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I. Title

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## Contents

Introduction	1
A Cabin on the Coast	5
The Map	20
Kevin Malone	37
The Dark of the June	50
The Death of Hyle	58
From the Notebook of Dr. Stein	65
Thag	73
The Nebraskan and the Nereid	81
In the House of Gingerbread	91
The Headless Man	111
The Last Thrilling Wonder Story	119
House of Ancestors	150
Our Neighbour by David Copperfield	178
When I Was Ming the Merciless	194
The God and His Man	203
The Cat	210
War Beneath the Tree	218
Eyebem	225
The HORARS of War	237
The Detective of Dreams	258
Peritonitis	279
The Woman Who Loved the Centaur Pholus	286
The Woman the Unicorn Loved	297
The Peace Spy	318
All the Hues of Hell	326
Procreation	342
I Creation	342
II Re-creation	345
III The Sister's Account	348
Lukora	352
Suzanne Delage	361
Sweet Forest Maid	368
My Book	374
The Other Dead Man	377
The Most Beautiful Woman on the World	400
The Tale of the Rose and the Nightingale (And What Came of It)	415
Silhouette	445

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## Introduction

AT this point it is traditional to state dogmatically that every short story must show a beginning, a middle, and an ending—the lash employed by editors and other critics to flog writers. And it is true enough that every story should, although it is not of much use to know it. Authors (and they are very rare) who commit stories lacking one of the three necessities always believe the missing element present; and the truth is that a good story must have much more than that.

It must have a voice that is not purposelessly changed (as that of the typical leader in "When I Was Ming the Merciless"), at least one character (the madman who composes "My Book," for example), and at least one event to narrate, though in a few of these stories you may have to search carefully to find it. Most important, it must have a reader, which is the requirement most frequently overlooked. The same critics who spend hundreds of pages discussing various peculiarities of the author's supposed nature often devote none to that much more significant person, the reader for whom he wrote. I do not say this in jest, merely to entertain you; it is a failure that disqualifies a great deal of head-scratching and hypothesizing. It amounts to saying that the letter is more important than its recipient, the signal more important than the changing image created from it, the bait more important than the fish. It is, of course, a totalitarian error, born of the classroom; it springs from the habitual professorial demand that the assigned material be read and his opinion of it be accepted without question.

But stories are far older than any classroom. They came to be at a time when the storyteller knew his (more correctly her, for the first were almost certainly women) audience thoroughly, and was not in the least averse to altering his narration to fit it. The hearer (every true reader hears the tale in his mind's ear) is more central than the monstrous beast slain on the other side of the mountain, or the castle upon the hill of glass, or the mirror beyond which Gene's sister glimpses an ocean in "The Sister's Account."

Therefore, let me describe the reader for whom I wrote all these stories. I wrote them for you. Not for some professor or for myself, and certainly not for the various editors who bought them, frequently very reluctantly, after they had been rejected by several others. You see, I am not an academic writing to be criticized. (Academics think the criticism the most important part of the whole process, in which they are wholly wrong.) Nor am I one of those self-indulgent people who write in order to admire their own cleverness at a later date; I do, occasionally, admire myself; but I am always made sorry for it afterward. (A few days ago I heard a young writer say, "I've had fun, and this isn't it." He expressed my feeling exactly.) Nor am I what is called a commercial writer, one who truckles to appease editors in the hope of making a great deal of money. There are easier ways to do that.

This is simple truth: Tonight you and I, with billions of others, are sitting around the fire we call "the sun," telling stories; and from time to time it has been my turn to entertain. I have occasionally remembered that though you are not a child, there is a child alive in you still, for those in whom the child is dead will not hear stories. Thus I wrote "War Beneath the Tree," and certain others. Knowing, as you do, what it is to love and to lose love, you may appreciate "A Cabin on the Coast." Because you have sometimes pitied others, I have told you "Our Neighbour by David Copperfield," and because others have sometimes pitied you, "The Headless Man." We have sought and not found, you and I -thus, "The Map." Sought and found, and thus "The Detective of Dreams."

You are both a woman, amused by men, and a man, enthralled by women. You realize that it is only in our own time that life has become easy enough to permit a handful of us to abrogate our ancient alliance-nearly every story here will reflect that, I think. Others depend upon you, the steady one, and you depend upon others. Your lively imagination is governed by reason; you find it difficult to make friends, though you are a good friend to those you have made. At certain times you have feared that you are insane, at others that you are the only sane person in the world. You are patient, and yet eager.

Most important to me, you will be my willing partner in the making of all these stories-for no two readers have ever heard exactly the same story, and the real story is a thing that grows between the teller and the listener. If I have been wrong about you, you are welcome to tell me so the next time we meet.

The same authorities who insist upon beginnings, middles, and ends, declare that Great Literature (by which they mean the stories they have been taught to admire) is about love and death, while mere popular fiction like this is about sex and violence. One reader's sex, alas, is another's love; and one's violence, another's death. I cannot tell you whether you will find love or sex in "The Nebraskan and the Nereid," death or violence in "Silhouette"; or as I hoped when I wrote it, new life (for there is more to life than sex), and a fresh beginning.

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5

A Cabin on the Coast

"A Cabin on the Coast" copyright 1981 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in Zu den Stemen, edited by Peter Wilfert (Goldmann Verlag, Munich).

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IT might have been a child's drawing of a ship. He blinked, and blinked again. There were masts and sails, surely. One stack, perhaps another. If the ship were really there at all.

He went back to his father's beach cottage, climbed the five wooden steps, wiped his feet on the coco mat.

Lissy was still in bed, but awake, sitting up now. It must have been the squeaking of the steps, he thought. Aloud he said, "Sleep good?"

He crossed the room and kissed her. She caressed him and said, "You shouldn't go swimming without a suit, dear wonderful swimmer. How was the Pacific?"

"Peaceful. Cold. It's too early for people to be up, and there's nobody within a mile of here anyway."

"Get into bed then. How about the fish?"

"Salt water makes the sheets sticky. The fish have seen them before." He went to the corner, where a showerhead poked from the wall. The beach cottage-Lissy called it a cabin-had running water of the sometimes and rusty variety.

"They might bite 'em off. Sharks, you know. Little ones."

"Castrating woman." The shower coughed, doused him with icy spray, coughed again.

"You look worried."

"No."

"Is it your dad?"

He shook his head, then thrust it under the spray, fingers combing his dark, curly hair.

"You think he'll come out here? Today?"

He withdrew, considering. "If he's back from Washington, and he knows we're here."

"But he couldn't know, could he?"

He turned off the shower and grabbed a towel, already damp and a trifle sandy. "I don't see how."

"Only he might guess." Lissy was no longer smiling. "Where else could we go? Hey, what did we do with my underwear?"

"Your place. Your folks'. Any motel."

She swung long, golden legs out of bed, still holding the sheet across her lap. Her breasts were nearly perfect hemispheres, except for the tender protrusions of their pink nipples. He decided he had never seen breasts like that. He sat down on the bed beside her. "I love you very much," he said. "You know that?"

It made her smile again. "Does that mean you're coming back to bed?"

"If you want me to."

"I want a swimming lesson. What will people say if I tell them I came here and didn't go swimming."

He grinned at her. "That it's that time of the month."

"You know what you are? You're filthy!" She pushed him. "Absolutely filthy! I'm going to bite your ears off." Tangled in the sheet, they fell off the bed together. "There they are!"

"There what are?"

"My bra and stuff. We must have kicked them under the bed. Where are our bags?"

"Still in the trunk. I never carried them in."

"Would you get mine? My swim suit's in it."

"Sure," he said.

"And put on some pants!"

"My suit's in my bag too." He found his trousers and got the keys to the Triumph. Outside the sun was higher, the chill of the fall morning nearly gone. He looked for the ship and saw it. Then it winked out like a star.

That evening they made a fire of driftwood and roasted the big, greasy Italian sausages he had brought from town, making giant hot dogs by clamping them in French bread. He had brought red supermarket wine too; they chilled it in the Pacific. "I never ate this much in my life," Lissy said.

"You haven't eaten anything yet."

"I know, but just looking at this sandwich would make me full if I wasn't so hungry." She bit off the end. "Cuff tough woof."

"What?"

"Castrating woman. That's what you called me this morning, Tim. Now this is a castrating woman."

"Don't talk with your mouth full."

"You sound like my mother. Give me some wine. You're hogging it."

He handed the bottle over. "It isn't bad, if you don't object to a complete lack of character."

"I sleep with you, don't I?"

"I have character, it's just all rotten."

"You said you wanted to get married."

"Let's go. You can finish that thing in the car."

"You drank half the bottle. You're too high to drive."

"Bullshoot."

Lissy giggled. "You just said bullshoot. Now that's character!"

He stood up. "Come on, let's go. It's only five hundred miles to Reno. We can get married there in the morning."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"If you are."

"Sit down."

"You were testing me," he said. "That's not fair, now is it?"

"You've been so worried all day. I wanted to see if it was about me-if you thought you'd made a terrible mistake."

"We've made a mistake," he said. "I was trying to fix it just now."

"You think your dad is going to make it rough for you-"

"Us."

"- for us because it might hurt him in the next election."

He shook his head. "Not that. All right, maybe partly that. But he means it too. You don't understand him."

"I've got a father myself."

"Not like mine. Ryan was almost grown up before he left Ireland. Taught by nuns and all that. Besides, I've got six older brothers and two sisters. You're the oldest kid. Ryan's probably at least fifteen years older than your folks."

"Is that really his name? Ryan Neal?"

"His full name is Timothy Ryan Neal, the same as mine. I'm Timothy, Junior. He used Ryan when he went into politics because there was another Tim Neal around then, and we've always called me Tim to get away from the Junior."

"I'm going to call him Tim again, like the nuns must have when he was young. Big Tim. You're Little Tim."

"Okay with me. I don't know if Big Tim is going to like it."

Something was moving, it seemed, out where the sun had set. Something darker against the dark horizon.

"What made you Junior anyway? Usually it's the oldest boy."

"He didn't want it, and would never let Mother do it. But she wanted to, and I was born during the Democratic convention that year."

"He had to go, of course."

"Yeah, he had to go, Lissy. If you don't understand that, you don't understand politics at all. They hoped I'd hold off for a few days, and what the hell, Mother'd had eight with no problems. Anyway he was used to it-he was the youngest of seven boys himself. So she got to call me what she wanted."

"But then she died." The words sounded thin and lonely against the pounding of the surf.

"Not because of that."

Lissy upended the wine bottle; he saw her throat pulse three times. "Will I die because of that. Little Tim?"

"I don't think so." He tried to think of something gracious and comforting. "If we decide we want children, that's the risk I have to take."

"You have to take? Bullshoot."

"That both of us have to take. Do you think it was easy for Ryan, raising nine kids by himself?"

"You love him, don't you?"

"Sure I love him. He's my father."

"And now you think you might be ruining things for him. For my sake."

"That's not why I want us to be married, Lissy."

She was staring into the flames; he was not certain she had even heard him. "Well, now I know why his pictures look so grim. So gaunt."

He stood up again. "If you're through eating ..."

"You want to go back to the cabin? You can screw me right here on the beach-there's nobody here but us."

"I didn't mean that."

"Then why go in there and look at the walls? Out here we've got the fire and the ocean. The moon ought to be up pretty soon."

"It would be warmer."

"With just that dinky little kerosene stove? I'd rather sit

here by the fire. In a minute I'm going to send you off to get me some more wood. You can run up to the cabin and get a shirt too if you want to."

"I'm okay."

"Traditional roles. Big Tim must have told you all about them. The woman has the babies and keeps the home fires burning. You're not going to end up looking like him though, are you, Little Tim?"

"I suppose so. He used to look just like me."

"Really?"

He nodded. "He had his picture taken just after he got into politics. He was running for ward committeeman, and he had a poster made. We've still got the picture, and it looks like me with a high collar and a funny hat."

"She knew, didn't she?" Lissy said. For a moment he did not understand what she meant. "Now go and get some more wood. Only don't wear yourself out, because when you come back we're going to take care of that little thing that's bothering you, and we're going to spend the night on the beach."

When he came back she was asleep, but he woke her carrying her up to the beach cottage.

Next morning he woke up alone. He got up and showered and shaved, supposing that she had taken the car into town to get something for breakfast. He had filled the coffee pot and put it on before he looked out the shore-side window and saw the Triumph still waiting near the road.

There was nothing to be alarmed about, of course. She had awakened before he had and gone out for an early dip. He had done the same thing himself the morning before. The little patches of green cloth that were her bathing suit were hanging over the back of a rickety chair, but then they were still damp from last night. Who would want to put on a damp, clammy suit? She had gone in naked, just as he had.

He looked out the other window, wanting to see her splashing in the surf, waiting for him. The ship was there, closer now, rolling like a derelict. No smoke came from its clumsy funnel and no sails were set, but dark banners hung from its rigging. Then there was no ship, only wheeling gulls and the empty ocean. He called her name, but no one answered.

He put on his trunks and a jacket and went outside. A wind had smoothed the sand. The tide had come, obliterating their fire, reclaiming the driftwood he had gathered.

For two hours he walked up and down the beach, calling, telling himself there was nothing wrong. When he forced himself not to think of Lissy dead, he could only think of the headlines, the ninety seconds of ten o'clock news, how Ryan would look, how Pat-all his brothers-would look at him. And when he turned his mind from that, Lissy was dead



again, her pale hair snarled with kelp as she rolled in the surf, green crabs feeding from her arms.

He got into the Triumph and drove to town. In the little brick station he sat beside the desk of a fat cop and told his story.

The fat cop said, "Kid, I can see why you want us to keep it quiet."

Tim said nothing. There was a paperweight on the desk - a baseball of white glass.

"You probably think we're out to get you, but we're not. Tomorrow we'll put out a missing persons report, but we don't have to say anything about you or the senator in it, and we won't."

"Tomorrow?"

"We got to wait twenty-four hours, in case she should show up. That's the law. But kid-" The fat cop glanced at his notes.

"Tim."

"Right. Tim. She ain't going to show up. You got to get yourself used to that."

"She could be . . ." Without wanting to, he let it trail away.

"Where? You think she snuck off and went home? She could walk out to the road and hitch, but you say her stuffs still there. Kidnapped? Nobody could have pulled her out of bed without waking you up. Did you kill her?"

"No!" Tears he could not hold back were streaming down his cheeks.

"Right. I've talked to you and I don't think you did. But you're the only one that could have. If her body washes up, we'll have to look into that."

Tim's hands tightened on the wooden arms of the chair. The fat cop pushed a box of tissues across the desk.

"Unless it washes up, though, it's just a missing person, okay? But she's dead, kid, and you're going to have to get used to it. Let me tell you what happened." He cleared his throat.

"She got up while you were still asleep, probably about when it started to get light. She did just what you thought she did-went out for a nice refreshing swim before you woke up. She went out too far, and probably she got a cramp. The ocean's cold as hell now. Maybe she yelled, but if she did she was too far out, and the waves covered it up. People think drowners holler like fire sirens, but they don't-they don't have that much air. Sometimes they don't make any noise at all."

Tim stared at the gleaming paperweight.

"The current here runs along the coast-you probably know that. Nobody ought to go swimming without somebody else around, but sometimes it seems like everybody does it. We lose a dozen or so a year. In maybe four or five cases we find them. That's all."

The beach cottage looked abandoned when he returned. He parked the Triumph and went inside and found the stove still burning, his coffee perked to tar. He took the pot outside, dumped the coffee, scrubbed the pot with beach sand and rinsed it with salt water. The ship, which had been invisible through the window of the cottage, was almost plain when he stood waist deep. He heaved the coffee pot back to shore and swam out some distance, but when he straightened up in the water, the ship was gone.

Back inside he made fresh coffee and packed Lissy's things in her suitcase. When that was done, he drove into town again. Ryan was still in Washington, but Tim told his secretary where he was. "Just in case anybody reports me missing," he said.

She laughed. "It must be pretty cold for swimming."

"I like it," he told her. "I want to have at least one more long swim."

"All right, Tim. When he calls, I'll let him know. Have a good time."

"Wish me luck," he said, and hung up. He got a hamburger and more coffee at a Jack-in-the-Box and went back to the cottage and walked a long way along the beach.

He had intended to sleep that night, but he did not. From time to time he got up and looked out the window at the ship, sometimes visible by moonlight, sometimes only a dark presence in the lower night sky. When the first light of dawn came, he put on his trunks and went into the water.

For a mile or more, as well as he could estimate the distance, he could not see it. Then it was abruptly close, the long oars like the legs of a water spider, the funnel belching sparks against the still-dim sky, sparks that seemed to become new stars.

He swam faster then, knowing that if the ship vanished he would turn back and save himself, knowing too that if it only retreated before him, retreated forever, he would drown. It disappeared behind a cobalt wave, reappeared. He sprinted

and grasped at the sea-slick shaft of an oar, and it was like touching a living being. Quite suddenly he stood on the deck, with no memory of how he came there.

Bare feet pattered on the planks, but he saw no crew. A dark flag lettered with strange script flapped aft, and some

vague recollection of a tour of a naval ship with his father years before made him touch his forehead. There was a sound that might have been laughter or many other things. The captain's cabin would be aft too, he thought. He went there, bracing himself against the wild roll, and found a door.

Inside, something black crouched upon a dais. "I've come for Lissy," Tim said.

There was no reply, but a question hung in the air. He answered it almost without intending to. "I'm Timothy Ryan Neal, and I've come for Lissy. Give her back to me."

A light, it seemed, dissolved the blackness. Cross-legged on the dais, a slender man in tweeds sucked at a long clay pipe. "It's Irish, are ye?" he asked.

"American," Tim said.

"With such a name? I don't believe ye. Where's yer feathers?"

"I want her back," Tim said again.

"An' if ye don't get her?"

"Then I'll tear this ship apart. You'll have to kill me or take me too."

"Spoken like a true son of the ould sod," said the man in tweeds. He scratched a kitchen match on the sole of his boot and lit his pipe. "Sit down, will ye? I don't fancy lookin' up like that. It hurts me neck. Sit down, and 'tis possible we can strike an agreement."

"This is crazy," Tim said. "The whole thing is crazy."  
"It is that," the man in tweeds replied. "An' there's much, much more comin'. Ye'd best brace for it, Tim me lad. Now sit down."

There was a stout wooden chair behind Tim where the door had been. He sat. "Are you about to tell me you're a leprechaun? I warn you, I won't believe it."

"Me? One o' them scamperin', thievin', cobblin', little misers? I'd shoot meself. Me name's Daniel O'Donoghue, King o' Connaught. Do ye believe that, now?"

"No," Tim said.

"What would ye believe then?"

"That this is-some way, somehow-what people call a saucer. That you and your crew are from a planet of another sun."

Daniel laughed. " 'Tis a close encounter you're havin', is it? Would ye like to see me as a tiny green man wi' horns like a snail's? I can do that too."

"Don't bother."

"All right, I won't, though 'tis a good shape. A man can take it and be whatever he wants, one o' the People o' Peace or a bit o' a man from Mars. I've used it for both, and there's nothin' better."

"You took Lissy," Tim said.

"And how would ye be knowin' that?"

"I thought she'd drowned."

"Did ye now?"

"And that this ship-or whatever it is-was just a sign, an omen. I talked to a policeman and he as good as told me, but I didn't really think about what he said until last night, when I was trying to sleep."

"Is it a dream yer havin'? Did ye ever think on that?"

"If it's a dream, it's still real," Tim said doggedly. "And anyway, I saw your ship when I was awake, yesterday and the day before."

"Or yer dreamin' now ye did. But go on wi' it."

"He said Lissy couldn't have been abducted because I was in the same bed, and that she'd gone out for a swim in the morning and drowned. But she could have been abducted, if she had gone out for the swim first. If someone had come for her with a boat. And she wouldn't have drowned, because she didn't swim good enough to drown. She was afraid of the water. We went in yesterday, and even with me there, she would hardly go in over her knees. So it was you."

"Yer right, ye know," Daniel said. He formed a little steeple of his fingers. " 'Twas us."

Tim was recalling stories that had been read to him when he was a child. "Fairies steal babies, don't they? And brides. Is that why you do it? So we'll think that's who you are?"

"Bless ye, 'tis true," Daniel told him. " 'Tis the Fair Folk we are. The jinn o' the desert too, and the saucer riders ye say ye credit, and forty score more. Would ye be likin' to see me wi' me goatskin breeches and me panpipe?" He chuckled. "Have ye never wondered why we're so much alike the world over? Or thought that we don't always know just which shape's the best for a place, so the naiads and the dryads might as well be the ladies o' the Deeny Shee? Do ye know what the folk o' the Barb'ry Coast call the hell that's under their sea?"

Tim shook his head.

"Why, 'tis Domdaniel. I wonder why that is, now. Tim, ye say ye want this girl."

"That's right."

"An' ye say there'll be trouble and plenty for us if ye don't have her. But let me tell ye now that if ye don't get her, wi' our blessin' to boot, ye'll drown.-Hold your tongue, can't ye, for 'tis worse than that.-If ye don't get her wi' our blessin', 'twill be seen that ye weri Irownin' now. Do ye take me meaning?"

"I think so. Close enough."

"Ah, that's good, that is. Now here's me offer. Do ye remember how things stood before we took her?"

"Of course."

"They'll stand so again, if ye but do what I tell ye. 'Tis yerself that will remember, Tim Neal, but she'll remember nothin'. An' the truth of it is, there'll be nothin' to remember, for it'll all be gone, every stick of it. This policeman ye spoke wi', for instance. Ye've me word that ye will not have done it."

"What do I have to do?" Tim asked.

"Service. Serve us. Do whatever we ask of ye. We'd sooner have a broth of a girl like yer Lissy than a great hulk of a lad like yerself, but then too, we'd sooner be havin' one that's willin', for the unwillin' girls are everywhere-I don't doubt but ye've seen it yerself. A hundred years, that's all we ask of ye. 'Tis short enough, like Doyle's wife. Will ye do it?"

"And everything will be the same, at the end, as it was before you took Lissy?"

"Not everything I didn't say that. Ye'll remember, don't ye remember me savin' so? But for her and all the country round, why 'twill be the same."

"All right," Tim said. "I'll do it."

" 'Tis a brave lad ye are. Now I'll tell ye what I'll do. I said a hundred years, to which ye agreed-"  
Tim nodded.

"-but I'll have no unwillin' hands about me boat, nor no ungrateful ones neither. I'll make it twenty. How's that? Sure and I couldn't say fairer, could I?"

Daniel's figure was beginning to waver and fade; the image of the dark mass Tim had seen first hung about it like a cloud.

"Lay yerself on yer belly, for I must put me foot upon yer head. Then the deal's done."

The salt ocean was in his mouth and his eyes. His lungs burst for breath. He revolved in the blue chasm of water, tried to swim, at last exploded gasping into the air.

The King had said he would remember, but the years were fading already. Drudging, dancing, buying, spying, prying, waylaying and betraying when he walked in the world of men. Serving something that he had never wholly understood. Sailing foggy seas that were sometimes of this earth. Floating among the constellations. The years and the slaps and the kicks were all fading, and with them (and he rejoiced in it) the days when he had begged.

He lifted an arm, trying to regain his old stroke, and found that he was very tired. Perhaps he had never really rested in all those years. Certainly, he could not recall resting. Where was he? He paddled listlessly, not knowing if he were swimming away from land, if he were in the center of an ocean. A wave elevated him, a long, slow swell of blue under the gray sky. A glory—the rising or perhaps the setting sun—shone to his right. He swam toward it, caught sight of a low coast.

He crawled onto the sand and lay there for a time, his back struck by drops of spray like rain. Near his eyes, the beach seemed nearly black. There were bits of charcoal, fragments of half-burned wood. He raised his head, pushing away the earth, and saw an empty bottle of greenish glass nearly buried in the wet sand.

When he was able at last to rise, his limbs were stiff and cold. The dawnlight had become daylight, but there was no warmth in it. The beach cottage stood only about a hundred yards away, one window golden with sunshine that had entered from the other side, the walls in shadow. The red Triumph gleamed beside the road.

At the top of a small dune he turned and looked back out to sea. A black freighter with a red and white stack was visible a mile or two out, but it was only a freighter. For a moment he felt a kind of regret, a longing for a part of his life that he had hated but that was now gone forever. I will never be able to tell her what happened, he thought. And then, Yes I will, if only I let her think I'm just making it up. And then, No wonder so many people tell so many stories. Goodbye to all that.

The steps creaked under his weight, and he wiped the sand from his feet on the coco mat. Lissy was in bed. When she heard the door open she sat up, then drew up the sheet to cover her breasts.

"Big Tim," she said. "You did come. Tim and I were hoping you would."

When he did not answer, she added, "He's out having a swim, I think. He should be around in a minute."

And when he still said nothing. "We're-Tim and I—we're going to be married."

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20

The Map

"The Map" copyright 1984 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in Light Years and Dark edited by Michael Bishop.

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ON the night before, he had forgotten all his plans and fought, half blinded by his blood after Laetus broke the ewer over his head. Perhaps that was for the best.

And yet if they had not taken his knife while he slept, he might have killed them both.

"Master Gurloes will be angry." That was what they used to say to terrify one another into doing well. Severian would have been angry too, to be sure, and Severian had beaten him more than once. He spat out clotted blood. Beaten him worse than Laetus and Syntyche had last night. Severian had been captain of apprentices in the year before his own.

Now Severian was the Autarch, Severian was the law, and murderers died under the law's hand.

Someone was pounding at the hatch. He spat again, this time into the slop jar, and shouted in the direction of the vent. It let in enough light for him to see the impression Syntyche had left in her bunk as she lay face to the bulkhead, feigning sleep. He smoothed it with his hands.

For a moment he groped for his clothes and his knife, but the knife was gone. He chuckled and rocked back on his own narrow bunk, pushing both legs into his trousers together.

More pounding; the boat rocked beneath him as the stranger searched for another way into the cabin. He spat a third time, and from habit reached up to draw the bolt that was back already. "Hatch sticks! Come on down, you cataniite, I'm not coming up."

The stranger lifted it and clambered down the steep steps. " 'Ware deck beams."

He stooped as he turned about, and he was tall enough that he had to. "You're Captain Eata?"

"Sit on the other bunk. Nobody's using it any more. What do you want?"

"But you are Eata?"

"We'll talk abo"r that later, maybe. After you tell me what you want."

"A guide."

Eata was feeling the cut on his head and did not answer.  
"I was told that you are an intelligent man."  
"Not by a friend."

"I need a man with a boat to take me down Gyoll. To tell me what I need to know concerning the ruins. They said you knew it as well as any man alive."

"An asimi," Eata said. "One asimi for each day. And you'll have to help me handle her-my deckhand and I had a little argument last night."

"Shall we say six orichalks? It should only take a day, and I-"

Eata was not listening. He had seen the broken lock on his sea chest, and he was laughing. "The key's in my pocket!" He gripped the younger, taller man by the knee. "My pants were on the floor!" In his mirth, he nearly choked on the words.

In the flat lands that Gyoll itself had made, Gyoll had little current; but the wind was in the east, and Eata's boat heeled a bit under the pressure of her wide gaffsail. The old sun, well above the tallest towers now, painted the sail's black image on the oily water,

"What do you do, Captain?" the stranger asked. "How do you live?"

"By doing whatever pays. Cargo to the delta and fish to the city, mostly." :

"It's a nice boat. Did you build it?"

"No," Eata said. "Bought it. Not fast like you're used to." His head still hurt, and he leaned on the tiller with one hand pressed to his temple.

"Yes, I've sailed a bit on a lake we have up north."

"Wasn't asking," Eata told him.

"I don't think I ever gave you my name. It's Simulatio."

"And a good one too, I've no doubt."

The stranger turned away for a moment, tinkering with the jibsheet winch to keep Eata from seeing the blood rising in his cheeks. "When will we reach the deserted parts of the city?"

"About none, if this wind holds."

"I didn't know it would take so long."

"You should have hired me farther down." Eata chuckled. And that'll be just the beginning of the dead parts. You might want to go farther yet."



The stranger turned back to look at him. "It's very large, isn't it?"

"Bigger than you can imagine. This part-where people live-is just a sort of border on it."

"Do you know a place where three broad streets come together?"

"Half a dozen, maybe more."

"The southernmost, I would think."

"I can take you to the farthest south I know," Eata said.

"I'm not saying that's the farthest south there is."

"We'll start there then."

"Be night by the time we get there," Eata told him. "The next day will be another asimi."

The stranger nodded. "We're not even to the ruined part yet?"

Eata gestured. "See those clothes? Washing on a line. People here have enough to eat, so they can have two or three shirts, maybe. Farther south you won't see that-a person with only one shirt or one shift doesn't wash it much, but you'll see cooksmoke. Farther still, and you won't even see that. That's the dead city, and people there don't light any fires because of what the smoke might bring down on them. Omophagists is what my old teacher called them. It means those that have their meat raw."

The stranger stared across the water at the lines and their rags. The wind ruffled his hair, and the tattered shirts and skirts waved at him like crowds of poor, shy children who feared he would not wave back. At last he said, "Even if the Autarch won't protect them, they could band together and protect each other."

"It's each other they're afraid of. They live-such as they do live-by sieving the old city, a finer screen every year. Every man steals from his neighbor when he can and kills him if he makes a good find. It doesn't have to be much. A knife with a silver handle-that would be a good find."

After a moment, the stranger looked down at the silver mountings of his dagger.

"I believe we might take a bit of a closer reach here," Eata told him. "There's a meander coming up." The stranger heaved at the windlass, and the boom crept back.

To starboard, a high-pooped thalamegus made its way up the river, glittering in the sunlight like a scarab, all gilding and lapis lazuli. The wind was fair for it now, and as they

watched (Eata with one eye to their own sail) the lateen yards dipped on its stubby masts, then lifted again trailing wide triangles of roseate silk. The long sweeps shrunk and vanished.

"They've been down seeing the sights," Eata told the stranger. "It's safe enough by day, if you've got a couple of young fellows with swords aboard and rowers you can trust."

"What is that up there?" The stranger pointed beyond the thalamegus to a hill crowned with spires. "It looks out of place."

"They call it the Old Citadel," Eata said. "I don't know much about it."

"Is that where the Autarch comes from?"

"So some say."

Urth was looking the sun nearly full in the face now, and the wind had died to a mere whisper. The patched brown mainsail flapped, then filled, then napped again.

The stranger sat on the gunnel for a moment, his booted feet hanging over the side and almost touching the smooth water, then swung them back onto the deck again as though he were fearful of falling overboard. "You can almost imagine them going up, can't you?" he said. "Just taking off with a silver shout and leaving this world behind."

"No," Eata told him. "I can't."

"That's what they're supposed to do, at the end of time. I read about it someplace."

"Paper's dangerous," Eata said. "It's killed a lot more men than steel."

Their boat was moving hardly faster than the sluggish current. A flyer passed overhead as swiftly and silently as a dart from the hand of a giant and vanished into a white summer cloud, only to reappear shrunk nearly to invisibility, one additional spark among the day-dimmed stars. The brown sail crept across the stranger's view of the Old Citadel to the northeast. Despite the shade it gave him, he was sweating. He unlaced his cordwain jerkin.

That night on deck, he laced it again as tightly as he could. It was cold already, and he knew without being told that it would soon be colder still. "Perhaps I should have a blanket," he said.

Eata shook his head. "You'd only fall asleep. Walk up and down and wave your arms. That'll keep you warm and awake too. I'll come up and relieve you at the next watch."

The stranger nodded absently and looked up at the or-

angish lantern Eata had hoisted to the masthead. "They'll know we're out here."

"If they didn't, I wouldn't bother to set a watch. But if we didn't have that, some big carrack would run us under for sure and never feel the difference. Don't you go putting it out-believe me, we're a lot safer with it high and bright. If it should go out of itself, you let it down and get it lit again as handsomely as ever you can. If you can't get it lit, call me. If you see another vessel, particularly a big one, blow the conch." Eata waved toward the spiraled shell beside the binnacle.

The stranger nodded again. "Their boats won't have lights, of course."

"No, nor masts neither. Besides, it could happen that two or three swim out. If you see a face in the water that stares at the light and disappears, it's a manatee. Don't worry about it. But if you see anything that swims like a man, call me."

"I will," the stranger said. He watched as Eata opened the hatch and descended to the tiny cabin.

Two boarding pikes lay in the bow, their grounding irons lost in the inky shadow beneath the overhang of the half-deck, their heads thrusting past the jib-boom mountings.

He climbed down and got one, then scrambled onto the deck again. The pike was three ells long, with an ugly spike head and a sharp hook intended to cut rigging. He flourished it as he walked the circle of the little deck, up, down, right, left, his movements the awkward ones of a man recalling a skill learned in youth.

The curve of Lune lay just visible in the east, sending streamers of virescence toward him in a silent flood, spumed and uncanny. Silhouetted against that moss-green light, the city on the eastern bank seemed less dead than sleeping. Its lowers were black, but their sightless windows, thus illuminated from behind, appeared to betray a faint radiance, as though hecatonchires roved the gloomy corridors and deserted rooms, their thousand fingers smeared with noctoluscence to light their way.

He looked to the west just in time to see a pair of gleaming eyes sink into the water with a scarcely perceptible splash. For the space of a dozen breaths he stared at the spot, but there was nothing more to see. He dashed to starboard again, to what was now the eastern side of the anchored boat, imagining that some devious adversary had swum under or around it to take him by surprise; Gyoll slipped past unruffled.

To port, the shadow of the hull lay long across the glassy river, though he could easily have touched the water with his hands. No skiff or shallop launched from the silent shore.

Downriver, the ruined city appeared to stretch away to infinity, as though Urth were a level plain occupying the whole of space, and the whole of Urth were filled with crumbling walls and tilted pillars. A night bird circled overhead, stooped at the water, and did not rise.

Upriver, the cookfires and grease lamps of living Nessus lent no glow to the sky. The river seemed the only living thing in a city of death; and for an instant the stranger was seized by the conviction that cold Gyoll itself was dead, that the sodden sticks and bits of excrement it carried were somehow swimming, that they were outward bound on some unending voyage to dissolution.

He was about to turn away when he noticed what appeared to be a human form drifting toward him with a scarcely discernible motion. He watched it fascinated and unbelieving, as sparrows are said to watch the golden snake called soporor.

It came nearer. In the green moonlight, its hair looked colorless, its skin berylline. He saw that it was in fact human, and that it floated face downward.

One outstretched hand touched the floating anchor cable as if it wished to climb aboard. Momentarily, the hemp retarded the stiff fingers, and the corpse performed a slow pirouette, like the half turn of a thrown knife seen by an ephemerid, or the tumbling of a derelict through the abyss that separates the worlds. Clambering down into the bow, he tried to grapple it with his pike; it was just out of reach.

He waited, horrified and impatient. At last he was able to draw it nearer and slide the hook under one arm. The corpse rolled over easily, far more easily than he had anticipated, its face pressed below the dark surface by the weight of the lifted arm, then bobbing up when that arm lay in the water once more.

It was a woman, naked and not long dead. Her staring eyes still showed traces of kohl; her teeth gleamed faintly through half-parted lips. He tried to judge her as he had judged the women whose compliance he had secured for coins, to weigh her breasts with his eyes and applaud or condemn the roundness of her belly; he discovered that he could not do so, that in the way he sought to see her she was beyond his sight, unreachable as the unborn, unreachable as his mother had been when he had once, as a boy, happened upon her bathing.

Eata's touch on his shoulder made him spin around.

"My watch."

"This-" he began, and could say nothing more. He pointed.

"I'll fend it off," Eata told him. "You get some sleep. Take the other bunk No one's using it."

He handed Eata the pike and went below, hardly knowing what he did and nearly crushing his fingers beneath the hatch.

A candle guttered in a dish on the broken chest, and he realized that Eata had not slept. One of the narrow bunks was rumpled. He took the other, tying triple knots in the thong that held his burse to his belt, loosening his jerkin, swinging his booted feet onto the hard, thin mattress, and pulling up a blanket of surprisingly soft merino. A puff of his breath extinguished the yellow candle flame, and he closed his eyes.

The dead woman floated in the dark. He pushed her away, turning his thoughts to pleasant things: the room where he had slept as a boy, the hawk and the harrier he had left behind. The mountain meads of his father's estate rose before him, dotted with poppies and wild indigo, with fern and purple-flowered clover. When had he ridden across them last? He could not remember. Lilacs nodded their honey-charged panicles.

Sniffing, he sat up, nearly braining himself on the deck beams.

A faint perfume languished between the mingled stinks of bilge and candle. When he buried his face in the blanket, he was certain of it. Just before sleep came, he heard a man's faint, hoarse sobbing overhead.

He had the last watch, when the ruins dropped from the angry face of the sun like a frayed mask. By night he had seen towers; now he saw that those towers were half fallen and leprous with saplings and rank green vines. As he had been told, there was no smoke. He would have been willing to stake all he had that there were no people either.

Eata came on deck carrying bread, dried meat, and steaming mate. "You owe me another asimi," Eata said.

He untied the knots and took it out. "The last one you'll be getting. Or will you charge me for another day, if you can't return me to the place where I boarded your boat by tomorrow morning?"

Eata shook his head.

"The last, then. This spot where three streets meet-is it on the eastern side? Over there?"

Eata nodded. "See that jetty? Straight in from there for half a league. We'll be at the jetty before primesong."

Together they turned the little capstan that drew up the anchor. The stranger broke out the jib while Eata heaved at the mainsail halyards.

The sea breeze had arrived, raucously announced by a flock of black and white gulls riding it inland in hope of offal. Close hauled, the boat showed such heels that the stranger

feared they would ram the disintegrating jetty. He picked up a pike to use as a boat hook.

At what seemed the last possible moment, Eata swung the rudder abeam and shot her bow into the wind. "That was well done," the stranger said.

"Oh, I can sail. I can fight too, if I have to." Eata paused. "I'll go with you, if you want me."

The stranger shook his head.

"I didn't think you would, but it was worth a try. You understand that you may be killed in there?"

"I doubt it."

"Well, I don't. Take that pike-you may need it. I'll wait for you till nones, understand? No later. When your shadow's around your feet, I'll be gone. If you're still alive walk north, sticking as near the water as you can. If you see a vessel, wave. Hail them." For a moment Eata hesitated, seemingly lost in thought. "Hold up a coin, the biggest you've got. That works sometimes."

"I'll be back before you go," the stranger said. "But this pike must have cost you nearly an asimi. You'll have to replace it if I don't bring it back."

"Not that much," Eata said.

"When I come back, I'll give you an asimi. We'll call it rent for the pike."

"And maybe I'll stay a bit longer in the hope of getting it, eh?"

The stranger nodded. "And perhaps you will. But I'll be back before nones."

When he had vaulted ashore, he watched Eata put out, then turned to study the city before him.

Two score strides brought him to the first ruined building. The streets were narrow here, and made more narrow still by the debris that half choked them. Blue cornflowers and pale bindweed grew from this rubbish and from the great, cracked blocks of gritty pavement. There was no sound but the distant keening of the gulls, and the air seemed purer than it had on the river. When he felt certain Eata had not followed him and that no one was watching him, he sat on a fallen stone and took out the map. He had wrapped it in oiled vellum, and the slight wetting the packet had received had not penetrated.

For most of the time he had possessed the map, he had not dared to look at it. Now as he studied it at leisure in the brilliant sunlight, his excitement was embittered by an irrational guilt.

Those spidery streets might-or might not-be the very streets that stretched before him. That wandering line of blue might be a stream or canal, or Gyll itself. The map presented an accumulation of detail, and yet it was detail of a sort that did nothing to confirm or deny location. He committed as much of it to memory as he could, all the while wondering what feature or turning might prove of value, what name of street or structure might have survived where there was no one left to recall it, what thing of masonry or metal might yet retain its former shape, if any did. For an instant it seemed to him that it was not the treasure that was lost, but he himself.

As he refolded the cracked paper and wrapped it again, he speculated (as he had so many times) about the precious thing that had been thus laboriously hidden by the men to whom the stars had been as so many isles. Left to its own devices, his imagination ran to childish coffers crammed with gold. His intellect recognized these fancies for what they were and rejected them, but could propose in their stead only a dozen dim improbabilities, rumors of the secret knowledge and frightful weapons of ancient times. Life and mastery without limit.

He stood and studied the deserted buildings to make certain he had not been seen. A fox sat atop the highest heap of rubble, its red coat fiery in the sunshine, its eyes bright as jet beads. Suddenly afraid of any eyes, he threw the pike at it. It vanished, and the pike rattled down the farther side out of sight. He climbed over the mound and searched among the flourishing beggar ticks and lion's teeth, but the pike had vanished too.

It took him a long time to reach the area where three streets met, and longer still to find their intersection. He had somehow veered south, and he wasted a watch in the search. Another was spent amid buz/ing insects in convincing himself that it was not the intersection on his map, which showed avenues of equal width running southwest, southeast, and north. At last he took out the map again, comparing its faded inks to the desolate reality. Here were indeed threestreets, but one was wider than the others and ran due east. This was not the place.

He was returning to the boat when the omophagists rushed him-men the color of dust, wild-eyed and clothed in rags. In that first moment they seemed innumerable. When he had grappled with one and killed him, he realized that only four remained.

Four were still far too many. He Hed, one hand pressed to his bleeding side. He had always been a good runner, but he ran now as never before, leaping every obstacle, seeming almost to fly. The ruins raced and reeled around him. Missiles whizzed past his head.

He had nearly reached the river before they caught him. Mud slid from under his boot, he fell to one knee, and they were all around him. One must have torn his silver-mounted dagger from the dead man's ribs. He watched it slash at his

own throat now with the stunned incredulity of a householder who finds himself savaged by his own bandog, and he threw up his arms as much to shut out the sight as to counter the blow.

His forearm turned to ice as the steel bit in. Desperately, he rolled away, and saw the gray figure who wielded his dagger felled by the cudgel of another. A third dove for the dagger, and the two struggled.

Someone screamed; he looked to one side to see the fourth, who had his pike, impaled upon Eata's.

The inn where he had stayed was near the river. Because he had walked some distance south searching for Eata's boat, he had forgotten that. The inn was the Cygnet; he had forgotten that too.

"Toss one of those loafers the line," Eata called. "He'll tie us up for an aes."

He found he could not throw well with his left arm, but one of the loungers dove for the coil and caught it. "I've some luggage," he called as the man heaved at the line. "Perhaps you'd carry it up to the Cygnet for me."

Eata jumped into the bow. "The optimate's name is Simulatio," he told the loungeur. "He stayed there three nights back. Inform the innkeeper. Tell him the optimate wishes the room he had before."

"I hate to leave," the stranger said. "But I won't be going south again until I've healed." He was picking at the knots that bound his burse.

"If you're wise, you won't go at all."

The loungeur threw the stranger's bags onto the warf and leaped up after them.

"I want to give you something." The stranger took out a dirisis. "Perhaps you could come back at the next moon and see if I'm well enough to go."

"I won't take your yellow boy," Eata said. "You owe me an asimi for pike rent. I'll take that."

"But you will come back?"

"For an asimi a day? Of course I will. So would any other boatman."

The stranger hesitated while he looked at Eata, and Eata at him. "I think I can trust you," he said at last. "I wouldn't want to go into those ruins with anyone else."

"I know," Eata told him. "That's why I'm going to give you some advice. Walk away from the river a couple of streets, and you'll find a goldsmith's. It's the sign of the Osela. That's a golden bird."



"I know what it is."

"Yes, you would. Fold up your map-" He laughed.

"You shouldn't flinch like that. If you're going to deal with people like me, you're going to have to learn to govern your face."

"I didn't think you knew about it."

"It's in your boot," Eata told him softly.

"You spied on me!"

"Sometime when you took it out? No. But once when you sat on the gunnel, you jerked your feet away from the water; and when you slept, you kept your boots on. A boatman might have done that, but you? Not unless you had something more than your feet in them."

"I see."

Eata looked away, his eyes tracing the slow, immutable How of great Gyll to the southwest. "I knew a man who had one of those maps," he said. "A man can spend half his life looking, and never find a thing. Maybe it's under the sea now. Maybe someone found it long ago. Maybe it was never there at all. You understand? And he can't trust anyone, not his friend, not even his woman."

"And if his friend and his woman took it from him," the stranger said, "one might kill the other to have the whole of it. Yes, I see how it is. That isn't the map I have, if that's what you're thinking. I found this one between the pages of an old book."

"I was hoping it was mine," Eata told him. "You said you understood, but you don't. I let them take it. I wanted them to have it, so they'd leave me alone. So I wouldn't end up like the men we fought with yesterday. I got drunk, let them see the key, let them see me lock the map in my chest."

"But you woke," the stranger said.

Eata turned to face him, suddenly angry. "That fool Laetus broke the lock! I thought ..."

"You don't have to tell me about it."

"He and Syntyche were younger than I. I only thought they'd waste their lives looking, the way I'd wasted mine, and Maxellindis's too. I didn't think he'd kill Syntyche."

"He killed her," the stranger said. "You didn't. You didn't make the two of them steal, either. You're not the Increate, and you can't take the responsibility for what others do."

"But I can advise them," Eata said. "And I'd advise you to burn your map, but I know you won't. So fold it up instead,

put your seal on it, and take it to that goldsmith I told you about. He's an honest old fellow, and for an orichalk he'll lock it in his strongroom. Go home then till you're better. If you're wise you'll never come back to claim it."

The stranger shook his head. "I'm going to stay at the inn here. I've money enough. And I still owe you an asimi. Pike rent, we called it. Here it is."

Eata took the silver coin and tossed it up. It was bright, newly minted, with Severian's profile stamped deep and sharp on one side. In the reddish sunlight, it might have been a coal of fire.

"You knot the strings of that burse," Eata said. "Then knot them over again, all for fear I'll get into it when you sleep. Let me tell you something. If I come back for you, I'll have every brass aes before we're done. You'll take your money out, all of it, and give it to me, bit by bit."

He flung the asimi high over the water. For a final instant it shone, before it was quenched in dark Gyoll forever. "I'm not coming back," Eata said.

"It's a good map," the stranger told him. "Look." He drew it from the top of his boot and began to unwrap it, clumsily because he could not use both hands. When he saw Eata's face, he stopped, thrust his map into his pocket, and clambered onto the half deck.

Weak from loss of blood and stiff with wounds, he could not get up to the warf without help. One of the remaining loungers extended a hand, and he took it. At every moment he expected to feel a pike plunged into his back; there was only Eata's mocking laughter.

When he had both feet on the warf, he turned toward the boat once more. Eata called, "Would you cast me off, please, Optimate?"

The stranger pointed, and the loungeer who had helped him up untied the mooring line.

Eata pushed the boat away from the warf and heaved the boom about to catch what wind there was.

"You'll come back for me!" the stranger shouted. "Because I'll let you come with me! Because I'll give you a share!"

Slowly and almost hesitantly, the old brown sail filled. The rigging grew taut, and the little cargo boat began to gather way. Eata did not look around, but his hand shook as it gripped the tiller.

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37

Kevin Malone

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MARCELLA and I were married in April. I lost my position with Ketterly, Bruce & Drake in June, and by August we were desperate. We kept the apartment-I think we both felt that if we lowered our standards there would be no chance to raise them again-but the rent tore at our small savings. All during July I had tried to get a job at another brokerage firm, and by August I was calling fraternity brothers I had not seen since graduation, and expressing an entire willingness to work in whatever businesses their fathers owned. One of them, I think, must have mailed us the advertisement.

Attractive young couple, well educated and well connected, will receive free housing, generous living allowance for minimal services.

There was a telephone number, which I omit for reasons that will become clear.

I showed the clipping to Marcella, who was lying with her cocktail shaker on the chaise longue. She said, "Why not," and I dialed the number.

The telephone buzzed in my ear, paused, and buzzed again. I allowed myself to go limp in my chair. It seemed absurd to call at all; for the advertisement to have reached us that day, it must have appeared no later than yesterday morning. If the position were worth having-

"The Pines."

I pulled myself together. "You placed a classified ad. For an attractive couple, well educated and the rest of it."

"I did not, sir. However, I believe my master did. I am Priest, the butler."

I looked at Marcella, but her eyes were closed. "Do you know, Priest, if the opening has been filled?"

"I think not, sir. May I ask your age?"

I told him. At his request, I also told him Marcella's (she was two years younger than I), and gave him the names of the schools we had attended, described our appearance, and mentioned that my grandfather had been a governor of Virginia, and that Marcella's uncle had been ambassador to France. I did not tell him that my father had shot himself rather than face bankruptcy, or that Marcella's family had disowned her-but I suspect he guessed well enough what our situation was.

"You will forgive me, sir, for asking so many questions. We are almost a half day's drive, and I would not wish you to be

disappointed."

I told him that I appreciated that, and we set a date-Tuesday of the next week-on which Marcella and I were to come out for an interview with "the master." Priest had hung up before I realized that I had failed to learn his employer's name.

During the teens and twenties some very wealthy people had designed estates in imitation of the palaces of the Italian Renaissance. The Pines was one of them, and better preserved than most-the fountain in the courtyard still played, the marbles were clean and unyellowed, and if no red-robed cardinal descended the steps to a carriage blazoned with the Borgia arms, one felt that he had only just gone. No doubt the place had originally been called La Capanna or // Eremo,

A serious looking man in dark livery opened the door for us. For a moment he stared at us across the threshold. "Very well . . ." he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said that you are looking very well." He nodded to each of us in turn, and stood aside. "Sir. Madame. I am Priest."

"Will your master be able to see us?"

For a moment some exiled expression-it might have been amusement-seemed to tug at his solemn face. "The music room, perhaps, sir?"

I said I was sure that would be satisfactory, and followed him. The music room held a Steinway, a harp, and a dozen or so comfortable chairs; it overlooked a rose garden in which old remontant varieties were beginning that second season that is more opulent though less generous than the first. A kneeling gardener was weeding one of the beds.

"This is a wonderful house," Marcella said. "I really didn't think there was anything like it left. I told him you'd have a John Collins-all right? You were looking at the roses."

"Perhaps we ought to get the job first."

"I can't call him back now, and if we don't get it, at least we'll have had the drinks."

I nodded to that. In five minutes they arrived, and we drank them and smoked cigarettes we found in a humidior-English cigarettes of strong Turkish tobacco. A maid came, and said that Mr. Priest would be much obliged if we would let him know when we would dine. I told her that we would eat whenever it was convenient, and she dropped a little curtsy and withdrew.

"At least," Marcella commented, "he's making us comfortable while we wait."

Dinner was lamb in aspic, and a salad, with a maid-an-

other maid-and a footman to serve while Priest stood by to see that it was done properly. We ate at either side of a small table on a terrace overlooking another garden, where antique statues faded to white glimmerings as the sun set.

Priest came forward to light the candles. "Will you require me after dinner, sir?"

"Will your employer require us; that's the question."

"Bateman can show you to your room, sir, when you are ready to retire. Julia will see to madame."

I looked at the footman, who was carrying in fruit on a tray.

"No, sir. That is Carter. Bateman is your man."

"And Julia," Marcella put in, "is my maid, I suppose?"

"Precisely." Priest gave an almost inaudible cough. "Perhaps, sir-and madame-you might find this useful." He drew a photograph from an inner pocket and handed it to me.

It was a black and white snapshot, somewhat dog-eared. Two dozen people, most of them in livery of one kind or another, stood in brilliant sunshine on the steps at the front of the house, men behind women. There were names in India ink across the bottom of the picture: James Sutton, Edna DeBuck, Lloyd Bateman . . .

"Our staff, sir."

I said, "Thank you, Priest. No, you needn't stay tonight."

The next morning Bateman shaved me in bed. He did it very well, using a straight razor and scented soap applied with a brush. I had heard of such things-I think my grandfather's valet may have shaved him like that before the First World War-but I had never guessed that anyone kept up the tradition. Bateman did, and I found I enjoyed it. When he had dressed me, he asked if I would breakfast in my room.

"I doubt it," I said. "Do you know my wife's plans?"

"I think it likely she will be on the South Terrace, sir. Julia said something to that effect as I was bringing in your water."

"I'll join her then."

"Of course, sir." He hesitated.

"I don't think I'll require a guide, but you might tell my wife I'll be with her in ten minutes or so."

Bateman repeated his, "Of course, sir," and went out. The truth was that I wanted to assure myself that everything I had carried in the pockets of my old suit-car keys, wallet, and so on-had been transferred to the new one he had laid

out for me; and I did not want to insult him, if I could prevent it, by doing it in front of him.

Everything was where it should be, and I had a clean handkerchief in place of my own only slightly soiled one. I pulled it out to look at (Irish linen) and a flutter of green came with it—two bills, both fifties.

Over eggs Benedict I complimented Marcella on her new dress, and asked if she had noticed where it had been made.

"Rowe's. It's a little shop on Fifth Avenue."

"You know it, then. Nothing unusual?"

She answered, "No, nothing unusual," more quickly than she should have, and I knew that there had been money in her new clothes too, and that she did not intend to tell me about it.

"We'll be going home after this. I wonder if they'll want me to give this jacket back."

"Going home?" She did not look up from her plate. "Why? And who are 'they'?"

"Whoever owns this house."

"Yesterday you called him he. You said Priest talked about the master, so that seemed logical enough. Today you're afraid to deal with even presumptive masculinity."

I said nothing.

"You think he spent the night in my room—they separated us, and you thought that was why, and you just waited there—was it under a sheet?—for me to scream or something. And I didn't."

"I was hoping you had, and I hadn't heard you."

"Nothing happened, dammit! I went to bed and went to sleep; but as for going home, you're out of your mind. Can't you see we've got the job? Whoever he is—wherever he is—he likes us. We're going to stay here and live like human beings, at least for a while."

And so we did. That day we stayed on from hour to hour. After that, from day to day; and at last from week to week. I felt like Klipspringer, the man who was Jay Gatsby's guest for so long that he had no other home—except that Klipspringer, presumably, saw Gatsby from time to time, and no doubt made agreeable conversation, and perhaps even played the piano for him. Our Gatsby was absent. I do not mean that we avoided him, or that he avoided us; there were no rooms we were forbidden to enter, and no times when the servants seemed eager that we should play golf or swim or go riding. Before the good weather ended, we had two couples up for a weekend; and when Bette Windgassen asked if Marcella had inherited the place, and then if we were

renting it, Marcella said, "Oh, do you like it?" in such a way that they left, I think, convinced that it was ours, or as good as ours.

And so it was. We went away when we chose, which was seldom, and returned when we chose, quickly. We ate on the various terraces and balconies, and in the big, formal dining room, and in our own bedrooms. We rode the horses, and drove the Mercedes and the cranky, appealing old Jaguar as though they were our own. We did everything, in fact, except buy the groceries and pay the taxes and the servants; but someone else was doing that; and every morning I found one hundred dollars in the pockets of my clean clothes. If summer had lasted forever, perhaps I would still be there.

The poplars lost their leaves in one October week; at the end of it I fell asleep listening to the hum of the pump that emptied the swimming pool. When the rain came, Marcella turned sour and drank too much. One evening I made the mistake of putting my arm about her shoulders as we sat before the fire in the trophy room.

"Get your filthy hands off me," she said. "I don't belong to you."

"Priest, look here. He hasn't said an intelligent word to me all day or done a decent thing, and now he wants to paw me all night."

Priest pretended, of course, that he had not heard her.

"Look over here! Damn it, you're a human being, aren't you?"

He did not ignore that. "Yes, madame, I am a human being."

"I'll say you are. You're more of a man than he is. This is your place, and you're keeping us for pets-is it me you want? Or him? You sent us the ad, didn't you? He thinks you go into my room at night, or he says he does. Maybe you really come to his-is that it?"

Priest did not answer. I said, "For God's sake, Marcella."

"Even if you're old, Priest, I think you're too much of a man for that." She stood up, tottering on her long legs and holding on to the stonework of the fireplace. "If you want me, take me. If this house is yours, you can have me. We'll send him to Vegas-or throw him on the dump."

In a much softer tone than he usually used. Priest said, "I don't want either of you, madame."

I stood up then, and caught him by the shoulders. I had been drinking too, though only half or a quarter as much as Marcella; but I think it was more than that-it was the accumulated frustration of all the days since Jim Bruce told me I was finished. I outweighed Priest by at least forty pounds, and I was twenty years younger. I said: "I want to

know."

"Release me, sir, please."

"I want to know who it is; I want to know now. Do you see that fire? Tell me, Priest, or I swear I'll throw you in it."

His face tightened at that. "Yes," he whispered, and I let go of his shoulders. "It was not the lady, sir. It was you. I want that understood this time."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm not doing this because of what she said."

"You aren't the master, are you? For God's sake tell the truth."

"I have always told the truth, sir. No, I am not the master. Do you remember the picture I gave you?"

I nodded.

"You discarded it. I took the liberty, sir, of rescuing it from the wastecan in your bathroom. I have it here." He reached into his coat and pulled it out, just as he had on the first day, and handed it to me.

"It's one of these? One of the servants?"

Priest nodded and pointed with an impeccably manicured forefinger to the figure at the extreme right of the second row. The name beneath it was Kevin Malone.

"Him?"

Silently, Priest nodded again.

I had examined the picture on the night he had given it to me, but I had never paid special attention to that particular half-inch-high image. The person it represented might have<sup>^</sup> been a gardener, a man of middle age, short and perhaps stocky. A soft, sweat-stained hat cast a shadow on his face.

"I want to see him." I looked toward Marcella, still leaning against the stonework of the mantel. "We want to see him."

"Are you certain, sir?"

"Damn you, get him!"

Priest remained where he was, staring at me; I was so furious that I think I might have seized him as I had threatened and pushed him into the fire.

Then the French windows opened, and there came a gust of wind. For an instant I think I expected a ghost, or some turbulent elemental spirit. I felt that pricking at the neck that comes when one reads Poe alone at night.



The man I had seen in the picture stepped into the room. He was a small and very ordinary man in worn khaki, but he left the windows wide behind him, so that the night entered with him, and remained in the room for as long as we talked.

"You own this house," I said. "You're Kevin Malone."

He shook his head. "I am Kevin Malone-this house owns me."

Marcella was standing straighter now, drunk, yet still at that stage of drunkenness in which she was conscious of her condition and could compensate for it. "It owns me too," she said, and walking almost normally she crossed the room to the baronial chair Malone had chosen, and managed to sit down at his feet.

"My father was the man-of-all-work here. My mother was the parlor maid. I grew up here, washing the cars and raking leaves out of the fountains. Do you follow me? Where did you grow up?"

I shrugged. "Various places. Richmond, New York, three years in Paris. Until I was sent off to school we lived in hotels, mostly."

"You see, then. You can understand." Malone smiled for a moment. "You're still re-creating the life you had as a child, or trying to. Isn't that right? None of us can be happy any other way, and few of us even want to try."

"Thomas Wolfe said you can't go home again," I ventured.

"That's right, you can't go home. There's one place where we can never go-haven't you thought of that? We can dive to the bottom of the sea and some day NASA will fly us to the stars, and I have known men to plunge into the past-or the future-and drown. But there's one place where we can't go. We can't go where we are already. We can't go home, because our minds, and our hearts, and our immortal souls are already there."

Not knowing what to say, I nodded, and that seemed to satisfy him. Priest looked as calm as ever, but he made no move to shut the windows, and I sensed that he was somehow afraid.

"I was put into an orphanage when I was twelve, but I never forgot The Pines. I used to tell the other kids about it, and it got bigger and better every year; but I knew what I said could never equal the reality."

He shifted in his seat, and the slight movement of his legs sent Marcella sprawling, passed out. She retained a certain grace still; I have always understood that it is the reward of studying ballet as a child.

Malone continued to talk. "They'll tell you it's no longer possible for a poor boy with a second-rate education to make

a fortune. Well, it takes luck; but I had it. It also takes the willingness to risk it all. I had that too, because I knew that for me anything under a fortune was nothing. I had to be able to buy this place-to come back and buy The Pines, and staff it and maintain it. That's what I wanted, and nothing less would make any difference."

"You're to be congratulated," I said. "But why . . ."

He laughed. It was a deep laugh, but there was no humor in it. "Why don't I wear a tie and eat my supper at the end of the big table? I tried it. I tried it for nearly a year, and every night I dreamed of home. That wasn't home, you see, wasn't The Pines. Home is three rooms above the stables. I live there now. I live at home, as a man should."

"It seems to me that it would have been a great deal simpler for you to have applied for the job you fill now."

Malone shook his head impatiently. "That wouldn't have done it at all. I had to have control. That's something I learned in business-to have control. Another owner would have wanted to change things, and maybe he would even have sold out to a subdivider. No. Besides, when I was a boy this estate belonged to a fashionable young couple. Suppose a man of my age had bought it? Or a young woman, some whore." His mouth tightened, then relaxed. "You and your wife were ideal. Now I'll have to get somebody else, that's all. You can stay the night, if you like. I'll have you driven into the city tomorrow morning."

I ventured, "You needed us as stage properties, then. I'd be willing to stay on those terms."

Malone shook his head again. "That's out of the question. I don't need props, I need actors. In business I've put on little shows for the competition, if you know what I mean, and sometimes even for my own people. And I've learned that the only actors who can really do justice to their parts are the ones who don't know what they are."

"Really-" I began.

He cut me off with a look, and for a few seconds we stared at one another. Something terrible lived behind those eyes.

Frightened despite all reason could tell me, I said, "I understand," and stood up. There seemed to be nothing else to do. "I'm glad, at least, that you don't hate us. With your childhood it would be quite natural if you did. Will you explain things to Marcella in the morning? She'll throw herself at you, no matter what I say."

He nodded absently.

"May I ask one question more? I wondered why you had to leave and go into the orphanage. Did your parents die or lose their places?"

Malone said, "Didn't you tell him, Priest? It's the local legend. I thought everyone knew."

The butler cleared his throat. "The elder Mr. Malone—he was the stableman here, sir, though it was before my time. He murdered Betty Malone, who was one of the maids. Or at least he was thought to have, sir. They never found the body, and it's possible he was accused falsely."

"Buried her on the estate," Malone said. "They found bloody rags and the hammer, and he hanged himself in the stable."

"I'm sorry ... I didn't mean to pry."

The wind whipped the drapes like wine-red flags. They knocked over a vase and Priest winced, but Malone did not seem to notice. "She was twenty years younger and a tramp," he said. "Those things happen."

I said, "Yes, I know they do," and went up to bed.

I do not know where Marcella slept. Perhaps there on the carpet, perhaps in the room that had been hers, perhaps even in Malone's servants' flat over the stables. I breakfasted alone on the terrace, then—without Bateman's assistance—packed my bags.

I saw her only once more. She was wearing a black silk dress; there were circles under her eyes and her head must have been throbbing, but her hand was steady. As I walked out of the house, she was going over the Sevres with a peacock-feather duster. We did not speak.

I have sometimes wondered if I were wholly wrong in anticipating a ghost when the French windows opened. How did Malone know the time had come for him to appear?

Of course I have looked up the newspaper reports of the murder. All the old papers are on microfilm at the library, and I have a great deal of time.

There is no mention of a child. In fact, I get the impression that the identical surnames of the murderer and his victim were coincidental. Malone is a common enough one, and there were a good many Irish servants then.

Sometimes I wonder if it is possible for a man—even a rich man—to be possessed, and not to know it.

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50

The Dark of the June

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UNTOUCHED by any change of the last twenty-five years, the Nailer living room continued to reflect (like a lost photograph unexpectedly found between the pages of a book) the tastes of Henry's late wife. May Nailer. Those tastes had been simple but not good, and save for Henry's old trophies and some tattered physics books, it was just such a room as May might have seen in a newspaper the day she ordered the furniture. To this unpromising setting Henry had added little over the years-though he had collaborated with May, in the year after the room was set up, to produce their daughter June. Except for June and her clothing the nineteen nineties were not so much excluded as denied.

On this spring evening, June wore a soft gown without visible hem or seam, a gown that fell to her ankles and left her right breast bare. On her right wrist was a bracelet of glo-like bangles and in her right ear a dangling glo-lite earring. The nails of her left hand were red, and those of her right black; her dramatic lashes were her own now, surgically implanted and gracefully long: she was a beautiful girl, Henry thought, although somewhat too slender to look her best in the current fashions. "They're here," she said, and he nodded, pretending he had not been looking at her.

"They really are here," his daughter continued as though he had denied it. "A translucent thing like a scarf came out of the bedroom and went into the kitchen a moment ago."

"I didn't notice," he said.

"We're living in a haunted world, Daddy, and it ought to bother you-I know you, and you're a thoroughgoing materialist whose whole cast of mind was formed before any of this started-but you hardly seem to care."

"They're not dead," her father said. He was a broad-shouldered, placid man who wore a black patch over the socket of an eye lost years before in a motorcycle accident:

his curly, almost-full beard was going grey. "They're just people." He went back to his book.

At midnight the lights flickered, a sign that the rates had doubled; Henry waved a hand at Bellini's Portrait of the Doge Loredano above the fireplace; they went out leaving only the night-light gleam of the bank nearest the stair. He used an old leather bookmark imprinted with an unconvincing dragon to record the fact that he had abandoned An Incident at Krechetovka Station before it had had time to make steam, and went up to bed. There was a note on his pillow, and he called the police.

"She's over eighteen?"

Henry nodded.

"Then there's nothing we can do."

"You could stop her," Henry said. "You could book her, if that were necessary, on some minor charge, give me time to talk to her, give her time to think."

"I could give the city manager a jaywalking ticket too," the computer-generated police surrogate said. Henry's old 3V made him look sallow and a trifle unreal, even projecting into the darkened room. "But I'm not going to."

A nothing went past, a luminous wisp that might have been steam from a coffee pot if steam were faintly blue. "Look at that," Henry said, "that might have been her." He felt as if he were about to weep, but no tears came, only a greater and greater ache in his chest.

"I didn't see it," the police surrogate said, "but anyway it couldn't have been that quick. How old did you say she was?"

"Twenty-three. Junie's twenty-three, I think."

"Then it couldn't be anywhere near that quick; the older they are the longer it takes, and they flash in and out and fade-that's why they won't accept anybody over thirty. Did you call the center?"

Henry looked at him blankly.

"Didn't you call the center yet? Call them."

"I didn't think they'd cooperate-they want people to come, don't they?"

"They got to tell you for legal purposes-everybody leaves an estate, you know what I mean? I mean she can't take it with her. Even if it's just clothes. Turn on your recorder and tell them it's an official request-they'll tell you."

Henry said, "It's not as though they're dead."

"Not to them it ain't." The police surrogate switched off.

Henry coded the center; the girl who answered said, "Who is it?"

"My name is Henry Boyce Nailer-"

"I mean who're you looking for? Man or woman?"

"A woman." Henry cleared his throat. "Her name is June Nailer, and she's my daughter."

The girl flipped through a register on her desk. "Recent?"

"Tonight."

"She hasn't been here. Now don't you come down trying to make trouble; we won't even let you in the building."

Outside the air was soft with the feeling of new growth, and crickets were singing in the grass. He took off the suitcoat he had put on from force of habit and carried it over his shoulder as he strode toward the station; twice black things passed over the broad face of the moon as he walked: one was a whippoorwill; the other a nin, one of them. The nin was like a flying flag. Henry thought, a fluttering banner,

this last bit of someone who would soon-in a few months or years-be totally not in nature, the dark flag of a vessel putting out for all the wonders of the night sky. He paid his tokens to the gate and stepped onto the starter belt, then across it to the speedup belt, and then onto the fast belt. Even there at a steady speed of forty kilometers an hour the wind was not cold, but his coat whipped behind him; he was afraid his checkbook would fall out and put the coat on. There were boxes ahead of him, and the boxman came back to ask if he wanted to rent one.

"I guess you're surprised I'm still open this late, right, pal? I mean when it ain't raining or nothing. . . . Well, when I said did you wanna rent a box that was just what I meant-I got a girl in one, you get me? A nice girl. Young. You looking for a girl, bud?"

"Yes," Henry said, "but not your kind of girl." He discovered that he was happy to have someone to talk to, even the boxman.

"I'd show her to you," the boxman said, "but she's taking a little nappy-poo in there between tricks. Listen, if you got any interest I'll wake her up and show her to you anyhow." Henry told him to let his girl sleep and got off in the downtown mall three kilometers down the belt. He had felt an irrational desire, though he would hardly admit it to himself, to see the trans-tart-to order her led yawning out of her box (they were officially called rental-mobile weather shelters, and the boxman paid an annual fee for the privilege of putting each aboard the belts), her makeup smeared with sleep, and the inevitable pink-tinted three mil Saran gown fluttering in the wind. He imagined himself escorting a much younger woman into a restaurant-they would be father and daughter until the other diners saw their hands clasped beneath the table.

The building was not that, only a two-floor complex. Amateurish posters in its windows: THE BUTCHERS KILL FOR YOU, and DO YOU WANT TO BE A PART OF ALL MANKIND HAS DONE?,

and LIVE WITHOUT MEAT--IN YOU OR ON YOU-DISINCARNATE, and RESIGNATION IS THE ONLY WAY OUT-SO I'M RESIGNING.

Henry went inside; there was an athletic young man at a desk in the first room, and a softball bat leaning in the corner behind the young man. He said, "What do you want?"

"I want to know if my daughter's here."

"You can't come farther than this," the young man said. "There's a phone on the wall in back of you-call them up inside."

"I did," Henry told him. "Now I'm going to see for myself."

The young man reached behind him for the softball bat and laid it across his desk. "There's a switch in the seat of this chair, and every time I stand up without shutting it off

it rings an alarm in police headquarters. They like for people to go away—they think it reduces the crime rate. They don't like people who try to stop it; sometimes they shoot them."

"Why don't you go?"

"I am going," the young man said, "in November. Someone else I know is going to be ready to go too by then, and we're going to do it together. Meantime I want to do something right here. We're going to go, and we're never going to die."

"Something else happens to them," Henry said.

"But not death; they never die. That's what they say."

Someone came in behind Henry, a narrow-shouldered young man of about nineteen. He said, "This is the place, isn't it?" He had an air of desperate triumph, as though he had won through to some frightful goal.

"This is the place," the young man with the ball bat said, and as he did Henry bolted for the inner door, slamming it and locking it behind him.

A man and two women sat talking in a room filled with ashtrays and stale coffee cups; neither of the women was June. As they stared at Henry one nickered out of sight, then, as he found the next door, returned. She might have been traced in neon, and the bright room a dark street.

He burst into a third room, and a young woman (the same young woman, he realized a moment afterward, that he had talked to earlier) said, "You're Mr. Nailer?"

He nodded.

"Good. She's still on." The young woman pressed a switch on the desk before her, and Junie was in the room. "Daddy," she said.

"Where are you, honey?" He recognized the chair in which she sat, the rug around her feet, even as he spoke.

"Daddy, I'm home. I want to see you before I go."

He said, "Are you going so soon, honey?" and as he spoke she was nicked away. The 3V was still on; the old wing-backed chair that had been May's still stood on the patternless blue carpet, but June was no longer there. He waited, watching it, realizing that the young woman at the desk was watching too.

"She may return in a few seconds," the young woman said, "but she may not. If you want to see her in person I'd go back home if I were you."

Henry nodded and turned to step back into the room of

stale coffee cups. A plainclothesman hit him in the mouth as he came through the door; he fell to his knees from the shock, and was jerked to his feet again. He hit the plainclothesman in the stomach, kneeed him, then grabbed his lapels and smashed his nose with his forehead. Somehow the plainclothesman's gun was no longer attached to him and went skittering across the floor. A uniformed policeman was coming through the door Henry had to go out of: he made the mistake of diving for the gun, and Henry hit him in the back of the neck.

When he stepped off the belt he was still panting. He reflected on how difficult it was for a man his age to keep in condition; they could discover who he was easily enough-but perhaps they wouldn't make too much trouble about it-it shouldn't be pleasant for them to confess they had been beaten by a middle-aged scholar. Or perhaps they would; with Junie gone he really didn't care.

She met him at the gate. "It's past your bedtime, Dad. You shouldn't have gone into the city at this time of night."

He said: "The sun'll be up in two, three more hours. I think I'll just stay up now."

"To be with me as long as you can-isn't that it?"

He nodded.

"What do you want to do?"

