"

Packer shook his head in bewilderment. "Something funny, Tony."

Tony walked in and stared around in admiration and astonishment.

"You sure did a job," he said.

"I didn't do it, Tony."

"Oh, I see. You hired someone to do it while you were up at our place."

"No, not that. It was done this morning. It was done by that!"

He pointed at the basket.

"You're crazy, Unk," said Tony, firmly. "You have flipped your thatch."

"Maybe so," said Packer. "But the basket did the work."

Tony walked around the basket warily. He reached down and punched the yellow stuff with a stuck-out finger.

"It feels like dough," he announced.

He straightened up and looked at Packer.

"You aren't kidding me?" he asked.

"I don't know what it is," said Packer. "I don't know why or how it did it, but I'm telling you the truth."

"Unk," said Tony, "we may have something here!"

"There is no doubt of that."

"No, that's not what I mean. This may be the biggest thing that ever happened. This junk, you say, will really work for you?"

"Somehow or other," said Packer. "I don't know how it does it. It has a sense of order and it does the work you want. It seems to understand you - it anticipates whatever you want done. Maybe it's a brain with enormous psi powers. I was looking at a cover the other night and I saw this yellow stamp..."

Packer told him swiftly what had happened. Tony listened thoughtfully, pulling at his chin. "Well, all right, Unk," he said, "we've got it. We don't know what it is or how it works, but let's put our thinking into gear. Just imagine a bucket of this stuff standing in an office - a great big, busy office. It would make for efficiency such as you never saw before. It would file all the papers and keep the records straight and keep the entire business strictly up to date. There'd never be anything ever lost again. Everything would be right where it was supposed to be and could be located in a second, when the boss or someone else should want a certain file - bingo! it would be upon his desk. Why, an office with one of these little buckets could get rid of all its file clerks. A public library could be run efficiently without any personnel at all. But it would be in big business offices - in insurance firms and industrial concerns and transportation companies - where it would be worth the most."

Packer shook his head, a bit confused. "It might be all right, Tony; it might work the way you say. But who would believe you? Who would pay attention? It's just too fantastic. They would laugh at you."

"You leave all that to me," said Tony. "That's my end of the business. That's where I come in."

"Oh," said Packer, "so we're in business now."

"I have a friend," said Tony, who always had a friend, "who'd let me try it out. We could put a bucket of this stuff in his office and see how it works out."

He looked around, suddenly all business.

"You got a bucket, Unk?"

"Out in the kitchen. You'd find something there."

"And beef broth. It was beef broth, wasn't it?"

Packer nodded. "I think I have a can of it."

Tony stood and scratched his head. "Now let's get this figured out, Unk. What we want is a sure source of supply."

"I have those other covers. They all have stamps on them. We could start a new batch with one of them."

Tony gestured impatiently. "No, that wouldn't do. They are our reserves. We lock them tight away against emergency. I have a hunch that we can grow bucket after bucket of the stuff from what we have right here. Pull off a handful of it and feed it a shot of broth -"

"But how do you know -"

"Unk," said Tony, "doesn't it strike you a little funny that you had the exact number of spores in that one stamp, the correct amount of broth, to grow just one basket full?"

"Well, sure, but..."

"Look, this stuff is intelligent. It knows what it is doing. It lays down rules for itself to live by. It's got a sense of order and it lives by order. So you give it a wastebasket to live in and it lives within the limits of that basket. It gets just level with the top; it lets a little run down the sides to cement the basket tight to the floor. And that is all. It doesn't run over. It doesn't fill the room. It has some discipline."

"Well, maybe you are right, but that still doesn't answer the question -"

"Just a second, Unk. Watch here."

Tony plunged his hand into the basket and came out with a chunk of the spore-growth ripped loose from the parent body.

"Now, watch the basket, Unk," he said.

They watched. Swiftly, the spores surged and heaved to fill the space where the ripped-out chunk had been. Once again the basket was very neatly filled.