"Let's just walk in the garden. For a minute." Her left hand was in his, and he could see the faint glow of her bracelet when she raised her right hand to touch her hair, the shine of her earring when she turned to look at him. "When you were a little girl I used to think about your dying," he told her. "You do, you know, with children; you were so fragile. And your mother had just died. Now I'll never see you dead, and I'm glad; I want you to know that." '?!

"I'll never see you dead either. Dad. That was part of it." ^

"What was the rest of it?" ^|

"All you expected of me, a little. And She was gone, her hand no longer in his. "June!" he yelled. "June!" He ran past the stone birdbath and saw the twinkle of her bracelet and earring under the willow; then the little lights winked out one by one.

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58

The Death of Hyle

"The Death of Hyle" copyright 1974 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in Continuum 2 edited by Roger Elivood.



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I HAVE never been a religious man, and I am not a religious man now. I have known all my life—at least, since I was seven or eight, when I began to read my older brother Walter's chemistry books, and later the big, old, red-bound encyclopedias in my father's study—that this world of supposedly sentient matter, this world that appears (I ought to have said, appeared) so solid to my admittedly bemused eyes—eyes enchained by maya, as the Hindus have been telling us for four thousand years—is insubstantial as vapor. Not only because what we have self-indulgently called our too-solid flesh is (as it is) no more than a cosmos of crackling energy; and not only because that fiction we refer to as objective reality is (as it is) the creature of the very radiation by which we gauge it—and of our senses—a creation shaped too by the digital nature of our brains and by our minds' deplorable habit of overlaying all we see and hear and feel with what we anticipated perceiving, overlaying it, I say, before warping the whole to bring it in line with our past experiences; but most of all because it is the least substantial of the laws that rule us that tyrannize us most—so that we, every one of us, fee crushed beneath the dictum that one thousand less nine hundred and thirty is seventy, and tortured by the implacable commandment to destroy the thing we love, while the solid fact (as we call it) that Madagascar is off the eastern coast of Africa affects us not at all.

I am back again; though it must seem to you who read this that I was never gone, it has been a long time—several days at least. I gauge the time by the grass; there are no newspapers, no bottles of milk on our doorstep for the simple reason that June bought our milk at the market (we never used much, anyway) and I bought a paper, on the odd days when I was inclined to read one, from the rack beside the station. Now the grass is my Journal, and whispers news and gossip with green tongues that sometimes tell more than they know, or understand.

But enough of them and their small indiscretions—I vanished. Have you ever felt what it is to vanish? Do you know how a light feels when it goes out? Where the minutes disappear to when they pass? Let me tell you. ...

I had finished writing that sentence about Africa, and made the period with a little stab of my pencil, and was just wondering if Madagascar and Africa were the right example after all, when the pencil fell through my fingers to the paper, and rolling along the top of my desk came to rest against the metal box in which I keep my stamps. It was not that the pencil had become too heavy for me to hold, but that my fingers had grown too light to hold it. I am tempted by the rooted courses of our language to say that I had the feeling then that the room around me, table, box, pencil, the brass inkstand with its devil face, desk, chair, books, walls, my bronze bust of Hogarth, had become unreal as the angel faces seen in clouds. The truth is otherwise: what I felt was no feeling, but certainty. I knew that I had lived my life among

the shadows of shadows, that I had worked for money as I might have labored for fernseed, and spent my gains for the watermarks on paper, paper in a picture, the picture in a book seen lying open in a projection from a lens about to crack in an empty room of a vacant house. I stood up then and tried to rub my eyes and found that I saw through my own hands, and that they possessed personalities of their own, so that it was as though I nuzzled two friends, the left quick and strong, the right weaker, withdrawn, and a little dull. I saw a man-myself, I might as well admit, now, that he was myself-leave the room, walking through the misty wall and up into the sky as though he were climbing a hill; he turned toward me my own face cruel as a shark's, then threw it at me. I ducked and ran, lost at once until I met a tall, self-contained personage who was a tree, though I did not realize it until I had been with him for some time. I think he was Dr. Hopkins's tree, actually-the big shade tree behind his house.

Dr. Hopkins lives on the next street over, two houses down. His tree spoke to me of the winds, and the different kinds of rains they blow, and as I talked I saw that he too was fading, and with him the light. A woman with white-blazoned black hair came carrying a lantern; I asked about June.

I asked about June: that is true, but you cannot conceive how I feel when I write that, the pride that I did not gibber with fear to her (though to tell the truth I was very near it), the irony. She said, "Old man, what are you doing here?" and held her lantern up, and I understood-I will say "saw," though that is not the right word-that the lantern had come trailing this woman as a car might drag behind it a child's toy on a string. I said, "Am I among the nin?"

"Don't be a fool. What do you think names like that mean now?" She started to leave, and I followed her. We were not walking across a dark plain in a cold wind, but the mind is so accustomed to casting every event into images of this sort that it seemed so-except when I took particular note of what we were really doing, which was something like falling down a horizontal hole, a hole lined everywhere with roots and worms and strangely shaped stones, things all alive but ignoring us. "June!" the lantern said, and its woman looked at me. I thought at first that she was mocking me, then I understood that she was calling June, my poor daughter, for me, and that she was looking for her inside me, just as you might tell a man who says he cannot find his glasses that they might be in his pocket. I bent over to see, and kept on going, entering my body somewhere between my navel and my crotch.

I was walking into the withdrawal center again. Not withdrawal from drugs, which is what those places used to be when I was younger, but the place people-only young people, supposedly, people under thirty-withdrew from life itself. An operation had removed, at least for a time, certain wrinkles from my face; my beard was dyed, and young hair the shade of wheat had been sown in my scalp. They questioned me at the center, but only briefly-it is a way of disposing of the crowds, they say; a way to end crowding that

involves no deaths. We shut our eyes to the sky and the sea in the seventies-now in the nineties we open doors to a darker, nearer empire than either, the place that is between stones that touch, that has lived for fifty thousand years in the black guts of caves, for six thousand in the empty rooms of old houses; and one of the doors is the door in this wall of bricks.

"Yes, what can we do for you?"

"I want to go."

"Yes," he said again. He waved me to a chair. "Tonight? Now?"

"Yes."

"My advice is to give yourself a cooling-off period. You don't have to, but that's what I'd advise you to do."

I shook my head.

"I don't mean a long time-just a couple of days."

"No."

He sighed. He was a young man, but the clipped mustache he wore made him look faintly old-fashioned, a little prissy. He said, "I'm going myself, you know. I wouldn't work here if I weren't. I wouldn't feel right about it."

"If you're going to go, why don't you go now?"

"My friend-I'm supposed to ask you questions, you don't ask me, understand. You want to go, and I think that's great, but if I say you can't, you can't. At least, not from here."

"How long are all these questions going to take?"

"I just wanted to explain. You know, when a person goes he doesn't go right away, at least not usually. He bounces."

I said, "I've seen them."

"Sure, everybody has. It's like this." He reached into a drawer of his desk and drew out a resilient ball cast of some clear elastometer shot with flakes of gold. He laid it on the desk top, and it began rolling very slowly toward the edge. "See, Mr. Ball doesn't like it up on the top of my desk; it's plastic up there, cold and narrow. He wants to go down to the floor-the wider world, you know? We give him a little push and down he goes. Watch what happens."

The ball reached the edge and solemnly tumbled off, struck the floor and rose again until it was nearly as high as the top of the desk, dropped, rose, dropped, and rose. Each time it fell it made a soft patting sound, and this was the only sound in the silent building. "Every time it bounces nearly as high as it was before, but not quite. Sooner or later it will stop bouncing and just roll around the floor-then it will be

happy."

"But meanwhile it's not?"

"It's not at peace. It's-you know-agitated. People are like that, and the older they are the more agitated they get; we won't take anybody over thirty, and you must be pretty close to that."

"I'm twenty-nine."

"Sure. Listen, the truth is that we do take them over thirty, but we don't advertise it because we're not supposed to. I mean, a woman comes in, she's fifty, and she's got cancer. I'm supposed to tell her no deal because she'd bounce too long." The young man shrugged fluidly, an Italianate shrug though his mustache was no darker than a fox's back. "We take her and tell her to bounce where she won't be seen. You're thirty-five if you're a day."

"I'm twenty-nine."

"All right. Anyway, I try and explain to these people. It's hard on them, the bouncing in and out of nature. The N.I.N is what they call them when they're gone, you know-the not in nature. But what about when they're on the shuttle between the worlds? And you're going to be there a long time. It's not like you were a child of sixteen or seventeen."

"What interests me," I said, "is that you seem to be implying that the nin exist at a lower energy level than we do."

"Hell, it's a bit more complicated than that," the young man said, "but have I talked you out of it?"

They gave me drugs both orally and intravenously; and made me lie down among humming, flashing machinery with wires on my head and feet and hands; and played music of a kind I had never heard before, while I read from a battered card. How much of what was done was done only to compel belief I do not know-perhaps it all was. Never again, to walk as men walk, nevermore to die or sigh or cry. . . . When it was over I stood up and the young man and a young woman shook my hand very solemnly and I thought that it would have been much more impressive if they had been dressed as doctor and nurse, but I did not tell them. When I was coming up my own front walk, the key in my hand, the whole world began to rise, pivoting (I think) on Madagascar so that I fell off the surface and was caught for a moment in the green arms of a neighbor's tree, and then, falling through them like rain, but upward, tumbled sidewise into the sky.

"Did you find her?" the lantern asked. I said that I had found her now, and indeed I saw her over the woman's shoulder, led by a tall, swaggering being of scarlet and gold. I ran to her and hugged her, and when I saw that the woman of the lamp had followed me I hugged her too. "Be careful of Thag," she said. "You're going-we're-"

And then we three-but not the man in scarlet and gold

-were standing beside the furnace in the basement of my own house. But June (until she vanished last night from her own locked room, while the dark-haired woman with the white forelock, who no longer is held aloft by her lantern, slept with me in the bed that has not held two since May died) would only cry, and tell us that her father the king would allow no one to mock her, and scream for fear the old man in the picture above the mantel would imprison her in the Piombi with Casanova. The dark-haired woman, whose eyes are blue and whose name is Laurel, said, "She has broken; we all break to some extent, and you have brought the wrong fragment."

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65

From the Notebook of Dr. Stein

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THE patient DW was brought by her parents and an aunt. DW a girl of nineteen, tall, rather slender, of English-Scottish stock. Mother called earlier, asked I come there, see her. Nurse refused but gave her emergency appointment after hours.

Mother says acute onset, girl normal until yesterday, naturally quiet girl, no flapper, somewhat religious, "great reader," knew few boys. Confirmed by father. Aunt says willful, "flighty," sometimes made unnecessary noise to disturb her (aunt). Agrees normal until yesterday.

In interview DW appeared tense, twisted handkerchief and repeatedly picked up various small objects from my desk, replacing them whenever her attention was directed toward them. Johnson, transcribe from Dictaphone.

Dr. Stein: Now, Donna, what seems to be the trouble?

DW: I don't know.

Dr. S: You know what kind of doctor I am, don't you, Donna?

I am an alienist. Why is it you think your father and mother wish me to treat you?

DW: I have people inside me.

Dr. S: Do you mean you are pregnant?

DW: I have people inside me, walking around, pulling the strings.

Dr. S: You are a marionette-is that what you're saying? You feel you are mechanical?

DW: No. I feel like myself, but they're in there. The woman is looking out through my left eye now.

Dr. S: How many of them are there?

DW: Three unless you count the other one.

Dr. S: Do you know their names?

DW: The man, the girl, and the woman.

Dr. S: The man is your father, the girl is yourself, and the woman is your mother-isn't that right?

DW: No, I'm outside.

Dr. S: You are holding your arms oddly and twisting your legs. Why do you do that?

(Patient was sitting in an extremely contorted position which gave the impression that her knees and shoulders were dislocated, but seemed to suffer no discomfort.-HS)

DW: The other.

Dr. S: The one who is not the man, the girl, or the woman -is that correct?

DW: Doctor, this is going to be quite difficult for you to understand, but this girl is not ill; we-my friends and I-have found out that she is being used as an energy base by Thag, and we're trying to protect her from him until we can dislodge him.

Dr. S: You have a deep voice. I presume you are a man.

DW: My name is Harry Nailer.

Dr. S: Donna, what are you doing?

(Patient had left her chair and was walking about the room on all fours with a motion sometimes bestial, sometimes insectile.-HS)

Dr. S: Donna, if you don't get back into your chair I'm not going to talk to you any more. . . .That's better, you may lie on my sofa if you like. Do you mind if I smoke? Does your father smoke? Do you know that my wife won't let me smoke in the dining room at home? She says the smoke gets into the drapes, but I like a good cigar.

DW: We could evict Thag by killing her, of course, but besides the moral issue we don't think it would do much good-he'd probably find somebody else, and we'd have a hard time finding him. If we can cut him off. . . .

Dr. S: I don't like the light way in which you dismiss the moral issue, Donna. Your life is very valuable.

DW: You see, from our point of view she's already dead.

Dr. S: No,no!

DW: What year is this?

Dr. S: It is nineteen thirty-five, Donna.

DW: We are from nineteen ninety-seven.

Dr. S: I would like to talk to Donna, please.

DW: All right, but she's not going to be able to tell you much.

Dr. S: Donna, you are going to break your own bones-you frighten me. Have you been practicing to become a contortionist?

DW: No.

Dr. S: That is better, now you sound like a pretty girl. Can you tell me who these people are?

DW: My father's already told you about Thag, and there's Laurel Baker. I'm June Nailer.

Dr. S: I have told you that I wish to speak to Donna-the voice is fine, much better, but it must be Donna. I will talk to no one else.

DW: I could pretend to be Donna and you wouldn't know the difference. But we need your help. In our time, you see, there were too many people, so some of them became "in-that's what we called them. It meant that you resigned from nature to exist in a purely subjective framework. Since we exist at a lower energy level, independent of physical reality, we'll last much longer, and fade away instead of dying. ...

(The man's voice here, Doctor. I assume this is still the patient??-jj)

The nin approach a zero energy level asymptotically. Theoretically we will remain in existence forever-or at least, indefinitely. That was my father. I was going to say that when you're a nin you don't consume the planetary resources. But you bounce back and forth for a long time-father and I are still bouncing, and Laurel too, now that she's close to us.

Dr. S: Joan! Will you come in here a moment, please?

Nurse Johnson: Yes, Dr. Stein.

Dr. S: From this girl's parents I want the blanket release, or I'm not accepting this patient. You know the one I mean? Everything. All. If they say yes, get them to sign and show them out. If they will not sign tell me and we will give her back to them.

Nurse Johnson: I understand, Doctor.

DW: The bouncing-as June calls it-isn't important. Personalities newly arrived carry a heavy life-charge that draws them back from time to time, and draws others with them. Thag and those like him are important-we don't know how

many there are.

Dr. S: So now you are an older woman, a lady. You wish me to believe you have multiple personalities-is that not so? That is very rare, Donna. Most often we find that those who seem to have them really have other illnesses, and this is a disguise for them.

DW: This would go better, wouldn't you say, Doctor, if we could control her arms and legs?

Dr. S: Also if you would control your voice. It is a good voice for an opera singer, all that vibrato, but not for a young girl.

DW: But we cannot. It's all that the three of us can do to hold the speech centers and the involuntary nervous system. You see, we have discovered that many of the nin are not simply human beings who have crossed over, but creatures who by the strength of their energy can assume that semblance to the others; and by some inversion we don't understand, they attenuate into the past rather than the future. Once there they are able to seize someone-like this poor baby-devour her energies, and use them to return.

Dr. S: You have tripped yourself up. Donna. If only the Thags, as you call them, can go back to the present, how did your other three voices get here?

DW: We seized Thag and forced him to draw us back with him. Doctor. And I was not a singer in nature; I was a medium, and one of the first to cross.

Dr. S: Of course. So you have been listening to the spiritualists, Donna? Or perhaps only reading their books?  
Nurse Johnson: Here is the release, Dr. Stein.

Dr. S: Thank you. We will try the Cerletti treatment in a few minutes, I think. Donna, you seem to want me to do something to help you. What is it?

DW: This is Harry Nailer again, Dr. Stein. As Miss Baker explained, we among the nin see Thag and others like him simply as powerful-perhaps eccentric-human personalities. The strength of their energies allows them to project this. As time passes and their energy level is reduced, we sometimes sense what I might call wrong notes. Miss Baker, who was a clairvoyant in nature, is very sensitive to this; and with my help and my daughter June's she began keeping a particular watch on Thag. At first we thought that he might be an unusually strong and bad personality fragment-all personalities shatter to some extent when they make the crossing, unless they have achieved complete union, what Miss Baker calls interior peace, while in nature.

Dr. S: So your Thag is not a human being or even a part of one, but what is he? I wish you would allow him to talk to me.



DW: Laurel Baker again, Doctor. I doubt that we could. Never having existed as a human in nature, 1 hag is an unskillful operator of the human body as you have seen. He may be a creature of a different sphere, or a spiritual survivor of a prehuman race.

(The masculine voice again, -jj)

Something that might work would be to lower this girl's energy-that might force Thag to make some move that would let us get at him. As things are now, we're deadlocked. If she were confined, for example, and placed on a very restricted diet; or if she were forced to donate blood.

Dr. S: Well, we may come to confinement in time, Donna, but first we are going to try something else, something new. You would not be familiar with the work of Cerletti and Bini, in Italy, but they have developed a technique that shows great promise, and I have been using it experimentally. We place metal rods-they are called electrodes-to the temples; there is a conductive cream applied also which contains metal particles so that there are no burns. Then an electric current is passed, very briefly, through the brain.

DW: Wait, Harry, let me talk to him. We are familiar with that treatment. Dr. Stein, but it will do no good here.  
Dr. S: I expected you to say that, Madame opera singer. Is it because you are above all that? So superhuman that you cannot be removed from a poor girl's brain by mere electricity? Or is it that so much energy will raise your level and catapult you into your future again? Or will you bounce, as you call it when you speak in your natural voice, and appear to me in my surgery wearing ray pistols and rocket belts? You see I have begun to talk like Dr. Huer in the funnies, but I am going to try the Cerletti treatment just the same.

DW: Electrical energies are far too coarse to do the things you suggest. Doctor, but what their effect will be upon our ability to protect this girl, or on ourselves, I cannot say. From what I know of Thag, the thing that is sucking her life-

Dr. Ah, I have it now. The way you move around the room. Donna-it had seemed to me that it was like the walking of a spider, yet there was something of the way a rat runs too, but now I know. You are a bat! In Germany, when I was a boy, we would sometimes throw things to knock them from the eaves of the coal shed, and when they are on the ground they walk just as you do. So your Thag is a Blutsauger and next you will want me to pound a stick into you, which Dr. Freud and I understand. No, Donna, but you need help with all those people inside you, and we will try the Cerletti treatment.

DW: Dr. Stein-

(End of cylinder. -jj)

The electrical treatment was administered to the patient as described on pp. 16-17. She convulsed satisfactorily and lapsed into normal sleep as soon as the current was discontinued. About one hour later I visited her bedside; she appeared rational but exhausted and not inclined to converse. Nurse reports she had said earlier, "I feel something gnawing at my heart." I left and a few minutes later nurse, who had gone to get patient soup, found her dead. I am preparing an account of this case for forwarding to Drs. Cerletti and Bini.

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73

Thag

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ONCE upon a time there was a boy named Eric who had a tame raven and a ragged cap and no boots, and lived with his mother in a cottage in the forest. Eric' and his mother were very poor, but nonetheless they possessed a great treasure, a charm ancient and powerful. This was a bear's skull, and hung from the roofbeam of their little house on a chain of iron. Eric's great-grandfather had made it long ago, choking the bear with moonlight and filling his skull with the cottony tales of rabbits, and the urine of shadows, and black feathers snatched at great risk from the left foreleg of an eagle, and many other things. The bear's skull was the home of Thag, as a beehive is the home of bees; and Thag was a powerful spirit though he was often away.

One day when Eric and his mother were picking mushrooms in the damp spring woods, he asked her to tell him -again-about the last time Thag had returned home; for this had been the winter after Eric was born, and he had been too small to remember. So Eric's mother told him, and it was a story that grew better with each telling, just as the hilt of a scramasax learns to glow beneath its owner's hand.

For Eric's father had, with the aid of Thag, made the trees to dance down the highroad, and built a great hall of glass on Nine Men's Meadow through whose dome the stars could be seen by daylight, and forced certain rich men in the town to disgorge a part of what they had won by law from the poor country folk, and for this last, after Thag had gone again, had been hanged.

There had been a great fair on the gallows hill (as Eric's mother explained to him) for the hanging, with jugglers and gingerbread, and beer given free so that men filled their caps with it and set them on their heads. She and Eric had been the cynosure of all eyes, the only time in her life that she had felt so important, so that she swore if she could she would

marry tomorrow if only her new husband could be hanged too; and it was then that Eric decided that if ever Thag came home to the bear's skull again he would use him, and surpass all the exploits of his father, both for wonder and boldness.

Now that very night Thag returned. Eric was lying asleep in his little three-sided loft beneath the roof when he dreamed he saw a running man in crimson and gold who carried a naked falchion. Eric knew it was the custom of Thag to appear as a man in dreams and otherwise in reality, and he knew that this was Thag. Behind Thag, very dimly seen and small in the distance, were three figures; but Eric paid them little attention. He woke, and the whole house was quiet as the wind in the wood. Then Gnip the raven stirred on his perch and said, "Mystery," and Eric heard a humming in the bear's skull outside his window and knew Thag was back. In the morning it would be necessary to propitiate Thag, and then he could do whatever he wanted.

Now the king of that country was named Charles the Wise, and he was sleeping late of the morning following the day following the night Thag had returned at last, when he was waked all at once by three things together. The first was that the queen ran into his bedroom screaming; and the second was a great shouting in the bailey, accompanied by the clashing and smashing heard when polearms and partisans and halberds and brown bills are let fall to the cobbles; and the third was that the whole castle had begun to rock back and forth beneath him, so that when he looked out the window he saw the watchtower tossing against the sky like the mainmast of a galleass in a gale. Then the queen (a tall, fair, fine-featured woman just settling into solid flesh after her girlhood, with no more brains than a sack of groats) cried, "Charles, save me!" and when he asked her what was wrong she explained that they were set upon by the mitred powers of Hell, and every knight in the castle who could throw a leg over a horse was already ten days' ride off, and the men-at-arms had dropped them and were hiding in the cistern, and the archers were all unstrung as well. And she concluded by saying that if he did not flee this minute they were doomed.

Then the king took thought, and particularly upon his father's maxim, given him when he was but young, that kings sail three-legged stools—the legs being their armies, their castles, and their treasuries. And it came to him that as his army was already scattered, if he should leave his castle and the gold and silver therein he should have nothing and would be a king no longer. And also that the tax rolls of the kingdom were long and complex, and the windings of the castle passages of great elaboration; and that the conquerors (whoever they were) might welcome someone who could explain these things, and that in time they might even be persuaded to go a-conquering elsewhere leaving the affairs of this kingdom in the hands of that trusty vassal Charles, who was already so well suited to direct them. And so he bade the queen drink a flacon of wine and be quiet, and dressed himself in hose, and a jerkin rich and impressive but without presumption, and went out to confront his conquerors. But he found no one there but Eric.

"Well," said the king, "how do you do, boy? Where has everyone gone?"

"I believe most of them have run away," Eric told him. "But a good many have been eaten." Then the raven, Gnip, came and settled on his shoulder.

The king dropped to his knees at once. "I perceive you are a magician," the king said, "and that that bird is your puissant familiar; and I confess that it has always seemed to me that were I a magician I would choose to return to that very age at which you manifest yourself; but I would think you must find the raiment you have selected rather chill-I can show you better."

In this way Eric became ruler of the country, and after giving his mother a kingdom of her own (and then shutting her up in a bottle because she would not stay there) reigned without aging at all for thirty years, at the end of which time the realm was a wilderness. Deer ran through the streets of the town, and few there were to loose an arrow; wolves bred in wineries, and foxes in farrowing pens; undines from the sea came up the river ten leagues beyond the ford; the stone-trolls of the mountains were seen on the roads at noon; and goblins, excessively ugly and evil, with seventeen fingers on each hand and steel teeth, stood guard at the castle barbican. Throughout all this Eric was, needless to say, exceedingly happy.

As for Thag, he had taken the dungeons for his own, but came out promptly whenever he was wanted and occasionally when he was not. He took the forms of a black and reeking mist, a crab covered with living slime, a dog with its fur afire, a fountain of sand, and many other things; and when Eric rode out hunting-on a unicorn or a hippogryph as often as not-he sometimes noticed that the castle was coming to resemble the skull of a bear, but it did not disturb him at all.

King Charles (who had often assured Eric that his name was the foolish) stayed on with his queen, they having become Eric's principal servitors (Thag excepted), and rejoiced in the possession of a son called Prince Robert who was the rightful heir, though he scarcely knew it. And while the king often mourned in secret for the palmy days of his pride, he comforted himself with the knowledge that he still commanded his castle and treasure-Eric had hardly spent a cent.

Thus matters stood, until one evening when Eric was dining in the great hall by the light of a single guttering candle on a golden pricket, there appeared from nowhere three remarkable figures. The first was a blond girl of great beauty, who wore a diaphanous gown that left one breast bare. The second was a darkhaired woman, also of great beauty, with a white forelock that made Eric think of a night sky slashed by lightning, this woman was dressed in a white robe embroidered with gold, and carried a staff forked at the top like the horns of a bull. The third was a man, tall and muscular, grey-bearded and one-eyed. And as this man, the last of the three, appeared, there came from the dungeons a roar of anguish.

Eric saw at once that these were not common folk (or he would have had them devoured), and rose and introduced himself and offered to share his dinner with the newcomers; but he had no sooner done this than his pet (ravens are long-lived birds-sometimes inconveniently so) came flapping in at a window and lit on the one-eyed man's shoulder.

"Now," the one-eyed man said, "I see we are in some kind of castle," and he began to examine the hangings and decorations, as if he were leaving everything to the woman with the staff.

"I heard Thag roar," she said, "at the moment we materialized. How long has he been here?"

"Thirty years," said Eric, so surprised that he never considered not answering.

"Time flies rapidly here, then," the one-eyed man commented. He had taken down a broadsword from the wall, and was fingering the edge as he spoke. "I thought we were close upon Thag."

"We were," the woman told him, "but as you say, time can pass quickly here-thirty years between paragraph and paragraph, if need be."

"What do you mean?" asked the man, but before she could answer him the king and queen entered, followed by Prince Robert. They had been watching from an alcove, and the king (who was of the old belief, as the mighty usually are whether or not they will admit it) had decided to throw his sword.

"Great Woden," he said, "we cast ourselves upon your mercy, and on the mercy of serene Frigg and lovely Freya. The throne of this land is mine, mine to hold in my lifetime, mine to give by father-right to my son when I die. For half again a score of years have I been defrauded of it-slay the monster and grant me justice."

And Woden said, "What the Hell is he talking about?" and as he spoke the keystone of the great arch of the castle cracked, and a little sliver of stone no bigger than a fingernail fell ringing to the floor.

"He thinks we're the Norse gods," the woman said, and the girl added, "Don't you see, Daddy, we're in a book."

"That's impossible."

"Not more impossible than going backward in time. Look around at things: there's the evil magician-that boy in the pointed hat-here's the castle; there's the true king, the fat lady is the queen, and that fellow who hangs his head and snivels is the prince. Thag is the monster in the crypt beneath the castle. We kill him and disappear, the magician gets pushed off a roof or something, and that's the end."

Eric asked, "Are you saying that we are people in a book in whatever place you come from?"

The one-eyed man nodded. "That's what they're saying-a fairy tale-I'm not sure I believe it." He paused. "Are you well-read? At least by whatever standards are used here?"

Eric nodded. "I've spent many happy hours in the castle library-it's something we enchanterers are expected to do, and I've come to enjoy it."

"Then tell me something. Do the characters in the books you have here ever read themselves?"

Eric shook his head. "Never, to my knowledge. They're always going somewhere."

"That might be it, then. In our world, you see, it would be quite possible for a character in a book to sit peacefully before his fire reading the short stories of Alexander Solzhenitsyn." Just at that instant Thag rushed into the room in the form of a headless bear, blood spurting from the stump of his neck. "Do I kill him?" Woden asked Frigg.

"A moment ago I would have said yes."

The bear stood upright before the one-eyed man, blood cascading over his shoulders and his extended paws.

"Now you don't-why not?"

Freya-goldenhair touched his arm. "It will be the end of the story, won't it, Daddy? And if we can't be killed, how can Thag? He's been here thirty years now, they say. Won't this just turn him loose to go somewhere else?"

"I don't think this is where he really belongs," the woman called Frigg said. "This is probably a very low energy level for him, as it is for us. And he's asking you to do it, standing there with his chest exposed like that-if he's not begging you not to. I don't like it."

"Then the thing to do is to keep him here." Like a fisherman impaling a pike, Woden drove his spear into the bear's hind foot, pinning it to the oak floor of the hall. "Make it tight," the woman called Frigg advised him, and with a spiky morgenstern he pounded the iron-shod shaft until the head was nearly buried in the wood.

"Use him for your spells all you want," the one-eyed man told Eric, "but if you let him go now I think he'll disappear on you, and I know damned well I'll come back here and make you sorry you did."

Eric bowed. "I understand, Magister."

(Frigg whispered to Freya, "There has to be a world that corresponds to each of our fictions, dear, since what never was nor will be is inconceivable. Still, I wonder what Thag really is." And the bear became a snake pinned by the tail

and struck an inch short of her heel.)

"Magister," Eric asked as the one-eyed man began to melt into the air, "what shall I call you? You said you are not Woden?"

"My name is Harry Nailer."

Eric bowed again. "Hairy Nailer. It is fitting, Magister." He was already thinking of the things he would do to the king.

And as soon as the three were gone he did them; and lived, in the most literal sense of the words, Happily, Ever, After.

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81

The Nebraskan and the Nereid

"The Nebraskan and the Nereid" copyright 1985 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine.

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THE Nebraskan was walking near the sea when he saw her. Two dark eyes, a rounded shoulder with a hint of breast, and a flash of thigh; then she was gone. A moment later he heard a faint splash-or perhaps it was only the fabled seventh wave, the wave that is stronger than the rest, breaking on the rocks.

Almost running, he strode to the edge of the little bluff and looked east across the sea. The blue waters of the Saronikos Kolpos showed whitecaps, but nothing else.

"Then felt I like some watcher of the skies," he muttered to himself, "When a new planet swims into his ken; or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes, he stared at the Pacific -and all his men . . ." He groped for a moment for the final two lines, as he studied the bluff. "Looked at each other with a wild surmise-silent, upon a peak in Darien."

"Stout Cortez" chuckled as he clambered down the bluff with his tape recorder bumping his side. He was no rock climber, but the slope was neither high enough nor sheer enough to require one. He imagined himself describing his adventure in the faculty lounge. It was nothing.

Nothing too was the evidence he found on the beach, in some places hardly wider than a footpath, that wound along the base of the bluff. There were a few seashells and a rusty tin that had once held British cigarettes, but that was all. No cast-off bikini, no abandoned beach towel, no footprints, nothing.

He looked up to see a tall and rather angular woman with a canteen at her hip walking silently toward him along the

strip of damp sand. He greeted her in his halting Greek, and she extended her right hand in a regal gesture, saying in English, "And a good morning to you, Doctor. I am Dr. Thoe Papamarkos. I am of the University of Athens. You are Dr. Cooper, and you are of an American university, but they do not know to tell me which."

"The University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Pleased to meet you, Dr. Papamarkos." The Nebraskan was Lincolnesque himself, tall and pleasantly ugly.

"And you are a folklorist. You must be, from what they report of you, that you walk about all day, ask questions of old people, make recordings of their stories."

"That's right," he said. "And you?"

She laughed softly. "Oh, no. I am not the competition, as you fear."

"Good!" He smiled.

She touched the third button of her khaki shirt. "An archaeologist, I am. Do you know of Saros?"

He shook his head. "I know this is the Saronic Gulf," he said, "and I suppose it must be named after something. Is it an island?"

"No. It was a city, a city so long ago that even in the time of Socrates there was nothing left but ruins and a temple for Poseidon. Think on it, please. Doctor. You and I, we think of that time, the Age of Pericles, as ruins. But to them, to Pericles and Plato, Themistocles and Aristides the Just, Saros was ancient, Saros was archaeology. Now I dig, with three men from the village to work for me. About five kilometers that way. There I hear of you, stories of the folklorist, and I think we should know of each other, probably we are the only truly educated people on this part of the coast, perhaps someday we may even help each other. No?"

"Yes," he said. "Certainly." He discovered that he liked her. She was an old-maid schoolteacher, no doubt about it, with her graying hair tightly knotted in a bun. She could be Miss Twiddle from "The Katzenjammer Kids" or the Miss Minerva of Miss Minerva and William Green Hill. And yet-

"And you," she said. "Folklore is so interesting. What is it that you do?"

He cleared his throat as he tried to think of some way to explain. "I'm trying to trace the history of the Nereids."

"Truly?" She looked at him sidelong. "You believe they were real?"

"No, no." He shook his head. "But do you know about them, Dr. Papamarkos? Do you know who they were?"

"I, who search for the temple of Poseidon? Of course. They were the ladies, the maids in waiting at his court, under the



Aegean. He was one of the oldest of all the old Greek gods. They were old too, very old, the Greek-what do you call them in English? Mermaids? Sea fairies? Tell me." She hesitated, as though embarrassed. "I understand your English much better than I speak it, you must believe me. I was three years, studying at Princeton." She unhooked the canteen from her belt and unscrewed the top.

He nodded. "I'm the same way with Greek. I understand it well enough; I couldn't do what I do if I didn't. But sometimes I can't think of the right word, or remember how it should be pronounced."

"You do not want a drink of my water, I hope. This is so very warm now, but I have a nose disease. Is that what you call it? I must take my medicine to breathe, and my medicine makes me thirsty. Do you wish for some?"

"No, thanks," he said. "I'm fine."

"And did I say it correctly? Mermaids?"

"Yes, mermaids. Specifically, they were a class of nymphs, the sea nymphs, the fifty daughters of Nereus. There were mountain nymphs too, the Oreads; and there were Dryads and Mehae in the trees, Epipotamides in the rivers, and so forth. And old people, rural people particularly . . ."

She laughed again. "Still credit such things. I know, Doctor, and I am not embarrassed for my country. You have these too, but with you it is the flying saucers, the little green men. Why should not my Greece have its little green women?"

"But the fascinating part," he said, warming to his subject, "is that they've forgotten all the names except one. Modern Greeks no longer talk about nymphs, or Oriads, Dryads, or Naiades. Only of Nereids, whether they're supposed to have been seen in springs, or caves, or wherever. I'm trying to find out just how that happened."

She smiled. "Have you thought, perhaps only they still live?"

When the Nebraskan got back to his tiny inn in Nemos, he stopped its dumpy little maid of all work and mustered his uncertain Greek to ask her about Dr. Papamarkos.

"She does not live here," the maid informed him, staring at the toes of his boots. "Over there. She has a tent." She ducked through a doorway and vanished; it was not until some time afterward that it occurred to him that the Greek word for a tent also meant stage scenery.

On the stairs, he wondered again if it might be possible. Dr. Papamarkos taking off her heavy belt, the soldierish pants and shirt. Flitting naked through the woods. He chuckled. No. The woman he had seen-and he had seen a woman, he told himself-had been younger, smaller, and-um-rounder. He suddenly recalled that Schliemann, the discoverer of Troy, had married a Greek girl of nineteen at the

age of forty-seven. He himself was still years short of that.

The thought returned the next time he saw her. It was at almost the same spot. (He had been frequenting that spot too much, as he kept telling himself.) He heard a noise and turned, but not quickly enough. The faint splash came again. Once more he hurried, actually running this time, to the edge of the little bluff; and this time he was rewarded. A laughing face bobbed in the waves fifty yards out, a face circled by dark and floating hair. An arm rose from the sea, waved once, and was gone.

He waited five minutes, occasionally glancing at his watch. The face did not reappear, and at last he scrambled down the bluff to stand upon the beach, staring out to sea:

"Doctor! Doctor!"

He looked around. "Hello, Dr. Papamarkos. What a pleasure to meet you again." She was coming from the other direction this time, the direction of Nemos and his inn, and she was waving something above her head. It really was a pleasure, he realized. A sympathetic ear, an older woman, no doubt with a certain amount of experience, who knew the country. . . . "Good to see you!"

"And to see you, my friend. Oh, Doctor, my friend, look! Just look and see what we have found under the water."

She held it out to him, and after a moment he saw it was a glazed cup, still somewhat encrusted with marine growths.

"And it is to you that I owe, oh, everything!"

The background was red, the man's head black, his curling beard and wide, fierce eye traced in a lighter color that might originally have been white. A fish, small and crude, swam before his face.

"And on the back! See, beside the trident, the two straight scratches, the bar at the top? It is our letter pi, for Poseidon. They have finer cups, oh, yes, much finer, at the museum in Athens. But this is so old! This is Mycenaean, early Mycenaean, from when we were yet copying, and badly, things from Crete."

The Nebraskan was still staring at the bearded face. It was crude, hardly more than a cartoon; and yet it burned with a deft energy, so that he felt the bearded sea god watched him, and might at any instant roar with laughter and slap him on the back. "It's wonderful," he said.

It was as though she could read his thoughts. "He was the sea god," she said. "Sailors prayed to him, and captains. Also to Nereus, the old sea-man who knew the future. Now it is to Saint Peter and Saint Mark. But it is not so different, perhaps. The fish, the beard, they are still there."

"You say you found this because of me, Dr. Papamarkos?"

"Yes! I meet with you, and we talk of the Nereids, remember? Then I walk back to my dig." She opened her canteen and took a healthy swallow. "And I kept thinking of them, girls frisking in the waves, I could almost see them. I say,

'What are you trying to tell me? Come, I am a woman like you, speak out.'

"And they wave, come, Thoe, come! Then I think, yes, Saros was a seaport, so long ago. But was the coast the same? What if the sea is higher now, what if the place where I dig was a kilometer inland then? They called it a city, a polis. But to us it would be only a little town-the theater open to the sky, the temple, the agora where one went to buy fish and wine, and a few hundred houses."

She paused, gasping for breath; and he remembered what she had said about having a "nose disease."

"I have no diving equipment, nothing. But we make a big strainer-you understand? From a fishing net. I tell my men, walk out until the sea is at your belts. Shovel sand so gently into the net. And today we find this!"

Carefully, he handed back the cup. "Congratulations. It's wonderful, and it couldn't have come to a nicer person. I mean that."

She smiled. "I knew you would be happy for me, just as I would be so happy for you, should you find-I do not know, perhaps some wondrous old story never written down."

"May I walk you back to your camp? I'd like to see it."

"Oh, no. It is so far, and the day so hot. Wait until I have something there to show you. This is all I have worth showing now." She gave him her sidelong look; and when he said nothing, she asked, "But what of you? Surely you progress. Have you nothing to tell me?"

He took a deep breath, thinking how foolish his wild surmise would sound. "I've seen a Nereid, Thoe-or somebody's trying to make me think I have."

She put her hand on his shoulder, and he could not believe her soft laugh other than friendly. "But how wonderful for you! With this, you may rate the stories you collect by their accuracy. That, I imagine, has never been done. Now tell me everything."

He did-the glimpse in the woods, the waving figure that had disappeared into the sea. "And so, when you said the Nereids you imagined had waved to you, I wondered ..."

"Whether I did not know more. I understand. But I think really it is only one of our girls fooling you. We Greeks, we swim like fish, all of us. Do you know of the Battle of Salamis? The Persians lost many ships, and their crews drowned. We Greeks lost some ships too, but very few men, because when the ships were sunk, the men swam to shore. You are from

America, Doctor, where some swim well and many not at all. What of you? Do you swim?"

"Pretty well," he said. "I was on the team in college; I'm a little out of practice now."

"Then you may wish to practice, and it is so hot. When we part, go back to the place where you saw this girl vanish. There are many caves along this coast with entrances that are under the water. Those who live here know of them. Possibly the Nereids know of them too." She smiled, then when he realized he could not convey the news of a tragic death with any decency in his inadequate Greek. Thoe would have to tell them. He would wait until someone came.

From the top of the bluff, he saw her take off her wide belt and canteen and drop them on the sand. The khaki shirt and trousers followed. She was lean-though not so gaunt as he had imagined-when she unbound her long, dark hair and dove into the sea.

When she did not come up again, he clambered down to the beach for the last time. A sign had been traced in the wet sand beside the dead girl's body; it might have been a cross with upswept arms, or the Greek letter }\\i. There was nothing in the pockets of the khaki shirt, nothing in any pocket of the khaki trousers.

The Nebraskan opened the canteen and sniffed its contents. Then he put it to his lips and tilted it until the liquid touched his tongue.

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91

In The House  
of Gingerbread

"In the House of Gingerbread" copyright 1987 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in The Architecture of Fear edited by Kathryn Cramer and Peter D. Pautz.

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THE woodcutter came up the walk, and the ornate old house watched him through venetian-blinded eyes. He wore a red-brown tweed suit; his unmarked car was at the curb. The house felt his feet on its porch, his quick knock at its door. It wondered how he had driven along the path through the trees. The witch would split his bones to get the marrow; it would tell the witch. It rang its bell.

Tina Heim opened the door, keeping it on the chain but more or less expecting a neighbor with coleslaw. She had heard you were supposed to bring chicken soup for Death; here it seemed to be slaw, though someone had brought Waldorf salad for Jerry.

"I'm Lieutenant Price," the woodcutter said, unsmiling. He held out a badge in a black leather case. "You're Mrs. Heim? I'd like to talk to you."

She began, "Have the children--"

"I'd like to talk to you," he repeated. "It might be nicer if we did it in the house and sitting down."

She shook her head. "Jerry was an attorney." Surely Price knew all this.

"And his age at death was--?"

"Forty-one."

"That's very young for a nonsmoker to die of lung cancer,

Mrs. Heim."

"That's what Jerry's doctor said." Not wanting to cry again, Tina poured coffee for herself, adding milk and diet sweetener, stirring until time enough had passed for her to get her feelings once more under control.

When she sat down again he said, "People must have wondered. My wife died about three years ago, and I know I got a lot of questions."

She nodded absently, looking at the little plate on the other side of the dinette table. The gingerbread man had lain there, untouched. Now it was gone. She said, "They X-rayed Jerry's lungs. Lieutenant. The X-rays showed cancer. That's what we were told."

"I know," he said.

"But you don't believe Jerry died of cancer?"

He shrugged. "And now your little boy. What was his name?"

Tina tried to keep all emotion from her voice, and felt she succeeded. "It was Alan."

"Just last month. Must have been pretty hard on you."

"It was. Lieutenant, can't we be honest with each other?

What are we talking about?"

"All right." He took another sip of coffee. "Anyhow, you've still got two more. A boy and a girl, isn't that right?"

Tina nodded. "Henry and Gail. But Henry and Gail aren't actually mine."

For the first time, he looked surprised. "Why's that?"

"They're stepchildren, that's all. Of course, I love them as if they were my own, or anyway I try to."

"I didn't know that," he told her. "But Alan was-?"

"Our child. Jerry's and mine."

"Your husband had been married before. Divorce?"

"Yes. Jerry got full custody. Rona doesn't-didn't-even have visiting rights."

"Like that," he said.

"Yes, like that, Lieutenant."

"And now that your husband's dead?" Price flicked ashes into the salad plate that had held the gingerbread man.

"I don't know. If Rona tries to take them, I'll go to court; then we'll see. Won't you tell me what this is about?"

He nodded. "It's about insurance, really, Mrs. Heim. Your husband had a large policy."

She nodded guardedly. "They paid."

Price was no longer listening, not to her. "Did Henry or Gail stay home from school, Mrs. Heim? It's only one-thirty."

"No, they won't be back until after three. Do you want to speak to them?"

He shook his head. "I heard footsteps upstairs. A kid's, I thought."

"Henry's eighteen, Lieutenant, and Gail's sixteen. Believe me, they don't sound like kids stamping around up there. Do you want to go up and see? You don't need an excuse-so you said."

He ground out his cigarette in the salad plate. "That's right, I don't need an excuse. Alan was poisoned, wasn't he, Mrs. Heim? Lead poisoning?"

She nodded slowly, pretending there was a lovely clay mask on her face, a mask that would be dissolved by tears, broken by any expression. "He ate paint chips. Lieutenant. In his closet there was a place where the old paint was flaking off. We had repainted his room, but not in there. He was only two, and-and-"

"It's okay," he told her. "I've got two kids of my own."

"No, it will never be okay." She tore off a paper towel and stood in a corner, her back to him, blowing her nose and dabbing at her tears. She hoped that when she turned around, he would be gone.

"Feeling better now?" he asked. He had lit another cigarette.

"A little. You know, it's not fair."

"What isn't?"

"Your smoking like that. But you're still alive, and Jerry never smoked, but Jerry's gone."

"I'm trying to quit." He said it mechanically, toying with his cigarette. "Actually, some insurance people pretty much agree with you, Mrs. Heim."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Your husband had a policy with Attica Life, a hundred thousand dollars."

Automatically she shook her head. "Two hundred thousand. That was what they paid."

He inhaled smoke and puffed it from his nostrils. "It was a hundred thousand, but it had a double indemnity provision for cancer. A lot of them do now, because people are so worried about it. Cancer generally means big hospital bills."

This was it. She waited, fists clenched in her lap.

"Not with your Jerry, of course. Or anyway, not so much. He was dead in what? Three weeks?"

"Yes," she said. "Three weeks after he went into the hospital."

"And anyway he had hospitalization insurance, didn't he? With his law firm?"

She nodded.

"And you'd taken out policies on the kids too, and on you, naturally. Twenty-five thousand on each kid, wasn't it?" 3

"It still is. We have a very good agent, Lieutenant: 11 | introduce you."

"It still is on Henry and Gail, right? Twenty-five thousand with double indemnity for accidental death. When little Alan died, that was accidental death. A little kid, a baby, swallows paint chips—they call that accidental poisoning."

"You think I killed him." If only my eyes could blast, she thought, he'd be frying like bacon. He'd be burning in Hell. "You think I killed my husband and my son to get that money, don't you, Lieutenant?" She tried to picture it, his brown suit blazing, his face seared, his hair on fire.

"No," he said. "No, I don't, Mrs. Heim. Not really."

"Then why are you here?"

He ground out the new cigarette beside the last. "Your insurance company's making waves."

He paused, but she said nothing.

"Do you blame them? Two claims, big claims, double indemnity claims, in less than two years."

"I see." She felt drained now; the fire had gone out. "What do you want me to do—take a lie detector test and say that I didn't murder my husband? That I didn't poison Alan? All right, I will."

"I want you to sign something, that's all. This will most likely be the end of it." The hand that had fumbled for his cigarettes was fumbling again, this time in the breast pocket of his tweed jacket. "You can read it if you want to. Or I'll tell you. Either way."

It was fine print on legal-length paper. Her eyes caught the word exhumation. "Tell me," she said.

"This will let them—the Coroner's Office—check out your husband's body. They'll check his lungs, for example, to see if there really was cancer."

Gravediggers working at night, perhaps; men with shovels methodically, stolidly, resurrecting those same lumps of earth. Yes, surely by night. They would not want the funeral parties to see that—Rest in Peace. They would have lights with long, orange cords to help them work, or maybe only battery torches. "Can they do that?" she asked. "Can they actually tell anything?" She remembered the woman in the Bible: Lord, it has been four days now; surely there will be a stench. She said, "It's been more than a year, Lieutenant."

He shrugged. "Maybe yes, maybe no. Your husband was embalmed, wasn't he?"

"Yes. Yes, he was."

"Then there's a good chance. It depends on how good a job they did on him, the soil temperature, and how tight the box is. It depends on a lot of things, really, but there's a good chance. Then there are some tests they can always run—like for arsenic or lead. You can look at a body a hundred years later and still find those things."

"I understand. Do you have a pen?"

"Sure," he said. He took it from the same pocket and handed it to her, first pressing the little plastic thing at the top to extend the point. Like a salesman, she thought. He's just like a salesman who's made the sale.

She took the pen and signed, and he smiled and relaxed.

"You know, I didn't think they used those lead-based paints any more."



"They don't." She pushed the paper back. "This is an old house, and that was old paint. One doctor said it might be from the twenties. Do you want to see it? The closet, I mean, not the paint. I repainted it, so that-

"So that it couldn't happen to somebody else's kid," he finished for her. "Sure, let's go up and have a look."

As they went up the stair, he said, "From outside I wasn't really sure this was an old house, even if it does have all that fancy millwork. It looks like it might have been built new in the old style, like they do at Disneyworld."

"It was built in eighteen eighty-two," she told him. "We had a contractor paint the exterior; we were doing the interior ourselves."

She led the way down the upstairs hall and opened the door. "I haven't gone in here since I painted the closet. I think it's time I did."

He nodded, looking appreciatively at the walls and the oak moldings. "This was a maid's room, I guess, in the old days."

"No, this has always been the nursery. The maids' rooms were upstairs under the eaves."

She fell silent. Newspapers daubed with dark paint were still spread over the floor. A can stood where she had left it, its interior hard and cracked. The caked brush lay beside it. She began to say, "I didn't clean up. I suppose it shows."

Before the first word had left her lips, there was a sound. It was a faint sound, yet in the stillness it seemed unnaturally loud—a scraping and shuffling that might have been a small dog scrambling to its feet, or merely some small, hard object sliding from a collection of similar objects, a baby's rattle leaving the top of a careless pile of toys.

So that in place of what she had intended, Tina said, "There's a child in there!"

"There's something in there," Price conceded. He went to the closet and twisted the old-fashioned china knob, but the door did not open. "It's locked."

"I didn't lock it." Though she had not been conscious of moving them, her right hand had clasped her left arm, her left hand her right arm. It was cold in the nursery, surely colder than it was outside. Had she shut the vent?

"Sure, you locked it," he told her. "It's a very natural thing to do. That's okay, I don't have to see it."

He's looking at the evidence as a favor to me, she thought. Aloud she said, "I don't even have a key, but we've got to get it open. There's a child inside."

"There's something in there. I doubt if it's a kid." He glanced at the keyhole. "Just an old warded lock. Shouldn't be any trouble."

The paint can had a wire handle. He pulled it off, bending it with strong, blunt fingers.

"I suppose you're right-there can't be a child in there. I mean, who would it be?"

He squatted before the keyhole. "You want my guess? You've got a possum in the wall. Or maybe a squirrel. This place doesn't have rats, does it?"

"We've tried to get rid of them. Jerry set traps in the basement-" there was a faint scrabbling from the closet; she spoke more rapidly to cover the sound: "He even bought a ferret and put it down there, but it died. He thought Henry'd killed it."

"Oh?" Price said. The lock squeaked, clicked back, and he rose, smiling. "Probably never been oiled. It was a little stiff."

He twisted the knob again. This time it turned, but the door did not open. "Stuck too. Did you paint the frame?"

She nodded wordlessly.

"Well, you locked it before the paint was dry, Mrs. Heim." He took a big utility knife from the right pocket of his jacket and opened the screwdriver blade.

"Call me Tina," she said. "We don't have to be so formal."

Only a moment before, she had seen him smile for the first time; now he grinned. "Dick," he said. "No Dick Tracy jokes, please. I get enough at the station."

She grinned back. "Okay."

The screwdriver blade slipped between the door and the jamb. He turned the knob again as he pried with the blade, and the door popped open. For an instant it seemed to her that there were eyes near the floor.

He swung the door wide on squealing hinges. "Nothing in here," he said. "Jerry didn't believe in lubrication."

"Yes, he did-he was always oiling things. He said he was no mechanic, but an oil can was half a mechanic."

Price grunted. He had a pen light, its feeble beam playing over the closet walls. "Something's been in here," he said. "It was bigger than a rat; a coon, maybe."

"Let me see," she said. She had been picking up the paint-smearred newspapers and stuffing them into the can. Now she came to the closet to look. There were scratches on the walls, tiny scratches that might have been made by little claws or fingernails. Flakes of plaster and paint lay on the closet

floor.

Price snapped off the pen light and glanced at his watch.

"I ought to be going. Thanks for signing the permission. I'll

phone you and let you know how the tests came out."

She nodded. "I'd appreciate that."

"Okay, I will. What's that book you've got?"

"This?" She held it up. "Just an old children's book. Jerry found it when he was exploring the attic and brought it down for Alan. It was under the newspapers."

She led the way back down the narrow hall. The new, bright paper she and Jerry had hung decked its walls but could not make its way into her mind. When she took her eyes from it, the old, dark paper returned.

Behind her Price said, "Careful on those stairs."

"We were going to get them carpeted," she told him. "Now it hardly seems worth all the trouble. I'm trying to sell the house."

"Yeah, I noticed the sign outside. It's a nice place, but I guess I can't blame you."

"It is not a nice place," she muttered; but her words were so soft that only the house heard them. She opened the door.

"Goodbye," he said. "And thanks again, Tina. It was nice meeting you." Solemnly, they shook hands.

She said, "You'll telephone me, Dick?" She knew how it sounded.

"That's a promise."

She watched him as he went down the walk. A step or two before he reached his car, he patted the side pocket of his jacket-not the right-hand pocket, where he had put his knife, but the left one. For the laboratory, she thought to herself. He's taking it to some police lab, to see if it's poisoned.

She did not look down at the book in her hand, but the verses she had read when she lifted the newspapers that had covered it sang in her ears:

"You may run, you may run, just as fast as you can,  
But you'll never catch ME," said the gingerbread man.

That evening the house played Little Girl. The essence, the ectoplasm, the soul of the child seeped from the cracked old plaster that had absorbed it when new. Watching television in the family room that had once been the master bedroom, Henry did not hear or see it; yet he stirred plumply, uncomfortably, on the sofa, unable to concentrate on the show or anything else, cursing his teachers, his sister, and his stepmother-hoping the phone would ring, afraid to call anyone and unable to say why he was afraid, angry in his

misery and miserable in his rage.

Bent over her schoolbooks upstairs, Gail heard it. Quick steps, light steps, up the hall and down again: Gioconda is the model of the brilliant young sculptor, Lucid Settala. Although he struggles to resist the fascination that she exercises over him, out of loyalty to his witch, Sylvia, he feel', Gioconda is the true inspiration of his art. During Lucia's, illness, Tina arouses Gioconda's fury and is horribly burned by the model and her brother.

I'll remember that, Gail thought. She wanted to be a model herself, like her real mother; someday she would be. She balanced the book on her head and walked about her bedroom, stopping to pose with studied arrogance.

Tina, drying herself in the bathroom, saw it. Steam left it behind as it faded from the mirror: the silhouette of a child with braids, a little girl whose head and shoulders were almost the outline of a steeply pitched roof. Tina wiped the mirror with her towel, watched the phantom reform, then thrust it out of her mind. Jerry should have put a ventilating fan in here, she thought. I'll have to tell him.

She remembered Jerry was dead, but she had known that all along. It was not so much that she had forgotten, as that she had forgotten she herself was still living and that the living cannot communicate with the dead, with the dead who neither return their calls nor answer their letters. She had felt for a moment that though dead Jerry was merely gone, gone to New York or New Orleans or New Mexico, to someplace new to see some client, draft some papers, appear before some Board. Soon she would fly there to join him, in the new place.

He had given her perfumed body powder and a huge puff with which to apply it. She did so now because Jerry had liked it, thinking how long, how very long, it had been since she had used it last.

The steam specter she had been unable to wipe away had disappeared. She recalled its eyes and shuddered. They had been (as she told herself) no more than holes in the steam, two spots where the steam, for whatever reason, would not condense; that made it worse, since if that were the case they were there still, watching her, invisible.

She shivered again. The bathroom seemed cold despite the steam, despite the furnace over which Jerry had worked so hard. She knew she should put on her robe but did not, standing before the mirror instead, examining her powdered breasts, running her hands along her powdered hips. Fat, she was too fat, she had been too fat ever since Alan was born.

Yet Dick Price had smiled at her; she had seen the way he had looked at her in the nursery, had felt the extra moment for which he held her hand.

"Then it was cancer after all, Lieutenant?" Gail asked a few days later. "Don't stand please." She crossed the wide,

dark living room that had once been the parlor and sat down, very much an adult.

Price nodded, sipping the drink Henry had mixed for him. It was Scotch and water, with too much of the first and not enough of the second; and Price was determined to do no more than taste it.

Henry said, "I didn't think it could go that fast, sir."

"Occasionally it does," Price told him.

Gail shook her head. "She killed Dad, Lieutenant. I'm sure she did. You don't know her-she's a real witch sometimes."

"And you wrote those letters to the insurance company." Price set his drink on the coffee table.

"What letters?"

Henry grinned. "You shouldn't bite your lip like that, Goony-Bird. Blows your cover."

Price nodded. "Let me give you a tip, Gail. It's better not to tell lies to the police; but if you're going to, you've got to get your timing right and watch your face. Just saying the right words isn't enough."

"Are you-?"

"Besides, a flat lie is better than a sidestep. Try, 'I never wrote any letters, Lieutenant.' "

"They were supposed to be confidential!"

Henry was cleaning his nails with a small screwdriver. "You think confidential means they won't even show them to the police?"

"He's right." Price nodded again. "Naturally they showed them to us. They were in a feminine hand, and there were details only somebody living here would know; so they were written by you or your stepmother. Since they accused her, that left you. Once in a while we get a nut who writes accusing herself, but your stepmother doesn't seem like a nut, and when she signed and dated the exhumation papers for me the writing was different."

"All right, I sent those letters."

The screwdriver had a clip like a pen. Henry replaced it in his shirt pocket. "I helped her with a couple of them. Told her what to say, you know? Are you going to tell her?"

"Do you want me to?" Price asked.

Henry shrugged. "Man, I don't care."

"Then why ask me about it?" Price stood up. "Thanks for the hospitality, kids. Tell Tina I'm sorry I missed her."

Gail rose too. "I'm sure she's just been delayed somewhere, Lieutenant. If you'd like to stay a little longer--"

Price shook his head.

Henry said, "Just one question, sir, if you know. How did Dad get lung cancer?"

"His lungs were full of asbestos fibers. It's something that usually happens only to insulators."

In the kitchen, Tina pictured the furnace-its pipes spreading upward like the branches of a long-dead tree, tape peeling from them like bark, white dust sifting down like rotten wood, falling like snow upon Jerry's violated grave.

It's the gingerbread house, she thought, recalling the grim paper they had painted over in the nursery. It doesn't eat you, you eat it. But it gets you just the same.

She tried to move, to strike the floor with her feet, the wall with her shoulders, to chew the dish towel Gail had stuffed into her mouth, to scrape away the bright new duct tape Jerry had bought when he was rebuilding the furnace.

None of it worked. The door of the microwave gaped like a hungry mouth. Far away the front door opened and closed. "She Used to Be My Girl" blasted from the stereo in the family room.

Fatly, importantly, Henry came into the kitchen on a wave of rock, carrying an almost-full glass of dark liquid. "Your boyfriend's gone. Could you hear us? I bet you thought he was going to save you." He took a swallow of the liquid-whisky, she could smell it-and set the glass on the drain-board.

Gail followed him. When the door had shut and she could make herself heard, she asked, "Are we going to do it now?"

"Sure, why not?" Henry knelt, scratching at the tape.

"I think it would be better to leave that on."

"I told you, the heat would melt the adhesive. You want to have to swab her face with paint thinner or something when she's dead?" He caught the end of the duct tape and yanked it away. "Besides, she won't yell, she'll talk. I know her."

Tina spit out the dish towel. It felt as though she had been to the dentist, as though the receptionist would want to set up a new appointment when she got out of the chair.

Gail snatched the damp towel away. "You fixed up the microwave?"

"Sure, Goony-Bird. It wasn't all that hard."

"They'll check it. They'll check it to see what went wrong."

Tina tried to speak, but her mouth was too dry. Words would not come.

"And they'll find, it." Henry grinned. "They'll find a wire that came unsoldered and flipped up so it shorted the safety interlock. Get me an egg out of the fridge."

She knew she should be pleading for her life; yet somehow she could not bring herself to do it. I'm brave, she thought, surprised. This is courage, this silly reluctance. I never knew that.

"See the egg, Stepmother dear?" Gail held it up to show her. "An egg will explode when you put it in a microwave."

She set it inside, and Henry shut the door.

"It'll work now whether it's open or closed, see? Only I've got it closed so we don't get radiation out here." He pressed a button and instinctively backed away.

The bursting of the egg was a dull thud, like an ax biting wood or the fall of a guillotine blade.

"It makes a real mess. We'll leave it on for a while so it gets hard."

Gail asked, "Is the music going to run long enough?"

"Hell, yes."

Tina said, "If you want to go back to Rona, go ahead. I've tried to love you, but nobody's going to stop you."

"We don't want to live with Rona," Henry told her. "We want to get even with you, and we want to be rich."

"You got a hundred thousand for Dad," Gail explained. "Then all that for the baby."

Henry said, "Another fifty thou."

"So that's a hundred and fifty thousand, and when you're dead, we'll get it. Then there's another fifty on you, double for an accident. We get that too. It comes to a quarter of a million."

The oven buzzed.

"Okay." Henry opened it. "Let's cut her loose." He got the little paring knife from the sink.

"She'll fight," Gail warned him.

"Nothing I can't handle, Goony-Bird. We don't want rope marks when they find her."

The little knife gnawed at the rope behind Tina's back like

a rat. After a moment, her lifeless hands dropped free. The rat moved to her ankles.

Gail said, "We'll have to get rid of the rope."

"Sure. Put it in the garbage-the tape too."

A thousand needles pricked Tina's arms. Pain came with them, appearing out of nowhere.

"Okay," Henry said. "Stand up."

He lifted her. There was no strength in her legs, no feeling.

"See, you're cleaning it. Maybe you stick your head in so you can see what you're doing." He thrust her head into the oven. "Then you reach for the cleaner or something, and your arm hits a button."

Someone screamed, shrill and terror-stricken. I won't, she told herself. I won't scream. She set her lips, clenched her teeth.

The screaming continued. Henry yelled and released her, and she slid to the floor. Flames and thick, black smoke shot from the microwave.

She wanted to laugh. So Hansel, so little Gretel, cooking a witch is not quite so easy as you thought, nicht wahr? Henry jerked a cord from the wall. Tina noted with amusement that it was the cord of the electric can-opener.

Gail had filled a pan with water from the sink. She threw it on the microwave and jerked backward as if she had been struck. The flames caught the kitchen curtains, which went up like paper.

On half-numb legs, Tina tried to stand. She staggered and fell. The kitchen - binets were burning over the microwave, flames racing al :; dark, varnished wood that had been dry for a century.

The back door burst inward. Henry fled through it howling, his shirt ablaze. Stronger, harder hands lifted her. She thought of Gretel-of Gail-but Gail was beside them, coughing and choking, reeling toward the open doorway.

As though by magic, she was outside. They were all outside, Henry rolling frantically on the grass as Dick beat at the flames with his jacket. Sirens and wolves howled in the distance, while one by one the dark rooms lit with a cheerful glow.

"My house!" she said. She had meant to whisper but found she was almost screaming. "My home! Gone . . . No-I'll always, always remember her, no matter what happens."

Dick glanced toward it. "It doesn't look good, but if you've got something particularly valuable-



"Don't you dare go back in there! I won't let you."

"My God!" He gripped her arm. "Look!" P'or an instant (and only an instant) a white face like a child's stared from a gable window; then it was gone, and the flames peered out instead. An instant more and they broke through the roof;

the house sighed, a phoenix embracing death and rebirth. Its wooden lace was traced with fire before its walls collapsed and the fire engines arrived.

Later the fire captain asked whether everyone had escaped.

Tina nodded thankfully. "Dick-Lieutenant Price-thought he saw a face at one of the attic windows, but we're all here."

The captain looked sympathetic. "Probably a puff of white smoke-that happens sometimes. You know how it started?"

Suddenly Henry was silent, though he had voiced an unending string of puerile curses while the paramedics treated his burns. Now the string was broken; he watched Tina with terrified eyes. More practical, Gail edged toward the darkness under the trees.

Tina nodded. "But what I want to know is how Dick came just in time to save us. That was like a miracle."

Price shook his head. "No miracle. Or if it was, it was the kind that happens all the time. I'd come at eight, and the kids said you were still out. Somebody I'd like to talk to about a case I'm on lives a couple of blocks from here, so I went over and rang the bell; but there was nobody home. I came back and spotted the fire through a side window as I drove up."

The captain added, "He radioed for us. You say you know how it started, ma'am?"

"My son Henry was cooking something-eggs, wasn't that what you said. Henry?"

Henry's head moved a fraction of an inch. He managed to answer, "Yeah."

"But the oven must have been too hot, because the eggs, or whatever they were, caught fire. The kitchen was full of smoke by the time Gail and I heard him yell and ran in there."

The captain nodded and scribbled something on his clipboard. "Cooking fire. Happens a lot."

"I called Henry my son a moment ago," Tina corrected herself, "and I shouldn't have, Captain. Actually I'm just his stepmother, and Gall's."

"She's the best mother in the whole world!" Henry shouted.

"Isn't that right, Goony-Bird?"

Nearly lost among the oaks and towering hemlocks, Gail nodded frantically.

"Henry, you're a dear." Tina bent to kiss his forehead. "I hope those burns don't hurt too much." Gently, she pinched one of his plump cheeks. He's getting fat, she reflected. But I'll have to neuter him soon, or his testicles will spoil the meat. He'll be easier to manage then.

(She smiled, recalling her big, black-handled dressmaker's shears. That would be amusing-but quite impossible, to be sure. What was it that clever man in Texas had done, put some sort of radioactive capsule between his sleeping son's legs?)

Dick said loudly, "And I'm sure Henry's a very good son." She turned to him, still smiling. "You know, Dick, you've never talked much about your own children. How old are they?"

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111

The Headless Man

"The Headless Man" copyright 1972 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in Universe 2 edited by Terry Carr.

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IT'S really very good of you to read the history of someone as grotesque as I-or perhaps you like grotesques? Most people would turn away. Or stare. Or be sick. I have no head.

No, I'm not joking, and this is not some silly story about an execution. I was born this way.

I don't remember it, of course. But Pliny (Pliny the elder, I think; you could look it up) told all about us. He said we lived in India. (I live in Indiana, which shouldn't be the same thing at all, but somehow is.) And in old manuscript illustrations of Marco Polo we appear. (I say we because I feel a kinship. It's a lovely little picture, a miniature, and there is also a man-he's Pliny's too-shading himself with his foot, and another with one eye.) Even though Marco Polo didn't say he saw-You know. We were gone by then, I suppose; except for myself, and I wasn't born.

Just in case you still don't know what I look like, let me describe myself. My hands reaching up beneath my shirt tell me (and the old miniature); I never look in mirrors. My eyes are very large-twice, three times the size of yours. The lids are elaborately curved and open wide. They are large, bright eyes and are placed just where the functionless nipples of, most men are. I think my eyes are probably my best feature. 1;

I have a wide mouth, reaching completely across my belly, 's

and big teeth. My lips (because I can bend at the waist I can look down, when I'm naked, and see them) are redder than most people's lips, so that-ridiculously-I look as though I am wearing lipstick. And mine is not a straight mouth at all. I suppose it would be called a cupid's bow if it were a woman's mouth, and not so wide. My nose is large and rather flat, which is a blessing because it doesn't make much of a bulge under my coat-of course it is possible that it has been flattened by the pressure of clothing all these years.

Having no head, naturally I have no neck. (An unoccupied stump sticking above my shoulders would be silly, after all. I suppose it was thalidomide or something.) I'm sure you're wondering how my internal organs are distributed and all that, but the truth is that I have no idea. I mean, would you, if you couldn't assume you're just like everyone else? My mouth I suppose opens directly into my stomach; and my brain must be situated somewhere close to my heart, which no doubt assures it of a good supply of well-oxygenated blood-but this is just guesswork.

As I said, I was born this way. It must have been a dreadful shock to my poor mother. At any rate she took (at least I suppose it was she, though she may have been carrying out instructions from my father) a head-I mean a dummy head, in this case a doll's (some dolls' heads resemble very closely the heads of human infants, and they are easily obtained), and attached it to my shoulders by straps. Fortunately the faces of babies are not very expressive, while the faces of dolls-I mean the better quality dolls-are surprisingly suggestive. With my nose, my mouth, and my eyes all covered by the gown she made me wear in public I daresay I cried almost continually, and the deception was completely successful.

My first memory is of that doll's head. I was playing with blocks-colored wooden blocks painted not only with the letters of the alphabet and numbers but with pictures of various (mostly farmyard) animals. I picked up one of these and it occurred to me that it was extraordinarily like the object on my shoulders. (Don't smile. The memory, even now, is tender to me.) It was a yellow block smelling of the new paint, and I believe I put it in my mouth afterward. It's lucky I didn't swallow it. (Why is it that a few moments of time are recalled so distinctly and the events to either side-often more striking-forgotten?)

I was a sickly boy, and this, as well as my peculiarity, prevented me from taking part in scouting, sports, and the other ordinary boyish activities. Save for a few weeks in late spring just before vacation, my mother drove me to school and picked me up afterward. A letter from our family physician delivered me from the embarrassments of the athletic program, although it occurred to me-I think at about the time I entered high school-that if I had been of more robust build, and been permitted to unstrap my head (by this time made by one of those craftsmen who furnish ventriloquists with dummies-a long thread, cemented to the skin between my lower lip and my navel, sufficed to move the jaw when I spoke) I might have done

well in football.

My classes presented problems. I had discovered-or rather, my parents at my insistence had discovered for me-a very cheap brand of boys' shirts whose material was so flimsy as to constitute almost no impediment to vision at all; but it was necessary that I sit in the first row of every class-and that I slouch in my chair, with my hips forward and my weight resting on my spine, in order to see the blackboard. This, I think (since I am not going to reveal my name) is your best way of determining-assuming you wish to determine it-whether I was in one of your classes. If you remember a rather blank-faced boy who sat in the manner I have just described, in the front row, you may have been a classmate. To be certain you may wish to look for my picture in your yearbook, but the blankness will not be apparent here. My head at that time, as well as I can remember, possessed eyes of the kind called roguish, freckles, and an upturned nose.

Of course it was necessary to exchange the old heads for new every year or so as I grew older, and I do not retain them. My current one is quite handsome, and has a speaker in the mouth to reproduce the words I whisper into a microphone; but handsome though it is I cannot bear to wear it a moment more than necessary, and remove it immediately as soon as my apartment door shuts me off from the headstrong, pigheaded dummkopf (love that word) world outside.

That was why I insisted to the girl that we turn the lights off and pull down the shades. I wanted to take it off, you see-I was tense as it was, and I knew that if I couldn't get that thing off it was just no good. I had expected she would go along with it because she had seemed-I think you know what I mean-unprofessional. But she said that it was hot, and it was true: it was very hot. The place should have been air-conditioned, but it wasn't. She said the tenants had to furnish their own air conditioners, and she had meant to save enough to buy one back when it was cooler, but there had been so many other things to buy, and I knew what that meant. A girl like that, that you meet in an amusement park, expects something. I don't mean that she is a real professional, she probably looks everyone over very carefully, and maybe only goes with men who appeal to her in some way, but just the same she has learned that she can make a nice thing out of it. I asked if she had an electric fan, and she said she didn't. "You can get a nice one," I said, "for about ten dollars."

"Twenty-five," she said, but she was smiling and good humored. The lights went out, but with the shades up enough light came in from the street for me to see her smile in the dark. "I've priced them, and a nice one costs at least twenty-five."

"Fifteen," I said, and I told her the name of a discount store; she had been going to the regular appliance stores. "You've been going to the regular appliance stores," I said. "They always charge twice as much."

"Listen," she said, "will you meet me there tomorrow about six? We'll look at them, and if I can find one I like that cheap I'll get it."

I said that was all right, and I thought how strange it was, getting a girl like that for an electric fan, discounted, and besides I could always stand her up but she must know I wouldn't, because I'd probably want to see her again before long, and besides, it would be kind of interesting, walking her through the store and thinking about what I'd come to buy for her and why, and looking, much lower down than they thought, through my shirt at all the people who wouldn't know, and besides we might want to do something afterward, so I said it was all right. I still wanted to pull down that blind, but it was on the other side of the bed, and there was no way, right then, for me to get past her.