"You see what I mean?" said Tony. "Given more living room, it will grow. All we have to do is feed it so it can. And we'll give it living room. We'll give it a lot of buckets, so it can grow to its heart's content and -"

"Damn it, Tony, will you listen to me? I been trying to ask you what we're going to do to keep it from cementing itself to the floor. If we start another batch of it, it will cement its bucket or its basket or whatever it is in to the floor just like this first one did."

"I'm glad you brought that up," said Tony. "I know just what to do. We will hang it up. We'll hang up the bucket and there won't be any floor."

"Well," said Packer, "I guess that covers it. I'll go heat up that broth."

They heated the broth and found a bucket and hung it on a broomstick suspended between two chairs.

They dropped the chunk of spore-growth in and watched it and it stayed just as it was.

"My hunch was right," said Tony. "It needs some of that broth to get it started."

He poured in some broth and the spores melted before their very eyes into a black and ropy scum.

"There's something wrong," said Tony, worriedly.

"I guess there is," said Packer.

"I got an idea, Unk. You might have used a different brand of broth. There might be some difference in the

ingredients. It may not be the broth itself, but some ingredient in it that gives this stuff the shot in the arm it needs. We might be using the wrong broth."

Packer shuffled uncomfortably.

"I don't remember, Tony."

"You have to!" Tony yelled at him. "Think, Unk! You got to - you have to remember what brand it was you used." Packer whuffed out his whiskers unhappily.

"Well, to tell you the truth, Tony, it wasn't boughten broth. Mrs. Foshay made it."

"Now, we're getting somewhere! Who is Mrs. Foshay?"

"She's a nosy old dame who lives across the hall."

"Well, that's just fine. All you have to do is ask her to make some more for you."

"I can't do it, Tony."

"All we'd need is one batch, Unk. We could have it analyzed and find out what is in it. Then we'd be all set."

"She'd want to know why I wanted it. And she'd tell all over how I asked for it. She might even figure out there was something funny going on."

"We can't have that," exclaimed Tony in alarm. "This is our secret, Unk. We can't cut in anyone."

He sat and thought.

"Anyhow, she's probably sore at me," said Packer. "She sneaked in the other day and got the hell scared out of her when a mouse ran across the floor. She tore down to the management about it and tried to make me trouble."

Tony snapped his fingers.

"I got it!" he cried. "I know just how we'll work it. You go on and get in bed -"

"I will not!" snarled Packer.

"Now listen, Unk, you have to play along. You have to do your part."

"I don't like it," protested Packer. "I don't like any part of it."

"You get in bed," insisted Tony, "and look the worst you can. Pretend you're suffering. I'll go over to this Mrs. Foshay and I'll tell her how upset you were over that mouse scaring her. I'll say you worked all day to get the place cleaned up just because of that; I'll say you worked so hard -"

"You'll do no such thing," yelped Packer. "She'll come tearing in here. I won't have that woman -"

"You want to make a couple billion, don't you?" asked Tony angrily.

"I don't care particularly," Packer told him. "I can't somehow get my heart in it."

"I'll tell this woman that you are all tuckered out and that your heart is not so good and the only thing you want is another bowl of broth."

"You'll tell her no such thing," raved Packer. "You'll leave her out of this."

"Now, Unk," Tony reasoned with him, "If you won't do it for yourself, do it for me - me, the only kin you have in the entire world. It's the first big thing I've ever had a chance at. I may talk a lot and try to look prosperous and successful, but I tell you, Unk..."

He saw he was getting nowhere.

"Well, if you won't do it for me, do it for Ann, do it for the kids. You wouldn't want to see those poor little kids -"

"Oh, shut up," said Packer. "First thing you know, you'll be blubbering. All right, then, I'll do it."

It was worse than he had thought it would be. If he had known it was to be so bad, he'd never have consented to go through with it.

The Widow Foshay brought the bowl of broth herself. She sat on the bed and held his head up and cooed and crooned at him as she fed him broth.

It was most embarrassing. But they got what they were after. When she had finished feeding him, there was still half a bowl of broth and she left that with them because, she said, poor man, he might be needing it.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon and almost time for the Widow Foshay to come in with the broth.

Thinking of it, Packer gagged a little.

Someday, he promised himself, he'd beat Tony's brains out. If it hadn't been for him, this never would have started.

Almost six months now and every blessed day she had brought the broth and sat and talked with him while he forced down a bowl of it. And the worst of it, Packer told himself, was that he had to pretend that he thought that it was good.

And she was so gay! Why did she have to be so gay? *_Toujours gai_*, he thought. Just like the crazy alley cat that ancient writer had penned the silly lines about.

Garlic in the broth, he thought - *_my God, who'd ever heard of garlic in beef broth!_* It was uncivilized. A special recipe, she'd said, and it was all of that. And yet it had been the garlic that had done the job with the yellow sporelife - it was the food needed by the spores to kick them into life and to start them growing.

The garlic in the broth might have been good for him as well, he admitted to himself, for in many years, seemed, he had not felt so fine. There was a spring in his step, he'd noticed, and he didn't get so tired; he used to take a nap in the afternoon and now he never did. He worked as much as ever, actually more than ever, and he was, except for the widow and the broth, a very happy man. Yes, a very happy man.

He would continue to be happy, he told himself, as long as Tony left him to his stamps. Let the little whippersnapper carry the load of Efficiency, Inc.; he was, after all, the one who had insisted on it. Although, give him credit, he had done well with it. A lot of industries had signed up and a whole raft of insurance companies and a bunch of bond houses and a good scattering

of other lines of business. Before long, Tony said, there wouldn't be a business anywhere that would dare to try to get along without the services of Efficiency, Inc.

The doorbell chimed and he went to answer it. It would be the Widow Foshay, and she would have her hands full with the broth.

But it was not the widow.

"Are you Mr. Clyde Packer?" asked the man who stood in the hall.

"Yes, sir," Packer said. "Will you please step in?"

"My name is John Griffin," said the man, after he was seated, "I represent Geneva."

"Geneva? You mean the Government?"

The man showed him credentials.

"Okay," said Packer a bit frostily, being no great admirer of the Government. "What can I do for you?"

"You are senior partner in Efficiency, Inc., I believe."

"I guess that's what I am."

"Mr. Packer, don't you know?" - "Well, I'm not positive. I'm a partner, but I don't know about this senior business. Tony runs the show and I let him have his head."

"You and your nephew are sole owners of the firm?"

"You bet your boots we are. We kept it for ourselves. We took no one in with us."

"Mr. Packer, for some time the Government has been attempting to negotiate with Mr. Camper. He's told you nothing of it?"

"Not a thing," said Packer. "I'm busy with my stamps. He doesn't bother me."

"_We_ have been interested in your service," Griffin said. "_We_ have tried to buy it."

"It's for sale," said Packer. "You just pay the price and -"

"But you don't understand. Mr. Camper insists on a separate contract for every single office that we operate. That would run to a terrific figure -"

"Worth it," Packer assured him. "Every cent of it."

"It's unfair," said Griffin firmly. "We are willing to buy it on a departmental basis and we feel that even in that case we would be making some concession. By rights the Government should be allowed to come in under a single covering arrangement."

"Look," protested Packer, "what are you talking to me for? I don't run the business; Tony does. You'll have to deal with him. I have faith in the boy. He has a good hard business head. I'm not even interested in Efficiency. All I'm interested in is stamps."

"That's just the point," said Griffin heartily. "You've hit the situation exactly on the head."

"Come again?" asked Packer.

"Well, it's like this," Griffin told him in confidential tones. "The Government gets a lot of stamps in its daily correspondence. I forget the figure, but it runs to several tons of philatelic material every day. And from every planet in the galaxy. We have in the past been disposing of it to several stamp concerns, but there's a disposition in certain quarters to offer the whole lot as a package deal at a most attractive price."

"That is fine," said Packer, "but what would I do with several tons a day?"

"I wouldn't know," declared Griffin, "but since you are so interested in stamps, it would give you a splendid opportunity to have first crack at a batch of top-notch material. It is, I dare say, one of the best sources you could find."

"And you'd sell all this stuff to me if I put in a word for you with Tony?"

Griffin grinned happily. "You follow me exactly, Mr Packer."

Packer snorted, "Follow you! I'm way ahead of you."