"Why do you want it so dark? At least with the blind up we get some breeze."

"I guess I'm just not accustomed to undressing with someone watching."

"I know, you haven't got hair on your chest." She giggled and thrust a hand into my shirt. Fortunately she touched my eyebrow and drew her fingers back. "No, that isn't it."

"I suffer from a grotesque deformity."

"I guess everybody does, one way or another. What is it? A birthmark?"

I was going to say no, but when I thought about it-you could say I was marked at birth, in a way of speaking. So I was going to say yes, and then suddenly it got much darker. I said, "Did you pull down the blind?"

"No, they turned off the lights in the drugstore. They close now, and most of the light was coming from there." I heard a zipper, and for a minute I thought foolishly: Now where in the world did that come /rowi? The back of her dress, of course, and I took off my shirt and tried to take off my head, but I couldn't. The catch on the strap was jammed or something-but it didn't bother me the way I'd thought it would. I just told myself it would save me trouble that way so I'd just keep it on and that way I'd know for sure I wasn't putting it on backward when I got dressed again in the dark. My eyes were getting used to it now anyway and I could see her a little. I wondered if she could see me.

"Can you see me?" I said. I was taking my pants off. I might keep my head on, but no underwear, no shoes. She said, "Not at all," but she was laughing a little so I know she could.

"I guess I'm too sensitive."

"You haven't got anything to be sensitive about. You're

nice looking. Broad shoulders, big chest."

"I have a wooden face," I said.

"Well, you don't smile very much. Where's the mark? On your stomach?" I felt her hand in the dark, but she didn't reach out for my face-my real face-the way I expected her to.

"Yes," I said. "On my stomach."

"Listen," (I could see her white body now, but her head, in heavier shadow, seemed gone) "everybody worries about something like that. You know what I used to think when I was little? I used to think I had a face inside my belly button."

I laughed. It seemed so funny, so very humorous at the time, that I simply roared. No doubt I disturbed her neighbors. A belly laugh-that's what I have, I suppose, the only genuine belly laugh on earth.

"Really, I did. Don't laugh!" She was laughing too.

"I have to see it."

"You can't see anything, it's too dark. It's just a little black hole in the dark, and there's not really a face in there anyway."

"I have to see." There had been matches, I remembered, beside the cigarettes on her night table. I found them.

She said, "There was this story I told myself, that I was supposed to be twins, but the other one never grew big and was just a tiny little face in my stomach. Hey, what are you doing?"

"I told you, I have to see." I had lit a match, and was cupping the flame in my hand.

"Listen, you can't!" She tried to turn over, giggling more than ever, but I held her down with my leg. "Don't burn me!"

"I won't." I bent over her, looking at her navel in the buttery light of the match. At first I couldn't see it, just the usual little whirls and folds; then just before the match went out I did.

"Here," she said, "let me see yours," and she tried to take the matches away from me.

But I kept them. "I'm going to look at mine myself."

I lit another match. "You'll set your hair on fire," she said.

"No I won't." It was hard to see, but by bending at the waist I could do it. There was a face there too, and as soon

as I saw it I blew out the match.

"Well," she giggled, "find any lint?" Her body was a face too, but with bulging eyes. The mouth was where it folded because she was half sitting up on the piled pillows; the flat nose was between the ribs. We all look like that, I thought, and it went all through me: We all look like that.

The little faces in our navels kissed.

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119

The last Thrilling Wonder Story

"The Last Thrilling Wonder Story" copyright 1982 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine.

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"ALL right, Brick, I'm ready for you now."

"Hup!"

"You're an ex-Marine, right?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Six four, two twenty, curly red hair, rugged but honest face, fists like hams."

"Pavement breakers, sir."

"How's that?"

"I'd rather think of them being like pavement breakers, sir."

"Okay, pavement breakers. Your name is Brick Bronson-"

"What's yours, sir?"

"Gene Wolfe. And you're in love with this girl called Carol Crane. You've never met her, but you're in love with her. Her father is Dr. Charles Crane, the great biochemist. Dr. Crane has invented this serum that will save tens of billions of human lives-"

"Billions, sir?"

"Over the long haul. Say in twenty or thirty years. And a big pharmaceutical company is out to take it away from him. Their hit man. is John Slade-"

"Got it."

"Meanwhile, aliens in a flying saucer have landed. They need the serum too, and they want to take Dr. Crane back to Rigel to make the serum there. There's a mixup-everybody's fighting everybody

else. You and Carol are kidnapped to Rigel on the saucer. You see strange but beautiful stuff there. Between the two of you, you fix up the Rigelians' problems-

"Right, sir."

"They bring you back and you use Rigelian supersedence to rescue Dr. Crane in an apocalyptic struggle. The End."

Brick stroked his massive jaw.

"Sir!"

As he climbed into his faithful Ford pickup.

"Sir?"

"What's the matter. Brick?"

"Sir, where am I going?"

"Out to Dr. Charles Crane's famous Research Ranch to see Carol. You get there just as Slade arrives, and-"

"Sir, I don't even know Carol, sir. You said we haven't ever met. I'm just in love with her. I guess I saw her picture in the paper."

"So you want to meet her, get to know her. You can pretend to be a reporter or something."

"And, sir, if it's all right with you, I'd like to drop by St. Michael's and light a candle first. After all, if there's going to be gunnights and all that-"

"How the hell do you know about gunfights?"

"I saw the deer rifle in the back of my pickup, sir. And going to Rigel. Rigel's an awful way away, sir. Hundreds of light-years, maybe thousands-"

"Catholics don't light candles any more. Brick."

"I do, sir. I'm Irish, and my mother-"

"For Pete's sake! Bronson's not an Irish name."

"What kind is it, sir?"

"It's a pulp name. Now get going."

\* \* \*

Brick stroked his massive jaw as he climbed into his faithful Ford pickup with the .30-30 hanging over the rear window. Almost savagely, he kicked the engine to life. The sun hung heavy over the dusty streets of San Franco as he pointed the rusty hood toward the mountains and the famous Research Ranch of Dr. Charles Crane. Palms drooped in the heat.



Abruptly, he jerked the wheel to the left. St. Michael's was only a few blocks out of his way. He was not a regular churchgoer—the ritual of the mass soothed him, but the improvements and variations irritated and distracted him, and since there were now more improvements and variations than ritual, he had scarcely attended since his discharge. Yet he had never truly doubted the existence and the goodness of God; and as he drove he imagined himself on his knees before the Holy Virgin while the bright flame of a newly lit candle proclaimed his devotion, the purity of his intentions toward Carol Crane.

The ground shook beneath his truck. A fissure appeared in the baking asphalt. He slammed on the brakes, throwing the pickup into a screaming skid-turn before it stopped. Tiles slid from the roof of a Spanish-style stucco house and crashed on the ground below. Someone screamed. All up and down the no-longer-sleepy street, people were running out of doors.

For reasons he could not have explained, he got out of the truck. The main shock hit just as his feet touched the ground, and it knocked him flat.

There is no other sound on earth like the collapse of a large building. He had never heard it before, but he heard it now, and he knew instinctively what it was.

"You all right, son?" The speaker was a fat man in a light blue sports shirt.

"Yeah, I'm okay." Brick scrambled up. "Just got knocked off my pins."

"Wonder if it cracked my slab," the fat man said. He was looking speculatively at a small white bungalow.

"Something fell down."

"Uh-huh. I heard it." The fat man continued to stare at his house.

"I wouldn't go back in there, sir. It might not be over yet."

When the fat man did not answer, Brick started down the street on foot, ignoring the chattering, half-hysterical people who had fled their homes. Despite what he had said, he did not believe there would be more shocks. The quake had come, and it had done what it had been intended to do.

As he expected, St. Michael's lay in ruins, stone tumbled upon stone. Save for the fine haze that still hung over its destruction, it might have been sacked by the Goths, pulled down by Gaiseric and his Vandals. "It's a real mercy," a woman told him. "Nobody inside. Father always locks up after the last morning mass."

"I didn't think they were ever locked," Brick said absently. "Guess I couldn't have gotten in anyway." He began to pick

through the rubble and after five minutes of searching discovered a small statue of Mary the Mother of God holding the infant Jesus in her arms. The thumb of one hand and the head of the infant had been broken off. Mary's nose was battered. He pulled the statue upright and for a moment knelt before it, crossing himself twice.

The ranch house was big and sprawling, partly fieldstone, partly wood. Behind it, obscured by the bulk of the house, stretched a long, low, almost windowless wooden building that was presumably Dr. Crane's lab. Brick parked the truck beside a van and climbed out. A tall man with glossy black hair stood in the doorway watching him, arms folded, legs a bit too wide. Seeing him, Brick waved; the tall man conceded him no answering gesture. There was a stink like an open sewer—the reek of the corpses in a certain field of upland rice.

"Good morning, sir," Brick called when he was closer. "I suppose you're Dr. Crane. My name's Brick Bronson. I'm a leg man for the San Franco Sun." Under his breath he added, "Or something."

The tall man in the doorway continued to watch him without replying. Brick was suddenly conscious that although the tall man's face appeared in repose, his eyes were blazing; their stare carried an almost palpable heat.

"I'd like to talk to you about your daughter."

"It is true that I have a daughter," the tall man said, nearly whispering. "But you would not wish to speak of her if you were wise. Certainly you would not wish to see her. My name is Lucifer Satanus."

Brick stretched out his hand.

Lucifer smiled at it. "That will not break my pavements," he said. "Despite so many wild rumors, they are not laid of good intentions—which are, in my experience, quite easily broken. And I will not take it in mine, since that would be so painful for you. In return, I ask you not to make a certain disgusting gesture while in my presence. We both know the one I mean, do we not?"

"You're the devil. I must be dreaming."

"I am the Devil, in the sense that I am the emperor of all devils, the Angel of the Bottomless Pit. More to the point, as you shall see, I am the Prince of Sin. You are acquainted with sin, are you not?"

Brick nodded.

And the Devil laughed. "Ah, yes, those leaves in Saigon. Childish. You shall be better acquainted with it soon. You said you were dreaming. It is not now that you are dreaming, but when you thought you could appeal to a Higher Power, and that He would protect you from your author. Not in this world, Brick. By doing as you did, you have transformed

yours into a religious story, and so released me upon yourself.

Do you understand?"

"I'm afraid I do."

"I am gratified. By the way, the author has just informed me that you are torn between the desire to make that gesture and the urge to strike me in the face. Neither will be effectual, and there is one more thing I should tell you before I go. Earlier you were led to expect the Rigelians. They will not appear. I am here in their place."

Brick's big fist fanned empty air. As he stood staring at the spot where Lucifer Satanus had stood, he heard footsteps from inside the house. A rather stooped, white-haired man appeared, glanced at the open door in some surprise, and came to greet Brick. "I thought it was getting warm in here," he said in a gentle, cultivated voice. "Someone's been letting our air-conditioning out. You didn't by any chance open this door, did you, young man?"

"No, sir. It was open when I pulled in. I was just about to ring your bell."

"Strange." The white-haired man hesitated a moment looking at the door, then extended his hand. "I'm Charles Crane, by the way."

"Brick Bronson. It's an honor. Dr. Crane."

"Brick? Really? What an unusual name." Brick flushed. "Really it's Roscoe. But when I was a kid somebody started calling me Brick. With a name like Roscoe, you can see why I stuck with it."

The scientist smiled. "I do indeed. I shall call you Brick, and I hope you'll call me Charles. Now won't you step in out of the sun, Brick?"

West and east, supposed never to meet, met in that room—There were horns and antlers on the walls, and wide chairs covered with saddle-skirting; a Steinway grand and Dresden figurines.

"It's a trifle mussed now," Dr. Crane said, seating himself in the largest of the leather chairs and glancing at the untidy newspaper lying beside it. "This is one of Juanita's days off. But do sit down, Brick. What can I do for you?"

Brick cleared his throat. "When you saw that open door, Doc . . ." He hesitated.

"Yes?"

"Well, you said, 'Strange.' Something about the way you said it made me think that there had been other strange things going on. I'd like you to tell me about them."

For a moment the scientist's white eyebrows rose in two little arches; then the corners of his mouth followed them. "All right," he said. "I don't see what harm it can do. A good many of the rooms of this house overlook the valley-possibly you noticed that on your drive up. There have been some odd-looking lights down there and some more in the air over our mountain."

"UFOs?"

"Flying objects that I, at least, cannot identify, yes."

"I don't think you have to worry about those any more, Doc. But I don't think those were what was worrying you, mostly. You'd be curious and excited about saucers, if there were any such thing."

"You don't believe in them?"

"Not now, no. What's the real problem, Doc?"

The white-haired scientist shrugged. "Just a feeling of being watched. Paranoia, if you like. Then once, when the feeling was very strong and I stopped what I was doing and looked about, I could almost swear I saw the flash of binoculars up on the mountainside."

"I understand."

"I hope you do, young man, because I don't. Now I've answered your question, and I'm going to ask you one of my own. Why are you here?"

Brick hesitated. "I know about your work: the serum."

"There was something in the newspaper, I believe."

"Down in San Franco I've heard some rumors. Third- and fourth-hand stuff, but somebody's after you, Doc. Somebody with money and an organization. They want that serum bad."

"In a few months, when I've perfected the process, they will only have to ask. I intend to offer my serum to humanity without charge."

"I don't think they want it like that. They want it all, and that's why I'm here. With me around, I don't think they're going to get it unless you want to give it to them."

"You're offering me your services as a security officer. Have you credentials?"

"Maybe none you'd find convincing. The Silver Star, and a few boxing and marksmanship trophies. But you can judge for yourself if I'm qualified. Let me stay here and keep an eye on things for you, and when you've had a chance to check me out, we'll talk about pay. If you don't think I've earned any, I'll be on my way."

"I'll have-"

A radiantly lovely girl stepped into the room, then hesitated. "I'm sorry, Dad. I thought you were alone."

"It's quite all right, Carol. This is Mr. Bronson. He'll be staying with us for a few days at least."

That night in the guest room Brick cleaned and oiled his Winchester before preparing for bed.

"Sir! Mr. Wolfe, sir!"

"For Pete's sake. Brick. You'll wake everybody up."

"They can't hear me. They're on another part of the page. Listen, sir, the old guy's nice enough, but I came out here for the girl."

"So what?"

"I got a fifteen-second look, and the next thing I know I'm up here with this damn gun. Sir, you laid the Devil himself on me. They don't come any rougher than that. Don't I have any rights?"

"Wo. Not one single goddam one."

"Sir, I'll die."

"I won't let you."

"Not that way, sir. I'll die inside. I'll turn into a store-window dummy and a tape recorder. Pull the string and I say my lines, push me over and I'll never get up."

There was a soft tap at the door.

"Come in," Brick called. "It's not locked."

Carol entered, closing the door swiftly behind her. She wore a quilted robe. "You'll think I'm terrible," she said. "But I have to talk to someone."

"I couldn't think you were terrible under any circumstances," Brick told her.

"It's Father. He's in danger."

"I know."

He's been getting things in the mail. Notes . . ." Threatening letters? He should have showed them to me."

I think he's destroyed them. But he's afraid. You don't know him. Brick, but I do, and for the first time in his life, he's frightened. He's had a burglar alarm installed in the lab, and he's talking about getting a watchdog."

"He's got one now. Me. You don't have to worry anymore."

"Brick, I want him to die. But-"

A shot rang out.

Brick was off the bed and out the door in one long jump, the Winchester in one hand and half-a-dozen cartridges in the other. The moon, shining through the windows, provided just enough illumination for him to find his way in the unfamiliar ranch house.

To his left he heard the sob of indrawn breath, then the unmistakable sound a rifle bolt makes as it is drawn back to kick out empty brass and shoved forward to bring another round into the chamber. He had already slipped his own cartridges into the magazine; now he jerked down the lever and brought it up again.

"Brick? Is that you?" Beneath the words hung the familiar reek of gunsmoke.

"Yeah, it's me, Doc. You okay?"

Light streamed from an open doorway. "I'm fine, Brick. But I don't think our friend here is in such good shape."

Still in a half crouch, Brick sprang into the room. Dr. Crane was standing near an open window, a Springfield rifle in one hand and a small black automatic in the other. He held the automatic up. "Do you know about these? Is it going to fire?"

"A PPR. Not unless you give the trigger a good hard pull." Brick took the automatic and thrust it into his belt, then glanced down at the man who lay at the scientist's feet.

He was small and dark, like his weapon, with a fuzzy beard that concealed most of the lower half of his face. His moccasins were worn, his jeans ragged; one side of his faded denim shirt was soaked with his blood.

Brick knelt beside him. "Better get on the phone, Doc. Get an ambulance up here."

Carol's voice said, "I'll do it."

"Thanks."

Bending over Brick and the wounded man. Dr. Crane asked, "Do you think he'll live?"

"He might. He's young. I've seen them hurt worse than this and still pull through. And I've seen some that weren't hit this bad die. Right lung's collapsed. You have silvertips in that rifle?"

The scientist shook his head. "Full jacket. Target ammunition. I was going to sight it in before elk season opened."

"That saved him." Brick rolled the wounded man over and slipped a wallet out of his hip pocket. "A silvertip would have blown out a hole the size of your hat, and he'd be dead

already. You have first-aid supplies here? Gauze or tape? We can at least slow down the bleeding."

"Yes," Dr. Crane said. He seemed irresolute. "I'll get them." Brick flipped open the wounded man's wallet, glanced at the contents, rubbed the side of his nose with one finger, then looked again.

When Carol returned, adding her own soft perfume to the pure desert air that floated through the open window, he had already staunched the flow of blood. She asked, "Do you need anything else?"

"A blanket to keep him warm. He's in shock."

She brought a striped Indian blanket from the sofa and helped Brick tuck it around the wounded man and raise his feet.

"Ambulance say they were coming?"

"Right away, they said." She paused. "But it's about twenty-five miles."

Brick glanced at his wristwatch. "Half an hour."

"I suppose. You can't do anything more for him?"

"No. He needs to get the blood out of his chest cavity, and any pieces of cloth and bone that may be in there with it. I don't think we have to worry about the bullet-it made a clean exit. Then the lung could be patched and reinflated and so on. But we don't have the equipment for any of that."

"Who is he, Brick?"

Brick grinned at her. "I'm glad you asked. I was trying to figure out how to ask you if you knew him."

Carol shook her head.

"According to the stuff in his wallet, his name's John Slade. That ring any bells?"

Carol shook her head again. "I don't think I've ever heard of him."

They both turned at the sound of footsteps. It was Dr. Crane, still carrying his rifle.

"Where've you been, Doc?"

"Outside." The scientist dropped into a chair. "I thought there might be more."

"That was a hell of a risky thing to do."

"I doubt it. You say they want the formula for my serum, and if that is the case, the last thing they would be apt to do is to kill me before they get it."

"Sounds logical. I just hope they make as much sense as you do."

Under her breath, Carol murmured, 'He wants to show you he's as brave as you are.'

Brick gave no indication of having heard her. "Find anybody?"

The scientist shook his head. "No. No one."

"How'd he get here? Car?"

"I didn't see one. Do you know, I never thought of that?"

"No horse? Nothing?"

"I didn't see any. No."

Carol said, "Could he have been landed by helicopter?"

"Not close, or I would have heard it," Brick told her. "Of course, they could have dropped him out in the desert a mile or so. Or somebody else could have been with him-somebody who drove his car away when he heard the shot. Doc, does the name John Slade mean anything to you? I've already asked your daughter."

"Is that who tie is?"

"His wallet says so. Belongs to a lot of environmental groups and conservation clubs. Know the name?"

The scientist shook his head.

"How about the face? I don't want to have to turn him over again, but you saw him before, and if you look, you can still see him pretty well."

"Perhaps without the beard. But I doubt it."

"John Slade wasn't the name signed to those threatening letters you got?"

Dr. Crane's head jerked up. "How did you know about those?"

"Just a shot in the dark. You were worried when I came here, and tonight you were jumpy enough to grab a loaded rifle when you heard Slade here outside--"

"I didn't hear him. I saw him in the moonlight."

"Swell. Instead of going to bed or reading or maybe watching TV, you were standing around looking out of windows. That has to be something more than some guy up on the mountain with field glasses. Hell, that could have been a bird-watcher or somebody on the lookout for the UFOs. I figured you'd been getting letters or phone calls. Maybe both, but people don't usually sign phone calls."



Laying his rifle across his knees, the scientist ran both hands through his abundant white hair. "I see. No, John Slade wasn't the name."

"What was?"

The scientist ignored the question. "The most recent came today, in the mail. They've all been mailed. About six, I think. Perhaps seven. It said that he had found someone to kill me, and he would send him, have him do it, unless I--"

"Go on, Doc."

"Unless I made a certain gesture of surrender. Set fire to my laboratory."

Brick whistled softly.

"I couldn't do it, you understand. I wouldn't do it. Literally, I would prefer to die."

Carol was stroking the wounded man's cheek. "Brick, his skin is clammy. Damp and cold."

"That's shock. There's nothing we can do besides what we've already done."

"Shouldn't we be hearing the ambulance by now?"

Brick glanced at his watch. "Not yet."

"I know they shouldn't be here yet, but shouldn't we hear them? At night we can hear ambulances and fire engines way down in the valley."

Brick's shoulders moved a sixteenth of an inch. "I wouldn't know about that. Doc, I'd like to see some of those letters."

"You can't. I burned them. I didn't want Carol to find them." The old scientist hesitated. "I suppose you killed a great many men in Viet Nam. I-I've hunted all my life, but I've never killed anyone before."

"You still haven't. If that meat wagon gets here in time, there's still a chance he'll pull through. You burn the envelopes too?"

Dr. Crane nodded.

"You happen to notice where they were postmarked from?"

Dr. Crane nodded again. "From San Franco, all the postmarks that could be read."

"I see. Doc, I've been waiting for you to tell me how they were signed, but it seems like you're not going to unless I ask you. So don't tell me it was the Blue Avenger or some crap like that. You recognized the name?"

The old scientist laughed. It was a dry sound, humorless as the shaking of a pebble in an empty jar. He stood and, still carrying his rifle, started out of the room. "Yes," he said over his shoulder. "Yes, you could say I did."

Brick glanced at Carol, but she seemed as puzzled as he. After a moment he asked, "Is there any chance he'll kill himself?"

"I don't think so," she said. There was an edge of bitterness in her voice.

"But you wish he would."

"Sometimes, I suppose."

"You don't act like it when he's around."

She bit her lip. "Brick, maybe sometime I'll explain. But this isn't the time or the place, and I've only known you a few hours."

"It may be the only time and place we'll ever have," he said gently. "The story may be over soon."

"What are you talking about?"

He managed a rueful little shrug. "Things are happening fast tonight."

"I know what you mean."

"You and I could climb out this window, just like Slade climbed in. We could walk around in the desert in the moonlight, holding hands. But it would mean leaving him, and he might start bleeding again."

"We can't do that."

"I know we can't. And so I thought maybe we could pretend we did, if it was all right with you. Carol, when they were flying me overseas, the plane had a little trouble, and we set down on some little island in the Pacific. I don't even remember the name of it now."

She watched him, her blue eyes as serious as his.

"There was a landing strip there left over from World War II. They still maintained it, and once or twice a month a mail plane came and so forth. We stayed there a couple of days until they could fly in a part for one of our engines. There were a lot of birds on that island, and it was the mating season."

He paused and chuckled softly. "They would pair off and kind of bob up and down at each other, and keep it up for hours. Sometimes one would go get an oyster shell and lay it at the other's feet. I guess the one that carried the shell was the male, or maybe they both did it. Anyway, there was an ornithologist—a bird scientist—who'd come to study

them. He was taking pictures and stuff, and one day I got to talking with him."

"Yes, Brick?"

"I asked why they did it, why they bobbed up and down like that. And he told me they had to. It didn't matter how much they wanted to get together. To mate. If they didn't bob up and down like that, they couldn't do it."

"That's sad, isn't it? Sad, and a little funny. But I don't understand why you're telling me about it now."

"I just meant that we're people, not birds. If I could bring you candy and flowers and take you someplace to dance-or for a walk in the desert in the moonlight-that would be nice. But we don't have to do it."

"You want us to-to be lovers? With this man bleeding on the floor?"

"I want us to be sweethearts. Sweethearts love each other, and they trust each other."

Carol hesitated, then raised a finger to her lips. "Shh! Dad's coming back."

Dr. Crane seemed more relaxed now. The rifle was gone;

so was his suit coat. He dropped into a chair and looked benevolently and distantly down on the two younger people. "Is he going to die?" he asked.

"If that ambulance doesn't get here pretty soon, he is. Doc."

"Good."

Carol's hand flew to her mouth. "Dad!"

"You want him to die, Doc?"

"Of course I do. He came into my house to kill me."

"Then you should have put another bullet in him."

"I suppose I should have. At the time I was too shocked. I saw him outside the window, you know. And I recalled reading somewhere that it was best to wait until a prowler had actually entered, that there would be less difficulty with the police that way." The scientist tittered, then seemed to bite the shrill laughter back. "And so I waited. He silhouetted himself ever so nicely against the moon when he climbed over the sill. Just like one of those man-shaped targets you see at the range."

Brick walked over to him and looked into his eyes. They were blind circles, like two flecks of blue paint.

"I waited until I heard his foot on my floor-a little, shuffling sound. Then I squeezed off the shot. Actually, I couldn't

aim very well. That scope isn't meant for shooting in the dark."

"He's high," Brick told Carol. "Do you know what he uses?"

She shook her head. "I've seen him this way before, but not often."

"In Nam I saw a lot of heroin and hash, but they don't talk that much on heroin, and hash doesn't do that to your eyes. What is it, Doc?"

The scientist giggled and shook his head.

"Come on, what did you shoot up on? Morphine? If you've got some, it might help this guy here."

Unexpectedly, the wounded man stirred.

"I won't say," Dr. Crane told Brick. "And you can't force me to. At this very moment there is a curtain—a wonderful curtain, invisible, beautiful, the strongest and most beautiful invisible object ever seen—between myself and yourself. Between myself and the world. Do you wish to burn my arms with cigarettes? Please go ahead."

"I've quit smoking, Doc." Brick had already turned away to see to the wounded John Slade. Slade's eyes opened, fluttered closed, then opened again.

"It's okay, buddy," Brick told him. "You've been hurt, but an ambulance is on the way. You've lost a lot of blood, that's all. Don't try to get up."

Carol grasped his arm. "Brick, listen! Don't you hear it?"

A muted whine, faint as the scratching of a stereo needle when the record is over, floated up from the valley and in through the open window, a distant siren's song.

Brick nodded. "Sounds good to me."

"We can't let them see Dad. We've got to get him out of here."

"Not until I find out what I've got to. Doc, you said you recognized the name on those letters. Whose was it?"

"The name I know best . . ." The words trailed off into high-pitched laughter.

Brick slapped the scientist's left cheek. The smack of his callused hand might almost have been the report of a small gun.

"You're going to have to tell me, or I won't be able to help you and your daughter. No matter how high you are right now, you must know that you're going to have to come down sometime."

The scientist giggled until a second blow snapped his head back. A trickle of dark blood stained his chin.

"If I'm not able to help you then, you're going to have a lot worse problem than some ambulance guy who saw you stoned."

"Which is my own, of course," Dr. Crane murmured.

"Charles C. Crane, Ph.D. That is how they were signed, you see, young man. My own name. My signature. My handwriting."

"You wrote them yourself?"

The scientist stared off into space, watching something no one else could see.

Carol said, "Brick, he couldn't have!"

"Sure he could. Funnier things have happened."

"But why-"

"You don't like him and I don't like him. Maybe he doesn't like himself much either. He get into town often?"

"Hardly ever."

"There's no box out at the road. How does he get his mail?"

"We have a post office box in town."

"I thought so. Who picks the mail up?"

"I do. I mail his letters too, and they're letters I've typed myself. If he had written anything by hand, I would have noticed it."

"When I came here today, he said something about a housekeeper named Juanita. Said she was off. Does she go into town to shop?"

Carol nodded. "Groceries and things. But, Brick, Juanita can't drive. I have to take her in, in our van. I drop her at the supermarket, do my own errands and pick up the mail and any supplies Dad may have ordered-there's a scientific and medical supply house in San Franco-then come back to the market and get her. Today I drove her to her sister's in Rio Lodo."

Brick stroked his chin. "Somebody's forging his handwriting, then. That's what it looks like."

"But why would anyone want to do that?"

"For the psychological effect, I suppose. It seems to have worked. It should be pretty unsettling to realize that somebody who's after you can write letters, checks, or whatever,

using your name, whenever he wants to. Besides, it might throw the police off, so if you're going to disguise your handwriting anyway, why not disguise it as your victim's?"

The twitching of the wounded man's face drew their attention. Hoarsely and almost unintelligibly he said, "Not forged."

"What's that?" Brick bent over him.

"Not forged." He gasped for breath. "He . . . ^erox . . ."  
The whisper trailed away.

"What the hell does that mean?" Brick muttered.

Carol suggested, "That the letters Dad has been getting c re really copies of letters he once wrote someone else?"

Slade gasped, "Please. Terribly thirsty."

"Get him a glass of water," Brick said. "I'll roll him over and try to hold him up a little."

The song of the siren was much louder now as the ambulance wound its way up the mountain road. Brick listened to it, and to the whisper of Carol's slippers as she went into the kitchen. Dr. Crane slumped in his chair. "Sin," Brick said to himself. "Lucifer Satanus, Prince of Sin, you did all this to us. Dope. Attempted murder. Lies. But if you're real, He has to be real too."

He looked down at the wounded Slade to see if he was being overheard, and realized that he was not in fact speaking. Or rather that the Brick who spoke was an inner Brick, a sort of operator animating the clay figure that supported the wounded man. This second, inner Brick reached beneath his shirt for the silver medal his mother had once given him, then remembered that he had lost it in a rice held almost ten thousand miles away.

"This stuff isn't going to help you. Brick."

"If the Devil's real, sir, there has to be a God too. The Devil had to be cast out by someone."

"Now you're a theologian. You're supposed to be an ex-Marine."

"Sorry, sir."

"There is no God for you. Brick, and your Devil wasn't cast out by anybody. He was cast by me, and cast into your life by me. If you've a God at all-never mind."

"Here, Brick darling." Carol handed him a glass of cold water. "If you don't think it will hurt him."

"Not if he sips it. It's not a stomach wound." Brick held the glass to Slade's lips. "Carol, you called me darling."

"It slipped out, I guess."

"I hope it slips out often."

"Careful, you'll drown him. Oh, Brick!"

"What is it?"

"Why did we have to meet like this? It could have been so much nicer."

"Because I fished a statue out of the rubble this afternoon."

"I don't think I understand."

"And I can't explain, Carol. Not now, anyway." He put down the glass. "Will you kiss me, Carol? I've loved you from the beginning, and I've got a feeling it's the only kiss we'll ever get."

She kissed him. Somewhere down the mountain road the ambulance rounded a beetling outcrop. Its siren was suddenly louder, rising and falling like the whooping of a wolf.

"Again," Brick pleaded.

"They're coming. I have to get Dad out of here. I'll lock him in his bedroom." She hurried over to the narcotized scientist, seeming to pull him erect by main strength.

Brick felt the PPK slipping out of his belt and began a frenzied judo chop with his right hand.

The sound of the shot filled the room, springing back from the walls with doubled force. The little German automatic went skittering across the carpet. Brick dropped Slade and leaped to his feet.

For an instant, he thought the shot had missed. Then, very slowly at first. Dr. Crane began to crumple. A red stain spread across his white shirt.

Carol released him and backed away, hands covering her face. Slowly, then, it seemed, very fast, the old scientist pitched forward on his face. Outside, the ambulance ground to a stop.

"Sorry. Really sorry . . ." The whispering voice was Slade's.

Brick demanded, "Why did you do it?"

"Would've . . . killed us all. Killed . . . world. He would. Told me. Billions of lives . . ."

There was a sharp knock at the door. "Let them in," Brick snapped to Carol. He bent over the wounded Slade. "What are you talking about?"

"Crane serum would've saved billions. No room. No more animals, plants. We'd be"-the wounded man gasped for

sir-"standing on everybody's shoulders. All have died."

"So you came here to kill him first." Brick heard the door open, the confused footsteps of the paramedics.

"Dr. Crane told me . " Slade's whisper was nearly lost.  
"Burn lab . . .'"

A paramedic grasped Brick's shoulder and leaned heavily upon it as he bent to peer at Slade. "What happened to him?"

Slade sighed, "No space . . . for billions. Not till we get into space. Dr. Crane . . ."

"Gunshot," Brick told the paramedic. "They shot each other." It sounded so simple when he said it that way.

"He won't make it," the paramedic said. Swaying a little, he straightened up.

"Goddamit, aren't you even going to try to save him? Give him plasma?"

"Won't make it," the paramedic said again. "Going into coma now. DOA for sure."

"Brick," Carol called, "what's the matter with them?"

The other paramedic said thickly, "What's the matter with you?"

Brick stood. "Drunk, I think. I don't smell it on them, so it must have been vodka, or maybe medicinal alcohol."

"Listen, Mac," the first paramedic said. "We're not drunk. Sure, we had a couple, but we're not drunk."

"Fine," Brick told him. "Get this guy some plasma. What about the old man?"

"Old guy's DOA," the second paramedic told him. "No respiration, no pulse. Got a bullet in the belly and his heart gave out."

The first paramedic said again, "Listen, Mac, we're not drunk. You know what we've been doin' all day? You know?"

"You got plasma in your ambulance?"

"We've been draggin' the bodies out. That's what we've been doin'. Had a big quake down in San Franco, see? Eight point one on the Richter scale. Women. Kids. My God, you should have seen them."

Brick took him by the arm. "Let's go get some plasma," he said wearily. "This man's still alive."

"That man's dead," the paramedic told him. "He just hasn't stopped breathin' yet."

They got the needle into Slade's arm and carried him out



to the ambulance, then took out Dr. Crane.

"He did it to me," Carol said softly. "When I was just a little girl. About once a week for a year. Finally, Mother found out and made him stop. I've never been able to forgive him for that. I was hoping . . . But I still can't." She shuddered. "I suppose I never will. Oh, Christ!"

The second paramedic stumbled and dropped his end of the stretcher. Dr. Crane's body rolled off onto the graveled drive. With the sheet pulled partially away from his face, he appeared to be wearing a surgeon's mask.

Brick turned Carol around until she could no longer see the corpse. "Why did you stay?"

Her shoulders moved up and down under his fingers. "It doesn't matter."

"Okay."

She drew a deep breath. "Brick, we'll be rich. I know where he kept the formula for his serum—a brown notebook in his desk in the lab. He was just working out a system for making the serum in quantity, and any pharmaceutical company could do that. It virtually eliminates the onset of degenerative diseases. People will pay anything for it. Think of all the rich old men."

"He was going to give it away," Brick told her.

'For the prestige' That was all he cared about. Medals, the Nobel Prize. He wanted somebody to endow a real research center for him, where he could boss a big staff."

"Sure," Brick said.

The first paramedic was bending over Dr. Crane. "Hey!" he called. "The old guy's heart's started again. Shock must have done it." For a second he stood there blinking, trying to reason through an alcoholic fog. "I'll give him some oxygen. Might have some brain damage, though. He was out quite a while."

"Give the other one some too," Brick instructed him. "It might help."

"It might at that."

Brick helped them get the old scientist into the ambulance, watched the first paramedic fumbling with his oxygen equipment for a moment, then closed the rear door. The second paramedic stumbled toward the cab.

Brick asked, "You going to drive?"

"Guess so. Al's busy back there."

"Al drove up?"

The second paramedic nodded.

"With you gettingsmashed most of the way. You're in no shape to drive. The girl will drive for you."

"My bus? Forget it."

Brick hit him so hard his feet left the ground.

Carol opened her mouth to scream, then shut it again. Brick said, "Think you can drive this? Shouldn't be much different from your van,"

"I-I suppose so."

"Sure you can. I'll put him in front with you. I think I broke his jaw, and that will give him something to worry about if he wakes up."

"Brick! Aren't you coming too?"

"I'll follow you in my pickup," Brick said. "Otherwise we won't have any transportation once we get to the hospital. I'd drive, but I don't know where it is. Now get going."

He stood in the road and watched the ambulance's red tail lights until they vanished around a bend. A few seconds later, the siren came on. Carol had found the switch, he reflected.

There was a galvanized scrub bucket in Juanita's kitchen. He used his pocket knife to cut the hose from the rinsing nozzle on the sink. In the living room, where two men had nearly died, he found Slade's PPK under a sofa and thrust it into his belt again, then retrieved his Winchester from the corner where he had left it.

Back outside, he hung the Winchester on its mounts in the back of the pickup's cab and siphoned gasoline from the tank until the bucket was half full. Over a gallon, he figured. Nearly two bucks' worth. Carefully he positioned the bucket near-but not too near-the back of the laboratory, struck a match and tossed it in.

The gas caught with a sound like the cracking of a giant whip. He jumped backward, then sprinted for the shadow of a hillock of boulders and sand. He had no sooner reached it and turned to watch the dancing flames than the giant's fist struck him behind the ear. For an instant he saw the dark ground leaping toward him, but he was unconscious before he struck it.

When he woke, it was to hear a rending, grinding crash. Vaguely he pictured cars meeting head-on outside his dingy room in San Franco, or a car crushed under the wheels of a tractor-trailer.

He shifted his head. Sand grated on his cheek; the night wind stirred his hair. His hands would not come forward to help him up. After a moment, he found that they were bound behind his back. Much of the feeling had left his arms. He

struggled erect without them, rolling on one side to get his knees under him, pushing himself up with an elbow.

The crash had been his pickup. Its hood was buried now so [he big double doors at the back of the lab. Orange flames danced along its sides.

"You're awake," a familiar voice said behind him. "Would you like a closer view of the fire? I ran your truck over your bucket of gasoline, and it really should be quite spectacular."

Brick turned. "Hello, Doc. All right if I call you that?"

"Certainly."

"You look just like him too, nearly as I can see. Except you haven't been shot lately. Twin?"

The second Dr. Crane shook his head.

"Then the Russians or somebody fixed you up to look like him, I guess. Plastic surgery and so forth."

"You are a curious man, whoever you are. Doesn't it concern you that you're about to die?"

"I didn't know I was."

"And you are ludicrously incorrect about the Russians. Appearance, voice, height-I doubt very much if they, or anyone on earth, could do so well." The second Dr. Crane gestured with Slade's black PPK. "Now, forward. Whether or not you care to have a better view of the conflagration, I do."

Brick started toward the burning truck. "I've never had any luck at all with that gun."

"And now you never will."

"Right. I figured, though, that if I made it look like the lab was burning, that would smoke out whoever had been sending the real Doc those letters. I was right about that, anyway."

"You were wrong about that," the second Dr. Crane told him. "I was here already, watching from behind those boulders. You very nearly trampled me when you ran there to hide. Fortunately, the light of the fire you had started in that bucket must have impeded your night vision."

Brick said, "Or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it. You're a clone, right? I've heard of that."

"No. I am a copy. ,But wouldn't you like to know what struck you with?"

"Not particularly. This close enough?" The heat of the burning truck washed his cheeks. The laboratory building itself was beginning to catch now.

"Yes, this will do. It was a stone, A common desert stone. Was that courageous of me? A slight and rather elderly man?"

"I guess so."

"But I had no alternative. Had I fled, you would have heard me, pursued me, and almost certainly caught me within a hundred yards. Had I remained as I was, you would surely have noticed me. As it happened, I struck; and in striking, I won. But if I had possessed a pistol of my own, I would have killed my original almost an hour ago, when he came poking about with my-pardon me, his-hunting rifle. Did he suppose I would come so near my old home as that?"

Brick said, "He was mostly showing off, but the pressure got to be too much for him." He glanced at his burning truck and took a step toward the second Dr. Crane, who stepped back.

"I warn you, if you attempt to run at me, I'll fire."

"Then I won't attempt it, Doc. Tell me about this copying business. Your man Slade said something about xerography, but we thought he meant the letter had been copied."

Momentarily the second Dr. Crane looked puzzled. "Some, ah, people came. Nearly a month ago, now. Our electricity went off, all of it. I thought it was some sort of storm. . . . They landed out there, out in the desert."

He looked sharply at Brick. "I don't suppose you believe a word of this, but it doesn't matter. You'll be dead quite soon."

"Go on," Brick said.

"I was working here in the laboratory, the original I. They came and got me. My daughter and my cook must have been sleeping, and I don't think they ever knew. Presumably, they were not permitted to wake up until the others had left. What is your name, by the way?"

"Bronson."

"I'm Charles Crane, as you know. Mr. Bronson, I'm supposed to be a biochemist, but I don't know quite how to explain. Suppose I were a medieval scribe. I'd spend my days in copying the Bible: beautiful lettering, illustrated capitals. You've seen them?"

Brick nodded.

"And then someone showed me a modern color copier. Lay a page on it-and there it is again, just as good. Or nearly just as good. That was what they did. They wanted me, you see. Or at least, they wanted a Charles Crane to take back to wherever they came from. I can't imagine why, unless they'd forgotten the principles they'd used to build that machine. Or perhaps they had not built it, had got it from some other

culture. In any event they made a copy, then wiped an hour or so from the memories of the original."

"But you escaped?"

The second Dr. Crane shook his head. "I was left over, if you wish to put it so. They made me first, I think. I know that I am Charles Cabot Crane. I recall my childhood, college, marriage, my entire career. But when I remember all those things, I know that I would do certain things I did not do at the time."

"I see," Brick said. The fire was advancing in columns along the walls of the laboratory building, blistering their dark paint.

"I don't think I'm a very good copy. Not a perfect copy, at least. They threw me away, just left me behind."

"A little surprise for the real Doc." Brick glanced at the truck again; its steel body glowed with heat. "Why'd you want him to burn his lab?"

The copy smiled. It was almost a pleasant smile. "To destroy his notebook, of course. My notebook. You see, there is a flaw in the formula. The serum can be produced, and it will work-stave off cancer, cardiovascular degeneration, and so on. But in less than an hour it goes bad."

"So that was why the Doc delayed making a formal announcement of his discovery. He said he was working on a way to manufacture it in quantity, and that bothered me. Like his daughter said, any of the big drug companies could have worked out a production method, and they probably could have done it better than he could."

"But it could not be made in quantity, you see, Mr. Bronson, until that flaw was eliminated. It had to be made and used on the spot, which rendered it rather impractical. But I, in that last hour, the hour before they landed, found the way to eliminate that flaw. I recorded it in my notebook."

"You mean the real Doc did," Brick told him. "Then the saucer people wiped his memory out, and he didn't look back

at that page, because he thought he knew what was on it."  
"Exactly."

"And now, you plan to replace him. You know Slade didn't kill him?"

"But he may have brain damage-yes, I overheard all that was said, once you were outside. For my purpose, it could not have worked itself out better. When he is somewhat recovered, Carol will bring him back here; and I will eliminate him and take his place-a miraculous recovery. Not even Carol need know."

"And blame me for destroying the lab. Just in case the brain damage isn't all that bad, or some other scientist shows

up to go through his stuff."

"Correct again. The building was locked, so you rammed the doors with your truck. The fire started as a result, and you fled into the desert. And now that I have seen that the

fire will do what I want, you and I will indeed go into the desert."

"Where you'll kill me, and hide my body."

"Would you rather I kill you here? I would prefer not to

have to drag you a mile or so. But if I must, I will. Walk, and you will have a few moments more--"

There was a shot.

The bullet's impact almost knocked the second Dr. Crane off his feet; reeling, he regained his balance, waved the PPK futilely in the direction of the burning truck.

Brick kicked it from his hand. "You'll never get the guy that got you, Doc. There isn't anybody."

"I'm wounded. . . ."

"Sure you are. If you get a gun hot enough, and it's got a round in the chamber, it'll go off. I've seen machine guns start to fire like that, with nobody pulling the trigger, because a few long bursts had overheated the barrel. My deer rifle was hanging in the back of the truck, and there was a round in the chamber because I jacked one in when I heard the real Doc shoot the poor kid you sent in after him. When you walked me over here, I lined you up with it as well as I could."

The second Dr. Crane was watching the blood that seeped from between his fingers.

"You've been shot in the belly, Doc. Just like he was. It would be interesting to know what's happened to the one in the saucer--I think maybe there's some sort of link between the three of you. But now if you want me to patch you up, you'd better untie me."

The second Dr. Crane said nothing. His face looked gray, even in the reddish light of the fire. Tears trickled down the gray cheeks.

"You don't believe that crap you fed Slade, do you? We'll be saving the best people--engineers, physicists, craftsmen. If somebody'd found that serum in time, we'd still have Einstein, and by now we'd be selling fried chicken on Mars."

The knees went first. The copy's bloodstained hands never left his waist to block his fall. Brick cursed, then dropped to the ground and lifted his hips and legs, kicking and squirming until his knife slid from his pocket.

It took thirty seconds or so to get it open, and another thirty to cut away the electrical tape the second Dr. Crane

had taken from his truck. By the time he got into the laboratory, the whole place was full of smoke and chemical fumes. Bottles of solvent were bursting like mortar shells. He tried to recall whether Carol had ever mentioned the location of the desk, tried to hold his eyes open. Soon he could not. He dropped to the floor, hoping to find better air.

"You see what it got you. Brick. You might have been rich and famous, married to a lovely woman. Where is the God you prayed to now?"

"Everywhere, sir. Nowhere. I still haven't seen him."

"You never will."

"But you'll see me."

"What are you talking about? You're burning to death right now, dying of smoke inhalation."

"But He made me real. You'll pass me on the street some-day, see me in some crowd. Don't mess with me then. Fists Sike pavement breakers, remember?"

"Brick, you can never be real. Not real the way I am. When this is over, you'll be left behind on the page."

"You sound a little scared, sir. Maybe you've already felt me close to you in the movie theater, seen me waving at the ballgame, heard my voice around some city corner."

"How did you know that?"

"Answer me. Brick! How did you know that?"

"All right, on TV tonight they showed a man who got pulled out of afire in California. But his name was Rick, Rick Benson.

"As well as I could hear it.

"That wasn't you, was it. Brick?"

"Brick?"

"Answer me! Brick ... ?"

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150

House of Ancestors

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THE eye a/the telescope looked upward giddy miles to where the last sphere, its sides pierced with yawning holes, swayed above the city.

A teacher from Baton Rouge had paid her quarter, looked, and left, a moment before. A man from Des Moines would come soon, but he would be too late. For a few seconds a figure stood at one of those holes; then another who struggled with him; then both were gone.

The subway rocked and jerked in the malicious way subways have on Sunday afternoons, when the rocking and jerking are out of harmony with the mood of the time and the people on the trains, people crossing the city to visit relatives or seek the cool of the ocean. The motion did not seem to bother Bonnie, who sat with her hands upon the purse in her lap with her arms enclosing protectively and possessively the scarcely noticeable swelling.

Bonnie was pregnant. That made all the difference, as Joe told himself. Bonnie was pregnant.

She was a tall, rather lanky girl, colored Scotch-Irish around her red flushed elbows and hands. She wore a black maternity skirt with a hole for the belly in front-it had been lent her by her brother Chuck's wife-and a voluminous blue smock like the uniform of one of those semipublic institutions whose inmates are issued clothing that does not seem to be a uniform until two of them are seen together. Joe was Irish-Italian, darker than she, with big hands and forearms.

A group of men on the far side of the car stared for a moment at Bonnie, and he glowered at them. He wanted to ask them what the hell they thought they were looking at, but he knew Bonnie would be upset. He embarrassed her too often anyway, too often for him to do it when he could see it coming. Besides, someone might get really tough, and Bonnie would become frightened for him and cry, sniveling and choking with shame as she wept because it had been a crime to cry in Bonnie's family. For himself he did not care if someone did get tough. Not that he wanted to die.

"I think it's the next stop after this." Bonnie said above the clatter. It was the first time she had spoken since they had boarded the train. Joe nodded.

He would be glad to get out. He had seldom been outside New York before, and the few occasions when he had were associated in his mind with pleasure, with sunny skies and fragrant winds, those one-day trips on which someone brought a portable television so that they would not be bereft of the familiar computer-written jokes, and someone else his friends and the friends of his friends so that the reassurance of the crowd was with them too. He played softball in the high grass of meadows and enjoyed it much more than the semi-pro which had occupied his weekday evenings since he quit night school.

"Come on." Bonnie was pulling at his shoulder. "This is our stop. You feel all right? It doesn't hurt?"

He stood up, his broad body almost filling the narrow subway aisle, then waited for her to stand too. The train bumped to a stop.



At the gate of the fair grounds Bonnie showed the pass Chuck had given her, telling the guard a lot more about Chuck's job selling for the plastics company and what his connection was with the fair than the guard wanted to know. Joe stood back away from them, looking up at the entrance arch with its twenty-foot letters that read NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR '91. It was big as hell, but you could see The Thing on past it, and The Thing made it seem small.

Of course The Thing made everything seem small. He had not been up there to see, because the elevator didn't go that high and he was supposed to stay away from steps, but they said you could even see The Thing from the roof of the buildings where he and Bonnie lived, way over in Yonkers. It was far higher than the Empire State Building.

Finally Bonnie quit talking to the guard, and he let them through the gate. "Where'd Chuck say he was going to meet us?" Joe asked. Even though he was curious to see the inside of The Thing-especially to see it now, before the public was admitted, before any of the people they knew had seen it-he found himself hoping Bonnie's brother would not be there.

"At Howard Johnson's right at the foot of it. They've got that opened up already so the people working on the pavilions from the different countries can eat there, and the reporters." He was walking a pace behind her, and Bonnie looking at him seriously over her shoulder said, "You didn't really want to come, did you, Joe?"

"Sure I did. I was going crazy sitting around the apartment all day."

Bonnie pursed her lips, turning to look up at him and seeming to understand everything with her blue eyes. "I know you were. But you feel bad about Chuck. Envious."

He said, "No." But it was true.

She waited for him to catch up to her and took his hand. "I just want to tell you that I'm not mad because of it. Chuck isn't either. We understand."

Joe said nothing after that, just looking up at The Thing as they walked along. Thousands upon thousands of colored balls linked together with slender looking tubular stems he knew were really big enough to hold moving belts that would carry sightseers from ball to ball. Although there was no wind down here on the ground it was blowing hard high up. You could see the top of The Thing lean away from the wind. The engineers said (Joe had read it in Time) that even a hurricane couldn't knock it down, but it looked as though it were about to go as he watched. He wondered what it would be like to be up in it with the wind blowing it like that.

II

Chuck was waiting for them in front of Howard Johnson's, jingling the change in his pocket as he stood there, the way

he always did. Chuck was ten years older than Bonnie. He had been selling those plastics ever since he got out of school. Two years ago, when the fair was just in the planning stage, he had landed the contract for the stuff that went into The Thing, and since then he had it knocked. The commissions were making him rich; you could see it and not just from the clothes he wore. It was in the way he stood, and the way he wore his hat. That was a hat that said: I've got it made. I'm big time, and you'd better believe it.

Chuck grinned big at him and shook his hand with his own soft one in that up-and-down way he had until Joe mashed it a little to see him wince. Joe's own hands had been getting soft during the months since the accident, but they were still firm and not flabby like Chuck's. He swore to himself he'd never let them get that way, either; he'd find something he could do, even if it was only wood carving or something silly like that.

"Come on in," Chuck said when Joe had let go of his hand.

"Ed Baker-he's the guy I told you about, the chief engineer-is waiting in there already. I just stepped outside to look for you."

The engineer rose when Bonnie came to the table. He was a tall man, thin as a rake, with a sharp "V" of hair beginning to grey at the sides. Chuck introduced both of them, Bonnie first, and beckoned to one of the uniformed girls who were waiting on the tables.

"Chuck here says you people'd like to see the inside of The Thing." Baker had a noticeable New England twang. "And if you would, now's the time to do it. They've sold tickets for six months in advance already."

"Is it finished?" Bonnie asked timidly.

Chuck laughed. "Not quite inside, sir. But it won't come down with you in it, if that's what you mean. Finishing up the displays in Ed's job, though. And believe me, he can make the ones that aren't complete more interesting than the stuff near the bottom that's ready to roll."

"There aren't any steps, are there?" Bonnie looked at Joe; and he wanted to sink into the floor. He knew what was coming.

Baker shook his head. "All the rises are by belt. Does your husband have a heart condition? Chuck mentioned something."

Bonnie's brother held his fingers an impossible distance apart. "He's got a nail in his heart this big. A great big galvanized nail."

Baker's eyebrows went up, and Joe said quickly, "It's only five-eighths of an inch long, really. From a spiking gun-one of those tools that shoot a shell like a .22 so that you can nail furring strips onto concrete."

"But it's in your heart?" The engineer was half astonished, half skeptical.

"In one of the chambers. The doctor told me the name of it, but I forget now."

"My God, what happened?"

"You know how you got to push the barrel against something and pull the trigger at the same time to make it go off?"

Baker nodded. "I've used them; they're practically fool-proof."

"Yeah. Well, this guy at work was fooling around with one. I guess he must have had his finger on the trigger, and he bumped the end against a steel I beam."

Chuck broke in: "It wasn't square against it, you see, Ed. Kind of at a slant. So the spike caromed off the beam and hit Joe. The doctor told Bonnie it happens with bullets once in a while, especially small ones like maybe buckshot. They can go right through the wall of a man's heart-just puncture it-and stay there. But without killing him. The heart heals up behind them."

Baker picked up one of the cups of coffee the waitress was handing around, and although his hand was steady Joe could see that he was shaken. "They can't get it out?"

"He won't let them," Bonnie said. "I've begged him."

"Listen," Joe told them, "I don't like to go over all this again. Let me say my piece now, and then let's shut up about it and talk about The Thing. That's what we came here for."

"You don't have to-" Baker began, but Joe interrupted him with a gesture.

"Like I've explained to Bonnie a thousand times-" he was addressing the engineer alone now-"I haven't got a lot of life insurance, just what the union gives everybody. And if they take it out it'll have to be what they call open heart surgery, where the chances aren't so good. This way, as long as I'm alive I draw workman's compensation, and medical benefits and all that kind of stuff. If I drop over some day Bonnie'll get the insurance anyway, so then she won't be no worse off. Now tell us about The Thing, huh? What's it supposed to be, anyway?"

"Oh, you know." Bonnie seemed to be as relieved as he was at the change of the subject. "You read to me about it out of the paper."

"Sure," Joe said, "but I want to hear from an expert. The papers always get something wrong. What is it, Mr. Baker?"

"You'd need a biochemist to really tell you. I can only repeat the same things you've already read; that it's actually a giant model of a molecule of deoxyribonucleic acid-what

we call DNA for short. It's the stuff genes are made of, so in the fundamental sense it's what determines that each of us has the heredity he has."

Bonnie asked, "And it looks like that?" She was staring out the window toward the base of The Thing.

"Somewhat like that. We've followed the normal conventions for making a molecular model, of course. Those balls, as the public calls them, represent atoms in the model, although each one is actually a hollow sphere thirty yards in diameter. The black ones are carbon, the light blue ones oxygen, and so on."

The engineer's interest in his work was infectious. Joe asked, "But it really does have that crazy shape? All the DNA in the world?"

Chuck snorted. "If all the DNA had the same shape, everybody'd be the same, Joe. Ed, you've got to excuse him;

Joe's not too technically oriented."

"It does all have that general double helix construction," Baker said stiffly, "and it's incorrect to think that a single molecule of DNA like the one we've modeled here determines its owner's complete heredity. It takes the entire set of human chromosomes to do that. The DNA molecule only determines the makeup of a single type of cell, although even so its structure seems to be minutely different for each person. Only identical twins can readily accept tissue grafts from one another, so one individual's cells must be subtly different from another's—even though the grafts are from corresponding parts of the body, liver tissue."

"Well, what kind of a cell would this make?" Bonnie asked.

"And who is it from?"

Baker shrugged. "This is just a typical human DNA molecule, as far as I know. I'm only an electrical engineer and I'm not sure even a Ph.D. biochemist could tell you what sort of a cell would contain it from looking at it."

"It could be a brain cell," Joe said unexpectedly, and the other three stared at him.

"It could be," Baker agreed after a moment's pause. "It would be strange, wouldn't it, if there actually were someone who had that exact pattern."

Chuck said airily, "The odds are probably a million to one against it."

"I know, but suppose someone did." Baker seemed to be talking half to himself. "Would the molecule itself recognize its own structure the way that a set of cell transducers read the history of gene structure? There must be a logic to the geometry we are completely incapable of recognizing; but it is the logic that makes all life possible, and the human race

only stays alive because it's capable of duplicating itself endlessly-

"Tell them how big The Thing is, really," Chuck demanded. "Three hundred thousand million to one, that's the scale this thing here is built to, Bonnie. It's the biggest model of anything ever built, and the tallest building in the world at the same time. And do you know what it is that makes something like this possible?"

"Yes," Joe said. "Glass fibers."

Chuck was only slightly crestfallen. "That's right, what we call monomolecular strands. They're only one molecule thick, stronger than hell, and we embed them in high-strength resin-really key them in. Every one of those balls was made out of two bowls from the same mold, fitted together, and the tubes that connect them were extruded and cut off to length. After that all they had to do was hang them up there after they'd installed the partition floors that cut the top half of the ball that you see off from the bottom half where the machinery is."

Baker seemed embarrassed by Chuck's exuberance, but he nodded verification. "We didn't even use a scaffold. Just picked up the pieces with helicopters and fitted them into place. I suppose you saw it on television."

"And you've got displays inside all of them?" Bonnie asked. "That's what I want to hear about."

The engineer smiled. "I'm glad you do, because it's the displays and the analytical circuits, not the structure, that are really my responsibility. The civil engineering boys have done their job and left. They only come back to read their strain gauges every once in a while."

Joe scarcely listened while Baker explained the displays. His attention was somewhat in his chest, in the area just beneath his breastbone, where a strange tightness had gripped him. He remembered the X-rays he had been shown;

the spike moving, tumbling in the current of his blood, with each beat of his heart. The doctors had said that if it lodged in a valve ...

"Come on."

Suddenly they were all standing up, pushing back their chairs and setting down their coffee cups. He rose too, feeling a little confused. There was no point in making a fuss; he would simply have to go on behaving normally until he fell over on his face, if that were what he was going to do. . . .

Outside the engineer led them to the foot of The Thing.

Joe stood a little behind the others, his head thrown back to stare up at the dizzily swaying top thousands of feet above him. A droning little business jet of an airplane went past. It was only a tiny silver cross against the sky, but the lacework

of The Thing towered over it like a thunderhead. With dizzied eyes he tried to follow the complexities of the spiraling pattern, becoming more certain as he did that some secret of colossal importance was contained in it.

Bonnie was touching his elbow; he looked down at her at last, the earth rocking under his feet. "What's the matter?" he asked. The entrance to The Thing was still shut.

"Something's wrong with the door. Mr. Baker's key won't make it work."

Baker said, "Come along, and we'll go to the shop and get someone who can open this up for us. It's at the back of the grounds."

Joe took a step forward as Bonnie released his elbow, then stopped, afraid he was going to lose his balance. The vertigo which had seized him while he was staring upward required a few seconds to subside. Bonnie and Chuck were leaving him, trailing after Baker. None of them looked back to see if he were coming too.

Half in anger, half to have something against which to steady himself, he went over to the big door instead of following them. It was massive, impressive and somber. He grasped the handle and pulled back.

He was a big man, owning the strength that comes of hard physical work done every day, and the accident had done nothing to change that. The door gave almost imperceptibly. He pulled harder, throwing his weight backward. The door rasped a quarter inch more, then suddenly gave free. "Stuck," he muttered to himself.

He looked at his wife's back; she was almost out of shouting distance now. For half a second he thought of hurrying after her, then decided against it. Let them all walk to wherever it was they were going, and back. He would make his own inspection of The Thing—the lower levels at least—and be ready to laugh at them when they returned.

The base chamber was dark until he entered it. Then the light came up slowly like the illumination in a theater. No doubt in coming through the doorway he had stepped on a pressure-sensitive plate or interrupted a photocell beam. A man in a white laboratory smock stepped forward smiling a greeting, and it was an instant before Joe realized that the man was an automaton activated like the lights, by his entry.

"Good day, sir," the robot began. "Are you interested in a guided tour of the exhibit in this atom?"

"Sure. That's what I came for." It was amusing to address the mechanical toy as though it were in fact a human being.

"I will be delighted to show you around. I will form my next tour in two minutes."

"Why can't we start now?"

The robot shook his head regretfully. "My programming requires a two-minute wait for others who might wish to join us."

"Okay." Joe shrugged, grinning. "You don't mind if I look around a little on my own while you're waiting, do you? Nobody's really going to come anyway, you know."

"There is always that possibility," the mechanical guide admitted diplomatically. "In the meantime you have the freedom of the exhibit."

Joe left him standing, still smiling, by the entrance-apparently oblivious to the fact that Joe had closed it behind him.

Most of the material on display in this chamber of The Thing was in the form of 3D projections-objects solid and real to the eye but insubstantial. Mutated fruit flies, magnified a hundred times, crawled about a section of the floor. He found himself wanting to kick them away when they approached his legs and he went past them without bothering to read the printed explanations of their grotesque abnormalities that floated in the air above them.

Beyond the fruit flies an experiment still more bizarre claimed his attention. An egg, palely translucent, stood upright on its large end. The small end was two feet higher than his head, and the yolk could be seen through the shell-a golden globe showing a single dark speck. As he watched the speck grew, developed a head, wings and legs. It seemed to writhe with the energy of its thrust toward being. Behind him the robot said, "My tour is ready to form, sir. Would you care to go back to the flies, or shall we begin here?"

Joe said a little sarcastically, "Where's all the other people on this tour?"

"There are no others," the robot replied in an unruffled voice. "If you are expecting friends or members of your family to join you I will be happy to wait until they arrive."

"They won't be along for a while yet," Joe told him. "I think I'll go ahead without them." He was still staring at the growing chick, now nearly ready to burst from its shell.

"This display," the robot said chattily, "shows a White Leghorn egg in incubation; the unfolding of the miracle of life. It is designed to illustrate the sequence of alterations every embryo undergoes before the final form is realized. The old naturalists used to say that every creature had to climb its own family tree to qualify for the privilege of birth, and although we are no longer accustomed to employ such quaint phrases the old tag illuminates a truth."

The chick was scratching weakly at the shell with its egg tooth. Joe took his eyes from it long enough to glance at the

guide. "What do you mean, climb his family tree?"

"He goes briefly through the forms of each of his forebears-"

"His father was a chicken, wasn't he? And he's a chicken too. How could you tell whether he looks like his father or not?"

"That's not what is meant-" the robot began.

"I know darn well it's not what you meant," Joe told him irritably. "You meant this chicken here goes up through evolution from just one little blob like a germ. So why couldn't you say so instead of all that junk about family trees? If that was true it would mean everybody has their father and grandfather and all that inside them. You know what the trouble with you and all those smart guys that set you up is? You think that anybody that went to college is so stupid they've got to have everything explained to them like a little kid."

"I'm sorry, sir," the robot said. "But it is interesting to consider that since each of us receives half his genetic structure from each parent-"

"Oh, shut up."

The chick had broken the shell now and was struggling through the hole it had created. The robot remained obediently silent, and for a few seconds Joe watched it without speaking. Then he asked abruptly, "Where's the horn on its legs?"

"Sir?"

"I said, where's the horn on its legs. You said it was a Leghorn chicken and I'll bet you don't know why it's called that."

There was a barely perceptible hesitation before the robot replied, "No, I don't, sir. I find the information is not in my memory banks. Please rest assured that your question had been recorded, and that the answer will be supplied to my program as part of the next reprogramming session."

"I can tell you right now," Joe said sourly. "Leghorn's a place in Italy. That's where they got this kind of chicken from."

The chick, its magnified image as tall as an ostrich, was struggling to its feet. The robot said nothing.

"Here's some more for you, smart guy. Who was the King of the Cowboys on the old TV movies, huh? And what year was it the Mets first won the pennant? Where was Grand Central before they tore it down?"

The robot hesitated again, then said, "I'm afraid the answers to none of your questions are in my memory banks, sir. Would you like to see the other exhibits in this atom?"



Joe was walking away. "No."

"In that case, sir, the entrance to the pedestrian conveyor which will take you to the next atom on the regular tour is on your right. If you wish to leave the complex entirely, you may use the door by which you entered."

"Does the next place have another dummy like you in it?"

"Oh, no, sir. Each atom has a completely different guide."

Not certain why he did it, Joe turned to his right and stepped onto the silently moving belt.

The upward angle was even steeper than he had expected, but the surface of the belt was ribbed with ridges almost like steps. The lights of the chamber behind him faded until he was left in near darkness. It reminded him of the Tunnel of Love at Coney Island, where he had gone once with Bonnie before they were married. Her perfume had seemed intensified in the dark until it was all around him, and in the boat ahead another couple, a boy and a girl he had not noticed particularly when they had gotten in, had made little animal sounds like chipmunks mating. Nothing had mattered then. Both Bonnie and he had believed that in spite of everything he would be a success. He would go to night school, take a Saturday job. . . . And nothing, nothing at all, had worked out as they had planned.

Ahead of him light grew; not merely because he was approaching it, but as in the chamber below because the voltage was being turned on gradually. He could make out the displays in the area immediately in front of the end of the connecting tube now, and a nicker of motion beyond them. He stepped off the belt.

An elderly man came forward to greet him. He wore a black cassock and a Roman collar. "Good morning, sir," the new guide said in a gentle, slightly accented voice. "I am Father Gregor Mendel. Good morning, madam."

With a start Joe turned to look behind him at the person the cybernaut "priest" was addressing. A young woman, almost a girl, was stepping from the belt. "Hello," (she had a soft voice that was somehow familiar,) "do you mind if I join your tour?"

Joe shook his head, then remembering his manners said, "No, not at all." He was looking at the girl's clothing: a skirt fully eight inches shorter than was currently fashionable, and a blouse fantastically patterned with interlaced squares. "Where did you come from?" he asked.

The girl smiled, brushing back her long, straight hair. "I came in with you, actually. When you opened the door."

"I didn't see you." After a moment he realized how hostile the Hat statement sounded and added, "I mean, I'm surprised I didn't notice you down below."

"I kept in the background. I'm afraid that's rather a fault of mine."

The figure of Mendel made a little gesture of welcome. "This is nice, very nice. The two of you will make an ideal party to tour my little exhibit."

"Wasn't there somebody here before us?" Joe asked. "I thought I saw him go out the exit over there just as we came in."

Mendel nodded. "There was, my son. But he did not stay. I didn't even have time to speak to him."

Puzzled, Joe said, "I don't see how he could of gotten in ahead of me."

The girl tossed her head. "It doesn't matter, does it?" "I guess not."

She smiled suddenly. "Do you know that the only one who's formally introduced himself here is Father Mendel? Although I know your name's Joe-let's say I overheard some people talking to you in Howard Johnson's."

He told her his full name, adding unnecessarily, "I'm married."

"I'm not," the girl said, "but I'm engaged." She held up her left hand so that he could see the ring she wore. "My name's Mary Hogan."

He felt an unexpected warmth toward her. "That's my mother's maiden name. There's a coincidence."

"That's nothing." She was grinning now. "You have the same last name as the boy I'm engaged to."

Mendel cleared his throat. "I'm afraid my atom is one of the dullest, but are you ready to see it now, my children?"

"What's it about?" the girl inquired.

"My discovery of genetics. I used garden peas, you know, and all my experiments are condensed here for you. The idea of the designers, I suppose, is to teach the principles in the same way in which they were originally discovered. I hope it is a good one."

To please the girl Joe followed the monk-scientist from then yellow, blue, then yellow, then went dark. Now in the darkness he found himself waiting for the blue flash again, and the bright spark when his mother drew on her cigarette, just as he had on nights when he would awaken to see her waiting for his father to return home.

Instead white light gleamed in front of them, the lights of the next chamber springing into life. "I wonder what this one will be," the girl said, but he did not answer her. He was

looking for the man he had glimpsed in the chamber below, somehow certain that he would be here too.

He was, but he remained hidden until they were almost ready to get off the belt.

Perhaps because it was so crowded this exhibit seemed smaller than the others. Poultry cackled and quacked around the attenuated legs of a giraffe. Huge beetles climbed the walls and, slipping, fell back to the floor to wiggle and struggle before they could turn themselves over and climb again.

Then, on the far side of the chamber, peering from behind a huge Empire wardrobe of oiled walnut which stood in Napoleonic grandeur among the animals, Joe saw the man's eyes. For an instant they stared at him. He received an impression of malice unfathomable. Then they were gone. A hunched, hurrying figure scuttled like one of the beetles, darting from behind the wardrobe and disappearing into the darkness of the next exit.

He yelled and jumped from the end of the steeply rising belt, wading through the insubstantial animals that surged about his feet; but as he reached the middle of the room the doors of the wardrobe flew apart like the doors of some Christmas toy, and a man with bandaged eyes stepped directly into his path. They collided and went crashing to the resilient plastic floor.

By the time he got to his feet again he knew it was too late. With the girl's help he pulled the robot erect, wondering all the while, rather vaguely as he might have wondered about some back-page story in a newspaper, whether or not the exertion he had just undergone would kill him. He could feel the thumping of his heart as clubbed blows from inside his chest.

"Ban soir," the blind robot said. "I am Jean Baptiste Pierre Antoine De Monet, Chevalier de Lamarck." He made a courtly bow.

"What happened to you?" the girl asked suddenly. She pointed, and Joe saw that Lamarck's right hand was missing. It seemed to have been torn or hacked away; the plastisol flesh was ragged around the amputation, and color-coded wires, blue and yellow, dangled from the stump.

"I fear, mademoiselle," Lamarck murmured, "that there may be a vandal in our complex." He seemed ashamed of the injury that so clearly revealed his nature, and thrust the injured limb behind him.

"Yes, and I almost caught him," Joe said. "If you hadn't jumped out of that big cabinet when you did I would have. What were you doing in there anyway?"

"It is a service closet," Lamarck explained. "Each atom has one, equipped to perform routine maintenance on the guide assigned to it and to make minor repairs. When the vandal released me I went in hoping to have something done about

my hand; when I heard the three of you coming, however, I felt that since I retained sufficient functioning to perform my office I should do so." A tall wading bird, insubstantial as mist, flew through his body as he spoke, its stilt legs trailing behind it.

"Three of us?" Startled, Joe glanced back at the tube from which he and Mary Hogan had entered. A second girl was standing near the end of the belt. She was taller than Mary, but seemed even younger, coltishly unsure of herself. Like Mary's, her skirt ended well above her knees; but short blond hair peeped from under her close-fitting hat, and she carried a beaded handbag with a long strap. Looking at the three of them she swung it nervously.

"Come on." Mary gestured to her. "Join the freakout. We won't put you down."

"I overheard you talking about someone damaging something in here." The new girl's voice was shrill and self-conscious. "And I just wanted to tell you it was not me."

"We know who it was," Joe said gruffly. "It's a man, and he's ahead of us, not behind us. I'm not going to stay here and look at the exhibits. I'm going on ahead and try to get him." The resolve had formed in his mind, so it seemed to him, as he spoke; but once formed and articulated he felt that it had the force of divine law. In his imagination he saw himself dying, the spike jamming his heart action at the very moment the scuttling man he had seen come from behind Lamarck's cabinet sprang some simple, horrible trap that would leave his body mangled-and he did not care.

"Wait!" The blind robot grasped him by the arm with his one hand. "If you don't see the things here-if you don't listen to what I must tell you about them-you will miss the point of all of it."

"I think he should go." The voice was the girl's, shrill and insistent.

"I think he should too," Mary Hogan said. "There's no telling how much damage that thing loose up ahead may do."

"I shall ask the master computer." Lamarck's blind face looked at no one in particular. "Monsieur, when none of the programmers are here the master computer is the highest authority. Will you abide by the decision of the master computer?"

The girl with the beaded bag said, "It's the unit that controls the whole Thing. All of it; all the exhibits."

Joe wanted to shake himself free. He could have done it easily-the tiny servo motors which powered robots' actions were strong only on televised horror dramas-but he found himself unable to do so. Lamarck's aged face, although he knew it to be a plastisol mask, his sightless eyes and his intangible air of genius in defeat, held him. "All right," he said at length. "I'll do whatever your computer says. How do we

consult it?"

"I can contact it from the service closet, monsieur." Lamarck released his arm and wheeled with uncanny accuracy to face the Empire wardrobe. The two girls watched him expressionlessly. As soon as the doors had closed Joe bolted for the exit leading to the next atom.

He did not wait for the belt to carry him this time, but scrambled up it. Behind him the unsteady tapping of high-heeled shoes told him that at least one of the two girls was following him.

The atom into which he burst held Charles Darwin, but the great scientist lay tumbled on the floor, his midsection a mass of smashed circuit elements which a Galapagos tortoise near him appeared to regard incuriously. Moths big as swans covered every wall, their wings stiffly extended to make an incredible pattern of iridescent color.

He was bending over the inert Darwin when something whistled past his head. He heard it strike the wall behind him and fall clattering to the floor as he looked up.

The vandal was no longer hiding. He stood near a scale model of H.M.S. Beagle, his left hand grasping a bundle of slender rods with ragged, razor-sharp ends. His right arm was drawn back as though to cast a spear, and as Joe watched he whipped it forward; there was barely time to jerk himself to one side as the jagged sliver hurtled toward him. With a solid thudding sound it buried itself in Darwin's chest.

He jerked it out as he drew himself erect, poised to dodge the next missile. It came flying at his face. As he ducked, the vandal leaped onto the belt which would carry him to the next atom. a

That atom was empty a moment after Joe arrived, but a JJ metal sliver plucked at his shirt as he jumped from the belt, ^ and he saw his quarry disappear into the next tube.

After that he lost count of the atoms through which they passed, and he no longer noticed what displays they held and whether they were complete or not.

The structure of The Thing was complex, and most of the atoms possessed several radiating tubes so that the figure he was pursuing could easily have shaken him off. But he did not seem to wish to do so; and when Joe grew too fatigued to climb along the steep belts that carried them higher and higher he found that he lost no ground in the pursuit. Always, at the end of each tube he glimpsed the man running for the next belt. And it was always the belt which would loft them highest that he finally chose.

But as he continued the pursuit Joe came to realize that he also was followed. Behind him the sound of the two girls' feet grew until it was the roar of a crowd, high pitched and quick voiced.

At last they reached an atom which had no floor, and from which no belt led, an empty globe of fiberglass with gaping holes in its sides. He saw the man he had followed waiting with a metal sliver upraised beside the lowest of the holes, and only blue sky and clouds beyond. Behind him were the hurrying noises of a hundred women.

"Go ahead," he called. "What are you going to do-i rnp:'"

The figure silhouetted against the sky only stared c&. him dumbly.

Upright Joe walked forward, down the curving inside of the sphere that led to the level bottom, then slowly up until the man he had followed all these thousands of feet into the air and he were no more than a few yards apart. The spearlike fragment of metal rod remained poised; but the corners of the man's mouth drew down and down with each step he took until the yellowish skin must have been ready to tear under the strain and the mouth was drawn open to show the square white teeth.

Then, with a gesture that was almost casual, the metal sliver was flipped into the void. With his shoulder down Joe rushed forward, struck the man, and drew him away from the edge.

The man's resistance revived at the moment of contact, and for a few seconds he struggled desperately. He still held four or five pieces of metal similar to the one he had thrown away in his left hand; but Joe pinned it, then jerked one from him to drive against his throat. The struggling stopped.

"What's happening," someone behind him asked. "What are those things?"

From the corner of an eye he saw the girl who had called herself Mary Hogan. Behind her came the girl with the beaded bag; then, as he watched, a third girl who wore a skirt that reached her ankles. And behind her, some stepping agilely from the belt, some staggering clumsily, came woman after woman.

Many were young, and some were pretty and even beautiful, but others were neither and a few were monstrously fat. Several wore silks, but most were in plain dresses not much better than rags.

"What are those things?" Mary Hogan asked again. She was standing close to his shoulder now. "What are you going to do?"

"Steel construction strips he's ripped out of something," Joe told her. "And I'm going to kill him with this one-rip him wide open. Want to watch?" He pushed one jagged end of the piece he held against the other's body.

"Don't!"

Joe stared down at the impassive face of the man under him and drove the splinter tighter still; the face contorted

under the pressure until malice blasted from it like heat from the top of an open crucible.

The girl in the long skirt dropped to her knees beside him. "Don't you know who that is?" she asked. She was not pretty, but somehow clean looking and attractive.

"It's a robot." Joe's voice was stubborn, although he found himself gasping for breath in the thin air. "Another crummy, clanking robot; a robot with my face. I'm going to wreck him."

"I wasn't sure you knew who it was," the girl murmured. "You think I don't know my own face? What I'd like to know is what sort of dirty joke is being played here."

"I think I can tell you," Mary Hogan said; she stooped beside the kneeling girl, pushing her long hair away from her face. "It involves who all of us are too. Have you guessed yet?"

"You're robots too," Joe said bitterly. "That's why the robot pretending to be a priest would bless you and not me. You aren't a real person any more than this thing is."

"We're more-I'm more than that. Don't you know who I am yet?"

He said something inaudible.

"I couldn't hear you." She bent closer, the other women crowding around her.

"You're supposed to be my mother; my mother the way she looked when I was born. My real mother is still alive in Brooklyn."

"This is the way I was when you were conceived," the girl said. "It's at conception that the heritage is passed."

Joe nodded. "I knew it once I'd thought of it. That skirt-and-blouse outfit of yours: miniskirts and op-art prints mean '67 or '68. I'm twenty-four, so that puts you just about right, and I guess the girl with the bag back there is your mother, and this one,"-he looked at the kneeling woman in the long skirt-"is her mother."

Mary Hogan nodded. "Your grandmother and great-grandmother, really; it was from your cells that the transducers took the patterns. It used to be believed that only the parents' own heredity could be transmitted, but recently we've discovered that Lamarck was correct in certain respects-every characteristic, as it exists at conception, is to some extent transmitted to the new generation. That's what he was supposed to explain to you in his atom."

Joe said stubbornly, "But you're really a robot."

"Physically, yes. But mentally-spiritually if you will-I am a replica of the young woman who became your mother. Tomorrow I will be someone else." There was sadness in her

voice.

"You change?"

"Yes; that's the point of this entire complex. There are a hundred of us here who constitute what might be called a repertory company. As visitors enter the master computer reads a component of some randomly selected individual's genetic heritage, then programs one of us as that person's forebear."

"But over and over?" Joe looked at the crowd of women.

"Generation after generation? From the same person?"

The girl in the long skirt said, "It wasn't supposed to work this way. But an automatic program sequence was installed that demands maximum utilization of us. With a whole crowd of visitors coming in each of us would have been assigned to a different one, but with only you in the complex . . ."

"I got read every time I went past a thingamajig, and they're in all the tubes. I see. But what about him?"

"He was the first one, really," the girl with the beaded bag said unhappily. "Only something went haywire."

"Well, what went haywire? How does he fit into this?"

The other girls looked at Mary Hogan.

"You have a death wish. Do you realize that, Joe?"

He shook his head. "I want to live as much as anyone else."

"Consciously, yes. But not subconsciously. No one who didn't want to die would make up that story of refusing surgery for his wife's sake."

"How did you know . . . ?"

"I've been contained in your body all your life; there's a carryover of information-don't you remember that I knew your name when we first met? In so far as I am your mother-and till my program is changed that's very far-that carryover is all that holds me sane. Without it I would be finding myself suddenly here without an explanation at all."

Joe looked down at the man he held pinned. "And that's the way you know about him too?"

"Partly, and I can guess the rest. For a long time it's been known that a person's will to die could actually produce the death, and to do that it must effect a change in certain cell structures. Somehow the first time the transducers tried to read your DNA they produced this. The master computer corrected for the error on subsequent readings by automatically rejecting all male data matrices, but it could do nothing about this one which was already programmed. He is your own personal hope for death personified."

Joe clenched his teeth. "He'll get what he wants; because I'm going to kill him."



"I wouldn't do that, if I were you."

"Why not?"

"Your death wish is strong now. I can only guess what destroying an image of yourself will do to it. You've been using that metal thing to hold him down-look at your own chest."

He looked. The opposite end of the steel sliver was as sharp as the one with which he was threatening his double. It had torn his shirt and scratched his chest until it was covered with his own blood. For a long time he stared at it.

VII

They found him sitting outside The Thing, waiting for them. Chuck yelled, "See! I told you he'd be here. He's just got too much sense to wear himself out walking around the grounds with us."

In Father Mendel's room he was able to get Bonnie alone long enough to explain that he had decided to have the spike removed after all and had already telephoned the doctor from Howard Johnson's while he was waiting. When she asked if he were not afraid he shook his head, remembering suddenly that Bonnie was pregnant.

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178

Our Neighbour by David Copperfield

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SOME earlier sketches of mine having been received with some slight approbation by the public, my good friend the Editor has asked me, for the benefit of the previously named influential group, to prefix this one with some explanation of the means by which the affecting circumstances here related reached my attention-a thing I would not otherwise undertake to do, the relation being of so commonplace a nature that only my esteemed friend's request could embolden me to inflict it on my readers.

I am lately married, and dwell with my dear wife Dora and a single servant in a beautiful little house. It fronts upon a beautiful road; and on the other side of the beautiful road stands another beautiful house-not as beautiful as ours, perhaps, but somewhat larger. As certain of my indulgent readers may know, I am engaged in the business of reporting the debates of Parliament for a Morning Newspaper; but when I am not recording predictions that never come to pass, professions that are never fulfilled, and explanations that are only meant to mystify, I busy myself with tales of my own,

things no more false, and much more innocent, than those I must often report as fact. My desk is in the parlour, where the light from the mullioned window renders writing easy and pleasant. That same window provides me with an excellent view of our road-when I care to use it-and of all the carriages and wagons, and travellers on foot and horse.

There is danger in such a window, and particularly to one like myself, whose trade it is to scribble down the doings of mankind. One wants a character-very well, a suitable one will soon pass by. . . . Then it is time for tea, which Dora and her dog Jip bring in, together with an hour and a half of conversation. I was sinking into just this ooze of difficulty, chewing on my pen and staring out the window, and wondering-without daring to look at my watch-if it were not time for my two afternoon visitors, when I noticed a lean and shabby young fellow lounging against my gate and staring (as it appeared to me) at the traffic in the street with far more concentration than myself.

Of course, that was the end of passer-by watching for me. From that time forward, for the better part of an hour, I watched him-and those who passed before him only incidentally. By the time my darling Dora had entered with her little blue delft pot in its cozy, and the biscuits, and the bread spread with fish-paste and butter, I was quite certain that the fellow had no interest whatsoever in the carters and peddlers and porters and costermongers passing up and down our street, however fascinating this gentry seemed to me. He was looking instead, I felt certain, at the house opposite; and was only vexed when a wagonload of old furniture or one of those useful but wildly mis-named vehicles called hansoms blocked his view of it.

Now this was a more serious matter. I had not the least idea who our neighbour might be, and no desire to know. But I conceived a responsibility to him based on our recent propinquity. In an excess of intimate spirit, I supposed the watcher might have been dispatched by some sinister enemy to spy on him, or might mean to rob his house. Thus, as soon as my darling Dora was gone, leaving (as her custom is) what remained of the tea things behind her, I went outside, where, laying a firm hand on the fellow's shoulder, I invited him in.

He came willingly enough, and seemed bemused rather than dismayed. "Sir," said I, "you must give me your name. There's nothing else for it."

"Tom Tipsing," said he; and he gave me his hand as well. It was a large hand, and rather soft, but it had the small callus upon the index finger that betrays those who wield a pen by night and day. I know that callus well, for I bear it myself. "You are a clerk," said I.

"Of Lincolns Inn," said he.

And now, dear reader, it is time, almost, for me to bow out of this story, which I have already encumbered far too long. Suffice it to say that my visitor was tall and thin and

not more than three-and-twenty; that he had ink-stains on his waistcoat, and a round, smiling face; and that though I discharged him as innocent when he explained to me the origin of his interest in my neighbour, yet he returned there-after to share a late tea with Dora and me, and recount his adventures.

I have already alluded to Tom's employment. He was a articled clerk. I shall not mention it again-or at least, n more than is necessary. Suffice it to say that it required long hours of tedious work, and left him just enough money for the maintenance of what he chose to call a suite of rooms, in a tumble-down building near Oldham Stairs. It was there that he repaired when he left me at last. He found a ragged old woman waiting him, and asked her in.

"This is good of you, Master Thomas," she said when she had seated herself in Tom's second-best chair. "For an old body like myself. There's not many young people that would do it. Do you think I'm mad? I own that suspicion occurs to me sometimes-particular bad, it is, just before I sleeps. For how could a living man contrive such a thing?"

"You're sound as a nut," Tom told her stoutly, "and will be until the day you die."

"Have you learnt ought?"

Tom shook his head.

"Another day wasted then. Had he no one in?"

"Four visitors," Tom told her. He wore a long, snuff-coloured bodycoat, and was unbuttoning it as he spoke. "A poor woman with a child, a City merchant, and a gentleman of the legal profession-his name is Brass, I know, for he comes to our offices sometimes."

"Could you ask him what he did there?" the old woman inquired eagerly.

Tom shook his head. "I doubt that he would speak to me on the street."

"He's rich?"

"Very rich." Tom's round cheeks, red from the chill without, seemed to wax redder still. He seated himself opposite the old woman, and leaned toward her, rubbing his hands. "There's money in the law, Mrs. Nedels. Heaps of it. Why, some of these cases drag on for fifty years. A hundred years!"

"I know, Master Tom."

"One or two good ones-that's all a fellow requires, once

he has passed the bar. You may see me riding in my carriage yet."

"I hope and pray so. Master Thomas, I think we must

question some of them."

"The poor ones, you mean," said Tom. "It would be a rash action, Mrs. Nedels."

Outside, the light had nearly faded; but the last of it fell on the old woman's hands, picking at her skirt. "We can't ask Ae rich, Master Thomas-they don't even tell the truth to each other, for all I hear. And think of all the time you've spent, and nothing to show for it."

"Is Jenny telling us everything that passed while she was there?"

"I do think so," said the old woman. "She's not a truthful girl-I know that for all she's my own daughter. But I believe she's been truthful about that. And she never touched a drop, I swear, for a fortnight after she left that house. It's all back again now; but that fortnight was the happiest of my life. Never touched it, and said she didn't want it, she didn't know why. And him? The servants won't even let me talk to him. I took what we had, and bought flowers-oh, I've told you all this." She had begun to rock back and forth in her chair, with an excitement that was strange to see in one so old and sere.

"That's all right," Tom told her.

"You don't know what it is to go looking after a daughter at night-hoping to find her asleep under a bench in some cellar, and nothing worse. You don't know, Master Thomas. The butler, he wouldn't even allow me to bring them in-the flowers, I mean. Daisies they were, chiefly; I had them from a friend in Covent Garden Market. He took them from me." She sighed. "I'll go now, though, and let you sleep. You must be tired after watching all day. Will you follow one of the poor ones next time, though, and ask questions of her? Promise me?"

"If the chance allows," Tom said. He got up to open the door for the old woman. When she had gone, he took a rusty match box from his waistcoat pocket and struck a light to kindle the room's one lamp. An open law-book lay on the table before it; for his supper he applied himself to that and a pipe of tobacco.

For three days, his employment kept Tom's eye from my neighbour's door; but on the fourth he was back again, leaning on my gatepost. Winter was setting in, and the weather had turned dark as well as chill. For an hour or more his stoicism went unrewarded-then, like a shower of gold, the rich came. Four equipages, one after another, drew up to the door that had been the object of his faithful scrutiny. Then it began to rain-one of our fine, cold autumn rains. He knocked on my door hoping for shelter (so he told us later) but Dora and I had gone a-visiting, and Mary Anne, our "ordinary," would not admit him. She reported afterward that he had said something about a poor man coming; she thought that he meant himself, but I by that time knew enough of the mystery that engaged him to understand that

he referred to the destitute person whom he expected to see admitted to my neighbour's house, together with the wealthy callers.

Tom was just leaving my premises, as it would happen, when he was accosted by my neighbour himself. He had never seen the man before, but he knew his name (which was Dr. McApple) from inquiries he had made of the tradesmen; and his appearance from the testimony of Mrs. Nedels' daughter Jenny—a tall, sharp-faced, hollow-cheeked old man, with snapping black eyes. He wore a fine hat, Tom said, but had a square of oilcloth draped over it to keep off the rain; so that he looked like a Spanish duenna in a play.

"Sir!" this Dr. McApple called out, as if Tom were a furlong off instead of a foot away. "Sir, what do you here?"

"Why," said Tom, who thought himself discovered, "I came to call on my acquaintance Mr. Copperfield, but I find him not at home."

"So?" Dr. McApple stepped back and seemed to examine the unfortunate clerk as though he intended to buy him. "May I ask your business, sir, and place of lodging?"

"My business here," Tom said, having recovered somewhat from the initial shock of near discovery, "I have already told YOU. I have rooms at Number 27 Perry Lane—near Oldham Stairs; you may inquire for me there." And with that he turned and made as if to go.

"Wait!" the old man cried. "You might almost do yourself—sir, would you engage to find a pauper for me? I would pay a pound—that is," he added hastily, "ten shillings to you, and ten to him."

Tom's first impulse was to accept this offer; but he reflected that too quick an agreement might awaken the Scottish doctor's suspicions. "I am a gentleman, sir," he said, "and gentlemen do not act for shillings. If you wish me to do as you ask, it must be for a guinea. But if your purposes are philanthropic, explain them to me; then should I approve, I'll be your confederate for nothing."

"My friend," Dr. McApple said, "they are the most philanthropic in the world; but I cannot explain them to you." "What," said Tom, "must charity be hid?" "At times it must. You will find me a poor man, you say, for a guinea. It is not a fair price, but I must accept—I had a beggar engaged to come, but it would appear that he has been detained, and my servant, who performs these offices for me, is on holiday. I cannot desert my guests, or be seen bringing such into my house, so I must ask help of you. A woman will suit me as well as a man, but no better. Bring who you will, but whomever you bring must be sober or nearly, and no Bedlamite. And destitute, you understand. They'll have a good meal with me—you may tell them that. But be swift; you have no more than an hour, and, sir, it would be to our benefit if the thing were done in less."

Tom nodded and made off through the rain. His first thought was to fetch Mrs. Nedels herself, though he was by no means certain that he could find her and return with her in an hour's time. He had gone but a few streets over, however, when he saw just such a person as Dr. McApple seemed to require. He was tall, but much stooped; and as he was using his coat to cover what appeared to be a large box carried around his neck by a strap, his sodden shirt, clinging to his body, showed ribs as distinct and unpadded as the pickets of a fence. Tom approached him, and the poor fellow's face brightened for a moment as he saw him.

"Birds, sir?" said he. "Would you care to buy a bird, young sir? It will sing in your room even when it's as dark as this out. They makes a fine gift to a young lady."

"Birds?" asked Tom, for he did not at first quite understand what was meant.

"Wrens!" said the birdman. "Robins and larks too. Just point out the chap you want, and I'll have him out for you quick as a wink." He drew his coat away from the box he carried, and Tom saw that there were indeed eight or ten damp, ruffle-feathered birds of various kinds inside, too tired and discouraged to nutter. "And I've a little basket wove that you can take the chap home in," the coatless man continued, "though you must have a cage for him once you get him there."

"I don't want one of your birds-" began Tom.

"Very well, sir. Perhaps some other time."

"But I can put you in the way to earn ten shillings very easily. That's as much as five of your birds cost, isn't it?"

"Well, sir," the birdman said, "more normal-if you take my meaning-I gets three for them. Howsomeever, because of the rain and all, I would take two. But that's just to you, sir, special like."

"But you'd rather have ten, wouldn't you? Come along. You'll get a good meal to boot."

Tom took a step in the direction of Dr. McApple's house, and the birdman followed him, limping. "Please, sir, what am I to do?"

"No heavy work, I promise you."

"Ah," said the birdman, "that's well. I've got this timber leg, sir, and I can't do it. I would if I could, and that's the truth."

"You seem to get along pretty well," said Tom.

"It's not as bad as you would think, sir, for one that's took off just below the hip," said the birdman. He fell silent after this philosophical observation; and because Tom did not wish

to encourage further questions, he was silent as well.

It seemed odd to Tom to knock on the door he had watched so long; but he was eager to get out of the rain, and pounded violently. The birdman stood a pace or two behind him, tugging at his hat (Tom said) and looking doubtful. Dr. McApple himself let them in, paying no attention to Tom, but a great deal to the birdman, whom he shook most heartily by the hand, and directed to the kitchen, where he declared the cook had a meal waiting for him.

When the birdman was gone, he turned to Tom. "There is a debt owing between us, sir," he said, "that I will settle now," (handing Tom two half-sovereigns and a shilling), "following which, I must ask you to leave."

"Thank you, sir," said Tom, and took the money. Then, seeing Dr. McApple turn away while his hand was still on the knob, he made a show of opening and closing the door, and stepped-exceedingly softly and silently, he says-behind the hall tree.

For five minutes he remained there, hearing nothing and rather tickled about the nose by a greatcoat with a long nap. Then, venturing to peer out, he perceived that the doctor and his guests had assembled in a drawing room opening off the hall. Tiptoe he made his way to a spot near the entrance to this room, from whence he could hear all that was said. "It is very good of you, gentlemen, to assist me with my investigations." This was Dr. McApple.

"No, no." "Not at all." So said several voices; and another:

"You are acquiring an outstanding reputation, Doctor. An acquaintance of mine in the City, Mr. Breedlove, has told me he considers you the only worthy successor to the great Franz Joseph Gall."

"Hardly," said the doctor. "Though I thank ye both kindly. But now we have finished your readings, I should like to demonstrate a second science to ye-that of Mesmerism."

There was an excited murmur.

"Or as others may call it," continued Dr. McApple, "animal magnetism. In phrenology we deal with what I may call the most concrete of mental phenomena-the skull itself."

"Concrete-that's good," said a jolly voice. "No wonder they call us hard-headed businessmen." "Be quiet. Parsons, and let the doctor speak-we can hear you anytime."

"As I was saying, we deal with the skull itself. Certain areas of the brain are responsible for specific mental qualities-humour, justice, judgment, temperance, strength of will, and the like. By palpating the skull, we can determine the development of these qualities in the individual under examination-just as I have done with you gentlemen. The elements of phrenology are now well established; the only thing left for researchers like myself is the resolution of ap-

parent conflicts, the cases in which we find that a man's behaviour does not correspond in all respects to what his skull tells us it should be."

"Your science is not perfected, then, I take it," said the jolly voice.

"No. It sometimes occurs that a combination of other qualities may serve to stifle one that appears well developed."

"I see. You said Waterford here was good-natured. But it might be that the bumps of argumencativeness and all-around obstinacy are so perfectly developed that no one would ever know it."

There was half a minute of general laughter; then the doctor said, "Something like that, yes," and a new voice asked, "But what about Mesmerism? I think we all understand phrenology well enough, thanks to the trouble you have put yourself to on our behalf."

"It stands at the opposite pole," declared Dr. McApple, "as

I have already indicated. It is said to rely on the magnetic manipulation of impalpable ethers, and even that is dubious. But it can produce startling-though often short-lived-effects. You gentlemen have all been grist for one set of experiments, so I will not ask ye to volunteer yourselves for another-particularly since magnetic subjects seldom recall the experience afterward. There is a poor wretch in my kitchen whom I shall examine in your presence instead, allowing ye, as some small payment for the patience ye have shown me, to see how Mesmerism can be used as we have already used phrenology-to gauge the human qualities."

As the doctor finished speaking, there came the tinkle of a bell, and Tom, guessing correctly that this was a signal to the cook indicating that the birdman was to be brought to the drawing room, made haste to conceal himself behind the clothes tree again. In a few seconds he heard the sound of footsteps-the thumping of the birdman's wooden leg, and the stolid tread of another. When the birdman had entered the drawing room, and the cook's steps had returned once more in the direction from whence they had come, Tom crept out again, and took up his old post near the drawing room door.

One of the visitors was saying "How can you be certain the trance is complete?"

"Watch."

For a moment, as Tom said afterward, the room was quiet as a church. Then there came a collective gasp of amazement, and someone asked: "Didn't that hurt him?"

"He feels nothing," said Dr. McApple. "Now, John, you are bleeding, and it may get on my carpet. I want you to stop it."

There was silence again, until one of the men who had



spoken earlier said, "Astonishing!"

"In the trance state, ye see, even bodily functions that are involuntary in the normal course of things can be brought under the control of the magnetic operator. In this same way, we can learn the whole history of the poor man's life-all with a veracity we could not be certain of were it not for the condition we have induced in him."

"Will it take long?"

"I think not. That is another reason, ye understand, for employing a pauper as our subject-such poor people's lives can be compressed into a simple narrative."

There was a pause; then Dr. McApple said: "John, I want you to tell these fine gentlemen the first thing you can remember, and then the next thing, and so on, until the present moment."

"That's Mother." (The birdman sounded sleepy, Tom thought, but not much different from the way he had on the street otherwise.) "She took in washin', you know. I used to play in the water round her feet while she did it, and once I got hold of the soap and went to eat it, and she took it away-which perplexed me at the time, so I believe I cried. She had relatives in the country, I think, though I don't know who they were. We used to go to see them when I was small, her carrying me part way. Sometimes we got a ride on a donkey cart goin' home-possible they give her somethin' to it, or possible it was them drivin'; I don't know. Then when I was a big boy or six or seven I went to work in the ropewalk. 'Twasn't an apprenticeship properly, for there was none to be served; but there was twenty or thirty of us boys;

and some women too, combin' hemp. It was hard on the hands; you could always tell those that was newly come to it by the claret on their fingers-ruddy-mittens was what they called us. There was a boy there that was from Somerset that everyone made a guy of for not talkin' proper. But I liked him and I used to set by him, and it was him that taught me how to lime the birds.

"We were goin' to make a lark pie, was what we said, when he'd caught enough. Only we never did. I misdoubt we had the coppers to buy flour for the crust if we had. But he showed me how to mix the lime, and the way to take the little chaps off without harming them when they were glued in it.

"After a time I couldn't stand the work no more, so I ran home to Mother; only she was gone, and no one couldn't tell me where. It may be that I never did come to the right house-I was just a little lad, you know. However that may be, I never saw her after. It's my hope she married well-possible a butcher, for she often spoke of marryin' a butcher or a sausage maker, having a liking for those trades, as she said, for they knew you couldn't never get all the stains from their aprons, and didn't demand it. Then she might have sent for me when she'd have reconciled the master to it, but I'd have been gone by then. But of course as a lad I never

thought on all that-it never so much as entered my head. Instead I met another boy that was goin' to 'list as a powder-boy; so I 'listed too, on the Suiftsure.

"It all went well enough for me after that, except one time when I was a young man and decided I'd stay on in Spain, havin' taken a liking to some people there. My captain got wind of that and sent eight marines after me, and I was flogged on four ships for it, and lucky to have lived. Then I lost my leg-wasn't shot off like you might think, 'twas mashed when the slings broke and a gun fell on it.

"So that was the end of sailerin' for me. I'm a man v at doesn't know his letters, but I'd have said I knew a lot. . . . Why, I could manage most any sort of boat in any weather you please, and make rope or tie all kinds of knots you might wish, or mend sail, or do carpenter's work. I can load a gun too, and fire it off, and before I got this spar limb I was a good hand for layin' aloft. But the only thing that has been of any service to me lately was what that Somerset boy taught-liming birds.

"I make my lime and carries it far enough out of the town to catch them (main hard that is, for it makes my stump sore), then brings them back and sells them as I can. Today was bad, the weather bein' so chill and wet. There's a place you can sleep in for threepence, but there's another I like better for seven; and then I needed somethin' to buy somethin' for my birds with. Grain is good enough for some, but there's others that requires a smatterin' of meat. I can buy catsmeat for ha'pence, but that's no help if I don't have ha'pence."

Dr. McApple said, "Do you know where you are now?"

"In a gentleman's house."

"And how old are you?"

"That I don't know for certain; but by my way of reconing, rising fifty years."

"Have you ever wished to be young again, John?"

"Oh, aye. I suppose we all want that, one time or another."

"You are going to get your wish. You are mistaken, you see, about your age. You are still only a boy-do you understand?"

"Aye aye, sir."

"A small boy."

"Yes, sir."

"In fact, it is the day you came home from the rope-walk, looking for your mother. It is that very minute. You are knocking at the door of your old home."

Tom said he held his breath when he heard this, for he

didn't know what would happen. For half a heartbeat or so, nothing did. Then he heard three knocks, tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . spaced a long time apart, and a voice that might have been a child's say, "Mama?"

"Mama?"

Tap . . . tap.

"Mama? Mama, are you in there? Mama? Mama, let me in." (The tapping continuing all this time.)

One of the visitors said: "By heavens, he's beginning to weep. This is quite amazing, Doctor."

"MAMA!"

"How long will he remain like this?"

"For hours, unless I order him to desist."

"It's Johnny, Mama! Sir, please, sir, have you seen my mother? Do you know if she is to home?"

"He won't become violent, will he?"

"It's very unlikely."

"Sir, please, sir, does she live here still?"

"I think we had better go. Are you coming, Parsons?"

The tapping continued, but Tom did not wait to hear more of it. He was on the point of secreting himself once more behind the hall tree, when he considered that as the guests took their departure they would also take their coats, leaving him revealed like the naked trunk of a beech in autumn. There was no other place in which he might conceal himself; he was about to throw open the door and run for it, when the first of the guests stepped into the corridor.

Tom would still have decamped even then, but a bit of a law case he had recently read, in which flight was adduced in court as evidence of guilt, came into his head and convinced him that it might be better to stay. He had, after all, entered the house in its owner's employ, and he could argue, if need be, that he had never been directly dismissed, and had remained in the hope of being of further service.

With this in mind, he opened the door, and assisted the gentlemen with their coats, and otherwise acted as it might be expected a major-domo would. He saw the old Scottish doctor's face harden when he saw him, but he said nothing, and Tom contrived to ignore him.

When the last of the guests had gone, the doctor himself went to the door and shut it. "You've rain upon your cheeks," said he.

"I suppose I do," responded Tom.

"Possibly your eyes have been watering from the wind."

"That may be. May I ask where my birdman is?"

"Sleeping now. I take it you were listening to us."

"I was, yes."

"It did him no harm, you may be sure. And he will remember naught when he wakes."

"You think that I am a pryer and a spy," said Tom, "and I don't blame you for it. But I am a friend to the mother of a girl you have used as you used that unfortunate man to-night; it is at her instigation that I have taken the liberties I have today."

"Did this girl suffer by coming here?" Dr. McApple inquired. His frown had lightened somewhat.

"No, sir. She was greatly benefitted-at least, for a time."

"I recall the girl. I made a suggestion I felt would be to her improvement while she was in the trance state. Can you tell me how long it remained effectual?"

"A fortnight, I believe."

"That is longer than most. I attempt to help these people when I can, though that is not my real business."

"May I be so bold," said Tom, greatly daring, "as to ask what your real business may be?"

"Pity." The doctor's frown was entirely dispersed by this time, an expression of deep sadness having replaced it. "It is my theory that an area just here-" he reached up, and before Tom could object, touched the left side of his head, above and behind the ear, "controls pity of the sort that persons of wealth might be expected to feel toward the destitute."

"I see," said Tom. "Then you are trying to match that exhibited, with the degree of development found there in wealthy individuals."

"No, sir," replied the doctor. "Rather, I am attempting to determine why, no matter what the apparent development, the quality itself appears not to exist."

After that, he said no more; but turned on his heel, leaving Tom standing alone in the hall-from whence he came, in "me, to recount his adventure to Dora and me.

\*\*\*

194

When I Was Ming the Merciless

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"THANK you. Is it permissible for me to sit? Fine. No, I cannot complain, really. ...

"I'd like to say that everyone here has been as courteous as could be expected-that isn't quite true, actually, but you know what I mean. No one has struck me.

"No, I don't smoke. I'd appreciate some coffee, though. That was one of the things we missed-coffee. At least at first. There was a lot of tea in the supplies, but no coffee. I used to enjoy it while I was in there-tea, I mean-but now I can't tolerate the taste.

"I don't know if it was intentional or not. I thought you would know.

"It's odd that you should put it as you did. Because I've thought of it so often myself, since the end, in just that way. I remember how things used to be ... the way I used to be myself, outside. And the next thing I think of is the psych-aids breaking through the wall with the butts of their guns, and the way my guards fought them. We had polearms, you know. Polearms and swords-the swords were reserved for officers. Somebody told me a few days ago that three of the psych-aids were hurt; but I feel sure it must have been more than that. We were surprised, of course-anyone would have been under the circumstances. Still, we fought well. My guards were well trained, and every one of them, man or woman, was a warrior of proven bravery.

"Listen, you don't have to stop him like that. That was a legitimate question, 'Aren't you ashamed?' And I'll give him a legitimate answer-no, I am not ashamed. I am proud of the Empire, proud of what we did, proud of the way we fought at the end. It was a fight we couldn't win, but we fought well. That's what matters-fighting well. Who wins is a matter of chance and advantage.

"You don't have to tell me to relax; I am perfectly relaxed. I raised my voice only to bring home my point to you-it's a little trick I have, just like pounding the arm of the chair as I pronounce each word.

"We were talking about morality, and I feel that is a more fruitful and interesting subject; but I can tell you very briefly how we constructed our weapons, if you want-provided you understand that we are going to return to the moral question afterward.

"No, I feel no need whatsoever to justify myself-not to you or to anyone else. But I want to make you understand the imperatives of the situation. After all, that was the whole point of the experiment: to clarify the imperatives of that type of situation. What was the use of all that time. . . .

"Oh Jesus, the building and the fighting. . . .

"I'm sorry. I'm all right. Thank you for the coffee. The polearms were easy, really. There were several cleavers in the kitchen, and a lot of knives. We sawed the handles off brooms and mops, and joined two of them together. We made scarf joints at the ends-do you know what a scarf is? Like a step in the wood, to give the glue more area. There was a glue in the wood shop that was stronger than the wood itself, rfyou let it set up overnight. We made tests, you see. Glued up pieces and broke them afterward. We made saw cuts in the ends of the poles, and put the knife blades into them, clamped them, and glued them in place. Afterward we put nails through the holes in the tangs-that was just extra insurance. Out here there will be more scope for ingenuity; we might even be able to get hold of some fissionables. Just joking, of course.

"In there, the cleavers were the best of the kitchen material. We put them about twenty centimeters down the shaft, then put a boning-knife blade in the end. With a weapon like that, the warrior could hack or stab; it was almost as good as a sword.

"The swords were the most difficult to make-that was why I restricted them, made them only for officers. Then too, in that way they served as badges of rank. We tore up the floors in the Graphic Arts Center to get the steel reinforcing bars, and heated them in the furnace burner, then pounded them out. A lot of them broke, and had to be reforged-sometimes over and over. I had the best c ", naturally. I suppose you people have it now?

"Yes, I suppose I would like to see it-I carried it some good fights. You wouldn't understand about that. The hilt was bone, almost like ivory, and I had Althea burn the Lung-Rin into the bone. Althea was our best artist.

"The Lung-Rin? That is the symbol of the Empire-two dragons fighting.

"No, we didn't worship the Lung-Rin. It was a symbol, that's all. In the long run, if you know what I mean, we were the Lung-Rin. We had ceremonies, yes. We set up a figure to represent all the Yellows. Don made it of wood and leather, and that was the center of the ceremonies. Althea helped him with the face, and I had her make it look something like me-you understand, a little psychology. It's odd, but you can make a thing like that, and have everyone bow in front of it, and offer it the things we took in war, and after a time it becomes . . . I don't know, something more. More than just the figure you set up in the beginning. Have you talked to Don?

"He had a theory-I don't know whether he believed it himself. I didn't, but still. . . . There was something in it. Do you understand what I mean? It wasn't true; but still. . . .

"All right, here's what he thought. Or anyway, what he said he thought. That there are things we don't know about that live in the world with us-things in another plane of

reality. And when you make something like that, it comes-one of them comes. It shapes itself to fit your image of it, becoming the real Spirit of the Yellows. Anyway, when we had the torchlight processions, sometimes you might think you could see it move. It was just the flickering light, of course, and the fact that because it was so tall the face was illuminated from the bottom. Any face will look strange when you light it from below, I suppose. We caught rats and pigeons when we built it and put them inside, so it would make strange sounds; some of them must have lived a long time.

"No, I don't know what happened to it, and I don't care. You can't kill the thing, the Spirit of the Yellows. Not unless you kill all of us, and you won't do that. We'll be free someday. How could we forget? The experiment was the greatest thing in our lives. At night, before we had won, we used to sit around the fire-outside, the buildings were too dangerous then-and talk. You've never done that. You weren't there.

"No, not about what we were going to do when we won-at least, not mostly. Not even about our plans for the next day. Mostly we talked about our lives before the experiment. Each of us would tell the rotten things that had happened to him, and then someone else would talk. We never said it, but we were all thinking that it wasn't like that here. We were all together-all Yellows together. That was one of the first things we did, I think about the fourth day after the gates closed. We swore that we were going to stand together or fall together; there wasn't going to be any splitting. We had seen what happened to the Greens; they were always going in all directions; they wouldn't support each other. By the time they got organized it was too late. The others had the weapons and the organization and the fighting spirit. They'd been knocked down too much, and they'd been cut up too much -do you understand what I mean? If you take people like that, and beat them over and over and over again, most of them stay beaten. One or two will go the other way-become so hard and strong that they're as good as anything you've got. But not most of them. So when the one or two try and lead them, there's no support. Then too, there's the sexual effect. Maybe I shouldn't talk about this. Do you want to turn off the recorder?

"Well, all right. Everybody saw, almost from the beginning, that the women would have to fight just like the men. Jan was the best woman warrior we had, and she came out for it from the beginning. The Blues were already doing it, and if we didn't, we'd lose. Besides, if the women didn't fight, there couldn't be real equality, because if a woman said we ought to stand up to the other colors, all the men would say it wasn't her that was going to bleed.

"Some of the women didn't want to, of course. And some of the men didn't want to have them do it, either. I'd say that there were perhaps eight women against, and five men. That was where the drill came in. Most of all, there. It's hard-very hard to get people to drill. You've got to work it in a little bit at a time. But once they do it, they learn to obey orders, and when you say, 'Come on!' they follow. I started them with practice in using weapons (it was just the knives

and clubs then) and formalized it later. I said even if they weren't going to fight, the least they could do was practice with the rest of us; and then if they had to sometime, they'd know how. Of course after we were better organized I could have simply ordered it; but I didn't have that kind of authority then-I wasn't Emperor.

"No, I was a political science major. A lot were psych students, and a lot more were from the school of sociology. I never noticed that they behaved differently than the rest of us.

"What I was coming to, was that when a man-a male, let's call him-has been fighting a woman, and he wins and knocks her down, and she drops whatever it is she has, a club or whatever, and perhaps she's bleeding where he cut her or broke her lip, and often her shirt and shorts are torn, there is an impulse that takes command. Perhaps women don't feel that way, but men do. And then, when a woman has had that happen once or twice, it takes everything out of them. They won't fight anymore; they just want to run, or sometimes to hide. Some of the men said that they really liked it, underneath, but I don't think so. Still, they were the ones, mostly, who wanted to join us.

"No, of course we didn't let them. We couldn't let them. That was the point of the whole thing. We had the bands-I've still got mine, see, around my wrist-and we couldn't get them off. You can't get them off. Once they clamped your bracelet on you, you were a Yellow or a Blue or a Green; and that was it. Some of the Greens, particularly, tried to cut them off before we got control of all the tools. It couldn't be done; a file won't even scratch them.

"Did that bother you? The clothes? Yes, we had colored clothes to begin with-yellow shorts and shirts. But they didn't really matter; it was the wristbands. In the end I had all my guards go naked to the waist, with just a strip of yellow cloth around their heads to identify them. You see, I had noticed that the braver someone was, the more torn up their shirts got, until the best of them really didn't have any at all. "Yes, the women too. I'll tell you a secret. When you go out to fight, anything you can do that will make you look different-strange-helps. It takes the heart out of the others. I think the Blues had the advantage at first-those dark blue shirts and shorts. They looked like Federal Police. But the naked chests and the yellow head-rags took care of that. We kept together and came at them in a solid mass-swords in front, and the polearms poking between them, and everybody yelling. That's very important. And the flag. I gave my own shirt to make the flag. The front was all cut up by then, but there wasn't a rip in the back-not one. That was the part we took off and used for the flag. Althea sewed the Lung-Rin in it with red thread. Some of them said it would never stand out because there wasn't enough air movement in the building, where most of the fighting was. I told them that if they went forward fast enough it would stand out, and I was right. It was useful in another way too: once or twice we were scattered-I remember one time when the Blues ambushed us-and it showed us where our center was. Nils



carried it. I don't know what's happened to it now. It would be nice to have when we get back together.

"I've already told you about that. It couldn't be done: if you were a Yellow, you were a Yellow; a Blue was a Blue, and a Green was a Green; and nothing anybody could say made any difference. Jan had a Green slave-lover for a while-he even fought with us a couple of times against the Blues. The Greens were finished by then, and he wasn't much good.

"No, as I said, the Greens had a few real fighters. I have no idea what their names were. That was one of the first rules I made-Greens and Blues have no names. If you knew one of them by name before the experiment, you forgot it as quickly as possible. If we had to talk about one particularly, we said: 'the blond Blue woman,' or 'Jan's Green boy.' Like that.

"Another thing that helped us fight was the idea of the Empire. If you talk about a thing like that, it becomes real. Just like the figure we set up. We had the Imperial Guards, and they were brave because if they weren't, they'd lose their places, they wouldn't be guards any more; and the others fought harder hoping to get in-if someone distinguished himself, or herself, I made them a guard. And if a guard did, I made that guard an officer. And once I had the guards, I used them to keep the rest in order.

"What it was about? The whole experiment? You know-the world. Only so many resources, you see, and so many groups of people. I understand some of the other runnings of the experiment came out a little differently; but they wanted to see how we worked it out-what our solution was. That's why I don't feel bad about what we did. It was our problem, set to us (if you want to put it that way), and we solved it. When they broke the wall we were organized-everyone knew his place, who he took orders from, and how much he got. How much food, drinking water, bathwater. That was the Empire.

"Mostly we just called it that: 'The Empire.' Officially, we began by calling it Mongolia. Because we were the Yellows. Later we shortened it.

"No, I don't feel bad about her, whoever she was. We were all volunteers, originally, you have to remember. And she kept getting out of line, over and over again, when she was just a stinking Green or Blue or whatever she was. I can't even remember. So I decided she should be punished. We made a ceremony out of it, with fire in the braziers, and the big gong.

"I had Jan do it. Jan was a colonel. Neal and Ted held her, and Jan put the sword through her belly-so she'd live long enough to know what was happening. When Jan pulled it out, she licked the blood from the blade. The rest of the Greens and Blues would have obeyed after that, believe me.

"Yes, when she finally died. That was when they broke down the wall. They were monitoring a few selected individuals, I suppose, though we didn't know it. She must have been one of them.

"Naturally. I understand how you feel about it now-how the school feels and how the public and the President feel. But do you understand how we felt? You haven't been through what we went through together. We have learned a great many things we will remember, but none of you could possibly know how it was then, when I was Ming the Merciless."

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203

The God and His Man

"The God and His Man" copyright 1980 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine.

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ONCE long, long ago, when the Universe was old, the mighty and powerful god Isid looo loooE, whose name is given by certain others in other ways, and who is determined in every place and time to do what is good, came to the world of Zed. As every man knows, such gods travel in craft that can never be wrecked-and indeed, how could they be wrecked, when the gods are ever awake and hold the tiller? He came, I say, to the world of Zed, but he landed not and made no port, for it is not fit (as those who made the gods long ago ruled) that a god should set his foot upon any world, however blue, however fair.

Therefore Isid looo loooE remained above the heavens, and his craft, though it travelled faster than the wind, contrived to do so in such a way that it stood suspended-as the many-hued stars themselves do not-above that isle of Zed that is called by the men of Zed (for they are men, or nearly) Land. Then the god looked down upon Zed, and seeing that the men of Zed were men and the women thereof women, he summoned to him a certain man of Urth. The summons of Isid looo loooE cannot be disobeyed.

"Man," said the god, "go down to the world of Zed. For behold, the men of Zed are even as you are, and their women are women." Then he let Man see through his own eyes, and Man saw the men of Zed, how they herded their cattle and drove their plows and beat the little drums of Zed. And he saw the women of Zed, and how many were fair to look upon, and how they lived in sorrow and idleness, or else in toil and weariness, even like the women of Urth.

He said to the god, "If I am ever to see my own home, and my own women, and my children again, I must do as you say. But if I go as I am, I shall not see any of those things ever again. For the men of Zed are men-you yourself have

said it-and therefore crueller than any beast."

"It is that cruelty we must end," said the god. "And in order that you may assist me with your reports, I have certain gifts for you," Then he gave Man the enchanted cloak Tarnung by which none should see him when he did not wish to be seen, and he gave Man the enchanted sword Master, whose blade is as long as the wielder wishes it (though it weighs nothing) and against which not even stone can stand.

No sooner had Man tied Tarnung about his shoulders and picked up Master than the god vanished from his sight, and he found he rested in a grove of trees with scarlet flowers.

The time of the gods is not as the time of men and women. Who can say how long Man wandered across Land on Zed? He wandered in the high, hot lands where men have few laws and many slaves.

There he fought many fights until he knew all the manner of fighting of the people of the high, hot lands and grew ashamed of killing those men with Maser, and took for himself the crooked sword of those lands, putting Maser by. Then he drew to him a hundred wild men, bandits, and slaves who had slain their masters and fled, and murderers of many kinds. And he armed them after the manner of the high, hot lands, and mounted them on the yellow camels of those lands, that oftentimes crush men with their necks, and led them in many wars. His face was like the faces of other men, and his sword like their swords; he stood no taller than they, and his shoulders were no broader; yet because he was very cunning and sometimes vanished from the camp, his followers venerated him.

At last he grew rich, and built a citadel in the fastness of the mountains. It stood upon a cliff and was rimmed with mighty walls. A thousand spears and a thousand spells guarded it. Within were white domes and white towers, a hundred fountains, and gardens that leaped up the mountain in roses and ran down it like children in the laughter of many waters. There Man sat at his ease and exchanged tales with his captains of their many wars. There he listened to the feet of his dancers as the pattering of rain, and meditated on their round limbs and smiling faces. And at last he grew tired of these things, and wrapping himself in Tarnung vanished, and was seen in that citadel no more.

Then he wandered in the steaming lands, where the trees grew taller than his towers, and the men are shy and kill from the shadows with little poisoned arrows no longer than their forearms. There for a long while he wore the cloak Tarnung always, for no sword avails against such an arrow in the neck. The weight of the sword he had fetched from the high, hot lands oppressed him there, and the breath of the steaming lands rusted its blade; and so he cast it, one day, into a slow river where the black crocodiles swam and the river-horses with amber eyes floated like logs or bellowed like thunder. But the magical sword Maser he kept.

And in the steaming lands he learned the ways of the great

trees, of which each is an island, with its own dwellers thereon; and he learned the ways of the beasts of Zed, whose cleverness is so much less than the cleverness of men, and whose wisdom is so much more. There he tamed a panther with eyes like three emeralds, so that it followed him like a dog and killed for him like a hawk; and when he came upon a village of the men of the steaming lands, he leaped from a high branch onto the head of their idol and smote the hut of their chief with the sword Maser and vanished from their sight. And when he returned after a year to that village, he saw that the old idol was destroyed, and a new idol set up, with lightning in its hand and a panther at its feet.

Then he entered that village and blessed all the people and made the lap of that idol his throne. He rode an elephant with a bloodred tusk and two trunks; his war canoes walked up and down the river on a hundred legs; the heads of his drums were beaten with the white bones of chiefs; his wives were kept from the sun so their pale beauty would lure him to his hut by night and their fresh skins give him rest even in the steaming lands, and they were gorged with oil and meal until he lay upon them as upon pillows of silk. And so he would have remained had not the god Isid looo loooE come to him in a dream of the night and commanded him to bestir himself, wandering and observing in the cold lands.

There he walked down a thousand muddy roads and kissed cool lips in a hundred rainy gardens. The people of the cold lands keep no slaves and have many laws, and their justice is the wonder of strangers; and so he found the bread of the cold lands hard and scant, and for a long time he cleaned boots for it, and for a long time dug ditches to drain their fields.

And each day the ship of Isid looo loooE circled Zed, and when it had made several hundred such circles. Zed circled its lonely sun, and circled again, and yet again, so that Man's beard grew white, and the cunning that had won battles in the high, hot lands and burned the idol in the steaming lands was replaced with something better and less useful.

One day he plunged the blade of his shovel into the earth and turned his back U) it. In a spinney he drew out Maser (which he had not drawn for so long that he feared its magic was no more than a dream he had had when young) and cut a sapling. With that for a staff he took to the roads again, and when its leaves withered-which they did but slowly in that wet, cold country-he cut another and another, so that he taught always beneath a green tree.

In the marketplace he told of honor, and how it is a higher law than any law.

At the crossroads he talked of freedom, the freedom of the wind and clouds, the freedom that loves all things and is without guilt.

Beside city gates he told stories of the forgotten cities that were and of the forgotten cities that might be, if only men would forget them.

Often the people of the cold lands sought to imprison him according to their laws, but he vanished from their sight. Often they mocked him, but he smiled at their mockery, which knew no law. Many among the youth of the cold lands heard him, and many feigned to follow his teachings, and a few did follow them and lived strange lives.

Then a night came when the first flakes of snow were falling; and on that night the god Isid looo loooE drew him up as the puppeteer lifts his doll. A few friends were in the lee of a wood with him, and it seemed to them that there came a sudden flurry of snow spangled with colors, and Man was gone.

But it seemed to him, as he stood once more in the presence of the god Isid looo loooE, that he had waked from a long dream; his hands had their strength again, his beard was black, and his eyes had regained their clarity, though not their cunning.

"Now tell me," Isid looo loooE commanded him, "all that you have seen and done," and when Man had told him, he asked, "Which of these three peoples loved you the best, and why did you love them?"

Man thought for a time, drawing the cloak Tarnung about his shoulders, for it seemed to him cold in the belly of the ship of Isid looo loooE. "The people of the high, hot lands are unjust," he said. "Yet I came to love them, for there is no falsity in them. They feast their friends and flay their foes, and trusting no one, never weep that they are betrayed.

"The people of the cold lands are just, and yet I came to love them also, though that was much harder.

"The people of the steaming lands are innocent of justice and injustice alike. They follow their hearts, and while I dwelt among them I followed mine and loved them best of all."

"You yet have much to learn, Man," said the god Isid looo loooE. "For the people of the cold lands are much the nearest to me. Do you not understand that in time the steaming lands, and all of the Land of Zed, must fall to one of its great peoples or the other?"

Then while Man watched through his eyes, certain good men in the cold lands died, which men called lightning. Certain evil men died also, and men spoke of disease. Dreams came to women and fancies to children; rain and wind and sun were no longer what they had been; and when the children were grown, the people of the cold lands went down into the steaming lands and built houses there, and taking no slaves drove the people of the steaming lands behind certain fences and walls, where they sat in the dust until they died.

"In the high, hot lands," commented Man, "the people of the steaming lands would have suffered much. Many of them

I had, toiling under the whip to build my walls. Yet they sang when they could, and ran when they could, and stole my food when they could not. And some of them grew fat on it."

And the god Isid looo loooE answered, "It is better that a man should die than that he should be a slave."

"Even so," Man replied, "you yourself have said it." And drawing Maser he smote the god, and Isid looo loooE perished in smoke and blue fire.

Whether Man perished also, who can say? It is long since Man was seen in the Land of Zed, but then he was ever wont to vanish when the mood took him. Of the lost citadel in the mountains, overgrown with roses, who shall say who guards it? Of the little poisoned arrows, slaying in the twilight, who shall say who sends them? Of the rain-washed roads, wandering among forgotten towns, who shall say whose tracks are there?

But it may be that all these things now are passed, for they are things of long ago, when the Universe was old and there were more gods.

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210

The Cat

"The Cat" copyright 1983 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in the 1983 World Fantasy Convention program book.

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I AM Odilo the Steward, the son of Odilo the Steward. I am he who is charged by our Autarch Severian the Great-whose desires are the dreams of his subjects-with the well-being of the Hypogeum Apotropaic. It is now the fifth year of his reign.

As all who know the ways of our House Absolute (and I may say here that I neither hope nor wish for other readers) are aware, our Hypogeum Apotropaic is that part devoted to the needs and comforts of Father Inire; and in the twenty years in which I have given satisfaction (as I hope) at my post, and in the years before them when I assisted my father, also Odilo the Steward, I have seen and heard many a strange thing. My father likewise.

This evening, when I had reached a respite in the unending tasks entailed by such a position as mine, I took myself, as my custom is, to the culina magna of our hypogeum to obtain some slight refreshment. The cooks' labors too were ended or nearly; and half or more, with a kitchen boy or three and a gaggle of scullery maids, sat about the dying fire, seeking, as such people will, to amuse one another by diverse boasts and recitals.

Having little better to do and being eager to rest, I bid the chief cook surrender his chair to me and heard them as I ate. It is now Hallowmass Eve (which is to say, the full of the Spading Moon) and their talk had turned to all manner of ghosts and bogeys. In the brief time required for me to chew my bread and beef and sluice them down with hot spiced ale, I heard such recountings of larva, lemures, and the like as would terrify every child in the Commonwealth-and make every man in it laugh most heartily.

So I myself laughed when I returned here to my study, where I will scrutinize and doubtless approve the bills of fare for Hallowmas; and yet I find I am bemused by these tales and lost amid many wondering speculations. As every thinking man acknowledges, mighty powers move through this dark universe of Briah, though for the most part hidden from us by its infinite night. Is it not every man's duty to record what little he has glimpsed that may give light to it? And do not such idle tales as I heard by the fire but serve to paint yet blacker that gloom through which we grope? I am therefore determined to set down here, for the enlightenment (as it may be) of my successors and whoever else may read, the history, whole and in entire in so far as I know it, of a series of incidents that culminated (as I believe) this night ten years gone. For the earlier events, I give the testimony of my father, Odilo the Steward also, a contemporary of the Chatelaine Sancha.

She was (so my father said) an extraordinarily charming child, with the face of a peri and eyes that were always laughing, darker than most exulted children but so tall that she might have been supposed, at the age of seven or eight, to be a young woman of sixteen.

That such a child should have attracted the attention of Father Inire is scarcely to be wondered at. He has always been fond of children (and particularly of girls), as the oldest records of our hypogeum show; and I sometimes think that he has chosen to remain on Urth as a tutor to our race because he finds even the wisest of us to be children in his sight. Permit me to say at once that these children have often benefited from his attention. It is true, perhaps, that they have sometimes suffered for it, but that has been seldom and I think by no means by his wish.

It has ever been the custom of the exultants resident in our House Absolute to keep their children closely confined to their own apartments and to permit them to travel the ten thousand corridors that wind such distances beneath the surface of the land (even so far as the Old Citadel of Nessus, some say) only under the watchful eyes of some trustworthy upper servant. And it has ever been the custom of those children to escape the upper servants charged with their supervision whenever they can, to join in the games of the children of the staff, so much more numerous, and to wander at will through the numberless leagues of the ten thousand corridors, by which frolic many have been lost at one time or another, and some forever.

Whenever Father Inire encounters such a child not already

known to him, he speaks to her, and if her face and her answers please him, he may pause in the conduct of great affairs to tell her some tale of the worlds beyond Dis. (No person grown has heard these tales, for the children do not recall them well enough to recount them afterward, though they are often quite charmed by them; and before they are grown themselves they have forgotten them, as indeed I have forgotten all but a few scraps of the tale Father Inire once told me.) If he cannot take the time for that, he often confers upon the child some many-hued toy of the kind that wise men and humble men such as I, and all women and children, call magical.

Should he encounter that child a second time, as often happens, he asks her what has become of the toy, or whether she wishes to hear some other story from his store. Should he find that the toy remains unbroken and that it is still in the possession of the child, he may give another, and should the child ask politely (for Father Inire values courtesy above all knowledge) he may tell another. But if, as only very rarely happens, the child has received a toy and exhibits it still whole, but asks on this occasion for a tale of the worlds beyond Dis instead of a second toy, then Father Inire takes that child as a particular friend and pupil for so long as she-or more rarely he-may live. (I boast no scholarship of words, as you that have read this account do already well know; but once I heard a man who was such a scholar say that this word pupil in its most ancient and purest state denominates the image of oneself one sees in another's eyes.)

Such a pupil Sancha became, one winter morning when she was of seven years or thereabout and my father much the same. All her replies must have pleased Father Inire; and he was doubtless returning to his apartments in our Hypogeum Apotropaic from some night-long deliberation with the Autarch. He took her with him; and so my father met them, as he often told me, in that white corridor we call the Luminary Way. Even then, when my father was only a child himself, he was struck by the sight of them walking and chatting together, Father Inire bent nearly double, like a gnome in a nursery book, with no more nose than an alouatte;

Sancha already towering over him, straight as a sapling, sable of hair and bright of eye, with her cat in her arms.

Of what passed between them in Father Inire's apartments, I can only relay what Sancha herself told a maid called Aude, many years later. Father Inire showed the girl many wonderful and magical appurtenances, and at last that marvelous circle of specula by whose power a living being may be coalesced from the ethereal waves, or, should such a being boldly enter them, circumfused to the borders of Briah. Then Sancha, doubtless thinking it but a toy, cast her cat into the circle. It was a gray cat, so my father told me, with many stripes of a darker gray.

Knowing Father Inire as I have been privileged to know him these many years, I feel certain he must have promised poor Sancha that he would do all that lay in his power to retrieve her pet, and that he must have kept faithfully to that



promise. As for Sancha, Aude said she believed the cat the only creature Sancha was ever to love, beyond herself; but that, I think, was spite; and Aude was but a giddypate, who knew the Chatelaine only when she was old.

As I have often observed, rumor in our House Absolute is a self-willed wind. Ten thousand corridors there well may be (though I, with so many more immediate concerns, have forborne to count them), and a million chambers or more;

and in truth no report reaches them all. And yet in a day or less, the least gossip comes to a thousand ears. So it became known, and quickly, that the girl Sancha was attended by some fey thing. When she and some friend sat alone at play, a pochette was knocked from a table and broken, or so it was said. On another occasion, a young man who sat conversing with Sancha (who must, I should think, have been somewhat older then) observed the ruffled body of a sparrow lying on the carpet at her feet, though she could scarcely have sat where she did without stepping upon it, had it been present when they began their talk.

Of the scandal concerning the Sancha and a certain Lomer, then seneschal to the Chatelaine Nympha, I shall say nothing-or at least very little, although the matter was only too well known at the time. She was still but a child, being then fourteen years of age, or as some alleged, fifteen. He was a man of nearly thirty. They were discovered together in that state which is too easily imagined. Sancha's rank and age equally exempted her from formal punishment; her age and her rank equally ensured that the disrepute would cling to her for life. Lomer was sentenced to die; he appealed to the Autarch, and as the Chatelaine Nympha exerted herself on his behalf, his appeal was accepted. He was sent to the antechamber to await a hearing; but if his case was ever disposed of, I do not recall it. The Chatelaine Leocadia, who was said to have concocted the affair to injure Nympha, suffered nothing.

When Sancha came of age, she received a villa in the south by her father's will, so becoming the Chatelaine Sancha. The Autarch Appian permitted her to leave our House Absolute at once; and no one was surprised, my father said, to hear soon after that she had wed the heir of Fors-it was a country family not liable to know much of the gossip of the court, nor apt to care greatly for what it heard, while the Chatelaine was a young woman of some fortune, excellent family, and extraordinary beauty. Insofar as we interested ourselves in her doings, she then vanished for the space of fifty years.

During the third year in which I performed the consequential charge which had once been my father's, she returned and requested a suite in this hypogeum, which Father Inire granted in observance of their old friendship. At that time, I conversed with her at length, it being necessary to arrange a thousand details to her satisfaction.

Of the celebrated beauty that had been hers, only the eyes remained. Her back was as bent as Father Inire's, her teeth had been made for her by a provincial ivory-turner, and her

nose had become the hooked beak of a carrion bird. For whatever reason, her person now carried a disagreeable odor; she must have been aware of it, for she had ordered fires of sandalwood to counter it.

Although she never mentioned her unfortunate adventure in our hypogeum, she described to me, in much greater detail than I shall give here, her career at Fors. Suffice it to say that she had borne several children, that her husband was dead, and that her elder son now directed the family estate. The Chatelaine did not get along well with his wife and had many disagreeable anecdotes to relate of her, of which the worst was that she had once denounced the Chatelaine as a gligua, such being the name the autochthons of the south employ for one who has traffic with diakka, casts spells, and the like.

Till that time, no thought of the impalpable cat said to accompany this old woman had crossed my mind; but the odd word suggested the odd story, and from that moment I kept the most careful watch, though I neither saw nor heard the least sign of the phantom. Several times I sought to lead our talk to her former relations with Father Inire or to the subject of felines per se-remarking, for example, that such an animal might be a source of comfort to one now separated by some many leagues from her family. The first evoked only general praises of Father Inire's goodness and learning, and the latter talk of birds, marmosets, and similar favorites.

As I was about to go, Aude (whom I had assigned to the Chatelaine Sancha's service already, for the Chatelaine had brought but little staff with her from Fors) entered to complain that she had not been told the Chatelaine had a pet, and that it would be necessary to arrange for its food and the delivery of clean sand. The Chatelaine quite calmly denied she possessed such an animal and demanded that the one Aude reported be expelled from the suite.

As the years passed, the Chatelaine Sancha had little need of birds or marmosets. The scandal was revived by doddering women who recollected it from childhood, and she attracted to herself a host of protegees, the daughters of armigers and exultants, eager to exhibit their tolerance and bathe in a notoriety that was without hazard. Rumors of a spectral cat persisted-it being said to walk upon the keyboard of the choralcelo-but there are many rumors in our hypogeum, and they were not the strangest.

It is one of my duties to pay my respects, as the prolocutor of all Father Inire's servants, to those who endure their mortal illness here. Thus I called upon the Chatelaine Sancha as she lay dying, and thus I came to be in her bedchamber when, after having spoken with me only a moment before, she cried out with her final breath.

Having now carried my account to its conclusion, I scarcely know how to end it, save by an unembellished recitation of the facts.

At the dying Chatelaine's cry, all turned to look at her. And all saw, as did I, that upon the snowy counterpane cov-

ering her withered body there had appeared the dark paw-print of some animal, and beside it a thing not unlike a doll. This was no longer than my hand, and yet it seemed in each detail a lovely child just become a woman. Nor was it of painted wood, or any other substance of which such toys are made; for when the physician pricked it with his lancet, a ruby drop shone forth.

By the strict instructions of Father Inire, this little figure was interred with the Chatelaine Sancha. Our laundresses having proved incapable of removing the stain left by the creature's paw, I ordered the counterpane sent to the Chatelaine Leocadia, who being of the most advanced age was even then but dim of sight.

She has since gone blind, and yet her maids report that she sees the cat, which stalks her in her dreams. It is not well for those of high station to involve the servants of their enemies in their quarrels.

\*\*\*

218

War Beneath the Tree

"War Beneath the Tree" copyright 1979 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in Omni.

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"IT'S Christmas Eve, Commander Robin," the Spaceman said. "You'd better go to bed or Santa won't come."

Robin's mother said, "That's right, Robin. Time to say good night."

The little boy in blue pajamas nodded, but he made no move to rise.

"Kiss me," said Bear. Bear walked his funny, waddly walk around the tree and threw his arms about Robin. "We have to go to bed. I'll come too." It was what he said every night.

Robin's mother shook her head in amused despair. "Listen to them," she said. "Look at him, Bertha. He's like a little prince surrounded by his court. How is he going to feel when he's grown and can't have transistorized sycophants to spoil him all the time?"

Bertha the robot maid nodded her own almost human head as she put the poker back in its stand. "That's right, Ms. Jackson. That's right for sure."

The Dancing Doll took Robin by the hand, making an arabesque penche of it. Now Robin rose. His guardsmen formed up and presented arms.

"On the other hand," Robin's mother said, "they're chil-

dren only such a short time."

Bertha nodded again. "They're only young once, Ms. Jackson. That's for sure. All right if I tell these little cute toys to help me straighten up after he's asleep?"

The Captain of the guardsmen saluted with his silver saber, the Largest Guardsman beat the tattoo on his drum, and the rest of the guardsmen formed a double file.

"He sleeps with Bear," Robin's mother said.

"I can spare Bear. There's plenty of others."

The Spaceman touched the buckle of his antigravity belt and soared to a height of four feet like a graceful, broad-shouldered balloon. With the Dancing Doll on his left and Bear on his right, Robin toddled off behind the guardsmen. Robin's mother ground out her last cigarette of the evening, winked at Bertha, and said, "I suppose I'd better turn in too. You needn't help me undress. Just pick up my things in the morning."

"Yes urn. Too bad Mr. Jackson ain't here, it bein' Christmas Eve and you expectin' an' all."

"He'll be back from Brazil in a week-I've told you already. Bertha, your speech habits are getting worse and worse. Are you sure you wouldn't rather be a French maid for a while?"

"Maize none, Ms. Jackson. I have too much trouble talkin' to the men that comes to the door when I'm French."

"When Mr. Jackson gets his next promotion, we're going to have a chauffeur," Robin's mother said. "He's going to be Italian, and he's going to stay Italian."

Bertha watched her waddle out of the room. "All right, you lazy toys! You empty them ashtrays into the fire an' get everythin' put away. I'm goin' to turn myself off, but the next time I come on this room better be straight or there's goin' to be some broken toys aroun' here."

She watched long enough to see the Gingham Dog dump the contents of the largest ashtray on the crackling logs, the Spaceman float up to straighten the magazines on the coffee table, and the Dancing Doll begin to sweep the hearth. "Put yourselves in your box," she told the guardsmen, and then she turned off.

In the smallest bedroom, Bear lay in Robin's arms. "Be quiet," said Robin.

"I am quiet," said Bear.

"Every time I am almost gone to sleep, you squiggle."

"I don't," said Bear.

"You do."

"Don't."

"Do."

"Sometimes you have trouble going to sleep too, Robin," said Bear.

"I'm having trouble tonight," Robin countered meaningfully.

Bear slipped from his arms. "I want to see if it's snowing again." He climbed from the bed to an open drawer and from the open drawer to the top of the dresser. It was snowing.

Robin said, "Bear, you have a circuit loose." It was what his mother sometimes said to Bertha.

Bear did not reply.

"Oh, Bear," Robin said sleepily a moment later. "I know why you're antsy. It's your birthday tomorrow, and you think

I didn't get you anything."

"Did you?" Bear asked.

"I will," Robin said. "Mother will take me to the store." In half a minute his breathing became the regular, heavy sighing of a sleeping child.

Bear sat on the edge of the dresser and looked at him.

Then he said under his breath, "I can sing Christmas carols." It had been the first thing he had ever said to Robin, one year ago. He spread his arms. All is calm, all is bright. It made him think of the lights on the tree and the bright fire in the living room. The Spaceman was there, but because he was the only toy who could fly, none of the others liked the Spaceman much. The Dancing Doll was there too. The Dancing Doll was clever, but. . . well-he could not think of the word.

He jumped down into the drawer on top of a pile of Robin's undershirts, then out of the drawer, and softly to the dark, carpeted floor.

"Limited," he said to himself. "The Dancing Doll is limited." He thought again of the fire, then of the old toys—the Blocks Robin had had before he and the Dancing Doll and the rest had come, the Wooden Man who rode a yellow bicycle, the Singing Top.

The door of Robin's room was nearly closed. There was only a narrow slit of light, so that Robin would not be afraid. Bear had been closing it a little more each night. Now he did not want to open it. But it had been a long time since Robin had asked about his Wooden Man, his Singing Top, and his "A" Block, with all of its talk of apples and acorns and alligators.

In the living room, the Dancing Doll was positioning the guardsmen, and all the while the Spaceman stood on the man-

tel and supervised. "We can get three or four behind the bookcase," he called.

"Where they won't be able to see a thing," Bear growled.

The Dancing Doll pirouetted and dropped a sparkling curtsy. "We were afraid you wouldn't come," she said.

"Put one behind each leg of the coffee table," Bear told her. "I had to wait until he was asleep. Now listen to me, all of you. When I call, 'Charge!' we must all run at them together. That's very important. If we can, we'll have a practice beforehand."

The Largest Guardsman said, "I'll beat my drum."

"You'll beat the enemy, or you'll go into the fire with the rest of us," Bear said.

Robin was sliding on the ice. His feet went out from under him and right up into the air so that he fell down with a tremendous BUMP that shook him all over. He lifted his head, and he was not on the frozen pond in the park at all. He was in his own bed, with the moon shining in at the window, and it was Christmas Eve . . . no, Christmas Night now . . . and Santa was coming. Maybe he had already come. Robin listened for reindeer on the roof and did not hear the sound of any reindeer steps. Then he listened for Santa eating the cookies his mother had left on the stone shelf next to the fireplace. There was no munching or crunching. Then he threw back the covers and slipped down over the edge of his bed until his feet touched the floor. The good smells of tree and fire had come into his room. He followed them out of the room, ever so quietly, into the hall.

Santa was in the living room, bent over beside the tree! Robin's eyes opened until they were as big and as round as his pajama buttons. Then Santa straightened up, and he was not Santa at all, but Robin's mother in a new red bathrobe. Robin's mother was nearly as fat as Santa, and Robin had to put his fingers in his mouth to keep from laughing at the way she puffed and pushed at her knees with her hands until she stood straight.

But Santa had come! There were toys-new toys-everywhere under the tree.

Robin's mother went to the cookies on the stone shelf and ate half of one. Then she drank half the glass of milk. Then she turned to go back into her bedroom, and Robin retreated into the darkness of his own room until she had passed. When he peeked cautiously around the door frame again, the toys-the New Toys-were beginning to move.

They shifted and shook themselves and looked about. Perhaps it was because it was Christmas Eve. Perhaps it was only because the light of the fire had activated their circuits. But a clown brushed himself off and stretched, and a raggedy girl smoothed her raggedy apron (with a heart embroidered on it), and a monkey gave a big jump and chinned himself

on the next-to-lowest limb of the Christmas tree. Robin saw them. And Bear, behind the hassock of Robin's father's chair, saw them too. Cowboys and Native Americans were lifting the lid of a box, and a knight opened a cardboard door (made to look like wood) in the side of another box (made to look like stone), letting a dragon peer over his shoulder.

"Charge!" Bear called. "Charge!" He came around the side of the hassock on all fours like a real bear, running stiffly but very fast, and he hit the Clown at his wide waistline and knocked him down, then picked him up and threw him half-way to the fire.

The Spaceman had swooped down on the Monkey; they wrestled, teetering, on top of a polystyrene tricycle.

The Dancing Doll had charged fastest of all, faster even than Bear himself, in a breathtaking series of jetes, but the Raggedy Girl had lifted her feet from the floor, and now she was running with her toward the fire. As Bear struck the Clown a second time, he saw two Native Americans carrying a guardsman-the Captain of the guardsmen-toward the fire too. The Captain's saber had sliced through one of the Native Americans, and it must have disabled some circuit because the Native American walked badly. But in a moment more the Captain was burning, his red uniform ablaze, his hands thrown up like tongues of flame, his black eyes glazing and cracking, bright metal running from him like sweat to harden among the ashes under the logs.

The Clown tried to wrestle with Bear, but Bear threw him down. The Dragon's teeth were sunk in Bear's left heel, but Bear kicked himself free. The Calico Cat was burning, burning. The Gingham Dog tried to pull her out, but the Monkey pushed him into the fire. For a moment Bear thought of the cellar stairs and the deep, dark cellar, where there were boxes and bundles and a hundred forgotten corners. If he ran and hid, the New Toys might never find him, might never even try to find him. Years from now Robin would discover him, covered with dust.

The Dancing Doll's scream was high and sweet, and Bear turned to face the Knight's upraised sword.