"Now, now," cautioned Griffin, "you must not get the wrong impression. This is a business offer - a purely business offer."

"I suppose you'd expect no more than nominal payment for all this waste paper I would be taking off your hands."

"Very nominal," said Griffin.

"All right, I'll think about it and I'll let you know. I can't promise you a thing, of course."

"I understand, Mr. Packer. I do not mean to rush you."

After Griffin left, Packer sat and thought about it and the more he thought about it, the more attractive it became.

He could rent a warehouse and install an Efficiency Basket in it and all he'd have to do would be dump all that junk in there and the basket would sort it out for him.

He wasn't exactly sure if one basket would have the time to break the selection down to more than just planetary groupings, but if one basket couldn't do it, he could install a second one and between the two of them, he could run the classification down to any point he wished. And then, after the baskets had sorted out the more select items for his personal inspection, he could set up an organization to sell the rest of it in job lots and he could afford to sell it at a figure that would run all the rest of those crummy dealers clear out on the limb.

He rubbed his hands together in a gesture of considerable satisfaction, thinking how he could make it rough for all those skinflint dealers. It was murder, he reminded himself, what they got away with; anything that happened to them, they had coming to them.

But there was one thing he gagged on slightly. What Griffin had offered him was little better than a bribe, although it was, he supposed, no more than one could expect of the Government. The entire Governmental structure was loaded with grafters and ten percenters and lobbyists and special interest boys and others of their ilk.

Probably no one would think a thing of it if he made the stamp deal - except the dealers, of course, and there was absolutely nothing they could do about it except sit and howl.

But aside from that, he wondered, did he have the right to interfere with Tony? He could mention it to him of course, and Tony would say yes. But did he have the right?

He sat and worried at the question, without reaching a conclusion, without getting any nearer to the answer until the door chimes sounded.

It was the Widow Foshay and she was empty-handed. She had no broth today.

"Good afternoon," he said. "You are a little late."

"I was just opening my door to come over when I saw you had a caller. He's gone now, isn't he?"

"For some time," said Packer.

She stepped inside and he closed the door. They walked across the room.

"Mr. Packer," said the Widow, "I must apologize. I brought no broth today. The truth of the matter is, I'm tired of making it all the time."

"In such a case," he said, very gallantly, "the treats will be on me."

He opened the desk drawer and lifted out the brand new box of PugAlNash's leaf, which had arrived only the day before.

Almost reverently, he lifted the cover and held the box out to her. She recoiled from it a little.

"Go ahead," he urged. "Take a pinch of it. Don't swallow it. Just chew it."

Cautiously, she dipped her fingers in the box.

"That's too much," he warned her. "Just a little pinch. You don't need a lot. And it's rather hard to come by."

She took a pinch and put it in her mouth.

He watched her closely, smiling. She looked for all the world as if she had taken poison. But soon she settled back in her chair, apparently convinced it was not some lethal trick.

"I don't believe," she said, "I've ever tasted anything quite like it."

"You never have. Other than myself, you may well be the only human that has ever tasted it. I get it from a friend of mine who lives on one of the far-out stars. His name is PugAlNash and he sends it regularly. And he always includes a note."

He looked in the drawer and found the latest note.

"Listen to this," he said.

He read it:

_Der Fiend: Grately injoid latter smoke you cent me. Ples mor of sam agin. You du knot no that I profetick and wach ahed for you. Butt it be so and I grately hapy to perform this taske for fiend. I assur you it be onely four the beste. You prophet grately, maybee.

Your luving fiend,

PugAlNash_

He finished reading it and tossed it on the desk.

"What do you make of it?" he asked. "Especially that crack about his being a prophet and watching ahead for me?"

"It must be all right," the widow said. "He claims you will profit greatly."

"He sounds like a gypsy fortune-teller. He had me worried for a while."

"But why should you worry over that?"

"Because I don't want to know what's going to happen to me. And sometime he might tell me. If a man could look ahead, for example, he'd know just when he was going to die and how and all the -
"

"Mr. Packer," she told him, "I don't think you're meant to die. I swear you are getting to look younger every day."

"As a matter of fact," said Packer, vastly pleased, "I'm feeling the best I have in years."

"It may be that leaf he sends you."

"No, I think most likely it is that broth of yours."

They spent a pleasant afternoon - more pleasant, Packer admitted, than he would have thought was possible.

And after she had left, he asked himself another question that had him somewhat frightened.

Why in the world, of all people in the world, had he shared the leaf with her?

He put the box back in the drawer and picked up the note. He smoothed it out and read it once again.

The spelling brought a slight smile to his lips, but he quickly turned it off, for despite the atrociousness of it, PugAlNash nevertheless was one score up on him. For Pug had been able, after a fashion, to master the language of Earth, while he had bogged down completely when confronted with Pug's language.

I profetick and wach ahed for you.

It was crazy, he told himself. It was, perhaps, some sort of joke, the kind of thing that passed for a joke with Pug.

He put the note away and prowled the apartment restlessly, vaguely upset by the whole pile-up of worries.

What should he do about the Griffin offer?

Why had he shared the leaf with the Widow Foshay?

What about that crack of Pug's?

He went to the bookshelves and put out a finger and ran it along the massive set of _Galactic Abstracts_. He found the right volume and took it back to the desk with him.

He leafed through it until he found _Unuk al Hay_. Pug, he remembered, lived on Planet X of the system.

He wrinkled up his forehead as he puzzled out the meaning of the compact, condensed, sometimes cryptic wording, bristling with fantastic abbreviations. It was a bloated nuisance, but it made sense, of course. There was just too much information to cover in the galaxy - the set of books, unwieldy as it might be, would simply become unmanageable if anything like completeness of expression and description were attempted.

X-lt.kn., int., uninh. Hu., (T-67), tr. intrm. (T-102) med. hbs., leg. forst., diff. lang...

Wait a second, there!

Leg. forst.

Could that be _legend of foresight?_

He read it again, translating as he went:

X-little known, intelligence, uninhabitable for humans (see table 67), trade by intermediaries (see table 102), medical herbs, legend (or legacy?) of foresight, difficult language...

And that last one certainly was right. He'd gained a working knowledge of a lot of alien tongues, but will Pug's he could not even get an inkling.

Leg. forst.??

One couldn't be sure, but it could be - it could be!

He slapped the book shut and took it back to the shelf.

So you watch ahead for me, he said.

And why? To what purpose?

PugAlNash, he said, a little pleased, _some day I'll wring your scrawny, meddling neck._

But, of course, he wouldn't. PugAlNash was too far away and he might not be scrawny and there was no reason to believe he even had a neck.

When bedtime came around, he got into his flame-red pajamas with the yellow parrots on them and sat on the edge of the bed, wiggling his toes.

It had been quite a day, he thought.

He'd have to talk with Tony about this Government offer to sell him the stamp material. Perhaps, he thought, he should insist upon it even if it meant a loss of possible revenue to Efficiency, Inc. He might as well get what he could and what he wanted when it was for the taking. For Tony, before they were through with it, probably would beat him out of what he had coming to him. He had expected it by now - but more than likely Tony had been too busy to indulge in any crookedness. Although it was a wonder, for Tony enjoyed a dishonest dollar twice as much as he did an honest one.

He remembered that he had told Griffin that he had faith in Tony and he guessed that he'd been right - he had faith in him and a little pride as well. Tony was an unprincipled rascal and there was no denying it. Thinking about it, Packer chuckled fondly. _Just like me_, he told himself, _when I was young as Tony and was still in business._

There had been that triple deal with the bogus Chippendale and the Antarian paintings and the local version of moonshine from out in the Packrat system. _By God_, he told himself, _I skinned all three of them on that one._

The phone rang and he padded out of the bedroom, his bare feet slapping on the floor.

The phone kept on insisting.

"All right!" yelled Packer angrily. "I'm coming!" He reached the desk and picked up the phone. "This is Pickering," said the voice.

"Pickering. Oh, sure. Glad to hear from you."

"The man you talked with about the Polaris cover."

"Yes, Pickering. I remember you."

"I wonder, did you ever find that cover?"