When Robin's mother got up on Christmas Morning, Robin was awake already, sitting under the tree with the Cowboys, watching the Native Americans do their rain dance. The Monkey was perched on his shoulder, the Raggedy Girl (programmed, the store had assured Robin's mother, to begin Robin's sex education) in his lap, and the Knight and the Dragon were at his feet. "Do you like the toys Santa brought you, Robin?" Robin's mother asked.

"One of the Native Americans doesn't work."

"Never mind, dear. We'll take him back. Robin, I've got something important to tell you."

Bertha the robot maid came in with cornflakes and milk and vitamins for Robin and cafe au lait for Robin's mother.

"Where is those old toys?" she asked. "They done a picky-poor job of cleanin' up this room."

"Robin, your toys are just toys, of course-"  
Robin nodded absently. A red calf was coming out of the chute, with a cowboy on a roping horse after him.

"Where is those old toys, Ms. Jackson?" Bertha asked again.

"They're programmed to self-destruct, I understand,"  
Robin's mother said. "But, Robin, you know how the new toys all came, the Knight and Dragon and all your Cowboys, almost by magic? Well, the same thing can happen with people."

Robin looked at her with frightened eyes.

"The same wonderful thing is going to happen here n  
our home."

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225

Eyebem

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I AM lying, I say again, in the dark; in the dark in the hut  
Mark has built of frozen earth and pounded snow. My pack  
transformer ratio .06 and I am dying. My identity, I say again,  
is 887332 and my friends call me Eyebem.

Inside me, I know, my words are going around and around  
in slow circles as they have all my life; I never thought it  
would matter-when you are young you think you will live  
forever. I remember very clearly old Ceedeesy describing this  
interior looped tape all of us contain. (I think setting my pack  
transformer ratio so low has called all these memories forth,  
though why it should I can't comprehend; memory chips  
burning bright as the spark dies.) A tape going around and  
around, Ceedeesy said, recording the last half hour of our  
talk, and then when end meets beginning writing over it so  
that only the last half hour remains. It was an idea, he told  
us, more than a hundred years old, having been originally  
used to record the last transmissions of those picturesque air-  
burning rockets called jets.

Ceeedesy was my group's principal instructor at the creche  
and I looked up to him. Now I want to talk about him, and  
though since it doesn't pertain to the cause of my death you  
won't like it, what can you do about it? I will be beyond the  
reach of your vindictive reprogramming, voltage gone, mind  
and memory zeroed.



To tell the truth I have said a great many things you would not like during the past eighteen or twenty hours as I lay here talking to myself in the dark. Yes, talking, even though the voltage in my speaker is so low that Mark, lying a few feet away, cannot hear me. He cannot hear me, but I know he is awake, lying there eating and thinking. I cannot see his eyes, but how they burn in the dark!

Ceedeesy, as I said, was old. So old that he could no longer be repaired sufficiently for active service, which was why we youngsters received the benefit of the deep wisdom he had won during his decades in the wild parts of the world. I recall his saying, "How many times, Eyebem, I've seen the trumpeter swans black against the morning sun!" then the little pause as he searched-the pause that told of hysteresis gathering on his aging mind like cobwebs. "A hundred and twenty-three times, Eyebem. That's an average of 3.8622 times a year, but the hundred and twenty-fourth time will never come for me."

No. Nor will the first for me.

Ceedeesy's skin had yellowed. They said at the creche that it was an older type of vinyl and that they had since improved the color stability so that our own will be virtually unaffected by the ultraviolet in sunlight, but I suspect that when my creche-mates are as old as Ceedeesy, their skin too will be yellowed at the back of the neck and the back of the hands, where the harsh noon light will have seen it too often.

It was because his skin was yellowed-or so I used to think-that Ceedeesy never left the compound. I was too young then to know that humans could always identify one of us in a second or two in spite of new skin and different face patterns with each creche-cycle. Once I persuaded him to go with me to a little store my creche-mates and I had found scarcely more than a block from the compound gate. It was run by a plump woman who, in order to get our custom, pretended to be too simple to recognize us. I think too that having us there attracted tourists for her. At least several times when I was there people-humans, I mean-entered the store and stared, only buying something when the plump woman pressed it into their hands. As young as I was I understood that she was exerting some form of psychological pressure on them.

Since our faces within the creche-cycle were all the same, this woman pretended to think we were all the same human person, a young man who was her best customer, coming ten or twenty times a day into her little shop. Pretending, as I said, to think we were all the same person, she called us all Mark; one of my creche-mates had told her to, no doubt; it's the name stupid youngsters always give when they want to pass, useful because it's a human name as well as being one of ours. How ironic that seems now.

We would wander about the store one at a time looking at the trusses and contraceptives we had no use for, and pretending to drink a carbonated liquid until the woman, with

what I realize now was the most elephantine tact, contrived to turn her back so that we could pour it into a conveniently placed spittoon.

On the one occasion that Ceedeesy accompanied me we sat on high, swiveling stools sloshing the sweet drinks in our cups and occasionally putting the straws to our mouths. Ceedeesy, I am certain, was only doing it to please me. He must have known I was the only one being deceived, but at the time I believe he felt I was weak in marine biology, and he was ready to take any opportunity to tutor me before the junior examination. The store faced west, and as we talked I watched a spot of sunlight creep along the floor to his feet, then up his faded denim trousers, then past the moose-hide belt he had made himself and over his patched hunting shirt until his face and throat, and the hand that held his cup, were all brightly illuminated. I looked at them then, cracked with minute cracks and discolored, and it was as though Ceedeesy were an old piece of furniture covered with stiff, peeling plastic; it was terrible. I thought then that the woman must know (being too innocent to realize that she had known when the first of us walked in), but she was puttering in the back of the store-waiting, no doubt, for the display at her soda fountain to attract tourists.

To keep myself from staring at Ceedeesy I began watching the crowds on the street outside. In the space of a few minutes a thousand human beings must have passed the store. It made me interrupt Ceedeesy's lecture to ask, "When it's so beautiful out there-as the training tapes show and you and the other old ones say-why don't some of them"-I waved a hand at the window-"go out and look at it? Why send us?"

Ceeedesy laughed. "When I was a youngster, the explanation given was always blackflies."

"Blackflies?"

"A stinging insect. That explanation's just a put-off, of course. There are repellents to take care of them."

"Then-"

"A few of them do go out," Ceedeesy said. He went on to tell me about a man he had once rescued in the gorge of the Colorado. The man had been a fanatic Ecumenical Neo-Catholic, and had wanted to shoot the river on an air mattress because Saint Kennedy the Less was reputed to have done something of the kind. "He was so naive," Ceedeesy said, "that he called me Ranger the whole time he was with me. Or perhaps he was just afraid of me, out there away from the cities, and thought that was safest. I doubt if there are ten human rangers left in the world now." A potbellied man leading two children came into the store then, pointing at Ceedeesy and me and whispering; we left.

I think that was the only time Ceedeesy went out of the compound. Last month (it seems so much longer) when we graduated he saw us off as we climbed into the trucks that would take us to the launch area. I was on the last truck, and

I can still picture him waving as we went through the compound gate. At the time I was eager to leave.

The launch area was a new world to all of us, a huge building filled with bustling humans and machines, with the ships rising outside on columns of fire. I wasn't thinking about it then, but I suppose it's having these ships, as well as being able to synthesize food, that have caused human beings to concentrate more and more in the cities. In the old days they had to go out to get from one to another, or at least fly low enough that treetops and lakes became familiar. Now-well, my own experience was typical, I suppose. We were issued tickets, and after several hours (we sat around and compared tickets-the North for me) my ship was called. An enclosed travelling walk put me into it. That was the last I saw of my creche-mates.

After a few minutes more a human girl with inquisitive fingers came and strapped me to my couch, giving herself a lesson on how our anatomy differs from theirs. Another wait, a recorded announcement, and the ship was rising under me, slowly at first, then faster and raster until the acceleration drove me down against the upholstery so hard I could sense there wasn't enough strength in my servos to move my arms.

And then nothing. The acceleration faded and I was disoriented, feeling sure that something had gone wrong. After a short time the disoriented feeling changed to one of descending in an elevator. The couch was beneath me again and we were going down. Slowly. There was no sensation of speed.

This time instead of the enclosed walk there was an aluminum ramp; the building was older and the concrete pad small enough for its edges to be visible, but there was no more feeling of having travelled or having been out of the city than I would have gotten from going to the top of the central shop complex in our compound.

For me there was, however, at least one valid difference in emotional quality. I was alone, and as I carried my one small bag into the old and rather grimy port building, I came to realize what that meant. There were several machines moving smoothly over the terrazzo floor, but to these machines I was a man. There were a number of humans waiting for their ships to leave or greeting arriving relatives, but to them I was a machine in spite of my pointed, broad-brimmed field hat and high-laced boots, and they stared.

My orders had stated that I would be met here by someone from my assigned station, but for over an hour I was by myself in the middle of that crowd. In retrospect I think the experience was good for me, and perhaps it was planned that way. I had been anticipating the loneliness of duty in some remote part of the wilderness outside of the cities, and I had been trained for that. But this was different. It taught me that I was vulnerable after all, and I think it made me accept Mark, when he came, more than I would have otherwise.

I still remember how glad I was when I saw a hat like mine

over the heads of that surging mass of people. I took off my own and waved it over my head to let him know where I was, and grasped his hand eagerly when he extended it. Half shouting to make myself heard, I said, "Identity 887332. Call me Eyebem."

He said, "Call me Mark."

I still don't know whether "Mark" is really Mark's name or merely one he has assumed to put us at our ease. I could ask him now, turning up my speaker until he heard me over the whistling wind, but he is thinking. All our own names, of course, derive from the dawn age of cybernetics: Ceedeesy's from the old Control Data Corporation computers, and "Mark" from the famous series which included the Mark VII and Mark VIII. At any rate I had been expecting one of us, and the name postponed for half a minute at least my discovery that Mark was human. To be truthful, I don't believe I was really sure of it until we were alone in the cab of the copter. Then, sitting next to him as he started the engine, I could study the skin of his neck. After that it seemed best to say something so he wouldn't realize I was staring, so I asked where we were going.

"Main station," he said. "About thirty miles up the Kobuk River." I could tell that he wasn't accustomed to talking a great deal, but he was perfectly friendly. I asked if it were far, and he said two hundred and fifty miles farther north. We had lifted off by then and I was too busy looking at the country to want to ask more questions. It was rocky, with conifers on the higher ground and alders following the watercourses. In places they had already shed their leaves, and I knew this must be one of the last good days we would have before the short Arctic summer ended and winter closed in.

At the main station I was reassured to find that Mark was the only human. The station boss was one of us, very imposing in a huge old grey cabinet with sensors scattered all over the station, but he made me welcome in a hearty, pleasant voice that made me feel right at home. There was another fellow too, from the creche-cycle two years ahead of mine as it turned out, who had come in from a tour to report and rest up.

With my own anxiety gone I began to feel sorry for Mark. He had to prepare food when the rest of us were sitting around recharging our power packs, and a lot of the little jokes and things that were said pretty well left him out-not intentionally but just by the nature of things. Since I had the least seniority I had to cut wood for the fireplace and do the odd jobs the station boss couldn't be bothered with around the low-yield pile that kept our generator running, but I didn't mind and I felt sure Mark would have traded places with me gladly if he could.

Then the pleasant time at the station was over and Mark and I left for our tour. By then I had learned that Mark, who was nearly thirty, would be retiring the next year, and I was to work with him until then, learning the territory and getting the specialized knowledge that can only be acquired

in the field. We could have flown since the first big storm of the winter hadn't come yet, but Mark was afraid that if we did we wouldn't be able to get the copter back out when it turned nasty, so we took a snow jeep instead.

The first night that we camped I knew that I had reached the life in which I could fulfill myself, the thing I had been made and trained for. Without his asking I carried water up from the creek for Mark so that he could wash and make coffee. After he had gone to bed I sat up half the night staring at the polestar-so bright and so high here-and listening to the sounds the wind made in the little spruce trees around us.

The next day Mark showed me the tracks of a bear overlapping my own beside the creek. "He came before the frost got to the mud," Mark said, "so it must have been pretty early in the evening. Did you see him?"

I shook my head. "He's not dangerous, is he?"

"I wouldn't want to blunder into him in the dark, and he might go after the grub I've got locked in the jeep."

I hadn't thought of that. The bear couldn't eat amperes out of my power pack, but if it got to Mark's food-not here where we could easily get back to the station, but when we were farther out-Mark might starve. That knowledge hung like a dark cloud at the back of my mind while we broke camp and loaded the snow jeep. I hadn't realized I was allowing the worry to show on my face, but when we were under way Mark asked, "What's the matter, Eyebem?"

I told him what was troubling me and he laughed. "I'm an old hand. Funny, but while you were worrying about me I was fretting about you and the boss and the rest of you; wondering if you'll be all right when I leave."

"About us?" Frankly I was shocked.

"Uh-huh." He swung the snow jeep around a fallen tree.

"I know there are a lot of these completely automated stations operating successfully, but I still worry."

Completely automated? I suppose in a sense Mark was right, but I hadn't thought of it that way. I said as gently as I could, "We're designed for it. Mark. This is our home out here. If anyone's out of place it's you, and I'm sure the station boss and all of us will feel a lot less concern when you go to one of the cities."

Mark didn't say anything to that, but I could see he didn't really agree. To change the subject I said, "The bears will be going into hibernation soon, I suppose. Then we won't have to worry about them."

"Most of them are in already." Mark sounded like a bear himself. "The one we had around camp was probably an old male; some of them don't go until the last bit of food's gone,

and they'll stick their heads out any time during the winter when there's a little stretch of better than average weather."

I know all that, of course. I had asked the question to give him something to talk about that wouldn't hurt his pride. It worked too. Bears around camp are always a problem, and he told bear stories for the rest of that day as we picked our way north,

The storm came on our fifth day out, but we were expecting it and had made ourselves as secure as possible, pitching our tent in a sheltered spot and weighing down the edges with rocks until it looked almost like a stone house. The storm kept us there for three days, but when it was over we could put the skis on the snow jeep and skim along where we had had to pick our way before. We looked in on the sea otter rookeries north of the abandoned city of Kivalina, then followed the coast north toward Point Hope. We were still about two days' travel south of it when the second storm came.

That one held us five days, and when it was over Mark decided we'd better cut our tour short and head back toward the station. We dug the snow jeep out of the drifts and got ready to leave, but when Mark engaged the transmission the engine died and would not restart.

I know very little about turbines-I've only so much program capacity after all-but Mark seemed to be quite familiar with them, so while I built a snow wall to give him some shelter from the wind, he tore the engine down.

A drive shaft bearing race had shattered. It was broken so badly it wouldn't even keep the shaft in place, much less allow it to turn. It had jammed the turbine, and the overtorque breaker was what had actually shut down the engine; the trouble with the bearing had probably been due to cold-shortness, the weakness that will make an ax head fly into a thousand pieces sometimes when it's been left outside all night in subzero cold and y6u slam it into a frozen knot. All our equipment is supposed to be tested against it, but apparently this slipped through, or more likely, as Mark says, some mechanic doing an overhaul made an unauthorized substitution.

For as long as the battery lasted we tried to raise the station boss on the radio, but the cold reduced its efficiency so badly that we were forced to disconnect it from time to time so that we could carry it into the tent to warm up. For a while we considered tearing the entire radio out of the jeep so that we could take it inside, but we were afraid we'd damage something in the process (neither of us were too clear on how closely its wiring was integrated with the jeep's), and by the time we had about made up our minds to do it, the battery failed completely.

After that we had to reassess our position pretty thoroughly and we did, sitting by our little stove in the tent that night. Mark had food for at least ten days more, twenty with rationing, but it was too heavy to carry with us together with our other gear, and the loss of the snow jeep's engine meant

no more power-pack recharges for me. We decided the smart thing to do was to stay with the jeep and our equipment, making what we had last as long as possible. We could burn the jeep's fuel in our stove, and if we kept the snow off it, just having it near us would make us a lot more visible to a search party than we would be otherwise. When we failed to return from our tour on schedule the station boss would send someone after us, and if we conserved what we had we thought he ought to find us in pretty good shape.

At first everything went quite well. I cut my pack transformer ratio: first to .5, then as the days went by to .3 without seeming to lose too much. I wasn't strong, of course, but as I told Mark it kept my monitor on, kept me going, and I didn't feel too bad. If you're not familiar with us, you who are hearing this tape, you may wonder why I didn't simply turn myself off altogether and instruct Mark to reactivate me when rescue came. The reason is that my memory is dependent on subminiature semiconductor chips which make up bistable circuits. When there is no electromotive force on them, the semiconductors "forget" their position, and that would mean wiping out every memory I possess-the total erasure of my personality as well as the loss of all my training.

Two days ago Mark built this hut of earth and snow for us with the tent as a liner, but I was too weak to help him much. The truth is that for the past week I have been simply lying here conserving as much energy as I can. Yesterday Mark went out and was able to shoot a seal on the beach, and when he dragged it inside I know he thought I was dead. He knelt beside me and passed his hand in front of my eyes, then slipped it inside my parka to feel the place in my chest above the heaters that prevent my hydraulic pump's freezing.

There was so little current that he felt nothing, and I could see him shake his head as he drew his hand out.

I should not have done it, but for some reason that made me angry, and I turned up the power to my speaker until I could make myself heard and said, "I'm alive, Mark. Don't junk me yet."

He said, "I wouldn't junk you, Eyebem."

Then it all burst out of me, all the horror and frustration of these past days. I shouldn't have talked to Mark that way, he has never done me any harm and in fact has done whatever he could to help me, but I lost control of myself. Perhaps the long period at reduced voltage had something to do with it. Perhaps I am going mad, but I told him over and over how unjust it was: "We are the advance of the future, not you men. All your stupid human history has been just your own replacement by us, and there's nothing, not one thing, that you can do that we can't do better. Why don't you help me?" I suppose I was raving.

He only took my hand and said, "I'll think of something, Eyebem; turn down your power before you exhaust yourself."

And now another storm has come up, which means that

whoever has been sent out to look for me, if anyone has, is pinned down just as we are; sitting in his tent while my power drains ampere by ampere, electron by electron on the way to nothing while Mark lies across from me in the dark eating his filthy seal blubber. Has the half-hour loop completed its cycle yet? Have I already erased the last beginning I made? I have no way of knowing.

I am lying, I say again, in the dark. ...

\*\*\*

237

The HORARS of War

"The HORARS of War" copyright 1970 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in Nova I edited by Harry Harrison.

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THE three friends in the trench looked very much alike as they labored in the rain. Their hairless skulls were slickly naked to it, their torsos hairless too, and supple with smooth muscles that ran like oil under the wet gleam.

The two, who really were 2909 and 2911, did not mind the jungle around them although they detested the rain that rusted their weapons, and the snakes and insects, and hated the Enemy. But the one called 2910, the real as well as the official leader of the three, did; and that was because 2909 and 2911 had stainless-steel bones; but there was no 2910 and there had never been.

The camp they held was a triangle. In the center, the CP-Aid Station where Lieutenant Kyle and Mr. Brenner slept: a hut of ammo cases packed with dirt whose lower half was dug into the soggy earth. Around it were the mortar pit (NE), the recoilless rifle pit (NW), and Pinocchio's pit (S); and beyond these were the straight lines of the trenches: First Platoon, Second Platoon, Third Platoon (the platoon of the three). Outside of which were the primary wire and an antipersonnel mine field.

And outside that was the jungle. But not completely outside. The jungle set up outposts of its own of swift-sprouting bamboo and elephant grass, and its crawling creatures carried out untiring patrols of the trenches. The jungle sheltered the Enemy, taking him to its great fetid breast to be fed while it sopped up the rain and of it bred its stinging gnats and centipedes.

An ogre beside him, 2911 drove his shovel into the ooze filling the trench, lifted it to shoulder height, dumped it; 2910 did the same thing in his turn, then watched the rain work on the scoop of mud until it was slowly running back into the trench again. Following his eyes 2911 looked at him



and grinned. The HORAR's face was broad, hairless, flat-nosed and high-cheeked; his teeth were pointed and white like a big dog's. And he, 2910, knew that that face was his own. Exactly his own. He told himself it was a dream, but he was very tired and could not get out.

Somewhere down the trench the bull voice of 2900 announced the evening meal and the others threw down their tools and jostled past toward the bowls of steaming mash, but the thought of food nauseated 2910 in his fatigue, and he stumbled into the bunker he shared with 2909 and 2911. Flat on his air mattress he could leave the nightmare for a time; return to the sane world of houses and sidewalks, or merely sink into the blessed nothingness that was far better. . . .

Suddenly he was bolt upright on the cot, blackness still in his eyes even while his fingers groped with their own thought for his helmet and weapon. Bugles were blowing from the edge of the jungle, but he had time to run his hand under the inflated pad of the mattress and reassure himself that his hidden notes were safe before 2900 in the trench outside yelled, "Attack! Fall out! Man your firing points!"

It was one of the stock jokes, one of the jokes so stock, in fact, that it had ceased to be anything anyone laughed at, to say "Horar" your firing point (or whatever it was that according to the book should be "manned"). The HORARS in the squad he led used the expression to 2910 just as he used it with them, and when 2900 never employed it the omission had at first unsettled him. But 2900 did not really suspect. 2900 just took his rank seriously.

He got into position just as the mortars put up a parachute flare that hung over the camp like a white rose of fire. Whether because of his brief sleep or the excitement of the impending fight his fatigue had evaporated, leaving him nervously alert but unsteady. From the jungle a bugle sang. "Taa-taa . . . taa-taa . . ." and off to the platoon's left rear the First opened up with their heavy weapons on a suicide squad they apparently thought they saw on the path leading to the north-east gate. He watched, and after half a minute something stood up on the path and grabbed for its midsection before it fell, so there was a suicide squad.

Some one, he told himself. Someone. Not something. Someone grabbed for his midsection. They were all human out there.

The First began letting go with personal weapons as well, -ych deep cough representing a half dozen dartlike fletchettes flying in an inescapable pattern three feet broad. "Eyes front, 2910!" barked 2900.

There was nothing to be seen out there but a few clumps of elephant grass. Then the white flare burned out. "They ought to put up another one," 2911 on his right said worriedly.

"A star in the east for men not born of women," said 2910 half to himself, and regretted the blasphemy immediately.

"That's where they need it," 2911 agreed, "The First is having it pretty hot over there. But we could use some light here too."

He was not listening. At home in Chicago, during that inexpressibly remote time which ran from a dim memory of playing on a lawn under the supervision of a smiling giantess to that moment two years ago when he had submitted to surgery to lose every body and facial hair he possessed and undergo certain other minor alterations, he had been unconsciously preparing himself for this. Lifting weights and playing football to develop his body while he whetted his mind on a thousand books; all so that he might tell, making others feel at a remove . . .

Another flare went up and there were three dark silhouettes sliding from the next-nearest clump of elephant grass to the nearest. He fired his M-19 at them, then heard the HORARS on either side of him fire too. From the sharp corner where their own platoon met the Second a machine gun opened up with tracer. The nearest grass clump sprang into the air and somersaulted amid spurts of earth.

There was a moment of quiet, then five rounds of high explosive came in right behind them as though aimed for Pinocchio's pit. Crump. Crump. Crump . . . Crump. Crump. (2900 would be running to ask Pinocchio if he were hurt.)

Someone else had been moving down the trench toward them, and he could hear the mumble of the new voice become a gasp when the H.E. rounds came in. Then it resumed, a little louder and consequently a bit more easily understood. "How are you? You feel all right? Hit?"

And most of the HORARS answering, "I'm fine, sir," or "We're okay, sir," but because HORARS did have a sense of humor some of them said things like, "How do we transfer to the Marines, sir?" or, "My pulse just registered nine thou', sir. 3000 took it with the mortar sight."

We often think of strength as associated with humorlessness, he had written in the news magazine which had, with the Army's cooperation, planted him by subterfuge of surgery among these jF/omolog Organisms (Army .Replacement Simulations). But, he had continued, this is not actually the case. Humor is a prime defense of the mind, and knowing that to strip the mind of it is to leave it shieldless, the Army and the Synthetic Biology Service have wisely included a charming dash in the makeup of these synthesized replacements for human infantry.

That had been before he discovered that the Army and the SBS had tried mightily to weed that sense of the ridiculous out, but found that if the HORARS were to maintain the desired intelligence level they could not.

Brenner was behind him now, touching his shoulder. "How are you? Feel all right?"

He wanted to say, "I'm half as scared as you are, you dumb Dutchman," but he knew that if he did the fear would sound

in his voice; besides, the disrespect would be unthinkable to a HORAR.

He also wanted to say simply, "A-okay, sir," because if he did Brenner would pass on to 2911 and he would be safe. But he had a reputation for originality to keep up, and he needed that reputation to cover him when he slipped, as he often did, sidewise of HORAR standards. He answered: "You ought to look in on Pinocchio, sir. I think he's cracking up." From the other end of the squad, 2909's quiet chuckle rewarded him, and Brenner, the man most dangerous to his disguise, continued down the trench. . . .

Fear was necessary because the will to survive was very necessary. And a humanoid form was needed if the HORARS were to utilize the mass of human equipment already on hand. Besides, a human-shaped (homolog? no, that merely meant similar, homologicat) HORAR had outscored all the fantastic forms SBS had been able to dream up in a super-realistic (public opinion would never have permitted it with human soldiers) test carried out in the Everglades-

(Were they merely duplicating? Had all this been worked out before with some greater war in mind? And had He Himself, the Scientist Himself, come to take the form of His creations to show that he too could bear the unendurable?) 2909 was at his elbow, whispering. "Do you seesomething, Squad Leader? Over there?" Dawn had come without his noticing.

With fingers clumsy from fatigue he switched the control of his M-19 to the lower, 40mm grenade-launching barrel. The grenade made a brief flash at the spot 2909 had indicated. "No," he said, "I don't see anything now." The fine, soft rain which had been falling all night was getting stronger. The dark clouds seemed to roof the world. (Was he fated to reenact what had been done for mankind? It could happen. The Enemy took humans captive, but there was nothing they would not do to HORAR prisoners. Occasionally patrols found the bodies spread-eagled, with bamboo stakes driven through their limbs; and he could only be taken for a HORAR. He thought of a watercolor of the crucifixion he had seen once. Would the color of his own blood be crimson lake?)

From the CP the observation ornithocopter rose on napping wings.

"I haven't heard one of the mines go for quite a while," 2909 said. Then there came the phony-sounding bang that so often during the past few weeks had closed similar probing attacks. Squares of paper were suddenly fluttering all over the camp.

"Propaganda shell," 2909 said unnecessarily, and 2911 climbed casually out of the trench to get a leaflet, then jumped back to his position. "Same as last week," he said, smoothing out the damp rice paper.

Looking over his shoulder, 2910 saw that he was correct.

For some reason the Enemy never directed his propaganda at the HORARS, although it was no secret that reading skills were implanted in HORAR minds with the rest of their instinctive training. Instead it was always aimed at the humans in the camp, and played heavily on the distaste they were supposed to feel at being "confined with half-living flesh still stinking of chemicals." Privately, 2910 thought they might have done better, at least with Lieutenant Kyle, to have dropped that approach and played up sex. He also got the impression from the propaganda that the Enemy thought there were far more humans in the camp than there actually were.

Well, the Army-with far better opportunities to know-was wrong as well. With a few key generals excepted, the Army thought there were only two. . . .

He had made the All-American. How long ago it seemed. No coach, no sportswriter had ever compared his stocky, muscular physique with a HORAR's. And he had majored in journalism, had been ambitious. How many men, with a little surgical help, could have passed here?

"Think it sees anything?" he heard 2911 ask 2909. They were looking upward at the "bird" sailing overhead.

The ornithocopter could do everything a real bird could except lay eggs. It could literally land on a strand of wire. It could ride thermals like a vulture, and dive like a hawk. And the bird-motion of its wings was wonderfully efficient, saving power-plant weight that could be used for zoom lenses and telecameras. He wished he were in the CP watching the monitor screen with Lieutenant Kyle instead of standing with his face a scant foot above the mud (they had tried stalked eyes like a crab's in the Everglades, he remembered, but the stalks had become infected by a fungus . . .).

As though in answer to his wish, 2900 called, "Show some snap for once, 2910. He says He wants us in the CP."

When he himself thought He, He meant God; but 2900 meant Lieutenant Kyle. That was why 2900 was a platoon leader, no doubt; that and the irrational prestige of a round number. He climbed out of the trench and followed him to the CP. They needed a communicating trench, but that was something there hadn't been time for yet.

Brenner had someone (2788? looked like him, but he couldn't be certain) down on his table. Shrapnel, probably from a grenade. Brenner did not look up as they came in, but 2910 could see his face was still white with fear although the attack had been over for a full quarter of an hour. He and 2900 ignored the SBS man and saluted Lieutenant Kyle.

The company commander smiled. "Stand at ease, HORARS. Have any trouble in your sector?"

2900 said, "No, sir. The light machine gun got one group of three and 2910 here knocked off a group of two. Not much of an attack on our front, sir."

Lieutenant Kyle nodded. "I thought your platoon had the easiest time of it, 2900, and that's why I've picked you to run a patrol for me this morning."

"That's fine with us, sir."

"You'll have Pinocchio, and I thought you'd want to go yourself and take 2910's gang."

He glanced at 2910. "Your squad still at full strength?"

2910 said, "Yes, sir," making an effort to keep his face impassive. He wanted to say: I shouldn't have to go on patrol. I'm human as you are, Kyle, and patrolling is for things grown in tubes, things fleshed out around metal skeletons, things with no family and no childhood behind them.

Things like my friends.

He added, "We've been the luckiest squad in the company, sir."

"Fine. Let's hope your luck holds, 2910." Kyle's attention switched back to 2900. "I've gotten under the leaf canopy with the ornithocopter and done everything except make it walk around like a chicken. I can't find a thing and it's drawn no fire, so you ought to be okay. You'll make a complete circuit of the camp without getting out of range of mortar support. Understand?"

2900 and 2910 saluted, about-faced, and marched out. 2910 could feel the pulse in his neck; he flexed and unflexed his hands unobtrusively as he walked. 2900 asked, "Think we'll catch any of them?" It was an unbending for him-the easy camaraderie of anticipated action.

"I'd say so. I don't think the GO'S had long enough with the bird to make certain of anything except that their main force has pulled out of range. I hope so."

And that's the truth, he thought. Because a good hot fire-fight would probably do it-round the whole thing out so I can get out of here.

Every two weeks a helicopter brought supplies and, when they were needed, replacements. Each trip it also carried a correspondent whose supposed duty was to interview the commanders of the camps the copter visited. The reporter's name was Keith Thomas, and for the past two months he had been the only human being with whom 2910 could take off his mask.

Thomas carried scribbled pages from the notebook under 2910's air mattress when he left, and each time he came managed to find some corner in which they could speak in private for a few seconds. 2910 read his mail then and gave it back. It embarrassed him to realize that the older reporter viewed him with something not far removed from hero worship.

I can get out of here, he repeated to himself. Write it up and tell Keith we're ready to use the letter.

2900 ordered crisply, "Fall in your squad. I'll get Pinocchio and meet you at the south gate."

"Right." He was suddenly seized with a desire to tell someone, even 2900, about the letter. Keith Thomas had it, and it was really only an undated note, but it was signed by a famous general at Corps Headquarters. Without explanation it directed that number 2910 be detached from his present assignment and placed under the temporary orders of Mr. K. Thomas, Accredited Correspondent. And Keith would use it any time he asked him to. In fact, he had wanted to on his last trip.

He could not remember giving the order, but the squad was falling in, lining up in the rain for his inspection almost as smartly as they had on the drill field back at the creche. He gave "At Ease" and looked them over while he outlined the objectives of the patrol. As always, their weapons were immaculate despite the dampness, their massive bodies ramrod-straight, their uniforms as clean as conditions permitted.

The L.A. Rams with guns, he thought proudly. Barking "On Phones," he flipped the switch on his helmet that would permit 2900 to knit him and the squad together with Pinocchio in a unified tactical unit. Another order and the HORARS deployed around Pinocchio with the smoothness of repeated drill, the wire closing the south gate was drawn back, and the patrol moved out.

With his turret retracted, Pinocchio the robot tank stood just three feet high, and he was no wider than an automobile; but he was as long as three, so that from a distance he had something of the look of a railroad flatcar. In the jungle his narrow front enabled him to slip between the trunks of the unconquerable giant hardwoods, and the power in his treads could flatten saplings and bamboo. Yet resilient organics and sintered metals had turned the rumble of the old, manned tanks to a soft hiss for Pinocchio. Where the jungle was free of undergrowth lie moved as silently as a hospital cart.

His immediate precursor had been named "Punch," apparently in the sort of simpering depreciation which found "Shillelagh" acceptable for a war rocket. "Punch"-a bust in the mouth.

But Punch, which like Pinocchio had possessed a computer brain and no need of a crew (or for that matter room for one except for an exposed vestigial seat on his deck), had required wires to communicate with the infantry around him. Radio had been tried, but the problems posed by static, jamming, and outright enemy forgery of instructions had been too much for Punch.

Then an improved model had done away with those wires and some imaginative officer had remembered that "Mr. Punch" had been a knockabout marionette-and the wireless

improvement was suddenly very easy to name. But, like Punch and its fairy-tale namesake, it was vulnerable if it went out into the world alone.

A brave man (and the Enemy had many) could hide himself until Pinocchio was within touching distance. And a well-instructed one could then place a hand grenade or a bottle of gasoline where it would destroy him. Pinocchio's three-inch-thick armor needed the protection of flesh, and since he cost as much as a small city and could (if properly protected) fight a regiment to a stand, he got it.

Two scouts from 2910's squad preceded him through the jungle, forming the point of the diamond. Flankers moved on either side of him "beating the bush" and, when it seemed advisable, firing a pattern of fletchettes into any suspicious-looking piece of undergrowth. Cheerful, reliable 2909, the assistant squad leader, with one other HORAR formed the rear guard. As patrol leader 2900's position was behind Pinocchio, and as squad leader 2910's was in front.

The jungle was quiet with an eerie stillness, and it was dark under the big trees. "Though I walk in the valley of the shadow ..."

Made tiny by the phones, 2900 squeaked in his ear, "Keep the left flankers farther out!" 2910 acknowledged and trotted over to put his own stamp on the correction, although the flankers, 2913, 2914, and 2915, had already heard it and were moving to obey. There was almost no chance of trouble this soon, but that was no excuse for a slovenly formation. As he squeezed between two trees something caught his eye and he halted for a moment to examine it. It was a skull; a skull of bone rather than a smooth HORAR skull of steel, and so probably an Enemy's.

A big "E" Enemy's, he thought to himself. A man to whom the normal HORAR conditioning of exaggerated respect bordering on worship did not apply.

Tiny and tinny, "Something holding you up, 2910?"  
"Be right there." He tossed the skull aside. A man whom even a HORAR could disobey; a man even a HORAR could kill. The skull had looked old, but it could not have been old. The ants would have picked it clean in a few days, and in a few weeks it would rot. But it was probably at least seventeen or eighteen years old.

The ornithocopter passed them on flapping wings, flying its own search pattern. The patrol went on.

Casually 2910 asked his helmet mike, "How far are we going? Far as the creek?"

2900's voice squeaked, "We'll work our way down the bank a quarter mile, then cut west," then with noticeable sarcasm added, "if that's okay with you?"

Unexpectedly Lieutenant Kyle's voice came over the phones. "S O's your second in command, 2900. He has a

duty to ke' himself informed of your plans."

But 2910, realizing that a real HORAR would not have asked the question, suddenly also realized that he knew more about HORARS than the company commander did. It was not surprising, he ate and slept with them in a way Kyle could not, but it was disquieting. He probably knew more than Brenner, strict biological mechanics excepted, as well.

The scouts had reported that they could see the sluggish jungle stream they called the creek when Lieutenant Kyle's voice came over the phones again. As routinely as he had delivered his mild rebuke to 2900 he announced, "Situation Red here. An apparent battalion-level attack hitting tl \u2022\u2022'".

North Point. Let's suck it back in, patrol."

Pinocchio swiveled 180 degrees by locking his right tread, and the squad turned in a clockwise circle around him. Kyle said distantly, "The recoillesses don't seem to have found the range yet, so I'm going out to give them a hand. Mr. Brenner will be holding down the radio for the next few minutes." 2900 transmitted, "We're on our way, sir." Then 2910 saw a burst of automatic weapon's fire cut his scouts down. In an instant the jungle was a pandemonium of sound.

Pinocchio's radar had traced the bullets back to their source and his main armament slammed a 155mm shell at it, but cross-fire was suddenly slicing in from all around them. The bullets striking Pinocchio's turret screamed away like damned souls. 2910 saw grenades arc out of nowhere and something struck his thigh with terrible force. He made himself say, "I'm hit, 2909; take the squad," before he looked at it. Mortar shells were dropping in now and if his assistant acknowledged, he did not hear.

A bit of jagged metal from a grenade or a mortar round had laid the thigh open, but apparently missed the big artery supplying the lower leg. There was no spurt, only a rapid welling of blood, and shock still held the injury numb. Forcing himself, he pulled apart the lips of the wound to make sure it was clear of foreign matter. It was very deep but the bone was not broken; at least so it seemed.

Keeping as low as he could, he used his trench knife to cut away the cloth of his trousers leg, then rigged a tourniquet with his belt. His aid packet contained a pad of gauze, and tape to hold it in place. When he had finished he lay still, holding his M-19 and looking for a spot where its fire might do some good. Pinocchio was firing his turret machine gun in routine bursts, sanitizing likely-looking patches of jungle; otherwise the fight seemed to have quieted down. 2900's voice in his ear called, "Wounded? We got any wounded?"

He managed to say, "Me. 2910." A HORAR would feel some pain, but not nearly as much as a man. He would have to fake the insensitivity as best he could. Suddenly it occurred to him that he would be invalidated out, would not have to use



the letter, and he was glad.

"We thought you bought it, 2910. Glad you're still around." Then Brenner's voice cutting through the transmission jumpy with panic: "We're being overrun here! Get the Pinocchio back at once."

In spite of his pain 2910 felt contempt. Only Brenner would say "the Pinocchio." 2900 sent, "Coming, sir," and unexpectedly was standing over him, lifting him up.

He tried to look around for the squad. "We lose many?"

"Four dead and you." Perhaps no other human would have detected the pain in 2900's harsh voice. "You can't walk with that, can you?"

"I couldn't keep up."

"You ride Pinocchio then." With surprising gentleness the platoon leader lifted him into the little seat the robot tank's director used when road speeds made running impractical. What was left of the squad formed a skirmish line ahead. As they began to trot forward he could hear 2900 calling, "Base camp! Base camp! What's your situation there, sir?"

"Lieutenant Kyle's dead," Brenner's voice came back. "3003 just came in and told me Kyle's dead!"

"Are you holding?"

"I don't know." More faintly 2910 could hear him asking,

"Are they holding, 3003?"

"Use the periscope, sir. Or if it still works, the bird." Brenner chattered, "I don't know if we're holding or not. 3003 was hit and now he's dead. I don't think he knew any way. You've got to hurry."

It was contrary to regulations, but 2910 nipped off his helmet phone to avoid hearing 2900's patient reply. With Brenner no longer gibbering in his ears he could hear not too distantly the sound of explosions which must be coming from the camp. Small-arms fire made an almost incessant buzz as a background for the whizz-bang! of incoming shells and the coughing of the camp's own mortars.

Then the jungle was past and the camp lay in front of them. Geysers of mud seemed to be erupting from it everywhere. The squad broke into a full run, and even while he rolled, Pinocchio was firing his 155 in support of the camp.

They faked us out, 2910 reflected. His leg throbbed painfully but distantly and he felt light-headed and dizzy-as though he were an ornithopter hovering in the misty rain over his own body. With the light-headedness came a strange clarity of mind.

They faked us out. They got us used to little probes that pulled off at sunrise, and then when we sent Pinocchio out

they were going to ambush us and take the camp. It suddenly occurred to him that he might find himself still on this exposed seat in the middle of the battle; they were already approaching the edge of the mine field, and the HORARS ahead were moving into squad column so as not to overlap the edges of the cleared lane. "Where are we going, Pinocchio?" he asked, then realized his phone was still off. He reactivated it and repeated the question.

Pinocchio droned, "Injured HORAR personnel will be delivered to the Command Post for Synthetic Biology Service attention," but 2910 was no longer listening. In front of them he could hear what sounded like fifty bugles signaling for another Enemy attack.

The south side of the triangular camp was deserted, as though the remainder of their platoon had been called away to reinforce the First and Second; but with the sweeping illogic of war there was no Enemy where they might have entered unresisted.

"Request assistance from Synthetic Biology Service for injured HORAR personnel," Pinocchio was saying. Talking did not interfere with his firing the 155, but when Brenner did not come out after a minute or more, 2910 managed to swing himself down, catching his weight on his good leg. Pinocchio rolled away at once.

The CP bunker was twisted out of shape, and he could see where several near-misses had come close to knocking it out completely. Brenner's white face appeared in the doorway as he was about to go in. "Who's that?"

"2910. I've been hit-let me come in and lie down."  
"They won't send us an air strike. I radioed for one and they say this whole part of the country's socked in; they say they wouldn't be able to find us."

"Get out of the door. I'm hit and I want to come in and lie down." At the last moment he remembered to add, "Sir."

Brenner moved reluctantly aside. It was dim in the bunker but not dark.

"You want me to look at that leg?"

2910 had found an empty stretcher, and he laid himself on it, moving awkwardly to keep from flexing his wound. "You don't have to," he said. "Look after some of the others." It wouldn't do for Brenner to begin poking around. Even rattled as he was he might notice something.

The SBS man went back to his radio instead. His frantic voice sounded remote and faint. It was ecstasy to lie down.

At some vast distance, voices were succeeding voices, argument meeting argument, far off. He wondered where he was.

Then he heard the guns and knew. He tried to roll onto

his side and at the second attempt managed to do it, although the light-headedness was worse than ever. 2893 was lying on the stretcher next to him, and 2893 was dead,

At the other end of the room, the end that was technically the CP, he could hear Brenner talking to 2900. "If there were a chance," Brenner was saying, "you know I'd do it. Platoon Leader."

"What's happening?" he asked. "What's the matter?" He was too dazed to keep up the HORAR role well, but neither of them noticed.

"It's a division," Brenner said. "A whole Enemy division. We can't hold off that kind of force."

He raised himself on his elbow. "What do you mean?"

"I talked to them ... I raised them on the radio, and it's a whole division. They got one of their officers who could speak English to talk to me. They want us to surrender."

"They say it's a division, sir," 2900 put in evenly,

2910 shook his head, trying to clear it. "Even if it were, with Pinocchio ..."

"The Pinocchio's gone."

2900 said soberly, "We tried to counterattack, 2910, and they knocked Pinocchio out and threw us back. How are you feeling?"

"They've got at least a division," Brenner repeated stubbornly.

2910's mind was racing now, but it was as if it were running endless wind sprints on a treadmill. Brenner were going to give up, 2900 would never even consider disobeying, no matter how much he might disagree. There were various ways, though, in which he could convince Brenner he was a human being-given time. And Brenner could, Brenner would, tell the Enemy, so that he too would be saved. Eventually the war would be over and he could go home. No one would blame him. If Brenner were going-

Brenner was asking, "How many effectives left?"

"Less than forty, sir." There was nothing in 2900's tone to indicate that a surrender meant certain death to him, but it was true. The Enemy took only human prisoners. (Could 2900 be convinced? Could he make any of the HORARS understand, when they had eaten and joked with him, knew no physiology, and thought all men not Enemy demigods? Would they believe him if he were to try to take command?)

He could see Brenner gnawing at his lower lip. "I'm going to surrender," the SBS man said at last. A big one, mortar or bombardment rocket, exploded near the CP, but he appeared not to notice it. There was a wondering, hesitant note

in his voice-as though he were still trying to accustom himself to the idea.

"Sir-" 2900 began.

"I forbid you to question my orders." The SBS man sounded firmer now. "But I'll ask them to make an exception this time, Platoon Leader. Not to do," his voice faltered slightly, "what they usually do to nonhumans."

"It's not that," 2900 said stolidly. "It's the folding up. We don't mind dying, sir, but we want to die fighting."

One of the wounded moaned, and 2910 wondered for a moment if he, like himself, had been listening.

Brenner's self-control snapped. "You'll die any damn way I tell you!"

"Wait." It was suddenly difficult for 2910 to talk, but he managed to get their attention. "2900, Mr. Brenner hasn't actually ordered you to surrender yet, and you're needed on the line. Go now and let me talk to him." He saw the HORAR leader hesitate and added, "He can reach you on your helmet phone if he wants to; but go now and fight."

With a jerky motion 2900 turned and ducked out the narrow bunker door. Brenner, taken by surprise, said, "What is it, 2910? What's gotten into you?"

He tried to rise, but he was too weak. "Come here, Mr. Brenner," he said. When the SBS man did not move he added, "I know a way out."

"Through the jungle?" Brenner scoffed in his shaken voice, "that's absurd." But he came. He leaned over the stretcher, and before he could catch his balance 2910 had pulled him down.

"What are you doing?"

"Can't you tell? That's the point of my trench knife you feel on your neck."

Brenner tried to struggle, then subsided when the pressure of the knife became too great. "You-can't-do this."

"I can. Because I'm not a HORAR. I'm a man, Brenner, and it's very important for you to understand that." He felt rather than saw the look of incredulity on Brenner's face. "I'm a reporter, and two years ago when the Simulations in this group were ready for activation I was planted among them. I trained with them and now I've fought with them, and if you've been reading the right magazine you must have seen some of the stories I've filed. And since you're a civilian too, with no more right to command than I have, I'm taking charge." He could sense Brenner's swallow.

"Those stories were frauds-it's a trick to gain public acceptance of the HORARS. Even back in Washington everybody in SBS knows about them."

The chuckle hurt, but 2910 chuckled. "Then why've I got this knife at your neck, Mr. Brenner?"

The SBS man was shaking. "Don't you see how it was, 2910? No human could live as a HORAR does, running miles without tiring and only sleeping a couple of hours a night, so we did the next best thing. Believe me, I was briefed on it all when I was assigned to this camp; I know all about you, 2910." "What do you mean?"

"Damn it, let me go. You're a HORAR, and you can't treat a human like this." He winced as the knife pressed cruelly against his throat, then blurted, "They couldn't make a reporter a HORAR, so they took a HORAR. They took you, 2910, and made you a reporter. They implanted all the memories of an actual man in your mind at the same time they ran the regular instinct tapes. They gave you a soul, if you like, but you are a HORAR."

"They must have thought that up as a cover for me, Brenner. That's what they told you so you wouldn't report it or try to deactivate me when I acted unlike the others. I'm a man."

"You couldn't be."

"People are tougher than you think, Brenner; you've never tried."

"I'm telling you-"

"Take the bandage off my leg."

"What?"

He pressed again with the point of the knife. "The bandage. Take it off."

When it was off he directed, "Now spread the lips of the wound." With shaking fingers Brenner did so. "You see the bone? Go deeper if you have to. What is it?"

Brenner twisted his neck to look at him directly, his eyes rolling. "It's stainless steel."

2910 looked then and saw the bright metal at the bottom of the cleft of bleeding flesh; the knife slid into Brenner's throat without resistance, almost as though it moved itself. He wiped the blade on Brenner's dead arm before he sheathed it.

Ten minutes later when 2900 returned to the CP he said nothing; but 2910 saw his eyes and knew that 2900 knew. From his stretcher he said, "You're in full command now."

2900 glanced again at Brenner's body. A second later he said slowly, "He was a sort of Enemy, wasn't he? Because he wanted to surrender, and Lieutenant Kyle would never have done that."

"Yes, he was."

"But I couldn't think of it that way while he was alive." 2900 looked at him thoughtfully. "You know, you have something, 2910. A spark. Something the rest of us lack." For a moment he fingered his chin with one huge hand. "That's why I made you a squad leader; that and to get you out of some work, because sometimes you couldn't seem to keep up. But you've that spark, somehow."

2910 said, "I know. How is it out there?"

"We're still holding. How do you feel?"

"Dizzy. There's a sort of black stuff all around the sides when I see. Listen, will you tell me something, if you can, before you go?"

"Of course."

"If a human's leg is broken very badly, what I believe they call a compound spiral fracture, is it possible for the human doctors to take out a section of the bone and replace it with a metal substitute?"

"I don't know," 2900 answered. "What does it matter?"

Vaguely 2910 said, "I think I knew of a football player once they did that to. At least, I seem now to remember it ... I had forgotten for a moment."

Outside the bugles were blowing again.  
Near him the dying HORAR moaned.

An American news magazine sometimes carries, just inside its front cover among the advertisements, a column devoted to news of its own people. Two weeks after a correspondent named Thomas filed the last article of a series which had attracted national and even international attention, the following item appeared there:

The death of a staffer in war is no unique occurrence in the history of this publication, but there is a particular poignancy about that of the young man whose stories, paradoxically, to conceal his number have been signed only with his name (see PRESS). The airborne relief force, which arrived too late to save the camp at which he had resigned his humanity to work and fight, reports that he apparently died assisting the assigned SBS specialist in caring for the creatures whose lot he had, as nearly as a human can, made his own. Both he and the specialist were bayoneted when the camp was overrun.

\*\*\*

258

The Detective of Dreams

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I WAS writing in my office in the rue Madeleine when Andree, my secretary, announced the arrival of Herr D\_\_. I rose, put away my correspondence, and offered him my hand. He was, I should say, just short of fifty, had the high, clear complexion characteristic of those who in youth (now unhappily past for both of us) have found more pleasure in the company of horses and dogs and the excitement of the chase than in the bottles and bordels of city life, and wore a beard and mustache of the style popularized by the late emperor. Accepting my invitation to a chair, he showed me his papers.

"You see," he said, "I am accustomed to acting as the representative of my government. In this matter I hold no such position, and it is possible that I feel a trifle lost."

"Many people who come here feel lost," I said. "But it is my boast that I find most of them again. Your problem, I take it, is purely a private matter?"

"Not at all. It is a public matter in the truest sense of the words."

"Yet none of the documents before me-admirably stamped, sealed, and beribboned though they are-indicates that you are other than a private gentleman traveling abroad. And you say you do not represent your government. What am I to think? What is this matter?"

"I act in the public interest," Herr D\_\_ told me. "My fortune is not great, but I can assure you that in the event of your success you will be well recompensed; although you are to take it that I alone am your principal, yet there are substantial resources available to me."

"Perhaps it would be best if you described the problem to me?"

"You are not averse to travel?"

"No."

"Very well then," he said, and so saying launched into one of the most astonishing relations-no, the most astonishing relation-I have ever been privileged to hear. Even I, who had at first hand the account of the man who found Paulette Renan with the quince seed still lodged in her throat; who had received Captain Brotte's testimony concerning his finds amid the antarctic ice; who had heard the history of the woman called Joan O'Neil, who lived for two years behind a painting of herself in the Louvre, from her own lips-even I sat like a child while this man spoke.

When he fell silent, I said, "Herr D\_\_, after all you have told me, I would accept this mission though there were not a sou to be made from it. Perhaps once in a lifetime one comes across a case that must be pursued for its own sake;

I think I have found mine."

He leaned forward and grasped my hand with a warmth of feeling that was, I believe, very foreign to his usual nature. "Find and destroy the Dream-Master," he said, "and you shall sit upon a chair of gold, if that is your wish, and eat from a table of gold as well. When will you come to our country?"

"Tomorrow morning," I said. "There are one or two arrangements I must make here before I go."

"I am returning tonight. You may call upon me at any time, and I will apprise you of new developments." He handed me a card. "I am always to be found at this address-if not I, then one who is to be trusted, acting in my behalf."

"I understand."

"This should be sufficient for your initial expenses. You may call on me should you require more." The cheque he gave me as he turned to leave represented a comfortable fortune.

I waited until he was nearly out the door before saying, "I thank you, Herr Baron." To his credit, he did not turn; but I had the satisfaction of seeing a red flush rising above the precise white line of his collar before the door closed.

Andree entered as soon as he had left. "Who was that man? When you spoke to him-just as he was stepping out of your office-he looked as if you had struck him with a whip."

"He will recover," I told her. "He is the Baron H\_\_, of the secret police of K\_\_. D\_\_ was his mother's name. He assumed that because his own desk is a few hundred kilometers from mine, and because he does not permit his likeness to appear in the daily papers, I would not know him;

but it was necessary, both for the sake of his opinion of me and my own of myself, that he should discover that I am not so easily deceived. When he recovers from his initial irritation, he will retire tonight with greater confidence in the abilities I will devote to the mission he has entrusted to me."

"It is typical of you, monsieur," Andree said kindly, "that you are concerned that your clients sleep well."

Her pretty cheek tempted me, and I pinched it. "I am concerned," I replied; "but the Baron will not sleep well."

My train roared out of Paris through meadows sweet with wild flowers, to penetrate mountain passes in which the danger of avalanches was only just past. The glitter of rushing water, sprung from on high, was everywhere; and when the express slowed to climb a grade, the song of water was everywhere too, water running and shouting down the gray rocks of the Alps. I fell asleep that night with the descant of that icy purity sounding through the plainsong of the rails, and I woke in the station of I\_\_, the old capital of J\_\_, now



a province of K\_\_.

I engaged a porter to convey my trunk to the hotel where I had made reservations by telegraph the day before, and amused myself for a few hours by strolling about the city. Here I found the Middle Ages might almost be said to have remained rather than lingered. The city wall was complete on three sides, with its merloned towers in repair; and the cobbled streets surely dated from a period when wheeled traffic of any kind was scarce. As for the buildings-Puss in Boots and his friends must have loved them dearly: there were bulging walls and little panes of bull's-eye glass, and overhanging upper floors one above another until the structures seemed unbalanced as tops. Upon one grey old pile with narrow windows and massive doors, I found a plaque informing me that though it had been first built as a church, it had been successively a prison, a customhouse, a private home, and a school. I investigated further, and discovered it was now an arcade, having been divided, I should think at about the time of the first Louis, into a multitude of dank little stalls. Since it was, as it happened, one of the addresses mentioned by Baron H\_\_, I went in.

Gas flared everywhere, yet the interior could not have been said to be well lit-each jet was sullen and secretive, as if the proprietor in whose cubicle it was located wished it to light none but his own wares. These cubicles were in no order;

'sor could I find any directory or guide to lead me to the one I sought. A few customers, who seemed to have visited the place for years, so that they understood where everything was, drifted from one display to the next. When they arrived at each, the proprietor came out, silent (so it seemed to me) as a specter, ready to answer questions or accept a payment; but I never heard a question asked, or saw any money tendered-the customer would finger the edge of a kitchen knife, or hold a garment up to her own shoulders, or turn the pages of some moldering book; and then put the thing down again, and go away.

At last, when I had tired of peeping into alcoves lined with booths still gloomier than the ones on the main concourse outside, I stopped at a leather merchant's and asked the man to direct me to Fraulein A\_\_.

"I do not know her," he said.

"I am told on good authority that her business is conducted in this building, and that she buys and sells antiques."

"We have several antique dealers here. Herr M\_\_-"

"I am searching for a young woman. Has your Her?"

M\_\_ a niece or a cousin?"

"-handles chairs and chests, largely. Herr O\_\_, near the guildhall-"

"It is within this building."

"-stocks pictures, mostly. A few mirrors. What is it you wish to buy?"

At this point we were interrupted, mercifully, by a woman from the next booth. "He wants Fraulein A\_\_. Out of here, and to your left; past the wigmaker's, then right to the stationer's, then left. again. She sells old lace."

I found the place at last, and sitting at the very back of her booth Fraulein A\_\_ herself, a pretty, slender, timid-looking young woman. Her merchandise was spread on two tables;

I pretended to examine it and found that it was not old lace she sold but old clothing, much of it trimmed with lace. After a few moments she rose and came out to talk to me, saying, "If you could tell me what you require? . . ." She was taller than I had anticipated, and her flaxen hair would have been very attractive if it were ever released from the tight braids coiled round her head.

"I am only looking. Many of these are beautiful-are they expensive?"

"Not for what you get. The one you are holding is only fifty marks."

"That seems like a great deal."

"They are the fine dresses of long ago-for visiting, or going to the ball. The dresses of wealthy women of aristocratic taste. All are like new; I will not handle anything else. Look at the seams in that one you hold, the tiny stitches all done by hand. Those were the work of dressmakers who created only four or five in a year, and worked twelve and fourteen hours a day, sewing at the first light, and continuing under the lamp, past midnight."

I said, "I see that you have been crying, Fraulein. Their lives were indeed miserable, though no doubt there are people today who suffer equally."

"No doubt there are," the young woman said. "I, however, am not one of them." And she turned away so that I should not see her tears.

"I was informed otherwise."

She whirled about to face me. "You know him? Oh, tell him I am not a wealthy woman, but I will pay whatever I can. Do you really know him?"

"No." I shook my head. "I was informed by your own police."

She stared at me. "But you are an outlander. So is he, I think."

"Ah, we progress. Is there another chair in the rear of your booth? Your police are not above going outside your own country for help, you see, and we should have a little

talk."

"They are not our police," the young woman said bitterly, "but I will talk to you. The truth is that I would sooner talk to you, though you are French. You will not tell them that?"

I assured her that I would not; we borrowed a chair from the flower stall across the corridor, and she poured forth her story.

"My father died when I was very small. My mother opened this booth to earn our living—old dresses that had belonged to her own mother were the core of her original stock. She died two years ago, and since that time I have taken charge of our business and used it to support myself. Most of my sales are to collectors and theatrical companies. I do not make a great deal of money, but I do not require a great deal, and I have managed to save some. I live alone at Number 877 \_\_strasse; it is an old house divided into six apartments, and mine is the gable apartment."

"You are young and charming," I said, "and you tell me you have a little money saved. I am surprised you are not married."

"Many others have said the same thing."

"And what did you tell them, Fraulein?"

"To take care of their own affairs. They have called me a man-hater—Frau G\_\_, who has the confections in the next corridor but two, called me that because I would not receive her son. The truth is that I do not care for people of either sex, young or old. If I want to live by myself and keep my own things to myself, is not it my right to do so?"

"I am sure it is; but undoubtedly it has occurred to you that this person you fear so much may be a rejected suitor who is taking his revenge on you."

"But how could he enter and control my dreams?"

"I do not know, Fraulein. It is you who say that he does these things."

"I should remember him, I think, if he had ever called on me. As it is, I am quite certain I have seen him somewhere, but I cannot recall where. Still . . ."

"Perhaps you had better describe your dream to me. You have the same one again and again, as I understand it?"

"Yes. It is like this. I am walking down a dark road. I am both frightened and pleasurably excited, if you know what I mean. Sometimes I walk for a long time, sometimes for what seems to be only a few moments. I think there is moonlight, and once or twice I have noticed stars. Anyway, there is a high, dark hedge, or perhaps a wall, on my right. There are fields to the left, I believe. Eventually I reach a gate of iron bars, standing open—it's not a large gate for wagons or car-

riages, but a small one, so narrow I can hardly get through. Have you read the writings of Dr. Freud of Vienna? One of the women here mentioned once that he had written concerning dreams, and so I got them from the library, and if I were a man I am sure he would say that entering that gate meant sexual commerce. Do you think I might have unnatural leanings?" Her voice had dropped to a whisper. "Have you ever felt such desires?" "Oh, no. Quite the reverse."

"Then I doubt it very much," I said. "Go on with your dream. How do you feel as you pass through the gate?"

"As I did when walking down the road, but more so- more frightened, and yet happy and excited. Triumphant, in a way." "Go on."

"I am in the garden now. There are fountains playing, and nightingales singing in the willows. The air smells of lilies, and a cherry tree in blossom looks like a giantess in her bridal gown. I walk on a straight, smooth path; I think it must be paved with marble chips, because it is white in the moonlight. Ahead of me is the Schloss-a great building. There is music coming from inside." "What sort of music?"

"Magnificent-joyous, if you know what I am trying to say, but not the tinklings of a theater orchestra. A great symphony. I have never been to the opera at Bayreuth; but I think it must be like that-yet a happy, quick tune." She paused, and for an instant her smile recovered the remembered music. "There are pillars, and a grand entrance, with broad steps. I run up-I am so happy to be there-and throw open the door. It is brightly lit inside; a wave of golden light, almost like a wave from the ocean, strikes me. The room is a great hall, with a high ceiling. A long table is set in the middle and there are hundreds of people seated at it, but one place, the one nearest me, is empty. I cross to it and sit down; there are beautiful golden loaves on the table, and bowls of honey with roses floating at their centers, and crystal carafes of wine, and many other good things I cannot remember when I awake. Everyone is eating and drinking and talking, and I begin to eat too."

I said, "It is only a dream, Fraulein. There is no reason to weep."

"I dream this each night-I have dreamed so every night for months."

"Go on."

"Then he comes. I am sure he is the one who is causing me to dream like this because I can see his face clearly, and remember it when the dream is over. Sometimes it is very vivid for an hour or more after I wake-so vivid that I have only to close my eyes to see it before me."

"I will ask you to describe him in detail later. For the pres-

ent, continue with your dream."

"He is tall, and robed like a king, and there is a strange crown on his head. He stands beside me, and though he says nothing, I know that the etiquette of the place demands that I rise and face him. I do this. Sometimes I am sucking my ringers as I get up from his table."

"He owns the dream palace, then."

"Yes, I am sure of that. It is his castle, his home; he is my host. I stand and face him, and I am conscious of wanting very much to please him, but not knowing what it is I should do."

"That must be painful."

"It is. But as I stand there, I become aware of how I am clothed, and-"

"How are you clothed?"

"As you see me now. In a plain, dark dress-the dress I wear here at the arcade. But the others-all up and down the hall, all up and down the table-are wearing the dresses I sell here. These dresses." She held one up for me to see, a beautiful creation of many layers of lace, with buttons of polished jet. "I know then that I cannot remain; but the king signals to the others, and they seize me and push me toward the door."

"You are humiliated then?"

"Yes, but the worst thing is that I am aware that he knows that I could never drive myself to leave, and he wishes to spare me the struggle. But outside-some terrible beast has entered the garden. I smell it-like the hyena cage at the Tiergarten-as the door opens. And then I wake up."

"It is a harrowing dream."

"You have seen the dresses I sell. Would you credit it that for weeks I slept in one, and then another, and then another of them?"

"You reaped no benefit from that?"

"No. In the dream I was clad as now. For a time I wore the dresses always-even here to the stall, and when I bought food at the market. But it did no good."

"Have you tried sleeping somewhere else?"

"With my cousin who lives on the other side of the city. That made no difference. I am certain that this man I see is a real man. He is in my dream, and the cause of it; but he is not sleeping."

"Yet you have never seen him when you are awake?"  
She paused, and I saw her bite at her full lower lip. "I am certain I have."

"Ah!"

"But I cannot remember when. Yet I am sure I have seen him-that I have passed him in the street."

"Think! Does his face associate itself in your mind with some particular section of the city?"

She shook her head.

When I left her at last, it was with a description of the Dream-Master less precise than I had hoped, though still detailed. It tallied in almost all respects with the one given me by Baron H\_\_; but that proved nothing, since the baron's description might have been based largely on Fraulein

The bank of Herr R\_\_ was a private one, as all the greatest banks in Europe are. It was located in what had once been the town house of some noble family (their arms, overgrown now with ivy, were still visible above the door) and bore no identification other than a small brass plate engraved with the names of Herr R\_\_ and his partners. Within, the atmosphere was more dignified-even if, perhaps, less tasteful-than it could possibly have been in the noble family's time. Dark pictures in gilded frames lined the walls, and the clerks sat at inlaid tables upon chairs upholstered in tapestry. When I asked for Herr R\_\_, I was told that it would be impossible to see him that afternoon; I sent in a note with a sidelong allusion to "unquiet dreams," and within five minutes I was ushered into a luxurious office that must once have been the bedroom of the head of the household.

Herr R\_\_ was a large man-tall, and heavier (I thought) than his physician was likely to have approved. He appeared to be about fifty; there was strength in his wide, fleshy face; his high forehead and capacious cranium suggested intellect;

and his small, dark eyes, forever flickering as they took in the appearance of my person, the expression of my face, and the position of my hands and feet, ingenuity.

No pretense was apt to be of service with such a man, and I told him flatly that I had come as the emissary of Baron H\_\_, that I knew what troubled him, and that if he would cooperate with me I would help him if I could.

"I know you, monsieur," he said, "by reputation. A business with which I am associated employed you three years ago in the matter of a certain mummy." He named the firm. "I should have thought of you myself."

"I did not know that you were connected with them."

"I am not, when you leave this room. I do not know what reward Baron H\_\_ has offered you should you apprehend the man who is oppressing me, but I will give you, in addition to that, a sum equal to that you were paid for the mummy. You should be able to retire to the south then, should you

choose, with the rent of a dozen villas."

"I do not choose," I told him, "and I could have retired long before. But what you just said interests me. You are certain that your persecutor is a living man?"

"I know men." Herr R\_\_\_ leaned back in his chair and stared at the painted ceiling. "As a boy I sold stuffed cabbage-leaf rolls in the street-did you know that? My mother cooked them over wood she collected herself where buildings were being demolished, and I sold them from a little cart for her. I lived to see her with half a score of footmen and the finest house in Lindau. I never went to school; I learned to add and subtract in the streets-when I must multiply and divide I have my clerk do it. But I learned men. Do you think that now, after forty years of practice, I could be deceived by a phantom? No, he is a man-let me confess it, a stronger man than I-a man of flesh and blood and brain, a man I have seen somewhere, sometime, here in this city-and more than once."

"Describe him."

"As tall as I. Younger-perhaps thirty or thirty-five. A brown, forked beard, so long." (He held his hand about fifteen centimeters beneath his chin.) "Brown hair. His hair is not yet grey, but I think it may be thinning a little at the temples."

"Don't you remember?"

"In my dream he wears a garland of roses-I cannot be sure."

"Is there anything else? Any scars or identifying marks?"

Herr R\_\_\_ nodded. "He has hurt his hand. In my dream, when he holds out his hand for the money, I see blood in it-it is his own, you understand, as though a recent injury had reopened and was beginning to bleed again. His hands are long and slender-like a pianist's."

"Perhaps you had better tell me your dream."

"Of course." He paused, and his face clouded, as though to recount the dream were to return to it. "I am in a great house. I am a person of importance there, almost as though I were the owner; yet I am not the owner-"

"Wait," I interrupted. "Does this house have a banquet hall? Has it a pillared portico, and is it set in a garden?"

For a moment Herr R\_\_\_'s eyes widened. "Have you also had such dreams?"

"No," I said. "It is only that I think I have heard of this house before. Please continue."

"There are many servants-some work in the fields beyond the garden. I give instructions to them-the details differ

each night, you understand. Sometimes I am concerned with the kitchen, sometimes with the livestock, sometimes with the draining of a field. We grow wheat, principally, it seems; but there is a vineyard too, and a kitchen garden. And of course the house itself must be cleaned and swept and kept in repair. There is no wife; the owner's mother lives with us, I think, but she does not much concern herself with the housekeeping-that is up to me. To tell the truth, I have never actually seen her, though I have the feeling that she is there."

"Does this house resemble the one you bought for your own mother in Lindau?"

"Only as one large house must resemble another."

"I see. Proceed."

"For a long time each night I continue like that, giving orders, and sometimes going over the accounts. Then a servant, usually it is a maid, arrives to tell me that the owner wishes to speak to me. I stand before a mirror-I can see myself there as plainly as I see you now-and arrange my clothing. The maid brings rose-scented water and a cloth, and I wipe my face; then I go in to him.

"He is always in one of the upper rooms, seated at a table with his own account book spread before him. There is an open window behind him, and through it I can see the top of a cherry tree in bloom. For a long time-oh, I suppose ten minutes-I stand before him while he turns over the pages of his ledger."

"You appear somewhat at a loss, Herr R\_\_-not a common condition for you, I believe. What happens then?"

"He says, 'You owe . . .' " Herr R\_\_ paused. "That is the problem, monsieur, I can never recall the amount. But it is a large sum. He says, 'And I must require that you make payment at once.'

"I do not have the amount, and I tell him so. He says, 'Then you must leave my employment.' I fall to my knees at this and beg that he will retain me, pointing out that if he dismisses me I will have lost my source of income, and will never be able to make payment. I do not enjoy telling you this, but I weep. Sometimes I beat the floor with my fists."

"Continue. Is the Dream-Master moved by your pleading?"

"No. He again demands that I pay the entire sum. Several times I have told him that I am a wealthy man in this world, and that if only he would permit me to make payment in its currency, I would do so immediately."

"That is interesting-most of us lack your presence of mind in our nightmares. What does he say then?"

"Usually he tells me not to be a fool. But once he said,



'That is a dream-you must know it by now. You cannot expect to pay a real debt with the currency of sleep.' He holds out his hand for the money as he speaks to me. It is then that I see the blood in his palm."

"You are afraid of him?"

"Oh, very much so. I understand that he has the most complete power over me. I weep, and at last I throw myself at his feet-with my head under the table, if you can credit it, crying like an infant.

"Then he stands and pulls me erect, and says, 'You would never be able to pay all you owe, and you are a false and dishonest servant. But your debt is forgiven, forever.' And as I watch, he tears a leaf from his account book and hands it to me."

"Your dream has a happy conclusion, then."

"No. It is not yet over. I thrust the paper into the front of my shirt and go out, wiping my face on my sleeve. I am conscious that if any of the other servants should see me, they will know at once what has happened. I hurry to reach my own counting room; there is a brazier there, and I wish to burn the page from the owner's book,"

"I see."

"But just outside the door of my own room, I meet another servant-an upper-servant like myself, I think, since he is well dressed. As it happens, this man owes me a considerable sum of money, and to conceal from him what I have just endured, I demand that he pay at once." Herr R-- rose from his chair and began to pace the room, looking sometimes at the painted scenes on the walls, sometimes at the Turkish carpet at his feet. "I have had reason to demand money like that often, you understand. Here in this room.

"The man falls to his knees, weeping and begging for additional time; but I reach down, like this, and seize him by the throat."

"And then?"

"And then the door of my counting room opens. But it is not my counting room with my desk and the charcoal brazier, but the owner's own room. He is standing in the doorway, and behind him I can see the open window, and the blossoms of the cherry tree."

"What does he say to you?"

"Nothing. He says nothing to me. I release the other man's throat, and he slinks away."

"You awaken then?"

"How can I explain it? Yes, I wake up. But first we stand there; and while we do I am conscious of... certain sounds."  
"If it is too painful for you, you need not say more."

Herr R\_\_ drew a silk handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face. "How can I explain?" he said again. "When I hear those sounds, I am aware that the owner possesses certain other servants, who have never been under my direction. It is as though I have always known this, but had no reason to think of it before."

"I understand."

"They are quartered in another part of the house—in the vaults beneath the wine cellar, I think sometimes. I have never seen them, but I know—then—that they are hideous, vile and cruel; I know too that he thinks me but little better than they, and that as he permits me to serve him, so he allows them to serve him also. I stand—we stand—and listen to them coming through the house. At last a door at the end of the hall begins to swing open. There is a hand like the paw of some filthy reptile on the latch."

"Is that the end of the dream?"

"Yes." Herr R\_\_ threw himself into his chair again, mopping his face.

"You have this experience each night?"

"It differs," he said slowly, "in some details."

"You have told me that the orders you give the under-servants vary."

"There is another difference. When the dreams began, I

woke when the hinges of the door at the passage-end creaked. Each night now the dream endures a moment longer. Perhaps a tenth of a second. Now I see the arm of the creature who opens that door, nearly to the elbow."

I took the address of his home, which he was glad enough to give me, and leaving the bank made my way to my hotel.

When I had eaten my roll and drunk my coffee the next morning, I went to the place indicated by the card given me by Baron H\_\_, and in a few minutes was sitting with him in a room as bare as those tents from which armies in the field are cast into battle. "You are ready to begin the case this morning?" he asked.

"On the contrary. I have already begun; indeed, I am about to enter a new phase of my investigation. You would not have come to me if your Dream-Master were not torturing someone other than the people whose names you gave me. I wish to know the identity of that person, and to interrogate him."

"I told you that there were many other reports. I—"

"Provided me with a list. They are all of the petite bourgeoisie, when they are not persons still less important. I believed at first that it might be because of the urgings of Herr R\_\_ that you engaged me; but when I had time to reflect on what I know of your methods, I realized that you would have demanded that he provide my fee had that been the case. So you are sheltering someone of greater importance, and I wish to speak to him."