"Yes, I found it. Sorry, but the strip had only four. I told you five, I fear. An awful

memory, but you know how it goes. A man gets old and -"

"Mr. Packer, will you sell that cover?"

"Sell it? Yes, I guess I told you that I would. Man of my word, you realize, although I regret it now."

"It's a fine one, then?"

"Mr. Pickering," said Packer, "considering that it's the only one in existence -"

"Could I come over to see it sometime soon?"

"Any time you wish. Any time at all."

"You will hold it for me?"

"Certainly," consented Packer. "After all, no one know as yet that I have the thing."

"And the price?"

"Well, now, I told you a quarter million, but I was talking then about a strip of five. Since it's only four I'd be willing to shave it some. I'm a reasonable man Mr. Pickering. Not difficult to deal with."

"I can see you aren't," said Pickering with a trace of bitterness.

They said good night and Packer sat in the chair and put his bare feet up on the desk and wiggled his toes watching them with a certain fascination, as if he had never seen them before.

He'd sell Pickering the four-strip cover for two hundred thousand. Then he'd let it get noised about that there was a five-strip cover, and once he heard that Pickering would be beside himself and frothing at the mouth. He'd be afraid that someone might get ahead of him and buy the five-strip strip while he had only four. And that would be a public humiliation that a collector of Pickering's stripe simply couldn't stand.

Packer chortled softly to himself.

"Bait," he said aloud.

He probably could get half a million out of that five strip piece. He'd make Pickering pay for it. He'd have to start it high, of course, and let Pickering beat him down.

Be looked at the clock upon the desk and it was ten o'clock - a good hour past his usual bedtime.

He wiggled his toes some more and watched them. Funny thing about it, he wasn't even sleepy. He didn't want to go to bed; he'd got undressed from simple force of habit.

Nine o'clock, he thought, is a hell of a time for a man to go to bed. He could remember a time when he had never turned in until well after midnight and there had been many certain memorable occasions, he chucklingly recalled, when he'd not gone to bed at all.

But there had been something to do in those days. There had been places to go and people to meet and food had tasted proper and the liquor had been something a man looked forward to. They didn't make decent liquor these days, he told himself. And there were no great cooks any more. And no entertainment, none worthy of the name. All his friends had either died or scattered; none of them had lasted.

Nothing lasts, he thought.

He sat wiggling his toes and looking at the clock and somehow he was beginning to feel just a bit excited, although he could not imagine why.

In the silence of the room there were two sounds only - the soft ticking of the clock and the syrupy gurgling of the basket full of spores.

He leaned around the corner of the desk and looked at the basket and it was there, foursquare and solid - a basketful of fantasy come to sudden and enduring life.

Someday, he thought, someone would find where the spores came from - what distant planet in what misty reaches out toward the rim of the thinning galaxy. Perhaps even now the origin of the stamps could be determined if he'd only release the data that he had, if he would show the covers with the yellow stamps to some authority. But the covers and the data were a trade secret and had become too valuable to be shown to any one; they were tucked away deep inside a bank vault.

Intelligent spores, he mused - what a perfect medium for the carrying of the mail. You put a dab of them on letter or a package and you told them, somehow or other, where the letter or the package was to go and they would take it there. And once the job was done then the spores encysted until the day that someone else, or something else, should recall them to their labors.

And today they were laboring for the Earth and the day would come, perhaps, when they'd be housekeepers to the entire Earth. They'd run all business efficiently and keep all homes picked up and neat; they would clean the streets and keep them free of litter and introduce everywhere an era of such order and such cleanliness as no race had ever known.

He wiggled his toes and looked at the clock again. I was not ten-thirty yet and it was really early. Perhaps he should change his mind - perhaps he should dress again and go for a moonlight stroll. For there was a moon; he could see it through the window.

Damn old fool, he told himself, whuffling out his whiskers.

But he took his feet down off the desk and paddled toward the bedroom.

He chuckled as he went, planning exactly how he was going to skin Pickering to within an inch of that collector's parsimonious life.

He was bending at the mirror, trying to make his tie track, when the doorbell set up a clamor.