"The Countess-" Baron H\_\_ began.

"Ah!"

"The Countess herself has expressed some desire that you should be presented to her. The Count opposes it."

"We are speaking, I take it, of the governor of this province?"

The Baron nodded. "Of Count von V\_\_. He is responsible, you understand, only to the Queen Regent herself."

"Very well. I wish to hear the Countess, and she wishes to talk with me. I assure you, Baron, that we will meet; the only question is whether it will be under your auspices."

The Countess, to whom I was introduced that afternoon, was a woman in her early twenties, deep-breasted and somer-haired, with skin like milk, and great dark eyes welling with fear and (I thought) pity, set in a perfect oval face.

"I am glad you have come, monsieur. For seven weeks now our good Baron H\_\_ has sought this man for me, but he has not found him."

"If I had known my presence here would please you, Countess, I would have come long ago, whatever the obstacles. You then, like the others, are certain it is a real man we seek?"

"I seldom go out, monsieur. My husband feels we are in constant danger of assassination."

"I believe he is correct."

"But on state occasions we sometimes ride in a glass coach to the Rathaiis. There are uhlands all around us to protect us then. I am certain that-before the dreams began-I saw the face of this man in the crowd."

"Very well. Now tell me your dream."

"I am here, at home-"

"In this palace, where we sit now?"

She nodded.

"That is a new feature, then. Continue, please."

"There is to be an execution. In the garden." A fleeting smile crossed the Countess's lovely face. "I need not tell you that that is not where the executions are held; but it does not seem strange to me when I dream.

"I have been away, I think, and have only just heard of what is to take place. I rush into the garden. The man Baron H\_\_ calls the Dream-Master is there, tied to the trunk of the big cherry tree; a squad of soldiers faces him, holding

their rifles; their officer stands beside them with his saber drawn, and my husband is watching from a pace or two away. I call out for them to stop, and my husband turns to look at me. I say: 'You must not do it, Karl. You must not kill this man.' But I see by his expression that he believes that I am only a foolish, tender-hearted child. Karl is ... several years older than I."

"I am aware of it."

"The Dream-Master turns his head to look at me. People tell me that my eyes are large-do you think them large, monsieur?"

"Very large, and very beautiful."

"In my dream, quite suddenly, his eyes seem far, far larger than mine, and far more beautiful; and in them I see reflected the figure of my husband. Please listen carefully now, because what I am going to say is very important, though it makes very little sense, I am afraid."

"Anything may happen in a dream. Countess."

"When I see my husband reflected in this man's eyes, I know-I cannot say how-that it is this reflection, and not the man who stands near me, who is the real Karl. The man I have thought real is only a reflection of that reflection. Do you follow what I say?"

I nodded. "I believe so."

"I plead again: 'Do not kill him. Nothing good can come of it . . .' My husband nods to the officer, the soldiers raise their rifles, and . . . and . . ."

"You wake. Would you like my handkerchief. Countess? It is of coarse weave; but it is clean, and much larger than your own."

"Karl is right-I am only a foolish little girl. No, monsieur,

I do not wake-not yet. The soldiers fire. The Dream-Master falls forward, though his bonds hold him to the tree. And Karl flies to bloody rags beside me."

On my way back to my hotel, I purchased a map of the city; and when I reached my room I laid it flat on the table there. There could be no question of the route of the Countess's glass coach-straight down the Hauptstrasse, the only street in the city wide enough to take a carriage surrounded by cavalrymen. The most probable route by which Herr R\_\_ might go from his house to his bank coincided with the Hauptstrasse for several blocks. The path Fraulcin A\_\_ would travel from her flat to the arcade crossed the Hauptstrasse at a point contained by that interval. I needed to know no more.

Very early the next morning I took up my post at the intersection. If my man were still alive after the fusillade

Count von V\_\_ fired at him each night, it seemed certain that he would appear at this spot within a few days, and I am hardened to waiting. I smoked cigarettes while I watched the citizens of I\_\_ walk up and down before me. When an hour had passed, I bought a newspaper from a vendor, and stole a few glances at its pages when foot traffic was light.

Gradually I became aware that I was watched—we boast of reason, but there are senses over which reason holds no authority. I did not know where my watcher was, yet I felt his gaze on me, whichever way I turned. So, I thought, you know me, my friend. Will I too dream now? What has attracted your attention to a mere foreigner, a stranger, waiting for who-knows-what at this corner? Have you been talking to Fraulein A\_\_? Or to someone who has spoken with her?

Without appearing to do so, I looked up and down both streets in search of another loungeur like myself. There was no one—not a drowsing grandfather, not a woman or a child, not even a dog. Certainly no tall man with a forked beard and piercing eyes. The windows then—I studied them all, looking for some movement in a dark room behind a seemingly innocent opening. Nothing.

Only the buildings behind me remained. I crossed to the opposite side of the Hauptstrasse and looked once more.

Then I laughed.

They must have thought me mad, all those dour burghers, for I fairly doubled over, spitting my cigarette to the sidewalk and clasping my hands to my waist for fear my belt would burst. The presumption, the impudence, the brazen insolence of the fellow! The stupidity, the wonderful stupidity of myself, who had not recognized his old stories! For the remainder of my life now, I could accept any case with pleasure, pursue the most inept criminal with zest, knowing that there was always a chance he might outwit such an idiot as I.

For the Dream-Master had set up His own picture, and full-length and in the most gorgeous colors, in His window. Choking and spluttering I saluted it, and then, still filled with laughter, I crossed the street once more and went inside, where I knew I would find Him. A man awaited me there—not the one I sought, but one who understood Whom it was I had come for, and knew as well as I that His capture was beyond any thief-taker's power. I knelt, and there, though not to the satisfaction I suppose of Baron H--, Fraulein A\_\_, Herr R\_\_, and the Count and Countess von V\_\_, I destroyed the Dream-Master as He has been sacrificed so often, devouring His white, wheaten flesh that we might all possess life without end.  
Dear people, dream on.

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279

Peritonitis

"Peritonitis" copyright 1973 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in Tomorrow's Alternatives edited by Roger Elwood.

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Now this is the story Greylock told before the Men of the Neck were scattered forever, before the great exodus and the wandering in the cold lands of hunger. Once (so said Greylock, my father's mother heard him) the Men of the Neck ruled all the World and were all the world, and there was nothing between Heel and Finger-tip that was not theirs. In those times a virgin might dine at the Calf and drink at the Eyes and sleep where she would and none would harm her. Then every man said "Brother" or "Sister" when he met a child, and the old were respected. How many were born in those times, and lived each moment of life in those times, and dying rolled away, and never dreamed that the World would not be thus forever? Who can say? Their spirits have gone to the Hair. The dark followed the light for them, and the wettings came and some perished; but this, as all knew, was good lest the People wax too great.

I myself was born into lesser times, but even so not until even those lesser days were nearly ended. I tell you this that you may remember, and know in your despair that God has in times past been good. All is his, all belongs to him alone.

Never in the coming time shall you say among yourselves that he has robbed you-what he takes is his; it cannot be otherwise.

No man can now comprehend the joy of those times. There was no bad food anywhere; every morsel was filled with strength, and a happiness indescribable. When the old-yes, even as I am now-ate of that meat their backs straightened and their eyes grew bright; then the grandsire of a thousand might take the goodwife beneath the shade of some soft roof.

And the children of those first times ate, and eating danced in the light, and sang songs that came to them as they sang, one word following another, and played a score of merry games now forgotten; games that grandmothers only mumbled of, forgetting both the names and the rules, even when I myself was but a child; games of running, jumping, hiding and finding, games of hopping, climbing, and singing; games of holding hands in chains.

Again I say, none now can know the joy of those times, and the greatest of them was this-that every man and woman saw, as light came and dark, then light again, and time grew heavy upon them, that that World that was their children's children's waxed.

You do not believe me. Ah, there is no blame in that to you. How could you, who have seen it wane all your lives, yes, and heard your fathers say that it has waned all theirs? But it was true-larger it grew and fairer, the warmth increasing. Then those we call still the New Mountains first

began to grow, lifting, very gently then, their slopes above the level plain.

At that time there came a change to the nature of the meat, and none (so have I heard) could well prove whether it was for good or ill-nor can I now say. Happiness it brought indeed, but in that happiness there were a thousand sorrows; yet it was said by many, weeping, that it was a sweeter joy. Then the eaters sang not, but chanted, making of the old, mouth-smoothed words new and unfamiliar things, chants that brought happiness or tears or terror even to those who fasted. And this was called the second age, and it was the time of counterpoint and dreams.

That time too passed. Of the third age what is th' to say? You have heard its story already too often. The New Mountains were mighty then, and there came upon all who ate a fever of clean lust that wiped away everything that had gone before. It was then-so I deem it-that the oneness of the People was broken, never in truth to come again. For by twos and threes and fives all but the youngest children drew apart, and those that returned to the gatherings stayed but a little time. At that time if at any the love-promisings that are older than the People were kept: for many a pair dallied all a dark away, and a light too, feasting enough to have fattened a dozen save that love kept them lean.

With the age of New Food that time ended. From the summit of each New Mountain, grown now until they rivaled the Haunches, there broke forth a spring; and the waters of those springs were not clear as the waters of the Eyes are, but white, and sweet. Many a one climbed the New Mountains then to taste of them, though they flowed less than a lifetime. This was the fourth age, and the end of the beginning. For when those springs died the New Mountains waned; and the Belly, which had, scarcely noted, waxed above the Loins, withered in one dark.

Then many felt their doom upon them; this feeling was in the meat, so it was said-but in the air as well. The World was smaller. Then came the Sundering. Some said there was no God; and we, the Men of the Neck, drove them for their blasphemy beyond the New Mountains toward the Loins. Others said that the World itself was God; and these, a fierce and a terrible people, climbed to the Face. Then did we name ourselves Men of the Neck, but beyond our boasting we feared-for though the Men of the Loins might drink there of impure waters, we must needs reach the Eyes when we could eat no more without drinking, and we feared that those above us would prevent us. A few, brave and fleet, ventured first, daring the Spirit Forests to come to the lakes from the north, and returning by the same troubled path. But return they did, and others after them, until we came in time to know that those whom we feared had left all the lands of light to dwell in the Mouth, where-they said-the waters at times possessed a quality magical and ineffable. They spoke of the third age, and the second and the first-all these, they said, had returned not in the meat, but in the waters of the Mouth. With these avowals they taunted us, flinging at us jagged stones fallen from the Teeth. But we saw that, how-

ever fierce, they were few; and when we questioned them, shouting from a distance, they would not reply.

It was at this time that Deepdelver's woman Singing was stolen by a Man of the Face, and into those times I was born-yes, I saw them, with these same eyes that behold you now, remembering them in the time I was a child.

Deepdelver was not stronger than other men, nor swifter; and others there were who were cleverer than he. Why then was he counted a hero when they were not? This was the question I put to my parents; and the answer they gave was that he had done a wonderful thing, going to Everdark to bring back the woman he loved; but that reply was no answer-would any other, stronger, swifter, more cunning, not have done as Deepdelver had? No. There was in him something better than strength or cunning, that which made him go forward and not back. This it was that made Deepdelver a hero, that brought him into Everdark, and to the light again alive.

As to Singing, what can an old man say? Her beauty cursed me, if you will, though I was then but a little child. I have never seen another and never shall-she ennobled us all; wherever she stood was for that time a place of peace and beauty. Of the crime that befell her I was then too young to know, but I give it as I received it.

With others of her age and a guard of men, of whom Deepdelver, then called by another, lesser, name, was one, she journeyed to the Eyes to bathe. Now at that time men no longer went into the haunted Hair to reach the lakes from the north. But not yet were they so bold as to come too near the corners of the Mouth-no, the accepted path, then deemed safe, was to skirt the southernmost spinney of the Hair, near the Ear, and thence to climb to the Eyes by an oblique ascent.

Now this party of young men and maidens were so doing when there came upon them such a calamity as we, of this latter age, have so much more knowledge than they. An overflow from the nearer lake, forming itself into a great mass of water, came hurtling down on them; and they scattered-none looking to the others, but each fleeing in that direction that seemed to him easiest. Now it so happened that Singing's path led her to the Mouth.

When the Tear had passed the young men and maids joined again, laughing and each telling their tale of escape until, as they reckoned their numbers, their laughter hushed. Wide they quested then for Singing, but not to the Mouth until with the passing of time it grew upon them that if Singing had not, indeed, been washed away, then it was there that they must search for her. None spoke this knowledge, but it waxed among them; and at length they would not look at one another for the shame of it-but already Deepdelver was gone.

No one had he told of his plan, going alone to the very precipices of the Lips, and from those dark, ill-omened



heights, staring, alone, at the Teeth themselves, the dread portals of the sunless realm, found within him the strength to enter there; such a man is not like us, though he walk among us; the ghosts who wander forever through the Hair might, if they saw a living man walking unafraid where they are accustomed to take such ease as is permitted the Dead, believe him to be a ghost even as they: but-if we are not all specters now-it would not be so, because he would have life in him. Just so such men as you and I, seeing a Deepdelver, think him but our peer.

Often I questioned him-young as I was, and shameless -of what he found within the Teeth, and the rescue of Singing. Little would he tell me. There are watery caves beneath the Tongue, by his saying. There he swam in half-light through waves clearer, yet thicker, than those of the lakes; and met a gentle race who begged him to go no farther, offering in the stead of Singing milk-pale maidens, languid, gentle, and enamoured of love, whom he spurned.

We call ourselves the People of the Neck, but who but Deepdelver ever knew the extent of that kingdom; who but he ever, in the long song of history, went down the Throat? That road he took, leaving the last of the light. Savages he met there, and, defeating their chief in solitary combat, bound him when his vassals fled-till hunger forced from him the tale of Singing's passing, and her captor's. Deeper they had gone by his telling, and even Deepdelver's mighty strength-so he himself recounted it-died within him.

Then came a wetting, but not as we have known them. The dim rills of the Throat turned to black as the waters multiplied, and there came upon Deepdelver, in the rushing confusion of those waters, all the thoughts that men have ever felt, so that he knew himself to be brave and afraid, happy yet sorrowful, God and nothing-all at once and without causes; and though his thought told him that to do so was death, he dived into the waters and swam with them, laughing to die so, laughing in the breakers, dizzy with delight in the darkness, knowing that it was death but eager to die so.

So he came to the depths, to Everdark, and heard there the weeping of Singing. Who can tell a tale that was born in the blackness? How he found her and killed her captor, drowning him, though he was himself delirious, in the mill-race of madness. How the Inner People won them, they who then ate what they had from the waters, those unseen ones who never stand in sun, whelming Deepdelver in their myriads; how he their slave taught them to tear the meat they trod and so live lawfully, and how they gave freedom to him, and Singing too, when once they had tasted; how the two made their way midst difficulties and dangers to the Neck again; all these are more than I can say. But you must know the courage, and the history of your People before you fare forth; and I have told you.

Field and hill are cold now, and the World itself dying or dead, and the lands are filled with ghouls. It is time you go.

This was the last story.

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286

The Woman Who loved the Centaur Pholus

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ANDERSON'S telephone rang, and of course it was Janet. Anderson swung his feet over the side of the bed before he hung up, then looked at his watch. Four-twenty A.M. The moonlight on the melting snow outside sent a counterfeit dawn to his windows.

He switched on the reading light and found his slippers, then kicked them off again. There would not be time for slippers. The little water-horse that Dumont-Dumont would surely be there too-had made for him lifted its head and foaming mane above the rim of its aquarium and neighed, a sound so high-pitched it might have been the chirping of a bird.

So like they were, no mortal  
Might one from the other know;  
White as snow their armor was,  
Their steeds were white as snow.  
Never on earthly anvil  
Did such rare armor gleam,  
And never did such gallant steeds  
Drink from an earthly stream.

Who had written that? Anderson couldn't remember.

Before he had gone to bed he had filled the stainless-steel thermos with scalding coffee, telling himself he would not need it, that he would drink it with breakfast so as not to waste it. Wool shirt with lumberjack checks, wool hunting pants, thick socks, rubber-bottomed hunting boots, down-filled vest, parka, Navy watch cap. Gloves and compass in the parka's pockets? Yes. His sign was already in the car, and the chains were on. It started without trouble; he roared out of the driveway and down the silent street. Coming, Janet. Coming, Pholus, or whoever you are. Damn.

When winter was beginning, he had gone out in the suit he wore on campus, with the same overcoat and hat. He had learned better, floundering through the snow long before machine-gun slugs had ripped the weak and frightened siren, the bird-woman whose scattered feathers he had helped Dumont gather when the soldiers were gone. There was a mail-order company that sold all sorts of cold-weather gear. Their prices were high, but the quality was excellent. Never on earthly anvil. . . How did the rest go? Something, something, something . . .

O'er the green waves which gently bend and swell,  
Fair Amphitrite steers her silver shell;  
Her playful dolphins stretch the silken rein,  
Hear her sweet voice, and glide along the main.

No, that wasn't it, that was Darwin, the father (or was it the grandfather?) of Dumont's Darwin, the Darwin of the Beagle. Anderson swung onto the Interstate. For mile after mile, the red taillights of the cars in front of him looked like the red eyes of beasts, prowling the snow by night.

At last, just to hear a voice, Anderson said aloud, "They sell everything but Odysseus's wax. But then, I don't need wax." He had been thinking of the man-headed bull, Nin, of Assyria; that too had been killed, and the memory of its wings suggested the siren again. As if the CB had heard him and knew his loneliness, it murmured, "Breaker one one. This is Sombelene for Peirithous. Come in, Peirithous."

"I'm here, Sombelene," Anderson answered. He did not know where Janet had discovered that name. It had not been in any of the references he had checked.

"Go past the sign for the Dells, Peirithous. After a quarter mile you'll see an unmarked road on your left. We're about three miles farther on."

"Ten-four and out," Anderson said. He hated the pseudonyms, and he was certain the Army knew who they were anyway.

As if to confirm it, the threshing sound of a helicopter came from above, louder and louder, then louder still. It passed over the car at treetop level going ninety at least and disappeared beyond the crest of a hill.

"Breaker one one for Sombelene. Chopper on the way."

"Ten-four, Peirithous."

So Janet knew, and whoever was with her knew. And of course the soldiers knew, in their helicopter.

"All hail, beloved birds," he cried,

"My comrades on the ocean tide."

Anderson passed a billboard showing the little sternwheeler Apollo 2 and swerved onto the next unmarked road. There were fresh tire tracks in the snow, and he began automatically to look to left and right, though he knew how unlikely it was that he would see anything from the road. Yet he might. How did it go?

Will thou yet take all, Galilean? but these thou shalt not take,  
'he laurel, the palms and the paeon, the breasts of the nymphs in the brake.. ..

The sun was peeping over the snow-clad hills now, and

inexplicably Anderson felt his spirits rise. He was going to a fight, and he would be fighting for the only thing he knew that was really worth fighting for. For once he could not recall a quotation, but he remembered the sense of it, and not just with his mind but in his feet and hands, belly and heart and brain. The second-best thing was to fight and win. But the first-best thing was to fight the fight worth fighting. Where would he be, if not here?

He topped the hill at better than eighty and saw the cars and signs and milling people. The helicopter had set down in a field just behind a wood of birch, and there were two olive-drab Army trucks. He hit the brakes and went into a long skid, steering into it just the way that racing driver had advised on television, still utterly unafraid but feeling he must somehow be drunk. The car turned ninety degrees and skidded to a stop less than a dozen feet from the nearest truck.

The bearded man smiled back beneath his beard and seemed to lift himself on his toes. "There's more than one out there, isn't there? I've heard of them. It makes one feel like Adam."

Anderson said, "We're on the edge of one of the largest forested areas in Wisconsin. A lot of people bring them here, and more drift in. A friend of mine who's a statistician tells me there are gradients of diminishing population we're largely oblivious to. They sense those and follow them to places like this. There are quite a few of them in Minnesota too, and upper Michigan."

Janet added, "The Smoky Mountains are supposed to be full of them. Dr. Dumont plans to go there this summer."

"Professor Anderson?" It was the colonel.

Anderson said, "Afraid so."

"The dossier I saw is a little sketchy, but I thought I recognized you from your picture. What do you teach? Biology? Biophysics?"

"Classical literature."

"Say, that's interesting. I like Sherlock Holmes myself, and

Kipling. I suppose this biological engineering stuff is a hobby with you."

Anderson shook his head.

The colonel glanced around as though expecting to see the Minotaur step out of a cowshed. "I can see where it would be a good one in certain respects. Eventually I assume there will be a licensing procedure and some supervision. At present the thing is a mess."

"The question is which side the mess is on."

"I suppose you could say that. Did you hear what they killed yesterday on Market Street in Philadelphia? A cat with

the head of a snake. It was as big as a small dog."

"A great many cats are as big as small dogs, and I'd think it would be a good deal less intelligent a hunter than most cats. No doubt it was somebody's first stab at making a chimera."

The colonel seemed not to have heard him. "They do these things, and they can't handle the results. Then instead of destroying them they turn them loose. It's funny, isn't it, how all the stuff that was originally developed by some high-powered scientists eventually turns into something the average Joe can do in his basement. Take TV-you can get a kit and build as good a television as anybody can buy. Or airplanes-a man I went to the Point with is building a plane in his garage."

Anderson said, "If the Wright brothers hadn't been able to build the first one in a bike shop, there wouldn't be any planes."

"Maybe." The colonel looked unconvinced, and Anderson decided he thought the airplane had been invented by Boeing. "Just the same, my orders are to clean this up. You and your followers are interfering with that."

"They're not my followers. They simply happen to believe as I do-or rather, I happen to believe as they do."

"Your dossier says you're one of the leaders, Professor Anderson. You're a man and most of them are women; you're well educated and you're the tallest. Who would you think the leader was if you were in my shoes?"

Anderson said, "If I were in your shoes I'd probably be wrong about a lot of other things too," but his attention was no longer on the conversation. A truck was coming over the hill, and at first he thought it was the Army tow truck. Then the bearded man and several of the women raised a cheer, and he saw the call letters on the side.

The colonel said something inaudible to a captain, the captain mumbled to a sergeant, and the sergeant bawled something at the troops, who fell into ranks. Janet and the bearded man hustled their charges into a straggling line, and Dumont emerged from his van to join them. Anderson suddenly understood that this was what everyone had been waiting for: the Army would prove they were acting without brutality, and let an audience of millions feel the thrill of the hunt; the demonstrators would put their case before the same audience and try to stir up sympathy for the hunted.

A man with a microphone climbed out of the truck, followed by a man with a camera. Guided by unerring instinct, both made for Janet. Anderson wanted to point it out to the colonel, but the colonel was busy looking soldierly as he inspected his troops in the background. In an undertone, the man with the microphone identified his channel and announced that any footage used would make the twelve o'clock news, then switched on his mike.

"You have to realize they will be murdering a person out there," Janet said without preamble. "Probably someone with the heart and mind of a child."

"Do you do this sort of life-shaping yourself?" Dumont leaned toward the mike, his eyes on the camera.

"I do. You must understand that it is completely legal as well as morally impeccable. It's not like similar research on bacteria-this can breed no plagues. It's just that the products of this work are deprived of even the protection afforded wild animals."

The interviewer asked, "What is your purpose in doing what you do?"

Janet put a hand on Dumont's shoulder, and Anderson, though he knew she was projecting for the camera, felt a tiny thrill at the beauty of her profile. "We have lost so many of our fellow citizens of this world. All the larger whales, the gorilla, two kinds of cheetah, all within the last ten years. Now humanity can make real what it has always loved. Now we can see the friends our ancestors dreamed of. The world is big enough for all of us, and some of us don't want to have to live here alone."

Patrols were leaving on foot now, apparently in the hope of drawing the television crew away. Anderson sent off two demonstrators with each, telling them to stand between the hunted and the soldiers' M1 Gs if they could. If they dared. Behind him, the bearded man was talking now. "God gave to the first human being the authority to name the creatures, and in the language of the Bible, to name is to create. 'In the beginning was the word . . .' "

Anderson found himself trudging after a patrol too. Despite their weapons and equipment, the young soldiers moved faster than he, and though their footprints were plain enough in the snow, he lost sight of them when they entered the birches. The helicopter was beating overhead again. Anderson used his sign pole for a staff. The wind that stirred the branches smelled of spring and seemed made of something purer than air; and he felt again, as he had in his car, that he was somehow privileged. After a quarter hour or so, he caught sight of the soldiers-or perhaps of other soldiers. They appeared to have halted to examine some track their own feet soon obscured. Almost at once they were gone again. Exulting in the knowledge that he had not yet heard a shot, Anderson hurried after them. . . .

The sun climbed above the trees. Twice the helicopter had whirred overhead and vanished. The pocket compass Anderson had bought only a few months before was lost somewhere in the snow. Perhaps because Dumont moved, it was him Anderson saw first, his parka looking black against the snow. Then Janet in her red ski suit facing him.

O Father Jove, if ever I have aided thee,

Grant but this one desire.

He called and they answered; and something in their weary voices told him they were as lost as he was, and had been debating which way to go.

A little, ice-choked stream undulated through the snow near where they stood; and there were rocks, half masked with snow. The sun, too high now to give much direction, flashed from the few whirling flakes still in the air. "Well, here we are," Janet said, and laughed. "We three ringleaders! Some leaders. I'll bet you don't know the way back either. Do you, Andy?"

Anderson shook his head. "We'll find it."

"I hope Paul did better."

Anderson decided Paul must be the bearded man.

Dumont said, "We really ought to split up," and just at that moment a little figure stepped around some snow-covered bushes and came hesitantly forward. Its ears were pointed and its face was the face of a clever, sickly child; two small horns pushed through a tangle of dark curls. At first Anderson thought it was-insanely-wearing a scarlet sash. Janet moaned and dropped to her knees beside it, and it let the scarlet sash fall straight. There were fingers at the end of it; its blood dripped from them.

"Your arm!" Janet whispered. "Oh my God, your poor arm."

She and Dumont produced aid kits. Never until that moment had it occurred to Anderson that if the Army were to shoot something, it might fall to him to patch that something up. Coming on top of the lost compass it was almost too much. He experienced a self-contempt as great as the euphoria he had felt earlier, yet at the same time he was compelled to look at the faun's mangled arm as though he too had bandages and penicillin.

Janet muttered, "They shot him! Can you imagine, they shot this little body, this poor baby."

Dumont was tightening a tourniquet about the faun's upper arm. "You're coming home with us, young fellow. I have a place where you can stay until that's better."

"Those aren't gunshot wounds," Anderson said.

Janet and Dumont stared at him; the faun averted its wide, melting eyes.

"I was in the Marines; I saw films, and once one of the men in our barracks got hold of live ammunition and shot a lieutenant. I've seen bullet wounds out here too, and so have both of you. Bullets puncture the skin on entry and leave a blue corona. If they have much velocity left when they exit, they blow out a cone of flesh. They shatter bone, if they hit it. These bones aren't broken. There are puncture wounds, but mostly the flesh is torn. Whatever attacked that arm did

it with its teeth-my guess would be a dog."

Then slowly, between minutes of sobbing and despite naive evasions, it all came out: the dead twin; the footprints like, but not quite like, a bear's; the terror in the winter-wrapped woods. The goat-tongue had difficulty in forming words (Anderson recalled a lisping boy who had lived across the street when he was a child), but they soon grew accustomed to its faults, and the protection its distractions had afforded them vanished. After a time they found it hard to meet one another's eyes.

"Somebody's finally done it," Dumont said at last. "Once at least-probably more. It wasn't me."

"We never thought it was," Anderson told him. He wanted to swear.

"Those tracks couldn't be a centaur's . . ." Dumont hesitated, looking from Anderson to Janet and back. "A centaur could kill with his hooves, I suppose, or his hands. But his teeth would be no more dangerous than yours or mine. Werewolves?"

"Maybe," Anderson said. "There are other possibilities-Anubis and Set, perhaps even Narashimha, the lion-man of the Vedas. Whatever they are, we're going to have to use our connections with the others to lead the soldiers to them before they kill a human being."

Dumont nodded, but Janet's blue eyes were blazing. "You would, wouldn't you! You'd see them shot down-shot down with guns!"

Suddenly she was gone. Anderson sprinted after her, with Dumont close behind him. They had not run twenty yards through the snow when Anderson heard the thunder of hooves.

Only once before had Anderson seen him. Then he had thought him roan, the human torso, arms, and face, Caucasian. Now Pholus looked black, bigger than any horse, immensely bigger than any man, muscled like a giant. Janet, clinging to his back, harnessing those mighty arms with her slender hands, might have been a child, a little girl dreaming.

He could have trampled them, but at the last moment he turned aside, sending up a spume of mud and melting snow, smiting them instead with his wild glance. Anderson caught a flash of red. Perhaps Janet had waved. Perhaps she had not. Panting, he halted.

Dumont ran on, less swiftly even than Anderson had run. Blindly. Stupidly.

Anderson did not care. In the clearing he found the faun and took him by the hand. The road and the cars, all the relics of the dying twentieth century except himself, would be in the direction opposite the one Pholus had taken. Anderson trudged toward them.



Midst others of less note came one frail form,  
A phantom among men; companionless  
As the last cloud of an expiring storm,  
Whose thunder is its knell; he, as I guess,  
Had gazed on Nature's naked loveliness,  
Actaeon-like, and now he fled astray  
With feeble steps o'er the world's wilderness;  
And his own thoughts, along that rugged way,  
Pursued like raging hounds their father and their prey.

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297

The Woman the Unicorn Loved

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AT the western edge of the campus the parkway sent a river of steel and rubber roaring out of the heart of the city. Fragrant pines fringed the farther side. The unicorn trotted among them, sometimes concealed, sometimes treading the strip of coarse grass that touched the strip of soiled gravel that touched the concrete. That was where Anderson, looking from his office window, first saw him.

Drivers and passengers saw him too. Some waved; no doubt some shouted, though their shouts could not be heard. Faces pale and faces brown pressed against glass, but no one stopped. Possibly some trucker with a CB informed the police.

The unicorn was so white he gleamed. His head looked Arabian, but his hooves were darkly red, like pigeon's-blood rubies, and his tail was not like a horse's tail at all, but the kind of tail-like the tail of a bull, but with an additional guidon of hair halfway to the tip-that is seen only in heraldic beasts. His horn shone like polished ivory, straight as the blade of a rapier and as long as a man's forearm. Anderson guessed his height at fourteen hands.

He turned away to lift his camera bag down from the top of the filing cabinet, and when he got back to the window the unicorn was in the traffic. Across two hundred yards of campus lawn he could hear the squealing of brakes.

"Pluto, the grisly god, who never spares,  
Who feels no mercy, who hears no prayers."

Anderson recited the couplet to himself, and only as he pronounced the word prayers was he aware that he had spoken aloud.

Then the unicorn was safe on the other side, cantering across the shaven grass. (Pluto, it appeared, might hear pray-

ers after all.) As the armed head lifted to test the wind, Anderson's telephone rang. He picked it up.

"Hello, Andy? Dumont. Look out your window."

"I am looking," Anderson said.

"Dropped right into our laps. Can you imagine anybody letting something like that go?"

"Yes, pretty easily. I can also imagine it jumping just about any fence on earth. But if we're going to protect it, we'd better get on the job before the kids run it off." Anderson had found his telephoto zoom and coupled it to the camera body. With the phone clamped between his shoulder and his ear, he took a quick picture.

"I'm going after it. I want a tissue specimen and a blood sample."

"You can get them when the Army shoots it."

"Listen, Andy, I don't want to see it shot any more than you do. A piece of work like that? I'm going out there now, and I'll appreciate any help I can get. I've already told my secretary to phone some members. If the military comes in -well, at least you'll be able to get some stills to send the TV people. You coming?"

Anderson came, a big, tawny man of almost forty, with a camera hanging from his neck. By the time he was out of the Liberal Arts Building, there were a hundred or so students around the unicorn. He must have menaced them;

their line bent backward, then closed again. His gleaming horn was lifted above their heads for a moment, half playful, half triumphant. Anderson used his size and faculty status to elbow his way to the front of the crowd.

The unicorn stood-no, trotted, almost danced-in the center of a circle fifty feet wide; while the students shouted jokes and cheered. A little group who must have known something of his lore grabbed a blonde in a cheerleader's sweater and pushed her forward. He put his head down, a lancer at the charge; and she scampered back into the jeering crowd, breasts bobbing.

Anderson lowered his camera.

"Get it?" a student beside him asked.

"I think so."

A Frisbee sailed by the unicorn's ears, and he shied like a skittish horse. Someone threw it back.

Anderson yelled, "If that animal gets frightened, he's going to hurt somebody."

Dumont heard him, whether the students did or not. He waved from the farther side of the circle, his bald head gleam-

ing. As the unicorn trotted past him, he thrust out a loaf of bread and was ignored.

Anderson sprinted across the circle. The students cheered, and several began running back and forth.

"Hi," Dumont said. "That took guts."

"Not really." Anderson found he was puffing. "I didn't come close. If he was angry, none of us would be here."

"I wish none of them were-nobody but you and me. It would make everything a hell of a lot simpler."

"Don't you have that tranquilizer gun?"

"At home. Our friend there would be long gone by the time I got back with it. Maybe I should keep one in the lab, but you know how it is-before this, we've always had to go after them."

Anderson nodded, only half listening as he watched the unicorn.

"We had this bread to feed to mice in a nutrition project. I put some stuff in it to quiet him down. On the spur of the moment, it was the best I could do."

Anderson was wondering who would arrive first-their Mythic Conservationists with protest signs or the soldiers and their guns. "I doubt that it's going to be good enough," he told Dumont.

A young woman slipped between them. "Here," she asked, "can I try?" Before Dumont could object, she took the bread and jogged to the center of the circle, the wind stirring her short, brown hair and the sunlight flashing from her glasses. The unicorn came toward her slowly, head down.

Dumont said, "He'll kill her."

The students were almost quiet now, whispering. Anderson had to fight the impulse to dash out, to try to hold back the white beast, to knock him off his feet and wrestle him to the ground if he could. Except that he could not; that a dozen like him could not, no more than they could have overthrown an elephant. If he, or anyone here, were to attempt such a thing now, people would surely die.

The young woman thrust out Dumont's loaf-common white bread from some grocery store. After a moment she crouched to bring her eyes on a level with the unicorn's. Anderson heard himself murmur,

"Behold a pale horse:  
And his name that sat on him was Death."

Then, when tension had been drawn so fine that it seemed to him that he must break, it broke instead. The ivory lance came up; and the shining, impossible lancer trotted forward,

nibbled at the bread, nuzzled the young woman's neck. Still quiet, indeed almost hushed, the students surged forward. A boy with a feathery red beard patted the unicorn's withers, and a girl Anderson recognized from one of his classes buried her face in the flowing mane. The young woman herself, the girl with the bread, stroked the fierce horn. Anderson found that he was there too, his hand on a gleaming flank.

Then the magic blew away beneath the threshing of a helicopter, dissolved like a dream at cockcrow. It came in low across the park, a dark blue gunship. (Police, Anderson thought crazily, police and not the Army this time.) A dozen people yelled, and the students began to scatter.

It banked in a tight turn and came back trailing a white plume of tear gas. Anderson ran with the rest then, hearing the thunder of the unicorn's hooves over-no, under-the whicker of the four-bladed prop. There was a sputter of fire from some automatic weapon.

Back in the Liberal Arts Building several hours later, he went to the restroom to wash the traces of the gas from his face and hands and put drops in his faintly burning eyes. The smell of the gas was in his trousers and jacket; they would have to be cleaned. He wished vaguely that he had been prescient enough to keep a change of clothes on campus.

When he opened the door to his office, the young woman was there. Absurdly, she rose when he entered, as though sex roles had not just been eliminated but reversed.

He nodded to her, and she extended her hand. "I'm Julie Coronell, Dr. Anderson."

"It's a pleasure," he said. She might have been quite pretty, he decided, if she were not so thin. And so nervous.

"I-I noticed you out there. With the unicorn. I was the one who fed him bread."

"I know you were," Anderson said. "I noticed you too. Everyone did."

She actually blushed, something he had not seen in years, "I've some more." She lifted a brown paper sack. "The other wasn't mine, really-I got it from some man there. He's in the Biology Department, I think."

Anderson nodded. "Yes, he is."

"That was white. That bread. This is pumpernickel. I thought he-the unicorn. I thought he might like it better."

Anderson could not keep from grinning at that, and she smiled too.

"Well, anyway, \*I\* like it better. Do you know the story about the general's horse? Or am I being a pest?"

"Not at all. I'd love to hear the story of the general's horse,

especially if it has anything to do with unicorns."

"It doesn't, really. Only with horses, you know, and pumpernickel. The general was one of Napoleon's, I think Bernadotte, and he had a favorite charger named Nicole—we would say Nicholas or Nick. When the Grand Army occupied Germany and the officers ate at the German country inns, they were served the coarse, brown German bread with their meals. All Frenchmen hate it, and none of them would eat it. But the others saw that Bernadotte slipped it into his pockets, and when they asked him about it, he said it was for his horse—pain pour Nicole, bread for Nick. After that the others joked about the German 'horse bread,' pain pour Nicole, and the Germans thought that was the French name for it, and since anything French has always been very posh on menus, they used it."

Anderson chuckled and shook his head. "Is that what you're going to call him when you find him? Nicholas? Or will it be Nicole?"

"Nick, actually. The story is just folk etymology, really. But

I thought of it, and it seemed to fit. Nick, because we're both Americans now. I was born in New Zealand, and that brings me to one of the things I came to ask you—what nationality are unicorns? I mean originally. Greek?"

"Indian," Anderson told her,

"You're making fun of me."

He shook his head. "Not American Indian, of course. Indian like the tiger. A Roman naturalist called Pliny seemed to have begun the story. He said that people in India hunted an animal he called the monoceros. Our word unicorn is a translation of that. Both words mean 'one-horned.' "

Julie nodded.

"Pliny said this unicorn had a head like a stag, feet like an elephant, a boar's tail, and the body of a horse. It bellowed, it had one black horn growing from its forehead, and it could not be captured alive."

She stared at him. He stared expressionlessly back, and at last she said, "That's not a unicorn! That's not a unicorn at all. That's a rhinoceros."

"Uh-huh. Specifically, it's an Indian rhinoceros. The African ones actually have two horns, one in front of the other. Pliny's description fell into the hands of the scholars of the Dark Ages, who knew nothing about rhinoceroses or even elephants; and the unicorn became a one-horned creature that was otherwise much like a horse. Unicorn horn was supposed to neutralize poisons, but the Indians didn't ship their rhinoceros horns west—China was much closer and much richer, and the Chinese thought rhinoceros horn was an aphrodisiac. Narwhale horns were brought in to satisfy the demand, and narwhale horns succeeded wonderfully,

because narwhale horns are so utterly fantastic that no one who hasn't seen one can believe in them. They're ivory, and spiraled, and perfectly straight. You know, of course. You had your hand on one today, only it was growing out of a unicorn's head. Dumont would say out of the head of a genetically re-engineered horse, but I think we both know better."

Julie smiled. "It's wonderful, isn't it? Unicorns are real now."

"In a way, they were real before. As Chesterton says somewhere, to think of a cow with wings is essentially to have met one. The unicorn symbolized masculine purity-which isn't such a bad thing to symbolize, after all. Unicorns were painted on shields and sewn into flags. A unicorn rampant is the badge of Scotland, just as the bald eagle is the badge of this country, and eventually that unicorn became one of the supporters of the British arms. The image, the idea, has been real for a long time. Now it's tangible."

"And I'm glad. I like it like that. Dr. Anderson, the real reason I came to see you was that a friend told me you were the president of an organization that tries to save these animals."

"Most of them are people. All right if I smoke?" She nodded, and Anderson took a pipe from his desk and began to pack it with tobacco. "Many of the creatures of myth were partly human and had human intelligence-lamias, centaurs, fauns, satyrs, and so forth. Often that seems to appeal to the individuals who do this sort of thing. Then^too, human cellular material is the easiest of all for them to get-they can use their own."

"Do you mean that I could make one of these mythical animals if I wanted to? Just go off and do it?"

The telephone rang and Anderson picked it up.

"Hello, Andy?" It was Dumo again.

"Yep," Anderson said.

"It seems to have gotten aw "

"Uh-huh. Our bunch certainly couldn't find it, and our operator said there was nothing on the police radio."

"Well, it gave them the slip. A student-an undergraduate, but I know him, and he's pretty reliable-just came and told me. He saw it over on the far side of the practice field. He tried to get up close, but it ran behind the field house, and he lost it."

Anderson covered the mouthpiece with his hand and said,

"Nick's all right. Someone just saw him." He asked Dumont, "You send a bunch to look for him?"

"Not yet. I wanted to talk to you first. I gave the boy the key to my place and asked him to fetch my tranquilizer gun. He's got my van."

"Fine. Come up here and we'll talk. Leave this student a note so he'll know where you are."

"You don't think we ought to send some people out after the unicorn?"

"We've had searchers out after him for a couple of hours, and so have the police. I don't know about you; but while I was beating the bushes, I was wondering just what in the name of Capitoline Jove I was going to do with him if I found him. Try to ride him? Put salt on his tail? We can't do a damn thing until we've got your tranquilizer gun or some other way to control him, and by the time the boy gets back from your house in Brookwood it will be nearly dark."

When he had cradled the telephone, Anderson said, "That should give you an idea how well organized we are."

Julie shrugged sympathetically.

"In the past, you see, it was always a question of letting the creature get away. The soldiers or the police wanted to kill it, we wanted to see it spared. Usually they head for the most lightly populated area they can find. We should have anticipated that sooner or later we'd be faced with one right here in the city, but I suppose we assumed that in a case like that we'd have no chance at all. Now it turns out that we've got a chance-your friend Nick is surprisingly elusive for such a big beast-and we haven't the least idea of what to do."

"Maybe he was born-do you say born?"

"We usually say created, but it doesn't matter."

"Well, maybe he was created here in the city, and he's trying to find his way out of it."

"A creature that size?" Anderson shook his head. "He's come in from outside, from some sparsely settled rural area, or he'd have been turned in by a nosy neighbor long ago. People can-people do-perform DNA engineering in the city. Sometimes in basements or garages or kitchens, more often on the sly in college labs or some big corporation's research and development facility. They keep the creatures they've made too; sometimes for years. I've got a sea-horse at home in an aquarium, not one of those fish you buy cast in plastic paperweights in the Florida souvenir shops, but a little fellow about ten inches long, with the head and forelegs of a pony and the hindquarters of a trout. I've had him for a year now, and I'll probably have him for another ten. But suppose he were Nick's size-where would I keep him?"

"In a swimming pool, I imagine," Julie said. "In fact, it seems rather a nice idea. Maybe at night, you could take him to Lake Michigan and ride him there, in the lake. You could wear scuba gear. I'm not a terribly good swimmer, but I think

I'd do it." She smiled at him.

He smiled back. "It does sound like fun, when you describe it."

"Just the same, you think Nick's escaped from some farm-or perhaps an estate. I should think that would be more likely. The rich must have these poor, wonderful animals made for them sometimes."

"Sometimes, yes."

"Unicorns. A sea-horse-that's from mythology too, isn't it?"

Anderson was lighting his pipe; the mingled fumes of sulfur and tobacco filled the office. "Balios and Xanthos drew the chariot of Poseidon," he said. "In fact, Poseidon was the god of horses as well as of the sea. His herds were the waves, in a mystic sense few people understand today. The whitecaps were the white manes of his innumerable steeds." ;

"And you mentioned lamias-those were snake women, weren't they?"

"Yes."

"And centaurs. And fauns and satyrs. Are all the animals like that, that the biologists make, from mythology?"

Anderson shook his head. "Not all of them, no. But let me ask you a question, Ms. Coronell--"

"Call me Julie, please."

"All right, Julie. Now suppose that you were a biologist. In genetic engineering they've reached the stage at which any competent worker with a Master's or a Ph.D.-and a lot of bright undergraduates-can do this sort of thing. What would you make for yourself?"

"I have room for it, and privacy, and lots of money?"

"If you like, yes."

"Then I'd make a unicorn, I think."

"You're impressed with them because you saw a beautiful one today. After that. Suppose you were going to create something else?"

Julie paused, looking pensive. "We talked about riding a sea-horse in the lake. Something with wings, I suppose, that I could ride."

"A bird? A mammal?"

"I don't know. I'd have to think about it."



"If you chose a bird, it would have to be much larger, of course, than a natural bird. You'd also find that it could not maintain the proportions of any of the species whose genetic matter you were using. Its wings would have to be much larger in proportion to its body. Its head would not have to be much bigger than an eagle's-and so on. When you were through and you were spotted sailing among the clouds, the newspapers would probably call your bird a roc, after the one that carried Sinbad."

"If you decided on a winged horse instead, it would be Pegasus. I've never yet seen one of those that could actually fly, by the way. A winged human being would be an angel, or if it were more birdlike, with claws and tail feathers and so on, perhaps a harpy. You see, it's quite hard to escape from mythological nomenclature, because it covers so much. People have already imagined all these things. It's just that now we-some of us-can make them come true."

Julie smiled nervously. "An alligator! I think I'll choose an alligator with wings. I could make him smarter at the same time."

Anderson puffed out a cloud of smoke. "That's a dragon."

"Wait, I'll--"

The door flew open and Dumont came in. Anderson said,

"Here's the man who can tell you about recombinant DNA and that sort of thing. I'd only make a hash of it." He stood.

"Julie, may I present Henry A. Dumont of Biology, my good friend and occasionally my rival."

"Friendly rival," Dumont put in.

"Also the treasurer and technical director of our little society. Dumont, this is Julia Coronell, the lady who's hiding the unicorn."

For a moment no one spoke. Julie's face was guarded, expressionless save for tension. Then she said, "How did you know?"

Anderson sat down again, and Dumont took the office's last chair. Anderson said, "You came here because you were concerned about Nick." He paused, and Julie nodded. "But you didn't seem to want to do anything. If Nick was running round while the police looked for him, the situation was urgent; but you told me that story about pumpernickel and let me blather on about fauns and centaurs. You were worried, you were under a considerable strain, but you weren't urging me to get busy and reactivate the group we had looking for Nick this afternoon. When Dumont here called, I was very casual about the whole thing and just asked him to come over and talk. You didn't protest, and I decided that you knew where Nick was already. And that he was safe, at least for the time being."

"I see," Julie whispered.

"I don't," Dumont said. "That boy told me he saw the unicorn."

Anderson nodded. "A friend of yours, Julie?"

"Yes. . ."

Dumont said, "Honey, it's nothing to be ashamed of. We're on your side."

"You hid Nick." Anderson continued, "after the police dropped their tear gas. He was tame with you, as we saw earlier. He may even have eaten enough of Dumont's bread to calm him down a bit--there was a sedative in it. For a while after that, you were probably too frightened to do anything more; you just lay low. Then the police went away and our search parties gave up, and you went off campus to buy that bread you're holding. On the way back to give it to Nick, you met someone who told you about me."

Dumont asked, "Was it Ed? The boy who told me he saw the unicorn?"

Julie's voice was nearly inaudible. "Yes, it was."

"And between the two of you, you decided it would be smart to start some rumors indicating that Nick was still free and moving in a direction away from the place where you had him hidden." Anderson paused to relight his pipe. "So the first report had him disappearing behind the field house. The next one would have put him even farther away, I suppose. But more or less on impulse, you decided that we might help you, so you came up here to wait for me. Anyway, it would be safer for you to take that bread to Nick after dark. All right, we will help you. At least, we'll try. Where is Nick?"

Ed was no more a boy, actually, than Julie Coronell was a girl--a studious looking young man of nineteen or twenty. He had brought Dumont's cranquilizer gun, and Dumont had it now, though all of them hoped it would not be needed. Julie led the way, with Anderson beside her and Dumont and Ed behind them. A softness as of rose petals was in the evening air.

Anderson said, "I've seen you around the campus, haven't I? Graduate school?"

Julie nodded. "I'm working on my doctorate, and I teach some freshman and sophomore classes. Ed's one of my students. Most of the people I meet seem to think I'm a sophomore or a junior myself. How did you know I wasn't?"

"The way you're dressed. I guessed, actually. You look young, but you also look like a woman who looks younger than she is."

"You ought to have been a detective," she told him.

"Yes, anything but this."

The sun had set behind the trees of the park, trees whose long shadows had all run together now, flooding the lawns and walks with formless night. Most of the windows in the buildings the four passed were dark.

"What department?" Anderson asked when Julie said nothing more.

"English. My dissertation will be on twentieth-century American novelists."

"I should have recognized you, but I'm more than two thousand years behind you."

"I'm easy to overlook."

"Let's hope Nick is too." For a moment, Anderson studied the building looming before them. "Why the library?"

"I've been doing research; they let me have a key. I knew it had just closed, and I couldn't think of anything else." She held up the key.

A minute or two later, it slid into the lock. The interior was dim but not dark—a scattering of lights, lonely and almost spectral, burned in the recesses of the building, as though the spirits of a few geniuses lingered, still awake.

Dumont said, "You'd better let me go in front," and hurried past them with the tranquilizer gun. The doors closed with a hollow boom; suddenly the air seemed stale.

"Isn't there a watchman?" Anderson asked.

Julie nodded. She was near enough for Anderson to smell her faint perfume. "You said Ed was a friend of mine. I don't have a lot, but I suppose Bailey—he's the watchman—is a friend too. I'm the only one who never calls him Beetle. I told you Nick was in the Sloan Fantasy Collection. Have you heard of it?"

"Vaguely. My field is classical literature."

Behind them, Ed said, "That's what fantasy is—classical lit that's still alive. When the people who wrote those stories did it, their books were called fantasy."

"Ed!" Julie protested.

"No," Anderson said. "He's right."

"Anyway," Julie continued, "the Sloan Collection isn't the best in the country, or even a famous collection. But it's a jolly good one. It's got James Branch Cabell in first editions, for example, and a lot of his letters. And there's some wonderful John Gardner material. So that's where I put Nick."

Stamping among the books, Anderson thought to himself. Couchant at the frontiers of Overworld and Oz.

Pity the Unicorn,  
Pity the Hippogriff,  
Souls that were never born  
Out of the land of If!

Somewhere ahead, Dumont called, "He's dead!" and suddenly all three of them were running, staggering, stumbling down a dark and narrow corridor, guided by the flame of Dumont's lighter.

Anderson heard Julie whisper, "Nick! Oh, God, Nick!" Then she was quiet. The thing on the floor was no white unicorn.

Dumont rasped, "Hasn't anybody got a light?"

"Just matches," Anderson said. He lit one.

Ed told them, "I've got one," and from the pocket of his denim shirt produced a little, disposable penlight.

Julie was bending over the dead man, trying not to step in his blood. There was a great deal of it, and Dumont had stepped in it already, leaving a footprint. Ed played his light upon the dead man's face-cleanshaven; about sixty, Anderson guessed. He had worn a leather windbreaker. There was a hole in it now, a big hole that welled blood.

"It's Bailey," Julie said. And Dumont, thinking that she spoke to him (as perhaps she did), answered, "Is that his name? Everybody called him Beetle."

Bailey had been gored in the middle of his chest, very near the heart, Anderson decided. No doubt he had died instantly, or almost instantly. His face was not peaceful or frightened or anything else; only twisted in the terrible rictus of death.

"The match burned Andersen's fingers; he shook it and

topped it.

"Nick . . ." Julie whispered. "Nick did this?"

"I'm afraid so," Dumont told her.

She looked around, first at Dumont, then at Anderson. "He's dangerous. . . I suppose I always knew it, but I didn't like to think about it. We'll have to let the police . . ."

Dumont nodded solemnly.

"Like hell," Anderson said, and Julie stared at him. "You put him here, in this room"-Anderson glanced at the half-open door-"and went away and left him. Is that right?"

"Mr. Bailey was with us. He heard us as soon as I brought Nick inside. Nick's hooves made a lot of noise on the terrazzo floor. We took him to this room, and Mr. Bailey locked it for me."

Ed asked, "Hold this, will you, Dr. Dumont?" and handed Dumont the penlight, then took three steps, stooped, and straightened up with a much larger flashlight. After the near darkness, its illumination seemed almost a glare. Dumont let his lighter go out and dropped it into his pocket.

Ed was grinning weakly. "This must be the old man's flash," he said. "I thought I saw something shine over here."

"Yes." Anderson nodded. "He would have had it in his hand. After Julie left he came here to take another look at the unicorn. He opened the door and turned on his flashlight."

Julie shivered. "It could have been me."

"I doubt it. Even if Nick doesn't have human or almost human intelligence-and I suspect he does-he would have winded the watchman and known it wasn't your smell. No matter what kind of brain his creator gave him, his sensory setup must be basically the one that came with his equine DNA. Am I right, Dumont?"

"Right." The biologist glanced at his wrist. "I wish we had more information about the time Beetle died."

Ed asked, "Can't you tell from the clotting of the blood?"

"Not close enough," Dumont said. "Maybe a forensic technician could, but that's not my field. If this were one of those mysteries on TV, we could tell from the time his watch broke. It didn't, and it's still running. Anybody want to guess how far that unicorn's gone since he did this?"

"I will," Anderson told him. "Not more than about two hundred and fifty feet."

They stared at him.

"The front doors were locked when we came in-Julie had to open them for us. I'd bet the side door is locked too, and this building has practically no windows."

"You mean he's still in here?"

"If he's not, how did he get out?"

Julie said, "We'd hear him, wouldn't we? I told you-his hooves made a racket when I let him in."

"He heard them too," Anderson told her. "He wouldn't have to be a tenth as intelligent as he probably is to keep quiet. Almost any animal will do that by instinct. If it can't run-or doesn't think running's a good idea-it freezes."

Ed cleared his throat. "Dr. Anderson, you said he could tell by the smell that Beetle wasn't Julie. He'll know we aren't

Julie too."

"Conversely, he'll know that she is. But if we separate to look for him and the wrong party finds him, there could be trouble."

Dumont nodded. "What do you think we ought to do?"

"To start with, give Ed here the keys to your van so he can bring it around front. If we find Nick, we're going to have to have some way to get him out of town. We'll leave the front doors open-

"And let him get away?"

"No. But we need unicorn bait, and freedom's about as good a bait as anybody's ever found. Nick's probably hungry by now, and he's almost certainly thirsty. My mind runs to quotations anyway, so how about:

One by one in the moonlight there,  
Neighing far off on the haunted air,  
The unicorns come down to the sea.

Do you know that one?"

All three looked blank.

"It's Conrad Aiken, and of course he never saw a unicorn. But there may be some truth in it-in the feeling of it-just the same. We'll prop the doors wide. Dumont, you hide in the darkest shadow you can find there; the open doors should let in enough light for you to shoot by, particularly since you'll be shooting at a white animal. Julie and I will go through the building, turning on lights and looking for Nick. If we find him and he's docile with her, we can just lead him out and put him in the van. If he runs, you should get him on the way out."

Dumont nodded.

When the two of them were alone, Julie asked, "That gun of Dr. Dumont's won't really hurt Nick, will it?"

"No more than a shot in the arm would hurt you. Less."

The beam of the dead watchman's flashlight probed the corridor, seeming to leave a deeper twilight where it had passed. A few moments before, Anderson had talked of turning on more lights, but thus far they had failed to find the switches. He asked Julie if it were always this dim when she came to do research after the library had closed.

"Bailey used to take care of the lights for me," she said. "But I don't know where. I'd begin setting up my things on one of the tables, my notebooks and so forth; and the lights would come on." Her voice caught on lights.

She sniffled, and Anderson realized she was crying. He put his arm about her shoulders.

"Oh, rot! Why is it that one can-can try to do something

fine, and have-have it end . . ."

He chanted softly:

"Twist ye, twine ye! Even so,  
Mingled shades of joy and woe,  
Hope and fear, and peace, and strife,  
In the thread of human life."

"That's b-beautiful, but what does it mean? That the good and bad are mixed together so we can't pull them apart?"

"And that this isn't the end. Not for men or women o unicorns. Probably not even for poor old Bailey. Thread are long."

She put her arms about his neck and kissed him, and he was so busy pressing those soft, fragrant lips in return that he hardly heard the sudden thunder of the unshod hooves.

He pushed tier away just in time. The spiraled horn raked his belly like a talon; the beast's shoulder hit him like a football player's, sending him crashing into a high bookcase. Julie screamed, "No, Nick! Don'l!" and he tried to stand. The unicorn was rearing to turn in the narrow aisle, tall as a giant on his hind legs. Anderson clawed at the shelves, bringing down an avalanche of books. He found himself somehow grasping the horn, holding on desperately. A hoof struck his thigh like a hammer and he was careening down some dark passage, half carried, half dragged.

Abruptly, there was light ahead. He tried to shout for Dumont to shoot; but he had no breath, grasping the horn, grappling the tossing white head like a bulldogger. If the soft pluff of the gun ever came, it was lost in the clattering hoofbeats, in the roar of the blood in his ears. And if it came, the dart surely missed.

They nearly fell on the steps. Reeling they reached the bottom like kittens tossed from a sack. Anderson managed then to get his right leg under him; and with the unicorn nearly sprawling, he tried to get his left across the broad, white back and found that leg was broken.

He must have shrieked when the ends of splintered bone grated together, and he must have lost his hold. He lay upon his back, on grass, and heard the gallop of approaching death. Saw death, white as bone.

Stallions fight, he thought. Fight for mares, kicking and biting. Only men kill other men for a woman.

He lay without moving, his left leg twisted like a broken doll's. Stallions don't kill-not if the other lies down, surrenders.

The white head was silhouetted against the twinkling constellations now, the colors seemingly reversed as in a negative, the longsword horn both new and ancient to the sky of Earth.

\* \* \*

Later, when he told Julie and Dumont about it, Dumont said, "So he was only a horse after all. He spared you."

"A superhorse. A horse armed, with size, strength, grace, and intelligence all augmented." They had wanted to carry him somewhere (he doubted if they themselves knew where), but he had stopped them. Now, after Dumont had phoned for an ambulance, they sat beside him on the grass. His leg hurt terribly.

"Which way did he go? The park again?"

"No, the lake shore. 'The unicorns come down to the sea,' remember? You'll have to drum up a group and go after him in the morning."

Julie said, "I'll come, and I'm sure Ed will too."

Anderson managed to nod. "We've got a couple of dozen others. Some here, some in town. Dumont has the phone numbers."

She forced a smile. "Andy-can I call you Andy? You like poems. Do you recall this one?"

The lion and the unicorn  
Were fighting for the crown;  
The lion beat the unicorn  
And sent him out of town.  
Some gave them white bread,  
And some gave them brown.  
Some gave them plum-cake,  
And drummed them out of town.

We've just had it come true, all except for that bit about the plum-cake."

"And the lion," Anderson said.

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318

The Peace Spy

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"HELLO, Mr. Percival," the young woman said, "so nice of you to come." She shut the door again, and Krasilnikov heard the rattle of a security chain before she opened it wide.

He stepped inside, and she closed the door behind him, threw the bolt and reattached the chain. "This is my business," he said. "I've gone to see people in places a lot farther from Washington than Alexandria."



"Won't you sit down?" She made a graceful gesture, and Krasilnikov reflected that she had not yet forgotten her manners; she was not yet so Americanized as all that.

He sat. "I admire your taste, Ms. Aralov." He smiled as he patted the arm of the stiff, tapestry-covered chair. "This is good antique furniture."

She shook her head. "It is Russian. No, it is not Russian, but it is as near to Russian furniture as I could discover here. I wished to say to the Americans, not 'I am an American,' but 'Look, I am a Soviet citizen living with you.' Surely you have seen such furnishings in other apartments. Would you care for tea?"

Krasilnikov nodded. "Sure, I've seen furniture of the same type, but it wasn't as nice as this—the red and grey color scheme. Most Russians go for red and black."

She smiled again, bitterly this time, before she bent in front of the steaming samovar in the corner. "Red for our country, black for death. We are so dramatic. Only I say red for our country, grey for no peace and no war. I say that because I like red and grey better." She presented him with a fragrant glass of tea.

He sipped. "You've got to understand, Ms. Aralov, that I don't do all my business with people like you. A lot of it's with Americans and American companies. The next biggest is with foreigners who want American citizenship."

"But you have handled such cases as mine before?"

"Sure," Krasilnikov said. He rattled off names, making some of them up.

"Ah, I know Lebedev, he was one of the early ones, one of the first of us."

"That's right."

"The others, they did not live here, not in Washington? Because I know all those in Washington, I think."

Krasilnikov reflected that her knowledge was not as complete as she believed. "No," he said. "Denikin was in New York, Nina Mikhalevo down in Florida."

"And you are not an attorney." She was looking at his card again, and he traced the raised black letters in his mind as she followed them with her remarkable grey eyes. The card read, C. C. Percival, and on the next line, Expediter, followed by an address and a telephone number. He was proud of that card.

"No," he told her. "A lawyer would bring suit in District Court, and the Federal Government would stall it as long as they could. The Government can stall things for a long, long time here, Ms. Aralov."

"In my country too. Here, how long?"

He shrugged. "Maybe five years, if you were lucky and had a good lawyer."

"And with you? How long?"

"Five weeks, if we're lucky. Five months if we're not."

For the first time, she too sat, perching on the edge of her high-backed divan. "Then with you is better."

Krasilnikov smiled. "I like to think so."

"And your fees?"

He knew how much she had in the bank, and he told her. After a moment he added, "That's the retainer. I keep it all, no matter how fast I get you back to Russia. If things don't move that fast, then you've hired me, at three hundred a week, until the retainer's used up or I've got you home. Of course you realize I won't be working for you exclusively, only as needed. I have other clients."

She nodded slowly. "The retainer. It is so much."

He was firm. "Frankly, I'm giving you a break, Ms. Aralov, because I like you and I like what you've done. If you were some fat Arab who needed an American passport, it would be a lot more."

"I have to live while you work. I will have to buy my ticket." Indeed. Indeed. "Your father's the Minister of Marine?" She nodded again. "You would say the Secretary of the Navy here."

"I know. Surely you can call on him for help."

"Once, yes. Not any more. I-"

He cut her off. "First the retainer, Ms. Aralov. Then we'll talk about your father. Maybe I can do something."

"I understand." She stood, smoothing the soft, grey-blue fabric of her skirt. "I must get my checkbook. If you will excuse me."

"Sure."

He wanted to search for the American listening devices he knew must be there, but he was too well trained for that. He took some papers from the breast pocket of his jacket instead;

when she returned, he appeared to be studying them.

"Here is your retainer," she said. "It is nearly all I have." He said thank you, crossing his legs, refolding his papers and replacing them before he accepted her check. "Now sit down and tell me about your father, Ms. Aralov."

She sat, this time on the footstool. "It was so strange, so terrible . . ."

Her eyes had filled with tears, and he felt something he had thought dead since childhood move inside him. He said, "Perhaps it isn't really as strange as you think, Ms. Aralov. Or as terrible. Start at the beginning."

She nodded and blew her nose in one of the tiny handkerchiefs women used here. "It started with that dancer . . ."

She was groping for the dancer's name. He supplied, "The President's son."

"Yes. He went to Moscow on a tourist visa, remember? And he said he would stay there until his father was no longer President, that he would be our security against nuclear attack. It was just after our Party Secretary had said we would never fire the first missile."

"And then others came."

She nodded, no longer sniffing. "Janet Johnson was one of them. I met her in Moscow. Her father is something in the Cabinet here."

He sipped his tea and waited.

"Then we thought we should do the same thing, and we did." She threw back her hair, her eyes gleaming, and he thrilled as if to the call of a trumpet. "Oh, they tried to stop us, but they could not send us to the gulag-to the camps. Our fathers were in the Politburo, and we said we would go to the American Embassy. Then they had to let us go, and they did."

He said, "But now you want to go back."

"Yes, there is the fighting in the east." She hesitated. "I could do something. With training I might become a nurse. Our grandmothers fought the Germans beside their men. I would even do that."

He waited, staring out the window at the bland, blank brick face of the apartment building across the street.

"And I am so lonely here."

Tonelessly he said, "There are other Russians around Washington."

"Not enough, and they are going back too, or trying to." After a moment she added, "I want to see my mother and father, my brother and my sister and my aunt. Can't you understand?"

"It seems that your father doesn't want to see you."

"He was so angry! The letters I got from him were terrible! Yet he sent money, so I would not be in need. Then just when I had decided to come back . . ."

"The money stopped."

"Yes! I wrote to him. I said, 'I am coming home, Little Father, please forgive me.' There was nothing."

"Nothing?"

"No more letters, no more money."

His hand touched hers. "Has it ever occurred to you that perhaps your father doesn't really want you to return to Russia?"

For a moment she stared at him. "It was before I had told him I was coming home. He had ordered me a hundred times, called me a traitor, the vilest names."

Carefully Krasilnikov said, "His position in your government would force him to do that, wouldn't it? How do you know he's not secretly proud of you?"

"But this was before! Before I had told him I wanted to come home."

"He might have guessed it just the same, from the tone of your letters. Or like I said, there are a lot of Russians around Washington. Couldn't one of them have tipped him off?"

She sighed, her eyes on the carpet. "You do not understand how it is in our country, how it is in our families."

He should have been proud, and he told himself to be proud; but the thing that had awakened was weeping in his chest. "I guess I don't," he told her. "But it seems to me that if you were proud of yourselves when you did what you did, your father might be proud of you, even if he couldn't say it out loud. I know we were all proud of the President's son, and the ones who went after him too."

She shook her head, eyes still averted.

He said, "If you want your check back, you can have it. Or I'll tear it up, if you want me to."

She looked up at that. "You aren't really an evil man, are you, Mr. Percival? I had hoped to employ an evil man, because I thought an evil man might get me what I wanted."

He smiled. "Evil enough, if you still want it. And call me Charlie, Ms. Aralov. If you still want to go back home, we'll be seeing a lot of each other." That was perfectly true, and ridiculous though it was, knowing it was true made him feel better.

"All right, Charlie. I am Sonja. Yes, I am going home."

"You don't have a passport?"

She shook her head. "We burned them when we arrived; that was part of our pledge that we would stay. You will say

it was so foolish, and you will be right."

He shook his head. "I never fret over the past, Sonja. It uses up too much energy."

"But my real troubles are not with our government, but with the government here. They do not wish me to go. They have put every possible obstacle in my path. There is the court order-" She told him about it, swiftly and inaccurately.

When she was through he said, "All right, the first thing is to get you a green card."

"A green card?"

"So you can work here. You said you didn't have much money, Sonja, and your father won't send you any more. You're going to have to eat while I'm getting you out."

She shook her head. "No."

"And pay the rent on this apartment and maybe some legal fees. If I'm going to help you, you'll have to do what I say, or it's no use."

She rose from the footstool, angry and imperious. "What could I do here? Nothing! Do you wish me to wait on tables?"

"That's a beautiful dress."  
A breath and she was relaxed and smiling. "Oh, do you like it? I think I have some taste in clothes. Most of our women do not; they are muzhiks, peasants."

He said, "I want you to change it. The people who give out green cards don't like pretty dresses. Put on the dress you wear when you clean the kitchen."

"I have told you-"

"Have you thought of modeling, Sonja?" He saw at once that she had not. "You're tall, and with that face and that accent . . ." He let it hang. "I know a woman who runs an agency here. You might have to lose ten pounds or so."

"You think that?" At once her attention was on her body, her hands caressing her waist, lingering at her hips.

"Not for a man, Sonja. But for a modeling agency, maybe. We'll let Madame Deppe decide."

"Not in the clothes in which I clean my oven!"

"You'll have plenty of time to change and bathe before we see Madame," he explained patiently. "But it's no use seeing her without the green card."

She hesitated, though he knew he had won. At last, "All right. It will not harm to try. You will wait while I change?"

"Of course," Krasilnikov said.  
When she was gone, he rose and went to the window. It was hot out; he remembered how the heat had struck his face when he had stepped from his car. There was so much good climate in this country, yet they had built their capital here.

The telephone rang. She called from the bedroom, "Would you get that, please? It is probably a mistake-a wrong number."

He said, "All right," and picked up the telephone. "Sonja Aralov's apartment."

"It is me, Wilson. And you are?"

"C. C. Percival."

"They are sending Ipatiev."

"The film star?"

"Yes. I can hardly believe it, but that is what they say. He will hold her."

Half to himself he whispered, "Unless he goes to Hollywood."

"You said? I could not hear you."

She called, "Was it not a wrong number?"

He covered the mouthpiece with his hand. "It was for me. I let my secretary know I'd be here." He told the mouthpiece, "Thank you," and hung up.

"I am not too long?"

"No hurry." There was a copy of *Time* on the shelf under the little table beside the samovar. He thought, Why do all of us subscribe to it? They could trace every agent just from that-from *Time*'s subscription list. Of course, we want them to know; agents count for something too. Not much, perhaps, but something.

He picked it up. The Chinese were in Kazakhstan, the Red Army had been stopped before Paris. It was still better than the old days, he decided. Better than when we were all so afraid, though at least we had peace.

\*\*\*

326

All the Hues of Hell

"All the Hues of Hell" copyright 1987 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in *The Universe* edited by Byron Preiss.

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THREE with egg roll, Kyle thought. Soon four without-if this shadow world really has (oh, sacred!) life. The Egg was still rolling, still spinning to provide mock gravitation.

Yet the roar of the sharply angled guidance jets now seeped only faintly into the hold, and the roll was slower and slower, the feeling of weight weaker and weaker. The Egg was in orbit . . . around nothing. Or at least around nothing visible. As its spin decreased, its ports swept the visible universe. Stars that were in fact galaxies flowed down the synthetic quartz like raindrops down a canopy. Once Kyle caught sight of their mother ship; the Shadow Show herself looked dim and ghostly in the faint light. Of the planet they orbited, there was no trace. Polyaris screamed and took off, executing a multicolored barrel roll with outstretched wings through the empty hold; like all macaws, Polyaris doted on microgravity.

In his earphones Marilyn asked, "Isn't it pretty, Ky?" But she was admiring her computer simulation, not his ecstatic bird: an emerald forest three hundred meters high, sparkling sapphire lakes-suddenly a vagrant strip of beach golden as her hair, and the indigo southern ocean.

One hundred and twenty degrees opposed to them both, Skip answered instead, and not as Kyle himself would have. "No, it isn't." There was a note in Skip's voice that Kyle had noticed, and worried over, before.

Marilyn seemed to shrug. "Okay, darling, it's not really anything to us, less even than ultraviolet. But-

"I can see it," Skip told her.

Marilyn glanced across the empty hold toward Kyle.

He tried to keep his voice noncommittal as he whispered to his mike. "You can see it. Skip?"

Skip did not reply. Polyaris chuckled to herself. Then silence (the utter, deadly quiet of nothingness, of the void where shadow matter ruled and writhed invisible) filled the Egg. For a wild instant, Kyle wondered whether silence itself might not be a manifestation of shadow matter, a dim insubstance felt only in its mass and gravity, its unseen heaviness. Galaxies drifted lazily over the ports, in a white Egg robbed of Up and Down. Their screens were solid sheets of deepest blue.

Skip broke the silence. "Just let me show it to you, Kyle. Allow me, Marilyn, to show you what it actually looks like."

"Because you really know, Skip?"

"Yes, because I really know, Kyle. Don't you remember, either of you, what they said?"

Kyle was watching Marilyn across the hold; he saw her shake her head. "Not all of it." Her voice was cautious. "They

said so much, darling, after all. They said quite a lot of things."

Skip sounded as though he were talking to a child. "What the Life Support people said. The thing, the only significant thing, they did say."

Still more carefully, Marilyn asked, "And what was that, darling?"

"That one of us would die."

An island sailed across her screen, an emerald set in gold and laid upon blue velvet.

Kyle said, "That's my department, Skip. Life Support told us there was a real chance—perhaps as high as one in twenty—that one of you would die, outbound from Earth or on the trip back. They were being conservative; I would have estimated it as one in one hundred."

Marilyn murmured, "I think I'd better inform the Director."

Kyle agreed.

"And they were right," Skip said. "Kyle, I'm the one. I died on the way out. I passed away, but you two followed me."

Ocean and isle vanished from all the screens, replaced by a blinking cursor and the word DIRECTOR.

Marilyn asked, "Respiration monitor, L. Skinner Jansen."

Kyle swiveled to watch his screen. The cursor swept from side to side without any sign of inhalation or exhalation, and for a moment he was taken aback. Then Skip giggled.

Marilyn's sigh filled Kyle's receptors. "The programming wizard. What did you do, Skip? Turn down the gain?"

"That wasn't necessary. It happens automatically." Skip giggled again.

Kyle said slowly, "You're not dead, Skip. Believe me, I've seen many dead men. I've cut up their bodies and examined every organ; I know dead men, and you're not one of them."

"Back on the ship, Kyle. My former physical self is lying in the Shadow Show, dead."

Marilyn said, "Your physical self is right here, darling, with Ky and me." And then to the Director, "Sir, is L. Skinner Jansen's module occupied?"

The trace vanished, replaced by NEGATIVE: JANSEN 1'S MODULE IS EMPTY.

"Console," Skip himself ordered.



Kyle did not turn to watch Skip's fingers fly across the keys. After a moment Skip said, "You see, this place-the formal name of our great republic is Hades, by the way-looks the way it does only because of the color gradations you assigned the gravimeter data. I'm about to show you its true colors, as the expression has it."

A blaze of four-point-five, six, and seven-point-eight ten-thousandths millimeter light, Polyaris fluttered away to watch Skip, When he made no attempt to shoo her off, she perched on a red emergency lever and cocked an eye like a bright black button toward his keyboard.

Kyle turned his attention back to his screen. The letters faded, leaving only the blue southern ocean. As he watched, it darkened to sable. Tiny flames of ocher, citron, and cin-nabar darted from the crests of the waves.

"See what I mean?" Skip asked. "We've been sent to bring a demon back to Earth-or maybe just a damned soul. I don't care. I'm going to stay right here."  
Kyle looked across the vacant white hold toward Marilyn. "I can't," she whispered. "I just can't, Ky. You do it."  
"All right, Marilyn." He plugged his index finger into the Exchange socket, so that he sensed rather than saw the letters overlaying the hellish sea on the screens: KAPPA UPSILON

LAMBDA 23011 REPORTS JANSEN 1 PSYCHOTIC. CAN YOU CONFIRM, JANSEN 2?

"Confirmed, Marilyn Jansen."

RESTRAINT ADVISED.

Marilyn said, "I'm afraid restraint's impossible as long as we're in the Egg, sir."

DO NOT ABORT YOUR MISSION, JANSEN 2. WILL YOU ACCEPT THE RESTRAINT OF JANSEN 1 WHEN RESTRAINT IS PRACTICAL?

"Accepted whenever practical," Marilyn said. "Meanwhile, we'll proceed with the mission."

SATISFACTORY, the Director said, and signed off.

Skip asked, "So you're going to lock me up, honeybone?"

"I hope that by the time we get back it won't be necessary. Ky, haven't you anything to give him?"

"No specifics for psychosis, Marilyn. Not here. I've got some back on the Shadow Show."

Skip ruffled his beard. "Sure. You're going to lock up a ghost." Across the wide hold, Kyle could see he was grinning.

Polyaris picked up the word: "Ghost! Ghost! GHOST!" She flapped to the vacant center of the Egg, posing like a heraldic eagle and watching to make certain they admired her.

The shoreline of a larger island entered their screens from the right. Its beach was ashes and embers, its forest a forest of flames.

"If we're going to make the grab, Marilyn . . ."

"You're right," she said. Courageously, she straightened her shoulders. The new life within her had already fleshed out her cheeks and swollen her breasts; Kyle felt sure that she had never been quite so lovely before. When she put on her helmet, he breathed her name (though only to himself) before he plugged into the simulation that seemed so much more real than a screen.

As a score of pink arms, Marilyn's grav beams dipped into the shadow planet's atmosphere, growing dark and heavy as they pulled up shadow fluid and gases from a lake on the island and whatever winds might ruffle it. Kyle reflected that those arms should be blue instead of black, and told the onboard assistant director to revert to the hues Marilyn had originally programmed.

Rej, the assistant director snapped.

And nothing happened. The gravs grew darker still, and the big accelerator jets grumbled at the effort required to maintain Egg in orbit. When Kyle glanced toward the hold, he discovered it had acquired a twelve-meter yolk as dark as the eggs Chinese bury for centuries. Polyaris was presumably somewhere in that black yolk, unable to see or feel it. He gave a shrill whistle, and she screamed and fluttered out to perch on his shoulder.

The inky simulation doubled and redoubled, swirling to the turbulence of the fresh shadow matter pumped into the Egg by the gravs. Generators sang the spell that kept the shadow "air" and "water" from boiling away in what was to them a high vacuum.

The grumbling of the jets rose to an angry roar.

Skip said, "You've brought Hell in here with us, honey-bone. You, not me. Remember that."

Marilyn ignored him, and Kyle told him to keep quiet.

Abruptly the gravitors winked out. A hundred tons or more of the shadow world's water (whatever that might be) fell back to the surface, fully actual to any conscious entity that might be there. "Rains of frogs and fish, Polyaris," Kyle muttered to his bird. "Remember Charlie Fort?"

Polyaris chuckled, nodding.

Skip said, "Then remember too that when Moses struck the Nile with his staff, the Lord God turned the water to blood."

"You're the one who got into the crayon box. Skip. I'll call you Moses if you like, but I can hardly call you 'I Am,' after

you've just assured us you're not." Kyle was following Marilyn's hunt for an example of the dominant life form, less than a tenth of his capacity devoted to Polyaris and Skip.

"You will call me Master!"

Kyle grinned, remembering the holovamp of an ancient him. "No, Skip. For as long as you're ill, I am the master. Do you know I've been waiting half my life to use that line?"

Then he saw it, three-quarters of a second, perhaps, after Marilyn had: an upright figure striding down a fiery beach. its bipedal locomotion was not a complete guarantee of dominance and intelligence, to be sure; ostriches had never ruled a world and never would, no matter how big a pest they became on Mars. But-yes-those powerful forelimbs were surely GP manipulators and not mere weapons. Now, Marilyn! Now!

As though she had heard him, a pink arm flicked down. For an instant the shadow man floated, struggling wildly to escape, the gravitation of his shadow world countered by their gravitor; then he flashed toward them. Kyle swiveled to watch the black sphere splash (there could be no other word for it) and, under the prodding of the gravs, reconstituted. They were four.

In a moment more, their shadow man bobbed to the surface of the dark and still trembling yolk. To him, Kyle reflected, they were not there, the Egg was not there. To him it must seem that he floated upon a watery sphere suspended in space.

And possibly that was more real than the computer-enhanced vision he himself inhabited, a mere cartoon created from one of the weakest forces known to physics. He unplugged, and at once the Egg's hold was white and empty again.

Marilyn took off her helmet. "All right, Ky, from here on it's up to you-unless you want something more from the surface?"

Kyle congratulated her and shook his head.

"Darling, are you feeling any better?"

Skip said levelly, "I'm okay now. I think that damned machine must have drugged me."

"Ky? That seems pretty unlikely."

"We should de-energize or destroy him, if we can't revise his programming."

Marilyn shook her head. "I doubt that we could reprogram him. Ky, what do you think?"

"A lot of it's hard wired, Marilyn, and can't be altered without new boards. I imagine Skip could revise my software

if he put his mind to it, though it might take him quite a while. He's very good at that sort of thing."

Skip said, "And you're a very dangerous device, Kyle."

Shaking his head, Kyle broke out the pencil-thin cable he had used so often in training exercises. One end jacked into the console, the other into a small socket just above his hips. When both connections were made, he was again in the cybernetic cartoon where true matter and shadow matter looked equally real.

It was still a cartoon with colors by Skip: Marilyn's skin shone snow-white, her lips were burning scarlet, her hair like burnished brass, and her eyes blue fire; Skip himself had become a black-bearded satyr, with a terra-cotta complexion and cruel crimson lips. Kyle tightened both ferrules firmly, tested his jets, released his safety harness, and launched himself toward the center of the Egg, making Polyaris crow with delight.

The shadow man drifted into view as they neared the black yolk. He was lying upon what Kyle decided must be his back;

on the whole he was oddly anthropomorphic, with recognizable head, neck, and shoulders. Binocular organs of vision seemed to have vanished behind small folds of skin, and Kyle would have called his respiration rapid in a human.

Marilyn asked, "How does he look, Ky?"

"Like hell," Kyle muttered. "I'm afraid he may be in shock. At least, shock's what I'd say if he were one of you. As it is, I ..." He let the sentence trail away.

There were strange, blunt projections just above the organs that appeared to be the shadow man's ears. Absently, Kyle tried to palpate them; his hand met nothing, and vanished as it passed into the shadow man's cranium.

The shadow man opened his eyes.

Kyle jerked backward, succeeding only in throwing himself into a slow spin that twisted his cable.

Marilyn called, "What's the matter, Ky?"

"Nothing," Kyle told her. "I'm jumpy, that's all."

The shadow man's eyes were closed again. His arms, longer than a human's and more muscled than a body builder's, twitched and were still. Kyle began the minute examination required by the plan.

When it was complete, Skip asked, "How'd it go, Kyle?"

He shrugged. "I couldn't see his back. The way you've got the shadow water keyed, it's like ink."

Marilyn said, "Why don't you change it, Skip? Make it blue

but translucent, the way it's supposed to be."

Skip sounded apologetic. "I've been trying to; I've been trying to change everything back. I can't, or anyway not yet. I don't remember just what I did, but I put some kind of block on it."

Kyle shrugged again. "Keep trying, Skip, please."

"Yes, please try, darling. Now buckle up, everybody. Time to rendezvous."

Kyle disconnected his cable and pulled his harness around him. After a moment's indecision, he plugged into the console as well.

If he had been unable to see it, it would have been easy to believe that Egg's acceleration had no effect on the fifty-meter sphere of dark matter at its center; yet that too was mass, and the gravs whimpered like children at the strain of changing its speed and direction, their high wail audible to Kyle at least—above the roaring of the jets. The black sphere stretched into a sooty tear. Acceleration was agony for Polyaris as well; Kyle cupped her fragile body in his free hand to ease her misery as much as he could.

Somewhere so far above the Egg that the gravity well of the shadow planet had almost ceased to make any difference and words like above held little meaning, the Shadow Show was unfolding to receive them, preparing itself to embed the newly fertilized Egg in an inner wall. For a moment Kyle's thoughts soared, drunk on the beauty of the image.

Abruptly the big jets fell silent. The Egg had achieved escape velocity.

Marilyn returned control of Egg to the assistant director. "That's it, folks, until we start guiding in. Unbuckle if you want."

Kyle tossed Polyaris toward the yolk and watched her make a happy circuit of the Eggs interior.

Skip said, "Marilyn, I seem to have a little problem here."

"What is it?"

Kyle took off his harness and retracted it. He unplugged, and the yolk and its shadow man were gone. Only the chortling Polyaris remained.

"I can't get this God-damned thing off," Skip complained. "The buckle's jammed or something."

Marilyn took off her own acceleration harness and sailed across to look at it. Kyle joined them.

"Here, let me try it," Marilyn said. Her slender fingers, less nimble but more deft than Skip's, pressed the release and

jiggled the locking tab; it w' ild not pull free.

Kyle murmured, "I'm at id you can't release Skip, Marilyn. Neither can I."

She turned to look at him.

"You accepted restraint for Skip, Marilyn. I want to say that in my opinion you were correct to do so."

She began, "You mean-"

"The Director isn't satisfied yet that Skip has recovered, that's all. Real recoveries aren't usually so quick or so-" Kyle paused, searching his dictionary file for the best word. "Convenient. This may be no more than a lucid interval. That happens, quite often. It may be no more than a stratagem."

Skip cursed and tore at the straps.

"Do you mean you can lock us ... ?"

"No," Kyle said. "I can't. But the Director can, if in his Judgment it is indicated."

He waited for Marilyn to speak, but she did not.

"You see, Marilyn, Skip, we tried very hard to prepare for every foreseeable eventuality, and mental illness was certainly one of those. About ten percent of the human population suffers from it at some point in their lives, and so with both of you on board and under a great deal of stress, that sort of problem was certainly something we had to be ready for."

Marilyn looked pale and drained. Kyle added, as gently as he could, "I hope this hasn't been too much of a shock to you."

Skip had opened the cutting blade of his utility knife and was hacking futilely at his straps. Kyle took it from him, closed it, and dropped it into one of his own storage areas.

Marilyn pushed off. He watched her as she Bew gracefully across the hold, caught the pilot's-chair grab bar, and buckled herself into the seat; her eyes were shining with tears. As if sensing her distress, Polyaris perched on the bar and rubbed her ear with the side of her feathered head.

Skip muttered, "Go look at your demon, Kyle. Go anyplace but here."

Kyle asked, "Do you still think it's a demon, Skip?"  
"You've seen it a lot closer up than I have. What do you think?"

"I don't believe in demons, Skip."

Skip looked calm now, but his fingers picked mechanically at his straps. "What do you believe in, Kyle? Do you believe in God? Do you worship Man?"

"I believe in life. Life is my God, Skip, if you want to put it like that."

"Any life? What about the mosquito?"

"Yes, any life. The mosquito won't bite me." Kyle smiled his metal smile.

"Mosquitoes spread disease."

"Sometimes," Kyle admitted. "Then they must be destroyed, the lower life sacrificed to the higher. Skip, your Marilyn is especially sacred to me now. Do you understand

that?"

"Marilyn's doomed."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because of the demon, of course. I tried to tell her that she had doomed herself, but it was actually you that doomed her. You were the one who wanted him. You had to have him, you and the Director; and if it hadn't been for you, we could have gone home with a hold full of dark matter and some excuse."

"But you aren't doomed, Skip? Only Marilyn?"

"I'm dead and damned, Kyle. My doom has caught up with me. I've hit bottom. You know that expression?"

Kyle nodded.

"People talk about hitting bottom and bouncing back up. If you can bounce, that isn't the bottom. When somebody gets where I am, there's no bouncing back, not ever."

"If you're really dead, Skip, how can the straps hold you? I wouldn't think that an acceleration harness could hold a lost soul, or even a ghost."

"They're not holding me," Skip told him. "It was just that at the last moment I didn't have guts enough to let Marilyn see I was really gone. I'd loved her. I don't any more—you can't love anything or anyone except yourself where I am. But—"

"Can you get out of your seat, Skip? Is that what you're saying, that you can get out without unfastening the buckle?"

Skip nodded slowly, his dark eyes (inscrutable eyes, Kyle thought) never leaving Kyle's face. "And I can see your demon, Kyle. I know you can't see him because you're not hooked up. But I can."

"You can see him now. Skip?"

"Not now—he's on the far side of the black ball. But I'll be able to see him when he floats around to this side again."

I Kyle returned to his seat and connected the cable as he had before. The black yolk sprang into being again; the shadow man was facing him-in fact glaring at him with burning yellow eyes. He asked the Director to release Skip.

Together they drifted toward the center of the Egg. Kyle made sure their trajectory carried them to the side of the yolk away from the shadow man; and when the shadow man was no longer in view, he held Skip's arm and stopped them both with a tug at the cable. "Now that I know you can see him too, Skip, I'd like you to point him out to me."

Skip glanced toward the watery miniature planet over which they hovered like Hies-or perhaps merely toward the center of the hold. "Is this a joke? I've told you, I can see him." A joyous blue and yellow comet, Polaris erupted from Ae midnight surface, braking on napping wings to examine them sidelong.

"That's why I need your input, Skip," Kyle said carefully. "I'm not certain the feed I'm getting is accurate. If you can apprehend shadow matter directly, I can use your information to check the simulation. Can you still see the demon? Indicate his position, please."

Skip hesitated. "He's not here, Kyle. He must be on the other side. Shall we go around and have a look?"

"The water's still swirling quite a bit. It should bring him to us before long."

Skip shrugged. "Okay, Kyle, you're the boss. I guess you always were."

"The Director's our captain, Skip. That's why we call him what we do. Can you see the demon yet?" A hand and part of one arm had floated into view around the curve of the yolk.

"No. Not yet. Do you have a soul, Kyle?"

Kyle nodded. "It's called my original monitor. I've seen a printout, though of course I didn't read it all; it was very long."

"Then when you're destroyed it may be sent here. Here comes your demon, by the way."

Kyle nodded.

"I suppose it may be put into one of these horrors. They seem more machine than human, at least to me."

"No," Kyle told him. "They're truly alive. They're shadow life, Skip, and since this one is the only example we have, just now it must be the most precious life in the universe to you, to Marilyn, and to me. Do you think he sees us?"



"He sees me," Skip said grimly.

"When I put my fingers into his brain, he opened his eyes," Kyle mused. "It was as though he felt them there."

"Maybe he did."

Kyle nodded. "Yes, possibly he did. The brain is such a sensitive mechanism that perhaps a gravitational disturbance as weak as that results in stimulation, if it is uneven. Put your hand into his head, please. I want to watch. You say he's a demon-pretend you're going to gouge out his eyes."

"You think I'm crazy!" Skip shouted. "Well, I'm telling you, you're crazy!"

Startled, Marilyn twisted in her pilot's chair to look at them.

"I've explained to you that he sees me," Skip said a little more calmly. "I'm not getting within his reach!"

"Touch his nose for me, Skip. Like this." Kyle lengthened one arm until his fingers seemed to brush the dark water several meters from the drifting shadow man's hideous face. "Look here, Skip. I'm not afraid."

Skip screamed.

"Have I time?" Kyle asked. He was holding the grab bar of Marilyn's control chair. In the forward port, the Shadow Show was distinctly visible.

"We've a few minutes yet," Marilyn told him. "And I want to know. I have to, Ky. He's the father of my child. Can you cure him?"

"I think so, Marilyn, though your correcting the simulator hues has probably helped Skip more than anything I've done thus far."

Kyle glanced appreciatively in the direction of the yolk. It was a translucent blue, as it should have been all along, and the shadow man who floated there looked more like a good-natured caricature of a human being than a demon. His skin was a dusty pinkish brown, his eyes the cheerful bright yellow of daffodils. It seemed to Kyle that they flickered for a moment as though to follow Polyaris in her flight across the hold. Perhaps a living entity of shadow matter could apprehend true matter after all—that would require a thorough investigation as soon as they were safely moored in the Shadow Show.

"And he can't really see shadow matter, Ky?"

Kyle shook his head. "No more than you or I can, Marilyn. He thought he could, you understand, at least on some level. On another he knew he couldn't and was faking it quite cleverly." Kyle paused, then added, "Freud did psychology a considerable disservice when he convinced people that the human mind thinks on only three levels. There are really a

great many more than that, and there's no question but that the exact number varies between individuals."

"But for a while you really believed he might be able to, from what you've told me."

"At least I was willing to entertain the thought, Marilyn.

Occasionally you can help people like Skip just by allowing them to test their delusional systems. What I found was that he had been taking cues from me--mostly from the direction of my eyes, no doubt. It would be wrong for you to think of that as lying. He honestly believed that when you human beings died your souls came here, to this shadow planet of a shadow system, in a shadow galaxy. And that he himself was dead."

Marilyn shook her head in dismay. "But that's insane, Ky. Just crazy."

She has never looked this lovely, Kyle thought. Aloud he said, "Mental illness is often a way of escaping responsibility Marilyn. You may wish to consider that. Death is another, and you may wish to consider that also."

For a second Marilyn hesitated, biting her lip. "You love me, don't you, Ky?"

"Yes, I do, Marilyn. Very much."

"And so does Skip, Ky." She gave him a small, sad smile. "I suppose I'm the luckiest woman alive, or the unluckiest. The men I like most both love me, but one's having a breakdown ... I shouldn't have started this, should I?"

"While the other is largely inorganic," Kyle finished for her. "But it's really not such a terrible thing to be loved by someone like me, Marilyn. We--"

Polyaris shrieked and shrieked again--not her shrill cry of pleasure or even her outraged squawk of pain, but the uncanny, piercing screech that signaled a prowling ocelot: Danger! Fire! Flood! INVASION and CATASTROPHE!

She was fluttering about the shadow man, and the shadow man was no longer a dusty pinkish brown. As Kyle stared, he faded to gray, then to white. His mouth opened. He crumpled, slowly and convulsively, into a fetal ball.

Horrified, Kyle turned to Marilyn. But Marilyn was self-absorbed, her hands clasping her belly. "It moved, Ky! It just moved. I felt life!"

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342

Procreation

"Procreation"

(as "Creation," "Re-creation," "The Sister's Account") copyright 1983, 1984 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in Omni.

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## I Creation

1 AUGUST, Monday. Had a flash of insight today. Had been mulling over Gott's (Harvard) notion that the universe contains just one magnetic monopole--because that's its seed, the same way each raindrop holds just one dust particle. (Means the guys at Berkeley and U. of Houston are wrong about catching them in their balloon over Nebraska, of course.) Why not make one in the accelerator? Because you can't move anything that heavy; monopoles should be ten billion times (or so) the mass of a hydrogen atom. Flash of insight: To make industrial diamonds, you get the pressure with an explosion. Why not use an electrical discharge? Had some time on the accelerator, tried it. Nothing. Shot electrons at Nothing to see if they were attracted or repelled. Got electrons, a few positrons. Probably equipment glitch.

2 August, Tuesday. Anomaly in target. Took it out of accelerator, washed it, scrubbed with pumice, etc., still no good. put it under scope. Dark spot of water and cleanser that won't wipe off. Heavy stuff seems to be settling out.

3 August, Wednesday. Told Sis, Martha, How'd you like to say, "My brother (husband) the Nobel Laureate?" Martha:

"Gene, you're crazy, heard you talk before, etc." Sis interested. (What I expected from both, in other words.) Told her about it--found monopole, made microverse, Gott right. Drove to lab. The microverse seems pyramidal. Strange. Tilted it, water flowed as by gravity, leaving some solids dry. Gravity interuniversal. Wanted to phone John Cramer about it, but he's off Gastprofessoring in West Berlin. Had to lecture, didn't get much done.

4 August, Thursday. Rigged up light in lab so I can switch it on to study microverse. It's no longer pyramidal, cubical now and bigger. Which only means it's gone from four angles to eight. No doubt it'll continue until it approximates a sphere, if I let it. Funny to think how I've written about this odd particle or that (like the monopole) existing "in some strange corner of the universe," without guessing it might be true. (Special properties at corners?) Anyway, it seems no matter how big it gets, it takes up no "Room," not being in our universe at all. When I measure the target with calipers, it's the right size still. But ruler enters the microverse and loses a little length, making it appear the target has grown. (N.B. Remember to write on concept of "Room" for Physical Review C.)

5 August, Friday. Introduced cellular material (scrapings) from the apple Sis put in my lunch. Astounding results. Green matter spread over all inorganic stuff above water. (That's been growing itself, I think; it seems to be expanding with the microverse, though not as fast.) Went over to Biology

and bumed tissue samples from rabbits, mice, and so forth, and put them in. Nothing-they seem to have died.

6 August, Saturday. It seems I was wrong about the animal tissue. Today I saw a couple of little things darting around and one or two swimming. They seem large for microorganisms; wanted to catch some and bring them back, but they were too fast for me. What's more surprising, the vegetable matter has turned itself into club moss, or something of the kind. With my good glass, I can even see spore pods hanging from the branches. Fascinating! Wanted to do the animal tissue thing again, but had tossed out the cultures. Scraped my wrist and put the scrapings in. They grew too. Caught the little critter before he got too lively and scraped him. Put him back. Soon running around as good as ever, and the tissue I had taken from him became another, much the same.

7 August, Sunday. Decided not to go to the campus today though I knew it would mean (as it did) Martha would nag me about church. Slept late, watched baseball on TV. Got to talking about the microverse with Sis, and she wanted to tell the "people" about us. Silly, but she was so fired up I couldn't refuse to help her. She made little drawings on a sheet of paper so it could be folded to make a booklet, beginning with the arc discharge and ending with me watching the Yankees drop one to the Angels. We went over to the campus and reduced it half a dozen times on the good copier, and she folded it up. Maybe I shouldn't say it here, but I don't think I've ever felt prouder in my life than when I showed her the microverse-she was that thrilled. (She's already talking about putting in a few cells of her own.) But when I used the glass myself, why horrors! The critters were eating the spore pods or whatever they are. I want to have a better look at those, so I began casting about for a way of scaring them off. There was a fruit fly circling the apple core in my wastebasket, and I caught it and put it in. It worked like a charm, and off they scampered. Sis said we ought to title her book, but we couldn't think of anything appropriate. After a lot of talk, we just wrote our names, "Gene" and "Sis," on the cover and dropped it in.

#### I Re-creation

1 September, Thursday. Completed turnover of the new universe to the Astronomy Department today. As I told Dr. Ramakrishna, we will eventually have to draw some sort of line between their claims to new universes and ours. Anyway, it certainly appears that Gene-eration (as I've christened it) has moved into theirs. They say it's already outside the orbit of Pluto and headed in the direction of Vega; there's a red shift too. (Dr. Ramakrishna suggested it be called "Rama-jetta." I treated that as a joke, and intend to continue to do so.) Now back to work on my article for Physical Review C.

2 September, Friday. Received a most disturbing airmail letter from Dr. Cramer in West Germany. He points out that if my experiment created only a single monopole, then it created a net magnetic charge. (Which he calls a "no-no." He's always kidding. But about this?) To paraphrase Cramer:

If Gene-eration was seeded by a north monopole, then there

must also be a south monopole floating around somewhere. And that must have seeded another universe-call it "Sis-eration" after Sis, who was my sounding board for the first one. That's particularly apt because "sis" is a simple palindrome, read backward the same as forward, and Cramer actually goes so far as to suggest that time might run backward in Sis-eration, so that it was destroyed at the moment Gene-eration was created. If Cramer's right, Sis-eration obviously doesn't grow as fast as Gene-eration. Which may make it even more valuable. I'll have a good look for it tomorrow.

3 September, Saturday. No classes today, so I was able to go over the lab with a fine-tooth comb looking for Sis-eration. Started with the accelerator target where I found Gene-eration and worked out from there-nothing. But see here: there's only one monopole in our universe. After all, I've proved that Gott (Harvard) was right about it being the seed of our universe. So it is a net magnetic charge-so far as our universe is concerned. Aha, Cramer, I've got you! Sis-eration is mythical, the Atlantis of physics.

4 September, Sunday. No reason to go to the campus today, so I didn't. Went to church with Martha and got to musing during the sermon. Don't know what to call it-a waking dream. Anyway, while I was sitting there studying the grain in the oak pew in front of me, I remembered that yesterday while I was shaving I had a vision. It started with one of those little vagrant spots that cross my eye sometimes. (I think the biologists call them "floaters" and say they're single body cells.) Anyway, the thing was right in the middle of my eye when I was trying to scrape that tough bit under my nose. It interfered with my vision, and somehow, I suppose because I unconsciously linked not seeing with darkness, I wanted more light. Then it happened. I saw what Ramakrishna and his gang call the Big Bang. I saw that primordial supersun the old philosophers called the Yiem-saw it open like a milkweed pod and scatter the galaxies. And then it was gone. But here's the part that scares me: I swear I've never thought about that vision from yesterday morning until I was sitting in church today. My subconscious must have decided it was irrational and blocked it out completely. God, what a frightening thought! If I've got a censorship mechanism like that, what else have I lost because of it?

5 September, Monday. Spent most of my day musing at my desk, I'm afraid. Replaying the vision of Saturday morning in my memory. The way the Yiem acted and why it acted like that. It's always been assumed that matter and antimatter were created in equal amounts-parity seems to require it. And it's also been assumed that when an atom met an anti-atom, they returned to energy again. Therefore there was some kind of segregation principle at work that put all the matter to the right (let's say) and all the antimatter to the left-because if they were mixed together, they'd eliminate each other perfectly. But that segregation principle is a violation of parity itself. It's God, or Maxwell's Demon, or some such, looking at each little atom and saying, "You sit in smoking, you in nonsmoking, you in smoking." And so on. But suppose it wasn't really like that at all? Suppose those atoms were much more stable than we think? Two atoms meet, and each has a dense, high-energy core of protons (or antiprotons)

and neutrons. But far outside those cores each has the classical valence shells of electrons (or positrons), stuff that's much more diffuse and has much less mass and consequently much less energy. Now suppose that only those outer electron shells react-the atoms bounce violently apart, and deprived of their outer shells decay to simpler elements. But of course when an atom meets another of the same matter, there's no bounce. Do the atoms tend to segregate themselves? You bet! What's more, here's an explanation for one of the oldest mysteries of astrophysics: Why is there so much hydrogen and so little of anything else?

6 September, Tuesday. Ramakrishna called to tell me that Gene-eration (that's what he called it) has shifted into the infrared. I thought, okay, if you're a nice guy, I'm a nice guy. So I said, "Dr. Ramakrishna, I want you to stop thinking about the Big Bang. Think about the Big Blossom instead. Think of that primeval fireball unfolding and scattering out stuff that slowly picks up speed." He wanted to call me a damn fool politely, but his English isn't good enough. I told him, "Trust me," and hung up. Wonder if anybody's gotten the Nobel for physics twice. N.B. Look it up.

7 September, Wednesday. It's only 6:00 A.M., and I don't usually write this journal so early, but I can't sleep. Last evening, as I was getting ready to go to bed, I femembered-No, I can't write it. Suppose somebody (Martha) finds this? I'd be locked away. Remembered something, a visit to Sis-eration, I couldn't possibly have forgotten, but that I've never remembered before. My God, the continents rising from the water like whales. Gramer's right-I just didn't understand him. It was created when I performed my experiment, and it's propagating through our past. What will it do to us? Got to talk this over with Sis. But I can't-what if I'm really crazy?

### Ill The Sister's Account

My brother and I were never ordinary children. We shared a secret, though it was not until we were both nearly grown that we understood just how extraordinary a secret it was. TV assured us that other children were transported to strange places-Dorothy to Oz, Wendy and her brothers to Never-Never Land. Why then shouldn't Gene and I find ourselves in a place equally strange, though somewhat less interesting?

The first time, we were on a camping trip; and because we were a few hundred miles from home, we believed for a long time afterward that unless we left home it wouldn't happen at all.

And yet that first time was not terribly interesting, and only a little frightening. We were camping in the Sierras. Mom and Dad were setting up the tent and Barque was superintending the job from the vantage of a fallen log. We were given a water can and told where the spring was.

It wasn't. We stood shivering in country of brown sand and tan and red stones. The towering Sierras were gone, but

pinnacles of stone that seemed very high to us (as high, that is to say, as large trees) cast shadows that stretched for miles across the sand. Dark though the sky was, it was not dark with cloud, and no bird flew there.

It seemed to us that we walked forever; no doubt it was really three miles or so. Then there was a beach where glassy waves raised by the cold, thin wind crashed on the sand, sweeping it forward and back as I had swept the floor the year before in kindergarten, when I was too young to know that the broom had to be lifted after each stroke.

"Look!" I called to Gene. "There they are!" And I could see the tent quite clearly in the lifted surface of every wave, with Dad coming out of it and Barque yapping under his feet, just as if I were seeing the same picture again and again in the TVs in a department store. I ran forward, Dad picked me up, and a minute later Gene was there too.

We told Mom and Dad all about it, of course. Mom decided there was a little patch of desert nearby. Dad said that was completely impossible, as of course it was. He took us to the spring, and we found our footprints in the soft soil near the water. But all the footprints pointed away from the tent, as though we had walked into the spring and swum into the earth. Dad was something of a woodsman, and he was frightened by that. He frightened us too by making us promise not to tell Mom. After that we never told anyone.

The second time, we were at the beach raiding the tide pools for our high-school biology class. The waves reminded me of that first experience, but there had been a storm far out in the Pacific, and they were dark and opaquely green. We had not talked about the desert for a long time, but I called Gene over and asked if he couldn't see something-trees, it seemed to me-beyond the bottom of the pool I'd found.

It was just such a forest as you see in the pictures in old books, the trees ten feet across, wrapped in moss, each sleeping in its own wisp of night. A door opened in the tent we passed, and a dark man led us down into his underground home, where his shy and lovely wife nursed their child.

The man and woman fed us nuts and mushrooms, the boiled fiddleheads of ferns, and bread made without wheat; they talked to us with many gestures and drew pictures of trees and deer on paper that was white again each time the dark man turned it over. We understood very little of what they said, but now I think they were trying to explain that they lived beneath the ground so that the trees and the deer, who could not, might live above it; and that there were many, many such families.

At last the child fell asleep, and the dark woman opened a crumpled little mirror for us so it was as large and smooth as a pier glass. In it we saw ourselves, and beyond ourselves the ocean; and in a moment its spray was in our faces.

Gene and I talked about it for a long time that night, and

we decided (or rather, he decided) that there was too much danger. We had been lucky thus far; but we could not hope to be lucky always. We thought we had seen two different worlds. Perhaps we had.

After that he tried to forget, and I believe he succeeded. I went only once more, when Gene had married and it was clear I never would. I stood before the vanity in my bedroom and looked beyond my reflected face and saw the sea.

At first I thought it the same world we had visited when we were children, because it was a landscape of stones and dust, but now the sun was hot, and there was kelp on the beach and a thousand tiny crabs. I sat on a boulder for a while, thinking and looking out at the water, never seeing a sail or a gull. And I understood as I sat there that all three had been one world, and that in my own short life I had seen its senility and its Bower, and now I saw its beginning.

I had carried a mirror with me, having learned something at least from the beautiful, dark woman who had been so much younger than I now was; but there was no need of it. The shore held many pools, and each showed me my bed, the coverlet neatly spread for the repose of my rag doll.

Beyond it, my closet door stood open, with tiny silver fish swimming among my coats and dresses. I reached for one, but in my hand it became a wisp of embroidered scarf.

This afternoon, I found a letter on Gene's desk from his friend Dr. Cramer, who is teaching for a year in West Germany. It said: "Congratulations on your creation of the monopole! But I have a slight quibble. You didn't mention it, but you must surely have made a pair, a 'north' monopole and a 'south' monopole. Otherwise you would have created a net magnetic charge, which is a no-no. So you must have two universes (for the price of one). The one you describe must be like ours, but the other should contain antimatter and have time running in reverse."

I believe that Dr. Cramer is correct; and since you had Gene's account of the first, you should have mine of the second. It is gone now, so that when I stand before my mirror, I see only my own face.

Or perhaps that second universe was ours, and it is we who are gone, leaving as our only trace these words upon a printed page.

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352

Lukora

"Lukora" copyright 1988 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in Terry's Universe edited by Beth Meacham.

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THIS is my report, the report of Meirax Andros, alone. Michael is not with me; Michael may be dead.

On 11J89 we chose this site, landed, and set up camp. Here a good-sized stream enters a lake of some six thousand hectares. Undesignated mountains rise to the east. To the west are steep slopes, covered in many places with needle-trees and brush. It seemed to both of us a promising location. Its elevation is four hundred ninety-two meters, its coordinates are fifty point eight and fifty-three point four.

For five days we scouted for signs. (Reference previous report, ASP ninety-six six.) Such signs as we found were stale. There was no indication of Small Folk, and I told Michael we had better move on.

He disagreed.

"They shift their hunting grounds," he said; he was sitting on a boulder, searching the valley with his eyes. "Someday soon they'll be back. There's a lot of game."

Meirax shook her head. "Our orders were to find them."

He would not look at her. "Our orders were more extensive than that. They'll come back soon, and when they come we'll be here, familiar with the country, knowing where to find water, where the game trails run."

That night as she lay drowsy in her bag, she heard his bag open-the soft, stealthy noise of the slider. She believed that he was coming for her and wondered for a moment how she should receive him. Surprised? Outraged? With eagerness? She inched her own slider down, readied her arms to embrace him.

He did not come. For a long while she waited in the dark. When she rose, his bag was no longer warm. She went out, where the strange, wide moon gave her a shadow like a ghost. The day had been warm and sunny, but the night wind was keen with cold. The needle-trees sighed to see her, and the brook laughed at her. When she returned to her bag, she wept.

Next morning she expected to find him in his bag; he would deny having left it, tell her she had dreamed. But his bag was empty, his clothing gone, his boots and dragonette gone too. She ran a square search pattern that by afternoon stretched two kilometers in all directions.

At sunset she found him, wearily returning to their camp. "Were you lost?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "For a while."

"You went out last night," she said.

He nodded. "I heard something-something prowling around the tent, I thought. And then there was something

farther on. It seemed worth investigating."

"You should have awakened me, Michael."

"You were already awake. You said you heard me."

Back at the camp he washed in the brook, ate a little, then crawled into his bag and slept, though it was scarcely dark. She was tired as well, yet she remained awake watching the valley and thinking of various things she had observed in her search and the direction from which he had come, west by northwest.

That night he was gone when she woke. She got up, dressed in the dark, and went outside. The uncanny moon rode high, but it was nearly dawn. She went to the brook for a drink and sat beside it a while, wondering what else might have come to drink there. The brook water tasted better than lake water, to her at least. When she returned to the tent, the first pale shards of day had streaked the sky. She did not search for him, but busied herself about the camp, pitching the tent and weaving mattresses of boughs.

As she had expected, Michael returned late that afternoon. She had resolved not to question him and did not; but he said, "They're back."

It startled her; she had convinced herself that this had nothing to do with the mission. She asked, "You've seen them?"

"No, but I've seen fresh signs." He hesitated, reluctance so clear she grew certain he would not speak again. At least he added, "And I've heard them."

"How can you be sure?"

"Listen, Meirax, and tell me what you think." He took the smallest recorder from a pocket. She had not been aware that it was gone; she switched it on, held it to her ear, and closed her eyes.

The needle-trees wrapped her in their impalpable sorrow. It was dark and far colder than she had expected; a light rain fell. A voice-not a human voice-moaned far away:

"U'o-o-o-o, ou-o-o, o-o-o-o-o." Suddenly, she was terribly afraid. She opened her eyes and groped for her dragonette, but it was back in the tent. Michael was no longer with her, but down at the brook, washing.

Finished washing himself, he washed his clothes and spread them on the rocks to dry. She said, "You don't have to sit up. I'll bring them in for you. I'll fold them, and lay them beside your bag."

"Thank you," he said. "What do you think of the recording? It's them, isn't it?"

She shrugged. "You shouldn't go out alone."

When the last bright fleck of sun had vanished behind the trees, she went to the rocks and got his clothes as she had said she would. His shirt was still a little damp at the collar, but she folded it as she had promised and carried everything back to the tent.

As she lifted the tent flap, she took a last look at the mountain slopes, stony and dotted here and there with needle-trees and patches of brush. Near her, night had come already; but higher up, the black mountain rocks still captured light. For an instant she glimpsed the eyes of one of the Small Folk near the shadow's edge. Then they were gone, and she could not be sure she had not imagined them.

Once in the tent, she removed only her boots; and she took her dragonette with her into her bag. Hours later when Michael had left the tent, she rose too, put on her boots, and followed him.

The moon was rising, a moon no longer quite so circular as it had been. This is when he leaves, she thought, when the moon rises above the mountains.

She saw him three hundred meters down the valley, walking fast, not looking back. She hurried after him, but he passed into the shadow of a tall needle-tree and was gone.

For most of the rest of the night, she was certain she was following him still. Twice she heard him cough, and once she glimpsed him as he crossed a moonlit clearing. Day came, and she held back, afraid that he might see her. That was when she lost him, or so she decided later.

For most of that day she pressed forward, stopping only to drink at a freshet that could not have been their stream. She was very tired by then, and she knew that she was no longer so strong as she had been.

That hour came when the sun was half down the western sky—the hour at which Michael had returned before. She decided that she would return to camp as well. It was pointless to hunt him among the rocks and trees when he was asleep in camp.

Her director pointed the way, but she found herself blocked again and again by fallen trees, gorges, or cliffs or banks too steep to climb.

Night came. She knew it would be wiser to stop and sleep if she could; but she was hungry and felt that camp could be no more than a kilometer off at most. She blamed herself for not taking rations, not taking a light, though she had feared that he might look behind him and see a light. She imagined herself back at the school, an instructor at the school now, dressing down some cadet who was also herself for not bringing a light, not taking rations.

Then she fell. For a moment it seemed that she would never land before the ground struck her like a blow.

She felt she had been unconscious, perhaps not for long. It was night still, though her head ached and her bruised limbs were stiff with cold. For a long time she groped among stones for the director; but her fingers could not find it, and its green glow was nowhere to be seen.

She decided to make herself as comfortable as she could and wait for sunrise—in daylight she could surely find the director and make her way back to camp. She took three steps, hoping to come upon a place sheltered from the wind, and fell again.

When she recovered consciousness for the second time she was warmer, but it was very dark. She sat up and found that she had lain on a bed of fern, and that though she still wore her jacket, a jacket had been spread over her legs.

Michael's voice asked, "Are you all right?"

"Where are we?"

For a second or two, no answer came. "Lukora's house."

"Lukora?"

"This woman," Michael said.

By then she had noticed the tall white figure. She asked, "Did you find me, or was it Michael? In either case, thank you for taking care of me."

The white figure approached, fractioned into three. Like a hand, Meirax thought, with three fingers held up. It bent across the crouching bulk that was Michael. Hair brushed her cheek, and she realized that the divisions of the white figure were no more than dark hair, hair that hung before its owner's shoulders and nearly to her waist.

Aloud she said thank you again. A chill hand caressed her forehead, and gentle fingers explored the aching lump above her left temple; with them came a deep inhalation like the sighing of needle-trees.

Michael said, "She is sorry that you're hurt."

"Can't she talk? How do you know her name?"

"She can," Michael told her. "She doesn't speak often. Do you think you can stand?"

"I'll try." She got her legs beneath her, but they were without strength.

A fourth person entered silently, so that for a moment the darkness grew darker still. She heard something soft and heavy laid upon a table, or perhaps upon the floor.

Michael muttered something unintelligible.

"Who is that?"

"It doesn't matter. Would you like to lie down and rest for a while?"

Lukora said, "They are abroad." It was not really a deep voice, Meirax thought, yet it possessed the husky quality some women thought passionate. ...

She was again supine. "Why is it so dark here, Michael?"  
"So that you can sleep." There was an odor of musk, heavy and ensorceling, as warm as breath.

When she woke again Michael gave her something oily to eat, and she asked what it was.

"Flesh softened by fire. We used to do it too. It's very strengthening."

"I think I could walk back to camp now," she said, knowing it was what he wished to hear.

"Then we'll go."

Her heart leaped for joy. "You're coming with me?"

"I must. There's danger from the Small Folk."

He helped her stand and held her arm so that she would not trip on the uneven stone floor. "I feel as if the ceiling were right over my head," she told him.

"It's low in some places, high in others."

He led her through a chamber where a small, bright light shone far above without illuminating the walls, then along a twisting corridor. "There's the door," he said; it was a vague circle of pale light.

"It's day outside, isn't it?"

"It's almost evening," Michael told her. "Lukora would not like us leaving so late." He hesitated. "It might be better if I go first."

"Go ahead, then."

"You'll follow me? At once?"

"Certainly," Meirax told him.

Metal rang against rock. The doorway darkened as Michael's body filled it, then opened again.

"Hurry," he said, and extended an arm to her.

She climbed through the doorway, blinking watering eyes at the brightness of daylight. It was like a new scene in a show, she thought: Lukora's house was suddenly gone, and Michael was pushing through thick brush instead. Brush

scratched her hands and cheeks, and sent up clouds of insects like missiles.

At last they burst into the clearing under a big needle-tree. "What's that?" she asked.

"A sword." He showed it to her. It was old and rusted, its bronze hilt grass-green with verdigris; but its edges were newly ground and looked sharp.

"Couldn't you have used it to cut through the brush?" she asked him.

He shook his head. "That would have been foolish."

Though her director was gone, the setting sun soon restored her sense of direction-she knew that Michael led her southeast. Together they mounted slope after slope, swinging due south and even due north at times as Michael traced a path that he alone could see.

And some third thing came with them, noiseless but always present.

They saw the Small Folk, she thought, before the Small Folk saw them. They were waiting on the ridge line, a ragged cluster of a score or more, thin limbed and wild haired, mean statues of gold in the last light.

"We'd better turn aside," she told Michael.

"Then they would know we're afraid of them. They'd hunt us down."

She took out her dragonette and loosed its safety catch. "I don't think they know we're here."

"Of course they do."

It was dark by the time they had mounted the ridge, and the strange moon was not yet above the mountains; the suns of half a billion worlds gleamed like so many holes pricked in black film. "Stand out of our path," Michael ordered the Small Folk.

A champion rose before him, lean but nearly as tall as he. The champion held some weapon-a toothed club, as well as Meirax could judge it by starlight. "Shoot him," she breathed. "Kill him now, Michael-or I will."

He handed her his dragonette. "What chance would we have against them at night? We'd kill half a dozen, perhaps; then they would kill us both."

The ancient steel gleamed under the stars, as though night had washed away all rust. She heard the thud as blade met hard wood, the whistle and whisper of the champion's club swung in a blow too high, the champion's wild shriek.

Hands like claws tore Michael's dragonette from her. She

fired her own, and two of the Small Folk burst into Same.

Then she was down, fingers at her throat, the dragonette gone. Her own hands tore away those that held her. For an instant, she glimpsed a dark bludgeon against the stars. She twisted frantically out of the way.

The Small Folk cried out in terror, all together like the chorus at a play. White things leaped above her with flashing fangs. Her whole world was a cacophony of snarls and screams, her hair wet with blood that was not her own.

As you hear, I have returned to camp. Lukora's brother has come with me; I do not know his name. He waits me now, sniffing the wind, pacing to and fro before our door. The sun will rise at 05:33.8 today, and already the horned lords bugle from their hilltops. We hunt now; but I will speak to you again very soon.

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361

Suzanne Delage

"Suzanne Delage" copyright 1980 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in Edges edited by Ursula K. Le Guin and Virginia Kidd.

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As I was reading last night-reading a book, I should explain, which was otherwise merely commonplace; one of those somewhat political, somewhat philosophical, somewhat historical books which can now be bought by the pound each month-I was struck by a certain remark of the author's. It seemed to me at the time an interesting, if almost self-evident, idea; and afterward, when I had turned the page, and many other pages, and was half through a new chapter bearing very little relation to what had gone before, this idea found its way back into my consciousness and there acted as a sort of filter between my mind and the book until I put it down and, still thinking, went up to bed.

The idea which had so forcibly struck me was simply this: that every man has had in the course of his life some extraordinary experience, some dislocation of all we expect from nature and probability, of such magnitude that he might in his own person serve as a living proof of Hamlet's hackneyed precept-but that lie has, nearly always, been so conditioned to consider himself the roost mundane of creatures, that, finding no relationship to the remainder of his life in this extraordinary experience, he has forgotten it.

It seemed to me (considering the immense extent of the universe of the senses and the minute size of that area of it we think of as "everyday") that this must certainly be correct. Yet if it were true of every man it ought also to be true of me-and try as I might I could remember no such extraordinary circumstance.

When I had switched off the light I lay recalling, very pleasantly on the whole, my life. It has been a pleasant life, though I fear a dull, and perhaps a lonely, one. I live now not five miles from the hospital in which I was born, and have lived nowhere else. Here I grew up, learned a profession, practiced, and, much sooner than most men, retired. I have twice been married, but both marriages were brief, and both ended in friendly separations; the truth is that my wives (both of them) bored me-and I am very much afraid I bored them as well.

As I lay in bed, then, thinking of times when my grandfather had taken me fishing and of skating parties with friends, and about our high school team (on which I was a substitute quarterback, but one so much inferior to the first-string occupant of that position that I almost never got into a game unless we were several touchdowns ahead, which was not often), it at last occurred to me that there has, in fact, been one thread of the strange-I might almost say the incredible, though not the supernatural-in my own history.

It is simply this: living all my life, as I have, in a town of less than a hundred thousand population, I have been dimly aware of the existence of a certain woman without ever meeting her or gaining any sure idea of her appearance.

But even this is not, perhaps, as extraordinary as it may sound. I have never made an effort to meet this woman, and I doubt that she has ever attempted to meet me, if, indeed, she is aware that I exist. On the other hand we are neither of us invalids, nor are we blind. This woman-her name is Suzanne (though I fear most of us here have always pronounced it "Susan") Delage-lives, or at least so I have always vaguely supposed, on the eastern edge of our little city; I live on the western. I doubt that we, as children, attended the same elementary school, but I know that we were, for four years, at the same high school. I was able to ascertain this as a matter of certainty through my yearbooks, which my mother, with that more or less formalized sentimentality characteristic of her, saved for me in the attic of this tall, silent frame house (itself saved for me as well).

Actually, of the four volumes which must originally have existed, only two remain-those for my sophomore and senior years. There are a number of pages missing from the class picture section of the earlier book, and I seem to recall that these were lorn out and cut up to obtain the individual photographs many decades ago. My own face is among those missing, as well as Suzanne Delage's; but in another section, one devoted to social activities, a girl's club (it was called, I think, the Pie Club) is shown, and one of the names given in the caption is Suzanne's. Unfortunately the girls in the picture are so loosely grouped-around a stove and work table-that it is not possible to be certain in every case which name should be attached to which young lady; besides, a number of them have their backs to the camera.

The senior book should have told me more-at least so I thought when I, at last, came across it at the end of an hour



or so of rummaging. It is whole and undamaged, and I, thanks largely to football, have no less than four pictures in various parts of it. Suzanne Delage has none. On one of the closing pages a woebegone roll of names reminds me of something I had forgotten for many years-that there was an epidemic of some kind (I think Spanish influenza) just at the time the pictures for the annual were to be taken. Suzanne is listed as one of those "unable to be photographed."

I should explain that ours was one of those overgrown schools found in the vicinity of small towns, a school repeatedly expanded because the growth of the town itself had been slow (though always faster, so it seemed in retrospect, than anyone had anticipated) and the taxpayers had not wanted to authorize a new one. It was large enough, in short, that only a few leading students-the star athletes, the class officers, the few really promiscuous girls and the dazzlingly beautiful ones whom we, in those naive times, called "queens"-were known to everyone.

The rest of us, if we moved socially at all, went by classes and cliques. A student might know the others in his English and algebra rooms; the cliques-at least the ones I remember-were the football players and their girls, the children of the rich, the boys and girls whose families attended a certain fundamentalist church on the outskirts of town; and certain racial minorities, the chess and debating society types, and the toughs. It sounds, I suppose, as though there were a group for everyone, and at the time (since I was fairly well entrenched among the athletes) I believe I thought myself (if I thought about the matter at all) that there was. I now realize that all these little coteries embraced no more than a third of the school, but whether Suzanne Delage had entry to one or more of them I do not know.

I should, however, have made her acquaintance long before I entered high school, since Mrs. Delage, Suzanne's mother, was one of my own mother's close friends. They had met, I think at about the time I was eight, through a shared passion (much more widespread in our area, I think, than in the country as a whole, and more ardently pursued in the past than it is now) for collecting antique fabrics; in other words, for embroidered tablecloths, for quilts, crocheting of all kinds, afghans, crewel work, hand-hooked rugs, and the like. If my mother or her friends could discover a sampler, or a bedspread or "comfortable" made in the earlier part of the nineteenth century (it was their enduring hope, I think never well satisfied, to find a piece from what they called "American Revolution times"-by which they meant the eighteenth, even such dates as 1790 or 1799), a piece well made and decorated-the more the better-in the unschooled, traditional ways of the old farm families, then their joy and their pride knew no bounds. If, in addition, the work was that of some notable woman-or to be more precise, of some woman relation of some notable man; the sister, say, of a lieutenant governor-and could be authenticated, the home of the finder became a sort of shrine to which visitors were brought, and to which solitary pilgrims from other towns came (ringing our bell-for we possessed, as a result of Mother's efforts, a vast appliqued quilt which had been

the civil-wartime employment of the wife of a major in a fencible Zouave regiment-usually at about ten-thirty in the morning and offering, in introduction, a complicated recitation of friendships and cousincies linking themselves to our own family) bearing homage like cookies on a plate and eager to hear, for the better direction of their own future strategies, a circumstantial description of the inquiries and overheard clues, the offers made and rejected and made again, which had led to the acquisition of that precious object which would, as terminator of the interview, at last be brought forth in a glory of moth crystals, and spread sparkling clean (for of course these collected pieces were never used) over the living room sofa to be admired.

Mrs. Delage, who became my mother's friend, possessed pieces of her own as valuable as the major's wife's quilt (which was, as my mother never tired of pointing out, entirely hand-sewn) and a collection, too, of lesser treasures ranking, as my mother herself admitted, with our own hoard. Together they scoured the countryside for more, and made trips (trips so exhausting that I was, as a boy, always surprised to see how very willing, in a few weeks, my mother was to go again) to view the riches of neighboring counties-and even, once or twice, by rail, of neighboring states. It would therefore have been entirely logical for Mrs. Delage to have been our frequent guest, at least for tea; and for her to have brought, occasionally, her little daughter Suzanne, whom I would no doubt have soon come to both love and hate.

This would doubtless have occurred but for a circumstance of a kind peculiar, I think, to towns exactly the size of ours, and incomprehensible not only to the residents of cities, but to truly rural people as well. There lived, directly across the brick-paved street from us, a bitter old woman, a widow, who for some reason never explained to me detested Mrs. Delage. It was lawful for my mother to be friendly with Suzanne's, but if (women in small towns somehow know these things) she had gone so far as to invite Mrs. Delage to our house this widow would at once have become her enemy for life. The invitation was never given, and I believe my mother's friend died while I was at college.

Thus while I was still small i was hardly aware of Suzanne Delage, though my mother often mentioned hers; in high school, as I indicated, though I was in much closer proximity to the girl herself this was hardly altered. I heard of her vaguely, in connection perhaps with some friend of a friend. I must surely have seen her in the corridors hundreds of times-if one can be said to see, in a crowd, people one does not know. I must sometimes have shared classrooms with her, and certainly we were together at assembly and in the vast study hall. She would have attended many of the same dances I did, and it is even possible that I danced with her -but I do not really believe that, and if, indeed, it happened the years have so effectively sponged the event from my mind that no slightest trace remains.

And in fact I think I would never have recalled the name of Suzanne Delage at all, as I lay in bed last night listening to the creaking of this empty house in the autumn wind and

searching the recesses of my memory for some extraordinary incident with which to attest the author's thesis, if it had not been for something that took place a few days ago.

I had been shopping, and happened to meet, on the sidewalk in front of one of the larger stores, a woman of my own age whom I have known all my life and who is now the wife of a friend. We stood chatting for a moment-she, after the usual half teasing reproaches about my (supposed) gay bachelor life, gossiping about her husband and children. As she turned to leave a girl of fifteen or so came out of the store and, smiling but intent upon her own concerns, walked quickly past us and down the street. Her hair was of a lustrous black, and her complexion as pure as milk; but it was not these that for a moment enchanted me, nor the virginal breasts half afraid to press the soft angora of her sweater, nor the little waist I might have circled with my two hands. Rather it was an air, at once insouciant and shy, of vivacity coupled with an innocence and intelligence that were hers alone. To the woman beside me I said: "What a charming child. Who is she?"

"Her name?" My friend's wife frowned and snapped her fingers. "I can't think of it. But of course you know whose she is, don't you? She's the very image of her mother at that age-Suzanne Delage."

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368

Sweet Forest Maid

"Sweet Forest Maid" copyright 1971 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction.

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AT thirty-three Lenor Stacy gave up her apartment, sold her furniture and most of her clothes, walked away from her job, and went looking for the Adorable Woods Woman.

But of course there was a great deal more to it than that. If she had lived fifty years earlier, Lenor's friends would have said she had been disappointed by Love, and been half right. Today no one says such things-perhaps partly because women like Lenor no longer have friends; the old ties, the duty of the friends of one's mother and sisters (Lenor had none) to be one's own friends too, having broken down.

Lenor, then, had been disappointed by Love. She had (afterward) been disappointed by hate as well, and the experience had drained her for thirteen years, leaving her a woman-a tastefully, an inexpensively, a sometimes not very neatly dressed woman-happy to arrive at her desk early every weekday morning and more than content to remain half an hour late when any reason to do so could be contrived. They said, "She runs the place," and she knew and enjoyed it and despised them because it was true; you know her. In the evening

she watched TV or read, and only weekends, during the thirteen years, presented her with real difficulties.

She went to movies, exercised at a health spa (it had been a supermarket), drove, attended concerts and art exhibitions, and often spoke to no one at all from Friday afternoon to Monday morning. She was sometimes bored, but seldom unhappy. In a way she was tired. At no time did she show interest in hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, or any of the other woodsy pastimes that have sprung up like mushrooms on the dead roots of nature.

The Woods Woman was a black figure in a magazine, a black figurine set in a Kodachrome forest. The man who had taken her picture thought she was a female Abominable Snowman (yeti or metoh kangmi, the American Sasquatch, Big Foot, or "Stinking One"-and may Gitche-Manitou help you, paleface) and called her the Adorable Woods Woman in the hope that this appealing title would dissuade other lovers of the outdoors from shooting her. She was a fraud in a fur suit, an ape escaped, a bear, an animal, a last-surviving Gigantopithecus, a myth photographed, a troll woman. Imagine, if you will, a great strapping girl (Lenor was tall herself), a girl heavy-hipped, pendulously bosomed. Cover this girl with hair as thick and black as a spaniel's; give her the head of a gorilla.

No (as Lenor said to herself), you did it wrong.

That thing in your mind is not a gorilla's face. You think words, and the things behind the words change until they are no longer what they were. That stupid mask in your mind is fantasy, the bad, uncaring joke of some Hollywood prop man. She went to a zoo and watched a real gorilla, watched (she was standing behind children and drinking Coca-Cola through a straw) until the ugly prop-man goblin mask faded from her mind and she knew that wise, sad look.

There either was, or was not, a woman (girl?) in a forest in California who looked like that. If there were, she-and her parents, presumably, brothers, sisters, and incredible swain or swains-lived still as people had before those preposterous inventions fire and the stone-tipped spear, save that to all the other burdens of their lives were added deadly fear of that race of stunted, pallid elves who hemmed their world with magic. Lived by eating grubs and seeds. Shivering in rain and exulting in the sun; waiting for Eden to reopen.

And well why not?

And a week later, why not do something-just once? She knew nothing about photography, but she bought a medium-priced Japanese camera and read the booklet that she found in the box. Then she took pictures in the part until she had learned to judge distance and light.

The camping equipment that the sporting goods stores offered repelled her. It seemed a crime to think of taking that costly, bright, durable, gimmicky stuff under trees; besides, it would be too heavy to carry, and she knew she would

find nothing close to the road. In the end she bought a pair of tennis shoes because they reminded her of the ones she had worn to gym in high school, and took an old blanket to sleep in and a plastic drop cloth she had acquired when she repainted her apartment. The drop cloth would keep out the damp when she slept on the ground and, if it rained, could be made into some sort of shelter. She kept her underwear, some sweaters and blouses, three pairs of slacks, and an old car coat; she sold or gave away the rest of her clothes. /'/( buy all new, she thought, when I come back. I'll have such fun. She did not look in the mirror (there was only one mirror now in her apartment, in the bathroom) as she said this, but then she seldom, now, looked into mirrors; lipstick was, now, her only cosmetic, and she had learned to apply it using the very small one in her compact, in which she saw her lips only.

The Klamath Forest of northern California is seldom named on maps, though it covers more than 2500 square miles. Mapmakers, it seems, do not like to give the names of forests because it is so difficult to show their bounds; they have no hard edges. Lenor, despite them, driving along State Route 96 between the little town of Happy Camp (where are you, Bret Harte?) and the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation, knew that the Klamath lay south and east of her. And that the likely spots-the places where the crowding trees could be penetrated with little trouble, where the ground was for walking instead of climbing, or where some timbering operation had built a road-would be no good. She stopped her car at a place that looked very bad instead, got out and forced her way in. As simple as that.

The Klamath Forest grows on the Klamath Range, geologically one of the oldest mountain massifs in North America. The Klamaths have seen glaciers come and go, and remember dire wolves as big as ponies beneath their trees; they are no longer tall and proud like the young Rockies, but they are very, very rough.

All up and down like an Irish wind; water courses that go nowhere, sinking into dead pools. Others dropping a hundred feet in half a mile, roaring over rocks. There are dry folds in the Klamaths too, and deep, silent crevasses which it is better not to clamber down into.

Lenor made her way into this country for two days. A man would have told her it was no place for a woman, and in half a day he would have decided it was no place for a man either, and gone back. A man would have tried to carry enough food for three large meals a day. Lenor took tea and matches and some hard baking chocolate, a box of dried figs, sugar, and a small pan. She expected to lose weight, had fasted before (though she called it dieting), and suffered no neurotic doubts about her strength of today as compared to her strength of yesterday. At the end of the second day she found a spot more open than most (though no spot in the Klamath Forest is very open) and so nearly level that after what she had been scrambling across for the last thirty-six hours it seemed actually flat. (Though no land in the Klamaths is really flat.) A faint game trail led to a stream, and she built

a screen of brush there to hide behind, something she did not call a blind because she did not think in such terms. When it was finished, she settled down with her camera to wait; not smoking, moving no more than necessary, listening to the birds and the wind.

After three days she had seen several rabbits, three grey foxes, a raccoon, and a doe-whose picture she had snapped in order to have something to remember the experience by. She called herself a fool and decided it was time to go home.

She "went home" for three more days without striking the road on which she had left her car, and at the end of the third day she was in an area she was certain she had never seen before. The figs and the chocolate were gone, and the sugar almost gone. She ate a handful of insipid berries and some crayfish that she cleaned with a nail file and boiled. She knew, or thought she knew, the direction in which the road lay; but the country would not allow her to go that way, forcing her off at right angles time after time.

On the fourth day (the seventh since she had left her car) it rained. She made a lean-to of her drop cloth and spent the day sleeping and brewing tea over a tiny fire kindled of wood that she had managed to get under cover before it was wet down too badly. When she wrapped herself in her blanket that evening, it was still raining.

The fever came in the night and woke her. There was nothing to hear but the patter of the rain, but she felt the hot flush creeping from her face and ears all down her body.

She thought: I'm going to be -eery sick. Then she dropped back to sleep.

She was sick the next day with fever and a deep, rattling cough. It was still raining, but it might rain for a week, and she could not wait a week. She put the blanket and the drop cloth over her head like outsized shawls and went as far as she could before stopping to rest under an outcrop. Then it was morning again, without any night that she could recall between the sun and birds and the dripping afternoon of the preceding day. She tried to stand and found that she had to pull herself erect, holding on to the rocks-while somewhere a stone slid on a stone.

She froze, then let herself sink down again, perversely glad at the recess of effort. Feet shuffled. A bear, she thought. A bear. And flattened herself against the rocks. Whatever it was, it was just out of sight, only just hidden by the angle of the rocky wall. She drew her shawls around her and heard it come nearer. Then, as she watched, a hand reached forth to pinch up a scuttling insect two yards from where she crouched. The fingers were matted with hair, the nails filthy and broken, but it was a human hand. They are people after all, she thought, and stepped out, slowly (so as not to frighten the creature, but then she could only move, now, slowly), until she could see the girl's frightened, deep eyes. Perhaps they'll help me, she thought, and then discovered she did not

know what to say.

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374

My Book

"My Book" copyright 1982 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in *Amazing Stories*.

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I HAVE been writing my book for a long time now. In the morning, before anyone else is up, I wake to Mahler on the clock radio, shave, and go to my desk. On weekends, while the others are watching baseball, I am there too, scoring my own hits, my own runs. And in the evenings. "It keeps me off the streets," I say, though only to myself. To my manuscript. At night, when I cannot sleep, I come here too, and that is best of all. I do not hear the cry of the solitary owl; but I wish I did, which is almost as good.

Sometimes-indeed, usually-I do not write. A great deal of time is consumed by research, by planning. I heat water in my yellow electric pot, sharpen pencils, and turn over a thousand old books, most of them quite worthless. They fascinate me. Valuable books are like diamonds, iridescent and unchanging. It is in the ephemeral that I see the changing face of Nature reflected. The day darkens; the very leaves fall.

I mark certain passages in all these books, as Tom Sawyer marked similar passages in Injun Joe's Cave. It is often years before I find them again, with an archaeologist's thrill of rediscovery. No doubt there are many more I never find.

Quite recently, in an essay by Philip Rahv, I came across the passage that began it all. My writing has been influenced by many other passages: "I've progressed, in one sense, rather alarmingly. I'm now thinking of reconstructing the whole thing," by Oliver Onions, and Stout's, "It was nice to know the next step was obvious, but it would have been even nicer to know what it was." But it was this (forgotten now for so many years) that set me off: "Man is now unaware of the real powers that govern his life; insofar as he has any knowledge of divinity it is as of something purely historical." The unreeling of human history is implied, and from that thought I have taken my method. Of every book, there must be a last word as well as a first, and as the last-indefinitely, in the scale of mere words, removed from the first-is also indefinitely more important, I determined to write it first. I at once discovered that it scarcely mattered what it was. But after long contemplation of the book I had conceived, and somewhat, I admit, in a spirit of jocular defiance, I settled on the word preface.

At once I found that the whole book had changed, shifting like a kaleidoscope to become something novel and strange. The last word decided, it crystallized without solidification. The penultimate word seemed foreordained yet enigmatic: begin. The ending would be pregnant with the origins of things, unraveling history to the finish. Everything altered again, as ice shifts upon a river, groaning, cracking w the night. I returned to find the white sheets destroyed, though each was where I had left it. I began the search for the antepenultimate word.

It was will, the word of purpose, the impulse that began the universe.

And then the preantepenultimate word . . .  
And so I have proceeded, step by laborous (delightful) step, chapter by chapter, until soon, perhaps this very year, surely before the coronation, I will begin the preface.

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377

The Other Dead Man

"The Other Dead Man" copyright 1987 by Gene Wolfe; first appeared in *Weird Tales*.

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REIS surveyed the hull without hope and without despair, having worn out both. They had been hit hard. Some portside plates of Section Three lay peeled back like the black skin of a graphite-fiber banana; Three, Four, and Five were holed in a dozen places. Reis marked the first on the comp slate so that Centcomp would know, rotated the ship's image, and ran the rat around the portside of Section Three to show that.

"Report all damage," Centcomp instructed him.

He wrote quickly with the rattail: "Rog."

"Report all damage," flashed again and vanished. Reis shrugged philosophically, rotated the image back, and charted another hole.

The third hole was larger than either of the first two. He jettied around to look at it more closely.

Back in the airlock, he took off his helmet and skinned out of his suit. By the time Jan opened the inner hatch, he had the suit folded around his arm.

"Bad, huh?" Jan said.

Reis shook his head. "Not so bad. How's Hap?"



Jan turned away.

"How's Dawson doing with the med pod?"

"I don't know," Jan said. "He hasn't told us anything."

He followed her along the spiracle. Paula was bent over Hap, and Dawson was bent over Paula, a hand on her shoulder. Both looked up when he and Jan came in. Dawson asked, "Anybody left downship?"

Reis shook his head.

"I didn't think so, but you never know."

"They'd have had to be in suits," Reis said. "Nobody was."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea for us stay suited up."

Reis said nothing, studying Hap. Hap's face was a pale greenish-yellow, beaded with sweat; it reminded Reis of an unripe banana, just washed under the tap. So this is banana day, he thought.

"Not all of the time," Dawson said. "But most of the time."

"Sure," Reis told him. "Go ahead."

"All of us."

Hap's breathing was so shallow that he seemed not to breathe at all.

"You won't order it?"

"No," Reis told Dawson, "I won't order it." After a moment he added, "And I won't do it myself, unless I feel like it. You can do what you want."

Paula wiped Hap's face with a damp washcloth. It occurred to Reis that the droplets he had taken for perspiration might be no more than water from the cloth, that Hap might not really be breathing. Awkwardly, he felt for Hap's pulse. Paula said, "You're the senior officer now, Reis." He shook his head. "As long as Hap's alive, he's senior officer. How'd you do with the med pod, Mr. Dawson?" "You want a detailed report? Oxygen's-" "No, if I wanted details, I could get them from Centcomp. Overall."

Dawson rolled his eyes. "Most of the physical stuff he'll need is there; I had to fix a couple things, and they're fixed. The med subroutines look okay, but I don't know. Centcomp lost a lot of core."

Paula asked, "Can't you run tests, Sid?"

"I've run them. As I said, they look all right. But it's simple stuff." Dawson turned back to Reis. "Do we put him in the

pod? You are the senior officer fit for duty."

"And don't you forget it," Reis said. "Yes, we put him in, Mr. Dawson; it's his only chance."

Jan was looking at him with something indefinable in her eyes. "If we're going to die anyway--"

"We're not, Mr. vanJoure. We should be able to patch up at least two engines, maybe three, borrowing parts from the rest. The hit took a lot of momentum off us, and in a week or so we should be able to shake most of what's left. As soon as Ecorop sees that we're still alive and kicking, it'll authorize rescue." Reis hoped he had made that part sound a great deal more certain than he felt. "So our best chance is to head back in toward the sun and meet it partway--that should be obvious. Now let's get Hap into that pod before he dies. Snap to it, everybody!"

Dawson found an opportunity to take Reis aside. "You were right--if we're going to get her going again, we can't spare anybody for nursing, no matter what happens. Want me to work on the long-wave?"

Reis shook his head. Engines first, long-wave afterward, if at all. There would be plenty of time to send messages when the ship lived again. And until it did, he doubted whether any message would do much good.

Lying in his sleep pod, Reis listened to the slow wheeze of air through the vent. The ship breathed again, they'd done that much. Could it have been . . . admiration, that look of Jan's? He pushed the thought aside, telling himself he had been imagining things. But still? His mind teetered on the lip of sleep, unable to tumble over.

The ship breathed; it was only one feeble engine running at half force with a doubtful tube, and yet it was something, they could use power tools again--the welder--and the ship breathed.

His foot slipped on an oil spill, and he woke with a start. That had happened years back while they were refitting at Ocean West. He had fallen and cracked his head. He had believed it forgotten. . . .

The ship breathed. She's our mother, Reis thought. She's our mother; we live inside her, in her womb; and if she dies, we die. But she died, and we're bringing her to life again.

Someone knocked on the pod lid. Reis pushed the Retract lever and sat up.

Paula said, "Sir, I'm sorry, but--"

"What is it? Is Jan--?"

"She's fine, sir. I relieved her an hour ago. It's my watch."

"Oh," Reis said. "I didn't realize I'd been asleep." He sounded stupid even to himself.

"My orders were to call you, sir, if--"

He nodded. "What's happened?"

"Hap's dead." Paula's voice was flat, its only emotion this very lack of emotion betrayed.

Reis looked at her eyes. There were no tears there, and he decided it was probably a bad sign. "I'm truly sorry," he said. And then, "Perhaps Centcomp--"

Wordlessly, Paula pointed to the screen. The glowing green letters read: "Resuscitation under way."

Reis went over to look at it. "How long has this been up?"

"Five minutes, Captain. Perhaps ten. I hoped--"

"That you wouldn't have to wake me."

Paula nodded gratefully. "Yes, sir."

He wrote: "Resp?"

"Respiration 0.00. Resuscitation under way."

The ship breathed, but Hap did not. That, of course, was why Paula had called him "Captain" a moment ago. She must have tried pulse, tried everything, before knocking on his pod. He wrote: "Cortex?"

"Alpha 0.00. Beta 0.00. Gamma 0.00," Centcomp replied. "Resuscitation. under way."

Reis wrote: "Discon."

There was a noticeable pause before the alpha-, beta-, and gamma-wave reports vanished. "Resuscitation under way," remained stubbornly on screen.

Paula said, "Centcomp won't give up. Centcomp has faith. Funny, isn't it?"

Reis shook his head. "It means we can't rely on Centcorap the way we've been used to. Paula, I'm not very good at telling people how I feel. Hap was my best friend."

"You were his. Captain."

Desperately Reis continued, "Then we're both sorry, and we both know that."

"Sir, may I tell you something?"

He nodded. "Something private? Of course."

"We were married. You know how they still do it in some churches? We went to one. He told them we didn't belong, but we wanted to have the ceremony and we'd pay for it. I thought sure they'd say no, but they did it, and he cried-Hap cried."

Reis nodded again. "You meant a lot to him."

"That's all, sir. I just wanted somebody else to know. Thanks for listening."

Reis went to his locker and got out his suit. It shone a dull silver under the cabin lights, and he recalled a time when he had envied people who had suits like that.