If it was Pickering, he thought, he'd throw the damn fool out. Imagine turning up at this time of night to do a piece of business that could better wait till morning.

It wasn't Pickering.

The man's card said he was W. Frederick Hazlitt and that he was president of the Hazlitt Suppliers Corporation.

"Well, Mr. Hazlitt?"

"I'd like to talk to you a minute," Hazlitt said, peering furtively around. "You're sure that we're alone here?"

"Quite alone," said Packer.

"This is a matter of some delicacy," Hazlitt told him, "and of some alarm as well. I came to you rather than Mr. Anton Camper because I know of you by reputation as a man of proven business sagacity. I feel you could understand the problem where Mr. Camper -"

"Fire away," invited Packer cordially.

He had a feeling that he was going to enjoy this. The man was obviously upset and scared to death as well.

Hazlitt hunched forward in his chair and his voice dropped almost to a whisper.

"Mr. Packer," he confided in stricken horror, "I am becoming honest!"

"That's too bad," said Packer sympathetically.

"Yes, it is," said Hazlitt soberly. "A man in my position - in any business connection - simply can't be honest. Mr. Packer, I'll tell you confidentially that I lost out on one of the biggest deals in all my business life just last week because I had grown honest."

"Maybe," Packer suggested, "if you persevered, if you set your heart on it, you could remain at least partially dishonest."

Hazlitt shook his head dolefully. "I tell you, sir, can't. I've tried. You don't know how hard I've tried. And no matter how I try, I find myself telling the truth about everything. I find that I cannot take unfair advantage of anyone, not even of a customer. I even found myself the other day engaged in cutting my profit margins down to a more realistic figure -"

"Why, that's horrible!" cried Packer.

"And it's all your fault," yelled Hazlitt.

"My fault," protested Packer, whuffling out his whiskers. "Upon my word, Mr. Hazlitt, I can't see how you can say a thing like that. I haven't had a thing to do with it."

"It's your Efficiency units," howled Hazlitt. "They're the cause of it."

"The Efficiency units have nothing to do with you, declared Packer angrily. "All they do..."

He stopped.

Good Lord, he thought, they could!

He'd been feeling better than he'd felt for years and he didn't need his nap of an afternoon and here he was dressing to go out in the middle of the night!

"How long has this been going on?" he asked in growing horror.

"For a month at least," said Hazlitt. "I think I first noticed it a month or six weeks ago."

"Why didn't you simply heave the unit out?" "I did," yelled Hazlitt, "but it did no good."

"I don't understand. If you threw it out that should be the end of it."

"That's what I thought at the time, myself. But I was wrong. That yellow stuffs still there. It's growing in the

cracks and floating in the air and you can't get rid of it. Once you have it, you are stuck with it."

Packer clucked in sympathy.

"You could move, perhaps."

"Do you realize what that would cost me, Packer? And besides, as far as I'm concerned, it simply is no good. The stuff's inside of me!"

He pounded at his chest. "I can feel it here, inside of me - turning me honest, making a good man out of me, making me orderly and efficient, just like it made our files. And I don't want to be a good man, Packer - I want to make a lot of money!"

"There's one consolation," Packer told him. "Whatever is happening to you undoubtedly also is happening to your competitors."

"But even if that were the case," protested Hazlitt, "it would be no fun. What do you think a man goes into business for? To render service, to become identified with the commercial community, to make money only? No, sir, I tell you - it's the thrill of skinning a competitor, of running the risk of losing your own shirt, of -"

"Amen," Packer said loudly.

Hazlitt stared at him. "You, too..."

"Not a chance," said Packer proudly. "I'm every bit as big a rascal as I ever was."

Hazlitt settled back into his chair. His voice took on an edge, grew a trifle cold.

"I had considered exposing you, warning the world, and then I saw I couldn't..."

"Of course you can't," said Packer gruffly. "You don't enjoy being laughed at. You are the kind of man who can't stand the thought of being laughed at."

"What's your game, Packer?"

"My game?"

"You introduced the stuff. You must have known what it would do. And yet you say you are unaffected by it. What are you shooting at - gobbling up the entire planet?"

Packer whuffled. "I hadn't thought of it," he said. "But it's a capital idea."

He rose stiffly to his feet. "Little old for it," he said, "but I have a few years yet. And I'm in the best of fettle. Haven't felt -"

"You were going out," said Hazlitt, rising. "I'll not detain you."

"I thank you, sir," said Packer. "I noticed that there was a moon and I was going for a stroll. You wouldn't join me, would you?"

"I have more important things to do, Packer, than strolling in the moonlight."

"I have no doubt of that," said Packer, bowing slightly. "You would, of course, an upright, honest businessman like you."

Hazlitt slammed the door as he went out.

Packer padded back to the bedroom, took up the tie again.

Hazlitt an honest man, he thought. And how many other honest men this night? And a year from now - how many honest men in the whole wide world just one year from now? How long before the entire Earth would be an honest Earth? With spores lurking in the cracks and floating in the air and running with the rivers, it might not take so long.

Maybe that was the reason Tony hadn't skinned him yet. Maybe Tony was getting honest, too. Too bad, thought Packer, gravely. Tony wouldn't be half as interesting if he should happen to turn honest.

And the Government? A Government that had come begging for the spores - begging to be honest, although to be completely fair one must admit the Government as yet did not know about the honesty.

That was a hot one, Packer told himself. An honest Government! And it would serve those stinkers right! He could see the looks upon their faces.

He gave up the business of the tie and sat down on the bed and shook for minutes with rumbling belly laughter.

At last he wiped the tears out of his eyes and finished with the tie.

Tomorrow morning, bright and early, he'd get in touch with Griffin and arrange the package deal for the stamp material. He'd act greedy and drive a hard bargain and then, in the end, pay a bit more than the price agreed upon for a long-term arrangement. An honest Government, he told himself, would be too honest to rescind such an agreement even if, in the light of its new honesty, it should realize the wrongness of it. For, happily, one of the tenets of honesty was to

stay stuck with a bad bargain, no matter how arrived at.

He shucked into his jacket and went into the living room. He stopped at the desk and opened the drawer. Reaching in, he lifted the lid of the box of leaf. He took a pinch and had it halfway to his mouth when the thought struck him suddenly and he stood for a moment frozen while all the gears came together, meshing, and the pieces fell into a pattern and he knew, without even asking, why he was the only genuine dishonest man left on the entire Earth.

I profetick and wach ahed for you!

He put the leaf into his mouth and felt the comfort of it.

Antidote, he thought, and knew that he was right.

But how could Pug have known - how could he have foreseen the long, twisting tangle of many circumstances which must inevitably crystallize into this very moment?

Leg. forst.??

He closed the lid of the box and shut the drawer and turned toward the door.

The only dishonest man in the world, he thought. Immune to the honesty factor in the yellow spores because of the resistance built up within him by his long use of the leaf.

He had set a trap tonight to victimize Pickering and tomorrow he'd go out and fox the Government and there was no telling where he'd go from there. Hazlitt had said something about taking over the entire planet and the idea was not a bad one if he could only squeeze out the necessary time.

He chuckled at the thought of how all the honest suckers would stand innocently in line, unable to do a thing about it - all fair prey to the one dishonest man in the entire world. A wolf among the sheep!

He drew himself erect and pulled the white gloves on carefully. He flicked his walking stick. Then he thumped himself on the chest - just once - and let himself out into the hall. He did not bother to lock the door behind him.

In the lobby, as he stepped out of the elevator, he saw the Widow Foshay coming in the door. She turned and called back cheerfully to friends who had brought her home.

He lifted his hat to her with an olden courtesy that he thought he had forgotten.

She threw up her hands in mock surprise. "Mr. Packer," she cried, "what has come over you? Where do you think you're going at this time of night, when all honest people are abed?"

"Minerva," he told her gravely, "I was about to take a stroll. I wonder if you might come along with me?"

She hesitated for an instant, just long enough to give the desired small show of reluctance and indecision.

He whuffled out his moustache at her. "Besides," he said, "I am not an honest person."

He offered her his arm with distinguished gallantry.