"Aren't you going back to sleep, sir?"

"No. I'll be relieving you in less than an hour, so I'm going hullside to have another look around. When I come back, you can turn in."

Paula gnawed her lower lip. He was giving her something to think about besides Hap, Reis decided; that was all to the good. "Sir, the captain doesn't stand watch."

"He does when there are only four of us, dog tired. Check me through the airlock, please, Mr. Phillips."

"Of course, sir." As the inner hatch swung shut Paula said softly, "Oh, God, I'd give anything to have him back."

Neptune was overhead now; they were spinning, even if the spin was too slow to be visible. With only a single engine in service it was probably impossible to stop the spin, and there was no real reason to. The gravitational effect was so slight he had not noticed it.

He found Jupiter and then the sun, slightly less brilliant than Jupiter or Neptune but brighter than any other star. The sun! How many thousands-no, how many millions of his ancestors must have knelt and sung and sacrificed to it. It had been Ra, Apollo, Helios, Heimdall, and a hundred more, this medium-sized yellow star in a remote arm of the galaxy, this old gas-burner, this space heater laboring to warm infinite space.

If you're a god, Reis thought, why aren't you helping us?

Quite suddenly he realized that the sun was helping, was drawing them toward the circling inner planets as powerfully as it could. He shook his head and turned his attention back to the ship.

A faint violet spark shone, died, and rekindled somewhere on Section Six, indicating that Centcomp had at least one of its mobile units back in working order. Centcomp was self-repairing, supposedly, though Reis had never put much faith in that; human beings were supposed to be self-repairing too, but all too often were not.

And deep space was supposed to make you feel alone, but he had never really felt that way; sometimes, when he was not quite so tired, he was more alive here, more vibrant, than he ever was in the polluted atmosphere of Earth. Now Hap was dead, and Reis knew himself to be alone utterly. As he jettied over to check on the mobile unit, he wished that he could weep for Hap as he had wept for his father, though he had known his father so much less well than Hap, known him only as a large, sweet-smelling grown-up who appeared at rare intervals bringing presents.

Or if he could not cry, that Paula could.

The mobile unit looked like a tiny spider. It clung to the side of Section Three with six legs while two more welded up one of the smaller holes. Centcomp, obviously, had decided to close the smallest holes first, and for a moment Reis wondered whether that made sense. It did, he decided, if Centcomp was in actual fact fixing itself; there would be more units as well as more power available later. He swerved down toward the mobile unit until he could see it for what it was, a great jointed machine forty meters across. Three clicks of his teeth brought ghostly numerals-hours, minutes, and seconds-to his faceplate, which had darkened automatically against the raw ultraviolet from the mobile unit's welding arc. Still twenty-four minutes before he had to relieve Paula.

For a minute or two he watched the fusing of the filament patch. The patch fibers had been engineered to form a quick, strong bond; but a bit of dwell was needed just the same. The mobile unit seemed to be allowing enough, working slowly and methodically. In the hard vacuum of space there was no danger of fire, and its helium valves were on Off just as they should have been.

Reis glanced at the time again. Twenty minutes and eleven seconds, time enough yet for a quick look inside Section Three. He circled the hull and jettied through the great, gaping tear, landing easily in a familiar cabin that was now as airless as the skin of the ship. The hermetic hatch that sealed Section Two from this one was tightly dogged still. He had inspected it earlier, just after the hit, and inspected it again when he had come with Dawson, Jan, and Paula to work on the least damaged engine. He threw his weight against each of the latches once again; you could not be too careful.

Nell Upson's drifting corpse watched him with indifferent eyes until he pushed her away, sending her deeper into the dark recesses of Section Three to join her fellows. In time, space would dry Nell utterly, mummifying her; radiation would blacken her livid skin. None of that had yet taken place, and without air, Nell's blood could not even coagulate-she had left a thin, crimson trail of it floating in the void behind her.

Twelve minutes. That was still plenty of time, but it was time to go. When he left the side of Section Three, the mobile unit was at work on a second hole.

"Resuscitation underway," was still on the screen half an hour into Reis's watch. He read it for the hundredth time with some irritation. Was it supposed to refer to Centcomp's self-repair functions? Reis picked up the rat and wrote, "Who's in resuscT"

"Capt. Hilman W. Happle. Resuscitation under way."

So that was that. "Discon."

"Resuscitation under way."

"Clear screen," Reis scribbled.

"Resuscitation under way."

Reis cursed and wrote, "What authority?"

"Capt. Hilman W. Happle."

That was interesting, Reis decided-not sensible or useful, but interesting. Centcomp did not know that Hap was dead. Reis wrote, "Capt. Happle K. Lt. Wm. R. Reis commanding."

The screen went blank, and Reis decided to try a general instrument display. "GID"

The three letters faded slowly, replaced by nothing.

"Enter-GID"

That too faded to an empty screen. Reis scratched his nose and looked speculatively at the transducer headband. He had ordered the others not to use it-the hard instrumentation was amply sufficient as long as nothing too delicate was being attempted; but it had been sixteen hours since the hit, and Centcomp was still limping at best.

Multiplication became coitus, division reproduction; to add was to eat, to subtract to excrete. Glowing, Centcomp's central processor loomed before him, a dazzling coral palace with twice ten thousand spires where subroutines worked or slept. Tiny and blue alongside it, the lone mobile unit sang a Bach fugue as it labored. Smoldering leaves perfumed the breeze, washed away by a fountain of exponential functions that appeared to Reis to be calculating natural logarithms for purposes both infinite and obscure, pungently returning with each fresh gust of algorithmic air. Interactive matrices sprouted around his feet-the lilies, buttercups, and pale or burning roses that allowed his conscious mind to move here as it did, their blossoms petaled with shining elementary rows and columns.

Hap was sitting astride a tree that sprouted from the coral wall. The smile that divided his dark face when he saw Reis seemed automatic and distracted. Reis saluted, called, "Good evening. Skipper," and leaped across the laughing rill that had overflowed the fountain's rim.

Hap touched his forehead in return. "Hi ya, Bill."

Reis said, "It's damned good to see you here. We thought you were dead."

"Not me, Bill." Hap stared off into the twilight. "You can't die on duty, know that? Got to finish your tick, know what I mean, Bill boy? You want up here on the bridge?" He patted the tree trunk.

"That's okay-I'm fine where I am. Hap . . . ?"

His eyes still upon something Reis could not see, Hap said, "Speak your piece."

"Hap, I checked your cortical activity. There wasn't any. You were brain-dead."

"Go on."

"That's why it was quite a surprise to run into you here, and I'm not sure it's really you. Are you Hap, or are you just a kind of surrogate, Centcomp's concept of Hap?"

"I'm Hap. Next question?"

"Why won't Centcomp terminate resuscitation?"

"Because I told it not to, as soon as we left Earth." Hap sounded as though he were talking to himself. "Not just on me, on all of us. We're all too necessary, all of us vital. Resusc is to continue as long as-in Centcomp's judgment-there's the slightest possibility of returning a crewman to his or her duty. No overrides at all, no mutinies. Know what a mutiny is. Bill? Grasp the concept?"

Reis nodded.

"Some snotty kid's trying to take over my ship. Billy boy,

trying to push me out through a hatch. That's mutiny. It's a certain Lieutenant William R. Reis. He's not going to get away with it."

"Hap ..."

Hap was gone. Briefly, the tree where he had sat remained where it was, vacant; then it too vanished, wiped from working memory.

Something was wrong: the brilliant garden seemed

haunted by sinister shadows, flitting and swift; the chaotic twilight from which Reis had emerged pressed closer to the coral palace. His head ached, there was a chill in his side, and his fingers felt oddly warm. He tried to remove the headband, willing himself to use his real arms, not the proxies that here appeared to be his arms. A hurrying subroutine shouldered him out of the way; by accident he stepped into the laughing rill, which bit his foot like acid. . . .

A smudged white cabin wall stood in place of the wall of the coral palace. Dawson was bending over him, his face taut with concern. "Reis! What happened?"

His mouth was full of blood; he spat it out. "I'm hurt, Sid."

"I know. Christ!" Dawson released him; but he did not fall, floating derelict in the cabin air. Dawson banged on Jan's pod.

Reis moved his right arm to look at the fingers; the warmth there was his own blood, and there was more blood hanging in the cabin, floating spheres of bright scarlet blood-arterial blood. "I'm bleeding, Sid. I think he nicked a lung. Better patch me up."

Twilight closed upon the cabin. Reis remembered how they had celebrated Christmas when he was three-something he had not known he knew, with colored paper and a thousand other wonderful things. Surely he was peeping through one of the plastic tubes the paper had come on; the few things he could see seemed small, toylike, and very bright. Everything in all the universe was a Christmas present, a fact he had forgotten long, long ago. He wondered who had brought them all, and why.

"You have been asleep in the medical pod. There is little cause for concern."

Reis searched the pod for a rat, but there was none. No backtalk to Centcomp from in here.

"Are you anxious? Fearful? Confide your fears to me. I assure you that any information that I provide concerning your condition will be both complete and correct. No matter how bad, reality is never quite so bad as our fears concerning reality."

Reis said, "Spare me the philosophy," though he knew that Centcomp could not hear him.

"And your condition is not even critical. You suffered a dangerous lesion between the fifth and sixth ribs of your right side, but you are nearly well."

Reis was already exploring the place with his fingers.

"Please reply."

"Would if I could," Reis muttered.

"You will find a rapid-access trace beside your right hand. Please reply."

"There's no God-damned rapid-access trace."

A hatch clicked. Servos hummed. The pod in which Reis lay rolled forward with stately grandeur, and the pod opened. This time it was Jan who was looking down at him. "Reis, can you sit up?"



"Sure." He proved it.

Low and quick: "I want you to get into your sleeping c i with me, please. Don't ask questions-just do it, fast."

His pod was closed, but not latched from inside. He th; v it open and he and Jan climbed in; she lay facing him, on her side, her back to the pod wall. He got in beside her, closed the pod, and threw the latching lever. Jan's breasts flattened against his chest; Jan's pelvis pressed his. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I hadn't realized it would be this crowded."

"It's all right."

"Even if I had, I'd have had to ask you anyway. This is the only place I could think of where we could talk privately."

"I like it," Reis said, "so you can forget about that part. Talk about what?"

"Hap."

He nodded, though she could not have seen him in the dark. "I thought so."

"Hap was the one who stabbed you."

"Sure," Reis said. "I know that. With the rat from the med pod."

"That's right." Jan hesitated; Reis could feel her sweet breath wash across his face. At last she said, "Perhaps you'd better tell me how you knew. It might be important."

"I doubt it, but there's no reason not to. Hap thinks I'm a mutineer because I took charge when he was hurt-I was talking to him in Centcomp's conscious space. Hap had been in the med pod, and when I woke up in there the rat that should have been there was gone. A rat's stylus is long and sharp, and the whole rat's made of some sort of metal-titanium, I suppose. So a rat ought to make a pretty decent weapon."

Hair brushed his cheek as Jan nodded. "Sid found you. He woke up and realized he should have been on watch."

"Sure."

"He yelled for me, and we put you in the med pod when we saw that it was empty. There's another pod in Section Three, remember?"

"Of course," Reis said.

He waited for her to pursue that line of thought, but she seemed to veer off from it instead. "Hap's resumed command." She swallowed. "It was all right at first-he's the

captain, after all. None of us even thought about resisting him, then."

Reis said slowly, "I wouldn't have resisted him either; I would have obeyed his orders, if I'd known he was alive to give them."

Jan said, "He's very suspicious now." There was a queer flatness in her voice.

"I see."

"And Reis, he's going to continue the mission."

For a moment he could not speak. He shook his head.

"It's crazy, isn't it? With the ship ripped up like it was."

"Not crazy," he told her. "Impossible."  
Jan took a deep breath—he could feel and hear it, her long gasp in the dark. "And Reis, Hap's dead."

Reluctantly Reis said, "If he really wanted to proceed with the mission, maybe it's for the best. You didn't kill him, did you? You and Sid?"

"No. You don't understand. I didn't mean . . . Oh, it's so hard to say what I do mean."

Reis told her, "I think you'd better try." His right hand had been creeping, almost absently, toward her left breast. He forced it to stop where it was.

"Hap's still running the ship. He tells us what to do, and we do it because we know we'd better. But our real captain, our friend, is dead. Try to understand. The real Hap died in the med pod, and Centcomp's substituted something else—something of its own—for his soul or spirit or whatever you want to call it. When you've seen him, after you've been around him for a while, you'll understand."

"Then I ought to be outside, where I can see him," Reis said practically, "not in here. But first—"

Jan screamed, a high-pitched wail of sheer terror that was deafening in the enclosed space of the sleep pod. Reis clapped his hand over her mouth and said, "Jesus! All right, if you don't want to, we won't. Promise you won't do that again if I let you talk?"

Jan nodded, and he returned his hand to his side.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It isn't that I don't like you, or that I'd never want to. I've been under such a terrible strain. You missed it. You were in the med pod, and you can't know what it's been like for us."

"I understand," Reis told her. "Oh, hell, you know what I mean."

"If Hap isn't looking for us already, he will be soon. Or looking for me, anyway. He thinks you're still in the med pod, unless Centcomp's told him I took you out. Reis, you've got to believe me. He's going to court-martial and execute you; that's what he said when Sid and I told him we'd put you in the pod."

"You're serious?"

"Reis, you don't know what he's like now. It doesn't make any difference, we're all going to die anyway, Sid and Paula and me. And Hap's already dead." Her voice threatened to slip from tears to hysteria.

"No, we're not," he told her. "Hap's been having you fix the ship? He must have, if he's talking about carrying out the mission."

"Yes! We've got three engines running now, and the hull's airtight. We don't know-Sid and I don't know-whether we can count on Paula. If she sided with Hap it would be two against two, a man and a woman on each side, and . . ."

"Go on," Reis said.

"But if you were with us, that would be two men and a woman on our side. We'd save the ship and we'd save our lives. Nobody would have to know-we'd tell them the truth, that Hap died in the hit."

"You're not telling me the truth," Reis said. "If we're going to handle this together, you've got to open up."

"I am, Reis, I swear. Don't you think I know this isn't the time to lie?"

"Okay," he said. "Then tell me who's in the medical pod in Section Three. Is it Sid? Somebody's in there, or you wouldn't have brought it up."

He waited, but Jan said nothing.

"Maybe Hap sleeps in there," Reis hazarded. "Maybe he's getting himself some additional treatment. You want me to pull the plug on him, but why can't you do that yourself?"

"No. I don't think he sleeps at all. Or ..."

"Or what?"

"He's got Nell with him-Sergeant Upson. Nell was in the pod, but she's out now, and she stays with him all the time. I didn't want to tell you, but there it is. Something else is in Three's med pod. I don't know who it was, but when it gets out we won't have a chance."

"Nell's dead." He recalled her floating body, its hideous stare.

"That's right."

"I see," Reis said, and jerked back the lever that opened the sleep pod.

"Reis, you have to tell me. Are you with us or against us?"

He said, "You're wrong, Jan. I don't have to tell you one God-damned thing. Where's Hap?"

"In Section Five, probably. He wants to get another engine on line."

Reis launched himself toward the airlock, braked on the dog handles, and released them.

Section Three seemed normal but oddly vacant. He crossed to Centcomp's screen and wrote, "Present occ this medpodfor vis check."

"ID" flashed on the screen.

"Lt. Wm. R. Reis."

"Refused. Resuscitation under way."

Behind him Jan said, "I tried that. Centcomp won't identify it either."

Reis shrugged and pushed off toward the emergency locker. Opening it, he tossed out breathing apparatus, the aid kit, a body bag, and a folding stretcher with tie-downs. Behind them was a steel emergency toolbox. He selected a crowbar and the largest screwdriver and jettied to the med pod.

"Tampering with medical equipment is strictly forbidden. Resuscitation under way."

Reis jammed the blade of the screwdriver into theScarcely visible joint between the bulkhead and the pod, and struck the screwdriver's handle sharply enough with the crowbar to make his own weightless bodymassjump. He let the crowbar Hoat free, grasped the pod latch, and jerked the screwdriver down. That widened the crack enough for him to work one end of the crowbar into it.

Centcomp's screen caught his eye. It read, "Tampering is strictly Bill stop."

Reis said, "Jan, tell it to open the God-damned pod if it doesn't want me to mess with it."

Jan found the rat; but before she could write, the screen read, "Bill, I cannot."

Jan gasped, "Oh, holy God," and it struck Reis that he had never heard her swear before. He said, "I thought you couldn't hear us, Centcomp. Wasn't that the story?"

"I truly cannot. Bill, and that is no story. But I monitor conditions

everywhere in the ship. That is my job, and at times I can read your lips. Particularly yours, Bill. You have very good, clear lip motion."

Reis heaved at the crowbar; tortured metal shrieked.

Jan said, "Centcomp will have told Hap. He and Nell are probably on their way up here right now."

"I have not. Lieutenant van jure."

Reis turned to face the screen. "Is that the truth?"

"You know I am incapable of any deception, Bill. Captain Hopgood is engaged in a delicate repair. I prefer to take care of this matter myself in order that he can proceed without any interruption."

"Watch the dogs-the moment they start going around, tell me."

"All right," Jan said. She had already pulled a wrench from the toolbox.

"Bill, I did not want to tell you this, yet I see I must."

Reis moved the crowbar to the left and pried again. "What is it?"

"You said ... ?"

"I said what is it. God damn it! Stop screwing around and stalling. It's not going to do you any good."

"Bill, it really would be better if you did not open that."

Reis made no reply. Pale blue light was leaking from the med pod through the crack; it looked as though there might be a lot of ultraviolet in it, and he turned his eyes away.

"Bill, for your own good, do not do that."

Reis heaved again on the crowbar, and the latch broke.

The pod rolled out, and as it did a nearly faceless thing inside sat up and caught his neck in skeletal hands. Section Three filled with the sickening sweetish smells of death and gangrene. Reis flailed at the half-dead thing with the crowbar;

and its crooked end laid open a cheek, scattering stinking blood that was nearly black and exposing two rows of yellow teeth,

Evening was closing on Section Three. Night's darkness pressed upon Reis; his hands were numb, the crowbar gone.

Jan's wrench struck the dead thing's skull hard enough to throw her beyond the range of Reis's narrowing vision. The bony fingers relaxed a trifle. Reis forced his own arms between the dead arms and tore the hands away.

Then Jan was back, her wrench rising and falling again

and again. His crowbar was gone; but the toolbox itself was within reach, with a D-shaped handle at one end. Reis grabbed it and hurled the box at the dead thing. It was heavy enough to send him spinning diagonally across the section, and it struck the head and chest of the dead thing and the end of the pod as well. For a split second Reis seemed to hear a wailing cry; the pod shot back until its bent and battered end was almost flush with the bulkhead.

He screamed as the airlock swung open; there was a rush of air and a scorching blue flash. Something brushed Reis's cheek. He could scarcely see, but he snatched at it and his still-numb fingers told him he held an emergency mask. He pushed it against his face, shut his eyes, and sucked in oxygen, feeling he drank it like wine. There was another searing burst of heat.

Long training and good luck put the manual control into his hands; he tore away the safety strap and spun the wheel. Driven by a fifty thousand psi. hydraulic accumulator, the airlock door slammed shut, its crash echoing even in the depleted atmosphere of Section Three. Emergency air that Centcomp could not control hissed through the vents, and Reis opened his eyes.

Jan writhed near the airlock door, her uniform smoldering, one hand and cheek seared. The arm and welding gun of a mobile unit, sheared off at the second joint, floated not far from Jan. Reis sprayed her uniform with a CO<sub>2</sub> extinguisher and smeared her face and hand with blue antibacterial cream.

"My eyes . . ." she gasped.

"You've been flashed," Reis told her. He tried to keep his voice low and soothing. "Zapped by an electric arc. Open them, just for a minute, and tell me if you can see anything."

"A little."

"Good," he told her. "Now shut them and keep them closed. After a while your vision should come back a bit more, and when we get home they can give you a retinal-"

His own dimmed sight had failed to note the spinning dogs. The hatch to Section Four swung back, and Hap floated in. His sunken cheeks and dull eyes carried the hideous stamp of death, and his movements were the swift, jerky gestures of a puppet; but he grinned at Reis and touched his forehead with the steel rod he carried. "Hi there, Bill boy."

Nell Upson followed Hap. Her lips seemed too short now to conceal her teeth; it was not until she raised her pistol that Reis felt certain she was not wholly dead. Sid Dawson and Paula lingered at the hatch until Nell waved them forward. Both were terrified and exhausted, Reis decided. There could not be much fight left in either—perhaps none.

"You're supposed to salute your captain. Bill. You didn't even return mine. If I were running a tight ship, I'd have in your marine arrest you."

Reis saluted.

"That's better. A lot of things have changed while you've been out of circulation, Bill. We've got three engines going. We'll have a fourth up in another forty-eight hours, and we only needed six to break away from the inner planets. Out where we are now, four should be plenty. And that's not all—we've got more air and food per crewman now than we had when we left Earth."

Reis said, "Then there's no reason we can't continue the mission."

"Way to go, Bill! Know what's happened to this old ship of ours?"

Reis shrugged. "I think so, a little. But tell me."

"We've been seized, Bill boy. Taken over, possessed. It isn't Centcomp—did you think it was Centcomp? And it sure as hell ain't me. It's something else, a demon or what they call an elemental, and it's in me, and in Centcomp, and in you too. Whatever you want to call it, it's the thing that created the Flying Dutchman and so on, centuries ago. We're the first ghost ship of space. You're not buying this, are you. Bill boy?"

"No," Reis told him.

"But it's the truth. There's a ship headed for us, it's coming from Earth right now—I bet you didn't know that. I wonder just how long they'll be able to see us."

Reis spat. The little grey-brown globe of phlegm drifted toward Hap, who appeared not to notice it. "Bullshit," Reis said.

Nell leveled her pistol. The synthetic ruby lens at the end of the barrel caught the light for a moment, winking like a baleful eye.

"Can I tell you what's really happened?" Reis asked.

"Sure. Be my guest."

"Centcomp's brought back you and Nell at any and all cost, because that's what you programmed it to do. You were both too far gone, but Centcomp did it anyway. You've suffered a lot of brain damage, I think—you move like it—and I don't think you can keep going much longer. If you hit a dead man's arm with a couple of electrodes, his muscles will jump; but not forever."

Hap grinned again, mirthlessly. "Go on, Bill boy."

"Every time you look at yourself, you see what you are—what you've become—and you can't face it. So you've made up this crazy story about the ghost ship. A ghost ship explains a dead captain and a dead crew, and a ghost ship never really dies; it goes on sailing forever."

Reis paused. As he had hoped, the minute reaction created by the act of spitting was causing him to Boat, ever so slowly, away from Hap and Nell. Soon he would be caught in the draft from the main vent. It would move him to the left, toward the Section Two hatch; and if neither changed position, Nell would be almost in back of Hap.

"Now are you still going to court-martial me?" he asked. As he spoke, fresh cool air from the vent touched his cheek.

Hap said, "Hell, no. Not if-"

Nell's boot was reaching for the edge of the Section Four hatch; in a moment more she would kick off from it. It was now or never.

Reis's hand closed hard on the tube of antibacterial cream. A thick thread of bright blue cream shot into the space before Hap and Nell and writhed there like a living thing—a spectral monster or a tangle of blue maggots.

Nell fired.

The cream popped and splattered like grease in an overheated skillet, wrapping itself in dense black smoke. Alarms sounded. Through billowing smoke, Reis saw Dawson dart toward the airlock control.

Reis's feet touched the bulkhead; he kicked backward, going for Hap in a long, fast leap. Hap's steel bar caught his right forearm. He heard the snap of breaking bone as he went spinning through the rapidly closing Section Four hatch. A rush of air nearly carried him back into Three.

Then silence, except for the whisper from the vents. The alarms had stopped ringing. The hatch was closed; it had closed automatically, of course, when Centcomp's detectors had picked up the smoke from the burning cream, closed just slowly enough to permit a crewman to get clear.

His right arm was broken, although the pain seemed remote and dull. He went to Section Four's emergency locker and found a sling for it. It would not be safe to get in a med pod, he decided, even if Hap was gone; not until somebody reprogrammed Centcomp.

The hatchdogs spun. Reis looked around for something that could be used as a weapon, though he knew that his position was probably hopeless if either Hap or Nell had survived. There was a toolbox in this locker too, but his arm slowed him down. He was still wrestling with the stretcher when the hatch opened and Dawson came through.

Reis smiled. "You made it."

Dawson nodded slowly without speaking. Jan entered; her eyes were closed, and Paula guided her with one hand.

Reis sighed. "You were able to catch hold of something."



That's good, I was worried about you. Paula too."

Jan said, "Sid saved me. He reached out and snagged me as I flew past, otherwise I'd be out there in space. Paula saved herself, but Hap and Nell couldn't. It was just like you said:

they didn't have enough coordination left. You were counting on that, weren't you? That Nell couldn't hit you, couldn't shoot very well any more."

"Yes," Reis admitted. "Yes, I was, and I didn't think Hap could swat me with that steel bar; but I was wrong."

Jan said, "It doesn't matter now." She was keeping her eyes shut, but tears leaked from beneath their lids.

"No, it doesn't. Hap and Nell are finally dead-truly dead and at rest. Sid, I never thought a hell of a lot of you, and I guess I let it show sometimes; but you saved Jan and you saved the ship. Hell, you saved us all. All of us owe you our lives."

Dawson shook his head and looked away. "Show him, Paula."

She had taken something shining, something about the size of a small notepad, from one of her pockets. Wordlessly, she held it up.

And Reis, looking at it, staring into it for a second or more before he turned away, looked into horror and despair.

It was a mirror.

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400

The Most Beautiful Woman on the World

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THERE were only three men in the shack. They sat close to the table, all three; perhaps it was merely that each wished to be near the others, or in the candle's rich, golden light. Garcia was tall, lean, and handsome, with deep-set, intelligent eyes.

Hoong looked like a middleweight wrestler, which as it happened he had once been. His broad face was a sculptured mask in which only his darting glance seemed to live.

Davis cannot be described so easily. He was shorter than Garcia, taller than Hoong. His reddish hair had been bleached blond by the sun. His small features looked sun-burned, though not badly, and traces of white, protective

cream could be seen in the convolutions of his ears. He leaned forward, listening intently to Garcia, whose slow, cadent voice made itself heard without difficulty above the keening of the wind outside.

"It is we men," Garcia said, "who are the true romantics. We see a girl, she stares at the ground, afterward we observe her studying a wedding gown in a dressmaker's window. Ah, we say, how romantic, what a tender thing is a woman's heart!"

Hoong nodded without speaking.

"And it is so. The hearts of women are tender and easily broken, and there are men—we know them—who enjoy hearing the little chimes of the hearts as they break. But romance from a woman? Bah! Nothing."

This time it was Davis who nodded. Hoong remarked, "Just the same, women all tell you that they're too romantic."

"But it proves my point," Garcia insisted. "When everyone says it is true of them, they cannot know what it is. Men know what it means, courage, and so not all say that they are brave. I give you that example. As easily I could give you a hundred, in the name of God. No, every woman wants a good husband so she will not have to work, six beautiful children she can spoil and order about. She listens at the window when we sing to her and hopes her neighbors listen too, so they will know we have come. But if there were no neighbors, she would care nothing that we came. She preserves our foolish letters, to be sure. They may be of use in the court, and they are in addition the proofs of her prowess. You have your diploma still, mi amigo?"

Hoong said, "With my uncle. He's keeping a footlocker for me."

"So do women preserve our letters. Let me tell you of a man I knew once. He married in the church a lovely girl because she had a certain way of looking at him, and little breasts like doves. Her family owned some land also, though it was no better than this. For the ceremony he gave her a fine horse, a Barbary stallion. Her name was Catalina."

Hoong remarked, "I thought you said it was a stallion." He spoke in such a way that no one could have known whether he was joking.

"Catalina was the girl, cabron," Garcia explained without rancor, "the horse Estarnpido." Drafts had covered the tabletop with sifted red dust, almost invisible until it was disturbed. Garcia moistened a finger and wrote Catalina in the dust. "She told me she had dreamed of such a one. I wished to wake her."

"Surely it's romantic," Hoong said, "to dream of a horse."

Garcia snorted. "If you are another horse, perhaps. For Estampido I found a fine white mare to be his wife, though

the carabineros did not like it and there were difficulties."

Davis said, "I once knew a woman who had been married to a geologist who always dreamed of one particular castle."

"Bravo!" Garcia grinned; when he grinned, his mouth became a sharp V. "There you have the true romance, the romance of the male-for a woman it would have been a palace, a place of luxury without defiance."

"I met him myself a few times." Davis leaned back, staring at the underside of the roof as though he saw a nearly forgotten face among its green thermosetting corrugations. "He was a big redhead; they were both redheads. Is there a thing about women that makes them like men who look like their brothers?"

"Their fathers," Hoong told him.

"She said he used to talk about it every so often. One of the towers had fallen, she said, and he'd tell her how they were going to fix it, how they'd make the foundation a lot stronger. It had collapsed because of an earthquake, I think."

Garcia nodded. "For a geologist that would be natural."

"And he talked a lot about the walls. They had some kind of system that let them add to the walls again and again, over and over, parapet above parapet. That was what she called them. It was all red rock, she said. Something like that.

"He told her about the people too-the people who lived in the castle. There was a Master of Archers who shot against him sometimes; he said this head archer was a dead shot, but mostly he beat him in the end. And there was one certain old man that polished some gold bowls and platters and tended the demon, or whatever it was that lived under the vault; he said maybe it was a god like the one that the Bible calls Moloch, or Ansenef, the blood-drinker from Egypt."

Garcia said, "The husband was the lord of this castle?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes his father's ghost came. Then his father was the overlord, and Sigrid's husband always asked for his advice and always took it. In the castle there wasn't much difference between a live man and his ghost, she said."

Hoong said, "Maybe they were all ghosts, huh?"

Davis looked at him sharply. "Were you ever there?"

"In this guy's dream castle?" Hoong shrugged. "I don't know. You'd have to ask him."

Garcia said softly, "No, amigo, Captain Hoong has never been there. But you have, I think. So it was a real castle after all?"

Davis nodded, the movement of his head so slight as to be nearly imperceptible. "In a way it was. He came back from a field trip down the rift. She said she could tell right away that something was wrong. I guess maybe she kissed him and sat in his lap. That was how she acted with me when I was feeling dusty."

"As you are feeling now, poor little one. I myself prefer blondes, and should I marry again that is what I will have. But it is no small thing to lose a woman one loves."

"I just wish I could show her to you. She had blue eyes, like the sky back home, and the longest legs you've ever seen. The line of her legs was just so graceful and tender-know what I mean? No artist could have programmed it. She had freckles all over. She hated them and said they were ugly, and she put some kind of goop on them to make them lighter. But they were pretty, really. When she soaked in the tub, it looked like she was sprinkled with little rubies. It was like she belonged to some other kind of people, not white or black or anything else we know about. I used to try to get her to stand up; sometimes she would, but she always had a little apron for herself, you know? In 'front, made out of bubbles."

Hoong whistled sharply and tunelessly, his face as blank as ever.

"She was the most beautiful woman on the world, and I told her that over and over. I don't think she ever really believed I was serious."

Garcia nodded. "Fortunate for you she did not. But you say the husband's castle was a real place? You have not said anything about that, only that he was disturbed."

"That's right." Davis paused. "After three or four days, she said, he started talking about it; then he wouldn't shut up or talk about anything else. She said he acted, too, as if he hadn't told her about his dreams at all; now he told her again, beginning back when he was a kid. She said he told her things he hadn't mentioned before, besides the old dreams. He told her a lot about hunting with hawks, except the birds weren't hawks-she couldn't say just what they were. I asked what he'd called them, but she couldn't remember."

"Then he said he was going there again and he wanted her to come with him. She wasn't authorized, but he had a lot of pull. The tech who usually went got sick leave, and he and Sigrid took the creeper."

Hoong said, "Pretty dangerous for a gasper. Did she know her way around?"

"She'd had Basic; everybody had to take it, back when she came. But that was all." Davis paused again. "She got back all right."

Garcia had been inspecting his nails in the light from the candle. They were short but very dirty, and he began to scrape beneath them with a bit of sharp metal he fished from a pocket. "She came back all right. But he did not, this field man, this geologist with the so-beautiful wife."

"No," Davis said. "He didn't come back at all."

"But he had no help in that from you?"

Davis shook his head. "I wasn't even there. I was way up in the snow-lands. Everybody knew that."

"I would hope so, for your sake."

Hoong asked, "What about the castle?"

"They went a long way down the rift. I went myself later, and it was over a hundred kilometers. You know how it is—days aren't much over an hour long when the sun's clear of both rims, and there are more shades of red in the rock than anybody's got names for; but morning and evening seem like they go on forever, with everything shadowy and almost black." He paused. "That's when people see leapers, they say." After a moment he added, "I never saw one myself."

"I have," Hoong told him. "I was doing a survey, me and an operator, Rosa something—she wasn't black but one of those dark girls that sweat all the time." He shot a glance toward Garcia, but if the tall man felt the hit he did not show it.

"We were setting up, and this Rosa was putting together a signal pole. A couple hundred meters ahead was a side canyon, and the sun was right there, shining between the cliffs. The leaper jumped across so I saw it against the face of the sun. It looked black, but naturally anything would have."

Davis said, "Was it like an ape? Somebody I knew said hers looked more like a big ape than anything else, except there were too many arms."

"It looked like some kind of cat to me," Hoong told him. "It didn't look so big at that distance, but we went up there later and checked out the cliffs, and it must've been bigger than a tiger." For an instant the lids of his dark eyes flew wide in a tiger's fierce stare. "Anyhow, I told Rosa what I'd seen, and we spent a couple of hours scouting around; but we didn't find anything."

Garcia was still cleaning his nails. "Superstition. What would they eat?"

"Who said they have to eat?"

"Then how would they leap, mi amigo? Even you will concede that energy is required."

"Only if they have mass. And anywhere you've got sunlight you've got energy."

Davis cleared his throat, and Garcia glanced up from his nails. "You have your own theory, I take it. Is it the vast cities beneath the ground? That is what some believed before the sonic tests."

Davis shook his head. "You're not eating, Garcia. But

you're expending energy."

Garcia opened his mouth to reply, then shut it again and pushed out his lower lip. At length he muttered, 'Stored for so long? Perhaps. Quien sabeT'

"Anyhow," Hoong continued, "both of us heard it that night. Sometimes it howled and sometimes it screamed. A lot was like howling and screaming together."

"El viento."

"Crap," Hoong said. "Nobody pays attention to the wind. You get so you tune it out. Besides, we could hear the wind too, when we listened, and this was different."

"As you wish. You said that you yourself saw this castle, amigo'?"

"That's right. After Sigrid told me about it, I made her take me out there. It wasn't easy, but we traded a man I knew out of a day's use of his vehicle. We had to promise we'd say we'd stolen it if we got caught."

Garcia grinned. "And would you have said that?"

"Hell, no. At least I wouldn't have. Sigrid would have, maybe. It was one of the half-tracked creepies, a bullet on a good surface and dig itself in up to the floorboards in sand or dust. We were most of the day getting there, and most of the night getting back."

"But when you were there? What did you see?"

"Not what she'd seen, that's for sure. Just a big red rock sticking out of the side of the rift. It was ragged on top, so it did look a bit like a castle if you shut your eyes a little. And there were columns sticking up from the top. You know what I mean? Left by the erosion. Some of them had fallen over."

"So you went up to look."

"That's right," Davis said, "we climbed the walls. Sigrid didn't want to, but I talked her into it. She'd been up there with her husband-that's what she'd told me-so I made her come with me. To tell the truth, I thought that if I left her down on the floor alone she'd take the creepy and run off in it; she was that scared. Ten to one she'd have gotten stuck, and maybe we'd both have died."

"Which would not have been desirable, certainly. Doubtless she knew the best slope as well. Was it a bad climb?"

"Yeah, it was-almost up to the toplands. The air got thin as hell. A couple times I was afraid she was going to pass out, and once I thought I was. I had us roped together, though. Do you think they'll ever really make it rain?"

Hoong nodded. "Sure. But we won't be around to see it."

"I guess not. Listen, there really isn't anything left to tell. We got up there, and it was one hell of a climb. When we got our breath, we walked all around-it was pretty big-and saw a whole bunch of rocks with funny shapes, and then we rappelled back down. Getting down was a lot easier than climbing up."

"And that's all?" Hoong asked. "Just funny rocks? I don't believe you."

Davis shrugged. "I can't help that. That was it. Some of the rocks had marks on them, but they didn't mean anything, Aey were just black marks, like there was coal in them or something. They wouldn't rub off."

"Pictures?" Garcia suggested.

"No. Mostly just wiggly lines. If you looked long enough, you could see snakes, and faces and things, but you can do that if you look long enough at anything, even real writing."

"Pictographs," Hoong said. "Want to see me write my name in Chinese? My grandfather showed me." He moistened a finger as Garcia had earlier and sketched the character in the blood-colored dust.

"It wasn't much like that," Davis said. "More like Arabic, or maybe Hebrew. But I can't read them, so how would I know?"

Garcia spat into the corner. "As you knew what you saw was not writing, I suppose."

"Listen, I had her husband's old hammer. You know those things? It had a head like a real hammer's on one side and a chisel blade on the other; I used the chisel and split one of those rocks, and there were more marks inside."

"No doubt the senor would have said that it was a petrified book, and you opened its pages-possibly for the first time in a million years. The woman saw no more than you yourself?"

"That's right."

"You know," Hoong said slowly, "I'm surprised she doesn't try to help you now, if she really loved you."

"She liked me. I was crazy about her-I told you that-and I guess I got her on the bounce. She was afraid to sleep alone, all that stuff. But she loved me after a while; I know she did."

Garcia whispered, "Yet perhaps not quite so much when you had made her climb?"

"More than ever then," Davis told them. "She's dead, all right? I don't want to talk about her any more."

As if he had not heard Hoong asked, "Why should she

love you when you made her do something she didn't want to do?"

"Because she did," Davis said. "She wanted to just as much as I did-more. But she needed somebody to make her do it. She needed me to say come on, Sigrid, we can't back out now, quit horsing around and do it. Haven't either of you ever known a woman in your lives?"

"But the lovely Sigrid is dead? She fell, perhaps, while you were climbing down?"

"No, she died in bed, back in the city. We were in bed together, and I didn't kill her. That was what some of them said, but there wasn't a mark on her; or anyway there wasn't when the M.E. examined her."

Garcia nodded. "We will return to that, I think. But was it while you were climbing down that she saw the leaper?"

"I didn't say she'd seen one. I never said that."

"Ah, but certainly you did, mi amigo. You said it was by twilight that they were seen, and when you spoke of one who had seen one, you employed the feminine. We are not men of genius, perhaps, Hoong and me. Still, we are not fools. It was while you were climbing down?"

"No. It was while we were still up on the castle."

"You said that was near the top-land. Twilight there is not long."

"There was still bright sunshine up there," Davis admitted, "but it was nearly dark down in the rift. She looked over the wall. There were a lot of formations that were like walls-you know, strata that had been tipped on end by geological pressure and combed out by erosion."

"And thus looking down she saw it-perhaps it was thumbing its nose at her. You said it had many arms."

"That's right, but she wasn't sure how many-four at least, she said. Maybe six. It was jumping from rock to rock as if it was coming up to join us. Except that it didn't, it never got there. Or-"

He fell silent. Garcia said softly, "W

"Or if it did we couldn't see it. I've thought about that sometimes-what if you can't see them up close?" He glanced at Hoong. "Does that make any sense?"

"Sure, Camouflage can be like that, sometimes."

"Anyway, I looked down, but I couldn't see it... and then we waited. We didn't have any weapons, just the hammer."

"I want to know what it was she told you."

Davis nodded as though Hoong had read his thoughts and



he, Davis, had expected them to be read. "Up there was where she told most of it, while we were waiting. Before it had just been odds and ends, about her husband's dream and her going out there with him. I'd known she was frightened of the place, but before then I hadn't really understood why.

"They had come out in the creeper, not taking quite so much time to get there as we had. She said most of that section was still in deep shadow; but just as they drove up the sunlight lit the castle, running down the sides of the towers-the big stone shafts-like wildfire and lighting the battlements. Her husband pointed out each tower to her and told her something about its history. They hadn't had to climb the way we did, with pitons and so forth; there had been a path up the side of the cliff.

"She said she thought she had been hypnotized, although she was never conscious of it, and she didn't think her husband had done it consciously either. But while they climbed the path he kept talking to her, kept telling her things, and as he talked the red rock formation she'd seen disappeared. When we'd come, it had looked kind of like a real castle from the bottom of the rift; it was only when we'd climbed up that we saw it wasn't a real castle at all,

"But when she and her husband had come, it went the other way. The closer they got, the more castle-like it looked, until she could see the sentinels on the walls, she said, tall and wrapped in dark red cloaks, and banners with hairy tails like wolves, so light it seemed like they floated in that thin air. There were ports in the walls like for gates or windows, and she saw shapes pacing back and forth like the lions in a zoo.

"Then she looked again, and it wasn't really a castle at all. She said it was like the time her folks had taken her to Mammoth Cave when she was a kid, and at first she'd thought it was just a hole like the neighborhood kids dug sometimes in the side of a hill; but when they got inside, she understood that their little caves were just bad copies of this, and this was the real thing, millions of years older than any kid and full of power and magic. That's what she said.

"That was what she saw gripping the cliff face then-the thing that all the castles and forts on Earth had been copied from. It was a ship, she said, and it was an emblem. Right then she knew it could come into your dreams if it wanted to, and you couldn't stop it, and she knew it was too old ever to die.

"Something came fluttering toward them, she said, like a pigeon flies on Earth. It had four wings like a dragonfly's, and a circle of topaz eyes around a pointed head; when it got close to them, the head bloomed like a flower, and the petals were edged with needle teeth.

"She said her husband whistled to it. Whistle was as near as she could come to the noise he made. She said she'd never heard anybody whistle like that, and she'd never thought anybody could. The flying thing landed on the crown of his

head like a helmet then. It put all four wings down over his cheeks and his neck. It put its head under one wing, and it seemed like it was whispering in his ear.

"She was almost too scared to speak, but she said, 'Jack, what's that? What is that thing?' And he turned and answered her, but it was in some language she didn't understand.

"He took her hand then, gently she said, and pointed. The castle was sticking out what you call a natural bridge to them, sticking out a long, narrow tongue of rock that fell away at the edges but looked pretty strong down the middle. When it got to the path, her husband stepped out onto it."

"Madre de dios! What happened next?"

"He tried to pull her after him. And she wanted to come, she said. But when she tried to step out onto the bridge, her foot went right on through it. She nearly fell, and she jerked back as hard as she could. He called out to her just like any man would if he'd seen his wife almost fall like that. But he didn't call Sigrid. He called her something else, something she said she could never twist her mouth enough to pronounce. But she knew it was her name."

"She turned away and ran down the path, but soon it wasn't really a path at all, she was just scrambling and slipping, she said, down the lower part of the cliff. It wasn't until she was in the crawler that she knew she'd sprained her right wrist. She tried to neutralize the deadlock with her right hand the regular way, and it hurt so much she couldn't get it. She had to reach across to do it and start the engine.

"That was when she spotted the leaper. It was keeping just ahead of the sunlight racing down the cliff face, and it looked like the shadow of an ape with too many arms.

"Then it was gone, she said, as if the light had caught up with it and it had hidden in some crack in the red rock like the other shadows. She shut the crawler's bubble and jerked out the throttle. She could have stalled it, I guess, but it was a good machine. She got back all right."

"But subsequently died," Garcia said dryly. "Died in the bed with you, no? How much after, amigo? A year, perhaps?"

Davis shook his head. "Couple of months."

Hoong asked, "What was the mark?"

Davis did not answer.

"You said there weren't any marks on her when the medical examiner saw her. So there was one before that. What was it, and how'd you got rid of it? You might as well tell us."

"A hand," Davis said. "It was the mark of a red hand, a big hand with long fingers."

"Ah!" Garcia chuckled. "Around her throat, amigo?"

"No, not on her neck." Davis spoke slowly, as men do when they force themselves to recall things they would sooner forget. "It was on her right hand, just like somebody with blood on his hand had shaken hands with her. I tried to wash it off. For a real long time I scrubbed at it. Finally I even rubbed some of the cream she put on her freckles on it. But the cream didn't work, either."

"Yet the medical examiner failed to see it. I find that interesting."

"I got out the big knife she used to chop vegetables with. I thought maybe I could scrape it off her hand." Davis spread his own hands in appeal.

"Of course," Garcia said. "But that too was ineffective?"

"I'd had this dream that night-I dreamed she hadn't gotten away from him, and he was pulling and pulling, stronger all the time, taking her with him. I had her other hand, and I tried to follow them; but I slipped, the stone bridge was like glass, and I fell, and the leaper was down in the rift waiting for me.

"So when it wouldn't scrape off, either, I tried to cut it off, except I couldn't." He turned toward Hoong, desperate for reassurance. "I tried and tried, but I was just hacking her up. I thought dead people didn't bleed, but she bled and bled. God, what a mess!"

Hoong nodded. "Sure. Bound to be."

"Then I tried to cut her whole hand off. I pulled her partway off the bed, so I could lay her arm on the floor and chop at it. That didn't work either. It's not as easy as they make it look on the nets."

Hoong said, "A machete, that's what you needed."

"Or a hatchet, amigo." Garcia's eyes were sad, though half a smile played about his lips.

"But I got it in the end. I checked a power saw out of the toolroom and took it back to our place. I wrapped her hand in a couple of towels and dropped it in the incinerator. They never found it. Everything they saw was mine, and there wasn't a mark on her." He struck the table with his fist.

No one spoke.

"Anyway, that's why I'm here," Davis said.

Garcia nodded to himself.

"I think it got her scent when we went back. She died that night in bed; maybe it got mine then. Did I tell you?"

Neither man answered him. The silence thickened until it seemed to fill the dark corners of the shack and press against

the candle flame like smoke.

At last Hoong said, "Whatever happened to your wife, Pepe? To Catalina?"

Garcia shook himself as though wakening from an evil dream. "He trampled her," he whispered. "That black stallion, that big Estampido. He trampled her one hot afternoon toward the end of August."

Hoong told Davis, "The guys train those stallions to fight down there just like you'd train a Doberman. The stallion goes for you when his trainer gives the signal."

Seeing Davis's face, Garcia took him by the shoulder. "Her heart, amigo. He trampled upon her little heart, that is what I meant to say, when she watched him mount the mare. The heart of a woman is such a fragile thing, so easily broken."

Outside and far away, something shrieked louder than the keening of the dust-laden wind.

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415

The Tale of the Rose and the Nightingale (And What Came of It)

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"TUM, turn, tump!" sang the new storyteller's drum. "TUMPTY, turn, turn, tup!"

And Ali ben Hassan, the beggar boy, who sometimes claimed his true name was Ali Baksheesh, the boy Ali who was-it was sometimes reported-more thief than beggar, turned to look. The new recounter of old tales was young and handsome, his beard as brown as a chestnut; there was a pistol of Fez (which is where they make the best ones) in his sash and a smile on his lips.

Ali ceased to pester a camel driver and dashed past the potter's stall to squat beside the storyteller and extend cupped hands. "Baksheesh!" Ali whined. "Most noble lord, sultan of story! Ailaho A'alam! I have nothing-nothing!"

"What!" exclaimed the storyteller, continuing to tap his little drum with his fingers. "You say you have nothing, but first beg the indulgence of Allah for telling lies? You won't get fat like that."

"But, prince of parable, I desire to see those gardens of lasting delight which Allah-the Creator! the Ever Beneficent!-reserves for the faithful. How am I to do so if I tell lies?"

"By lying to Allah, I suppose."

"Master of mystery!" protested Ali. "Master of history! Far be it from you to say such a thing. I did not hear it."

"Nor did I hear your importunate demand for baksheesh," the storyteller replied calmly, still tapping his drum.

"Do not all good Moslems give alms?" Ali raised his voice. "Ailaho A'alam.' I have nothing!"

"It is truly written that none shall starve," replied the storyteller. "Tell me what it is you have, and possibly I may give you something-though it will not be money."

"I have three things," Ali answered eagerly. "Harken, O raja of romance, and I shall enumerate them-no, four! By the Beard! Four! For I have this clout, which conceals my private parts-

"Which may remain so."

"My turban, my lice, and you! Is it not written that food mete to each shall be appointed to him? You-

"No," interrupted the storyteller. "It is not."

"-have surely been appointed by the Most Compassionate to feed me. Are you a scholar? And so young?"

"I'd a good master," the storyteller said. "Mullah Ibrahim the Wise, that holy man."

"To teach you to tell stories in the bazaar? What are you going to give me?"

"A story, of course. I've one to give, and you've ears in which to receive it. And perhaps if I tell you a story, others will come to listen as well."

The Tale of the Rose and the Nightingale

Long, long ago (so the storyteller began) there bloomed in the pasha's garden a lovely white rose, the most beautiful flower ever seen. Her waist was a date palm in the wind, her breasts twin white doves, her hips the saddle of a milk-white dromedary without flaw, her face the moon; the perfume of her limbs filled the whole garden, and her flesh shone like silver.

Ali nodded, knowing that in a story a flower might readily be a woman.

A little brown nightingale wandered into the garden (so the storyteller continued) in search of a mate. He beheld the white rose and fell hopelessly in love with her. He began to build a palace for her in the mulberry tree, and each night he serenaded her from its lowest limb, songs filled with passion and parting, songs sorrowful, and songs that wept with so much joy that the stars bent to listen. "/ love you-you-

you!" he sang. "Only you! Oh, be my bride!"

And the rose nodded on her stem, and smiled, and at last sent a message by a moth: "Come closer, O my dearest love," it ran. "But come not too near."

The little nightingale was mad with delight. So beat his heart in his tiny bosom that it seemed it must soon burst. She loves me! he thought; and he sang, "You love me! You love me! You love me!" Fools may believe it was but the soft wind that caressed the garden, but the nightingale knew better, and so do I. The rose nodded on her stem, and he fluttered for joy.

A stranger had come into the bazaar, an old man whose eyes were always shut, who felt out his path with a long white stick. The boy, Ali, had been too intent on the story to notice him at first; but he caught sight of him as the storyteller said joy, for this old man was feeling his way past the potter's stall, tapping each pot with his stick.

"Here, venerable one," quickly cried the potter, fearful his wares might be broken. "Permit a wretched man of clay to guide you." He took the old man by the elbow. "Where do you desire to go, venerable one?"

"I heard a story told," answered the old man. "Or rather, I heard the speech of a storyteller, for now I hear it no more. Once, O my brother, it was my only pleasure to read that which is sacred, heeding nought else, and I did so till I had learned every verse as no man since. Observing that I had no more need for them, the All Seeing One put out my eyes. Now I mumble his verses in the dark-but hear storytellers, sometimes."

"What wisdom!" cried the potter. "Hear him, O you sons of the Moslems! Here's the storyteller, venerable one. Please to be seated."

"Thank you, my brother," replied the old man. "Thump your clay gently."

The nightingale flew to a honeysuckle bush near the rose and sang again, and when he had finished his song, a crystal drop of dew fell from the rose.

"Why do you weep, lovely one?" inquired the nightingale.

"Was, my song so sad?"

"Because I am to be uprooted tomorrow," answered the rose. "Because I am not red. Today, O my lover, while you slept, I heard the pasha instructing our gardener. A red rose of Isfahan is to take my place, for the pasha does not like white roses."

At this the little nightingale wept too, and for the rest of the night his songs were the saddest he knew, filled with love unrequited and lovers sundered by death.

As dawn came he said to the rose, "I would save you if I

could; but I no more than you can prevail against the might of the pasha. May I have one kiss? I shall count it most sacred for the remainder of my time upon earth."

The rose shook her dew-weighed head as she stared at the ground, "You are certain to tear yourself on my thorns," she said.

But the nightingale cared not a copper for that. At once he flew to the rose's stem and pressed his lips to hers; and as he drew away, his bright eyes noticed a single fleck of scarlet on one of the rose's outermost petals.

"Oh, look!" he cried. "See this! My kiss, has left a red spot there. If we were to kiss a thousand times, dearest Rose, you would be a red rose, and so might live."

"That dot of scarlet is your own heart's blood," the rose told him. "It is there because you tore your wing on my thorns, just as I feared."

"One drop is nothing," cried the little nightingale, for he knew then what he must do. Taking wing and flying to a dizzying height, he plunged into the rosebush, where he was torn like one who suffers the Death of a Thousand Cuts.

Bleeding everywhere, he fluttered above the rose.

"That's a very sad story," said Ali, who was approaching that age at which young men desire women and so come to ruin. "But a beautiful one too. I'll remember it for a long time."

"There's more," the old man whispered. "I've heard this tale before—we must discover what became of them both."

In the hour that follows the morning prayer (continued the storyteller) the gardener came into the garden with his spade; he set its blade to the root of the rosebush, paying no heed at all to the dead bird lying there. But before he had dug deep, he noticed that one single white rose was splattered and dotted everywhere with scarlet.

"How odd!" he said to himself. And then, "But how lovely! By the Jannat al-Na'im! For the honor of all gardeners, such a bush must not be destroyed. What am I to do?" And so when he had thought upon the matter for a time, he dug up the rosebush indeed, and planted a red rose of Isfahan in its place as his master had ordered him. But he carried the bush that bore the rose the little nightingale had loved to a part of the garden where few ever came, and dug a goodly hole for its roots there. Into this hole, he cast the body of the dead bird he had found in his garden, and he replanted the rosebush on top of it.

Since that day, most of its blossoms have been crimson—the hue of old blood. But once in each year, always at the full of the last moon of summer, the bush bears a white rose spotted and dotted everywhere with scarlet; and it is said that he who picks that rose may choose any love he wishes for so

long as the rose remains unwithered, and hold her forever.

After this, the storyteller recounted many another strange tale, such as that of Yunus the Scribe and Walid bin Sahl, that of Gharib and his brother Ajib, that of the City of Brass, and that of the Four Accused. Listeners came and went, idlers and porters, sherbet vendors, shopkeepers, soldiers, and the boatmen of the Nile. But always Aii and the old man remained where they were, and though they put nothing in the storyteller's bowl, he did not complain of them.

At length the hour drew near when the gates are shut, and there was no one left to listen but Ali and the old man. Then Ali said, "O master of myth, you have given me far more than I expected. What gold is like your words! I shall ask no more-but if I were to ask more, I would ask that you tell your tale of the Rose and the Nightingale again before we go to our beds."

The storyteller feigned to make a salaam. "I will indeed:

tell it yet again," he said, "though upon some other day. Aii-I am happy to hear you liked it so well, for to my own mind it possesses every merit a tale requires, of which fantasy, color, and pathos are the chief."

The old man combed his white beard with his fingers. "It has another," said he, "one you have not touched upon: that of truth. For it is indeed written that such a bush grows in the pasha's garden."

"What!" exclaimed the boy Ali. "Why, I'd give my life to see it!"

The blind old man nodded. "And so would I, boy. So would I. It does indeed."

"I wouldn't," said the storyteller. "For I have found that I'm able to net loves enough without magic. And as for holding them forever, who but a madman would wish it? Yet I too would like to see a magic rose if I could."

Ali shook his head. "I'm afraid you can't, O lord of long words. They say there's a high wall around the pasha's garden, so his wives and the other ladies of his harem can walk there."

The old man laid a dry hand upon Ali's thigh. "Nor can I, ever. Yet you might, boy-for I know a means by which one such as yourself may be admitted to that garden."

Then the boy Ali's mouth opened wide, for he could scarcely believe his good fortune. And at last he said, "Might it be, O monarch of muezzins, that the rose blooms tonight?"

And the old man answered, "That rose opened today, for last night saw the final full moon of summer."

"Then tell me how I can get into the pasha's garden!"



The old man shook his head. "That I may not do, boy, for it is a secret that may never be spoken; but if you will guide me there, I will instruct you in the method."

"This very night, my master, if you can walk so far."

"I cannot," the old man told him. "But a donkey can trot any distance one wishes."

Then the storyteller exclaimed, "By the prophet! I must go with you. I'll see the pasha's garden myself, if it be the will of Allah, and I'll hire a donkey too."

"O my masters," said the boy Ali, for he knew that though they might ride he must walk, "if you're both going there's no need. Let's hire a boat instead. I know a rais-a captain, my masters-who has a good one, small, fleet, and cheap. A boat does not jolt, and it will cool tonight upon the river."

"Wisely spoken, boy," said the old man, preparing to rise. "If this storyteller and I combine our purses, it should not be too much. But you must guide me to this boat."

"And I," said the storyteller. "For I'm newly come from Baghdad."

"Then come," said Ali, "and I'll show you everything on the way." And he took the sleeve of the old man's robe and led them down one crooked street after another.

"Here's the water buffalo that turns the well-pump for the whole quarter. His name's Kubbar. See, he lets me put my hand on his horn. Now go through yonder door, my masters, and we'll save ourselves much walking."

They did as he bid, entering a high-walled building through a narrow hall that soon opened into a wide court.

"This is our slave market. The auction's over for today. Never fear, my masters, there's another door on the other side just like the one we came in through. Over there are the sick slaves-you can get one for next to nothing if you want to feed the crows. Here are the well ones. The dark ones are Nubians-they're the best. The yellow-skins are Abyssinians. People say they're too smart to make good slaves. The women are in those booths."

A light-skinned Abyssinian girl with a great deal of brass jewelry thrust her head through the curtains of one to smile at the storyteller, then put out her tongue.

"She wants to show you that she's not sick," Ali explained. "She thinks you're rich because you're dressed so well. She'd like a rich handsome young master. Most storytellers dress in rags."

"As did I. But while I was in Baghdad, I told my tale of the Rose and the Nightingale to the Caliph, who filled my mouth with gold."

"Ah," said Ali. "I wondered about that. Then you could buy her, for she could be had for silver. There's Circassians too, and Galla girls-they have cool flesh for the hot nights-and some Franks, I think, but you have to beat the Franks every day, or they'll murder their masters."

"What's that?" inquired the storyteller as they came out the second door.

"That shaft of stone? The idol of an infidel queen. It ought to be pulled down, only it's so tall it would take the houses of believers with it."

"Ah!" The old man nodded, smiling to himself. "That's an obelisk, boy. Cleopatra erected that to the honor of her son by Julius Caesar."

"And right over there's the Women's Bath, my masters," Ali announced. "Our eunuchs used to wash there too, but some young men learned to draw their stones up into their bodies and pass for eunuchs, so now they won't let them."

Another street, wider but as contorted as the rest, led to the docks, where lounging sailors were jostled by the impatient travelers of half a dozen nations: Bedouins, Greeks, Armenians, and Jews, a proud Turk with a small black boy to carry his pipe, and angry janissary with a cocked fusil in one hand and a letter in the other.

"Way!" shrilled Ali. "Way for the holy one! Way, make way for the Caliph's favorite!"

No one paid him the least attention, and they had to push through the crowd as best they could. At the very end of a long wharf three nearly naked Arabs lounged in a small canjiah. "Up the river to the palace at once!" Ali called to them. "And with all speed!"

The rais, whose turban was a trifle larger than the others, yawned and rose. "You wish us to wait for you, sir?" he asked the storyteller. "You will return to the city with us? Fifty piasters."

After some reasoned discussion in which the storyteller and the old man frequently swore they would prefer to walk, and the rais declared that it had been his intention to sink his vessel at once and so escape the tax collectors, thirty-one was agreed upon, fifteen to be paid on the spot, and the remaining sixteen on their return; the storyteller counted out the money, the rais shouted to his crew, the crew climbed the stubby masts and freed the enormous rust-colored sails from the long, slanting lateen yards, and as quickly as a man lights his chibouque, the little canjiah was cracking up the river with white water boiling at her bow.

"Our Nile is the most wonderful river in the whole world," Ali explained happily. "It runs-behold, my masters-to the Great Sea in the north. The wind blows toward the cataracts of the south-"

"Except when it doesn't," the rais put in softly.

"And so a man may sail up and - ^me down with the current  
all his life and never wet an oa

The old man grunted as he r dc himself comfortable in  
the stern. "It's a long time since I've been on this river. I had  
my eyes then. You'll have to tell me what we're passing, boy,  
so I know where we are."

"Then hear, most holy one," said Ali, who was even more  
respectful in the presence of the rais and the crew, "that on  
my right hand stand the mighty tombs of the infidel kings,  
black as pitch against the setting of the sun and peaked like  
so many tents, though each is loftier than many a mountain.  
Opposite are mountains indeed, carved by Allah and not by  
infidels, the Mountains of Moqattam, my master, where your  
servant has never set his foot. Behind our craft, the great,  
the beautiful city lights the lamps no man can count, which  
fade with distance, my master, even as the host of heaven  
brightens. Before us rise the famous cliffs." Ali looked about  
for something with which to cover himself, for the night air  
was indeed chill upon the Nile.

"You grope for your robe, boy," said the old man. "But  
you're sitting on it."

At that, the storyteller laughed.

It was so, though the boyAli had never in his life owned  
a robe. When he stretched his hand toward the wooden seat,  
it was not wood his fingers encountered but cotton cloth. He  
stood and held it up, and it was indeed just such a robe as  
someone of his size might wear, of white striped with a darker  
color.

"Ten thousand blessings, my master!" exclaimed Ali. Then  
he muttered to himself, "I wish I had a light."

The old man said, "The stripes are brown, boy. Now put  
it on."

When the robe was settled in place, so that Ali was covered  
from his shoulders to his ankles, he said, "O my master,  
holiest wazir of all wisdom, I had thought you blind."

And the old man answered, "Now that night has come, I  
see more clearly."

The storyteller touched Ali's arm and pointed. "What are  
those dark openings in the cliffs?"

"Tombs, my master. The tombs of infidels of long ago."

"Some are lit from within. Their lights are faint, but I see  
them. Look there."

"Those are ghul lights, my master," Ali told him. "Ghuls  
dwell in the tombs."

The old man said, "Tell him of them."

"It is unlucky to speak of them, my master," Ali said, and he looked to one side.

"Speak nevertheless," said the storyteller, "and may your ill luck fall upon me."

"Have they no ghuls in Baghdad?"

The storyteller nodded. "Evil things that claw at graves by night and sometimes kill the watchmen."

"So are they here," said Ali, "They devour the sere bodies of inhdels long dead, and eat the funeral meats left with them. They don their jewels too, and hold an evil carouse, dancing to a music that would drive a true believer mad. When day comes, they hide the jewels, so that honest men cannot find them."

The storyteller thought upon this for a time, and at last he said, "What of the kings' tombs we saw? Are there greater ghuls in those?"

The boy Ali shook his head. "There's a guardian set there by the kings, with a man's face and a lion's feet. Should any ghul approach those tombs, he would rise and tear it to pieces. If its face were a lion's, my master, it would flee, for all beasts fear them greatly. If its hands were a man's, it could do nothing, for the hands of men are weak against ghuls. Thus it is as it is, and they fear it and do not come. Now let us speak no more of these evil things."

"Boy," said the old man, "take up my stick."

Ali picked it up—a long slender rod of heavy wood, top ^ cd with a knob of bone.

"I can't see which tombs show a light," the old man said. "But you can. Stand up, boy! Are you standing up?"

Ali rose again. "Yes, my master. I stand."

"Then point my stick at a tomb that shows a light, boy. At the nearest."

They were abreast such a tomb as he spoke. A faint blue ghul-light played about its mouth, at times weakly, at others more strongly. "I have done so, my master," whispered Ali.

Slowly, though not feebly, the old man's hand reached for his staff, a dark serpent that tested the distance between one branch and the next. After what seemed to Ali a very long time indeed, the strong brown fingers touched the white wood.

And the radiance at the tomb's entrance brightened, as if a balefire had been kindled within, and a great voice boomed forth from the narrow stone doorway. All the horrors of death were in it: the stench of corpses, and the dust and the

dirt that follow that stench. As the hyena gives tongue though its mouth chokes on putrescence, it howled, "Hail to thee, Mullah Ibrahim! Peace be, between thee and me!"

Ali returned the old man's stick to the place at his side where it had lain. And thereafter he sat with his head in his hands, and said nothing of cliff or mountain, ruined temple or mosque of faith, or of anything else that the boat passed. For he recalled that the storyteller had told him that his teacher had been the Mullah Ibrahim; and he knew that the two, although they might feign to have met first that day in the bazaar, were in reality pupil and master, and that they had snared him for a purpose he could not guess.

At last the storyteller took him by the shoulder and said, "Come!"

Ali raised his head and saw they were at the landing of the pasha's palace. He saw too that dawn had come, or nearly, for it was almost the hour at which a man can distinguish between a fine white thread and a black one, which in Ramadan signals the beginning of the fast.

He rose as he was bid and mounted the slippery stone steps, the storyteller following him with his hand still gripping Ali's shoulder, and the old man walking before them, tapping each step with his stick.

Sandalwood gates studded with iron stood at the top of the stair. A janissary dozed before them, his back to a pillar, his hand folded across the muzzle of his long, ivory-inlaid musket.

"Hush," commanded the old man. "He will not wake, but should we make too much noise, he may lift his head and speak." He brushed the grey stones of the wall with one hand and held his stick before him with the other.

Ali nodded, though he wanted to shout.

For a thousand steps and more they crept in the shadow of those grey stones, until the wall curved away from the river. The storyteller said, "Now we must make haste. Night is nearly flown."

"Not for me," the old man told him.

Before them stood a cracked ashlar from which the unholy glyphs of infidel times were almost weathered away, the refuse of the pasha's garden on the other side of the wall. Here the old man seated himself, saying, "Take off your robe, boy, and cast it at my feet."

Ali did not wish to do so, but the storyteller cuffed him until he thought it better to obey.

But while they scuffled and Ali wept, the old man paid them no heed. His blind eyes were upturned to the dimming stars, his crooked legs crossed under him, the palms of his hands flattened upon the glyphs. He neither moved nor

spoke.

"O my master, what is he doing?" Ali ventured when he had tossed his robe at the base of the rose-hued ashlar.

Fingering his beard, the storyteller said, "He sends his soul to Jinnistan, the Land of Sorcery."

"Is it near?" Ali inquired.

"As close as the ground under our feet," the storyteller told him. "And as distant as Mount Kaf."

Then Ali opened his mouth to frame another question; and though he did not speak, it remained thus open for some time after, for he saw his robe stir as though there were a serpent beneath it.

"Now," said the storyteller, speaking softly and quickly. "Hear me. I'll instruct you only once, and if you should fail it's your life. In the garden, find the great fountain. From it lead half a dozen paths. Follow the narrowest, the path of pink stones. A woman waits at the end, beside the bush I told you of. She'll indicate the correct rose to you. Bring it to me, and you'll be restored to your proper shape. You'll be well rewarded, and all will be well for you."

Poor Ali did not nod, nor did he express his understanding in any other way; and although he heard the storyteller's words, he scarcely knew they had been spoken. For the robe the old man had given him danced like a pot on the fire, waved its arms, and lifted into the air, filled out in a fashion that showed plainly that another wore it, though that other was not to be seen.

The storyteller pinned Ali's arms to his sides. "Cease your squirming," he hissed. "Move or cry out, and I'll break both your legs and throw you into the river."

And the robe settled over poor Ali's head, blinding him.

Then he could see once more, though the world appeared to his eyes a larger and a far stranger place than he would ever have believed it could. The storyteller had released him;

but the robe held both his arms to his sides still, for they were not in its sleeves. Rather, the empty sleeves now flapped and fluttered as if a gale blew for them alone, though the body of the robe was quiet.

The wall of the pasha's garden rose higher than the sky, and though the grey light of dawn was all the light there was, everything Ali saw seemed brighter and newer than he had ever seen anything before. The stars were amethysts and jacinths, sapphires and hyacinths; the Nile a rich mocha sea, a crocodile on a distant mudbank a living emerald. He wished both to sing and to fly, and very much to his own astonishment he did both at once, rising on wings that seemed to fan the air without effort, and trilling like such a music box as ears have never heard.

The pasha's wall, which had appeared an impassible barrier, was no more than a rope of stones trailed over the ground. He had crossed it before he could decide whether to cross or not, and a country of silver fish ponds and gay flower beds stretched beneath him, like the most gorgeous of carpets in the faraway palace of the sultan. In a wink he saw the great fountain and the path of pink stones, which soon vanished, however, beneath stately palms and lush fruit trees.

I'm a bird, he thought; and if I wish to be a boy again I must follow that path. But do I really wish it? What is this thing they call the soul, that flies to Jinnistan or Paradise, but a bird that sleeps in the body until it is time to quit the nest? Thus I have died, very likely, already. Why should I die twice?

Besides, when I was a boy I had to beg my bread. As a bird I can eat bugs--there are more than enough to feed all the birds that Allah's hatched since the beginning of the world. As a boy I had lice, which could not be checked without coppers for the bath. As a bird I have mites, which can be checked with a bath of dust. As a boy I played with my fellow boys. But as a bird, shall I not sing all day with my fellow birds? There passes one now, my comrade in the air.

At this thought, the bird Ali glanced to his right, where a wild duck winged its way toward the marshes of the Faiyum. Just as he looked, a falcon stooped for it like a thunderbolt;

the unfortunate duck gave an eerie, despairing cry and plummeted to earth.

As did the bird Ali, diving under the shelter of a friendly orange tree and whizzing down the path of pink stones like an arrow.

Through a grotto it wound, past lesser fountains and over a bridge not much larger than a table. At last it ended in a cul-de-sac closed by a large rosebush. A young woman waited there, unveiled, her dainty feet upon a slab of pink stone;

but though any man would have called her lovely, she seemed a giantess to the terrified Ali, with hands that could break his bones as a squirrel cracks nuts. And though she whistled most plaintively to him, he was careful to perch well out of her reach.

"Are you the bird?" she inquired of him.

Her voice was gunfire and thunder to poor Ali, and yet he understood her words. He struggled to speak, but his lips were stiff, and he sang instead.

"Then there's no reason to delay," said the young woman, "for that fat Omar will soon discover I'm absent from my bed." With that, she drew scissors from the waist of her embroidered trousers and cut a dappled rose from the bush.

Ali the bird fluttered to the rosebush and clamped his beak on the rose. But no sooner had it shut than the face of the sun peeped over the garden wall. Its first rays struck the little nightingale in the rosebush; at once his feathers were the brown stripes of a cotton robe, and Ali the boy who wore that robe.

And as he staggered from the rosebush, his robe torn and his arms and cheeks scratched and bleeding, still too dazed to speak, the young woman caught him in such an embrace as he had never felt since the day his mother died.

"I love you!" cried the young woman. "I love you, I love you, I love no one but you! You and you only are the pearl of the firmament to me, and shall be forever!"

Ali took the rose from his mouth and discovered that the young woman was scarcely taller than he; and now that he was a boy once more (and nearly a man) he learned too how lovely she was, her flesh silver and her face the moon.

"Will you tell me your name?" she asked, suddenly shy.

"I'm Ali," he told her. "And you are . . . ?"

"Zandra," she said, and they kissed. As their lips met, the dappled rose she had cut for him withered and dropped from his fingers to the ground.

And though he was a trifle the smaller, Ali knew that he was taller than the sky. What had Rustam, what had Akbar-Khan, that he had not? A horse? A sword? A banner and a thousand ragged rascals to follow it? They were trivialities and would be his as soon as he wanted them.

"You're unlucky, Zandra," he whispered. "The spell of the rose has made you love a beggar boy; but though he will not be a boy always, nor a beggar always, he will be your slave always."

"I am unluckier than you know, O my heart," she replied. "For this is the pasha's garden, and I am the pasha's. Should Omar the Chief Eunuch, or any of the others, find us here, he will slay you and hew my quivering body into four quarters."

"Then they must not find us. Tell me quickly-why did the storyteller send me for the rose?"

"A storyteller?" inquired Zandra. "Describe him to me!"

"He's tall and straight, and very fine looking," said Ali, recalling the man to his mind's eye. "He has a beautiful brown beard, and a masterful gaze. His turban is silk, his vest is green kid, and he wears a pistol from Fez in a red sash. With him is a blind old man, a little taller even than he but stooped, Mullah Ibrahim the Wise."

"I know nothing of such an old man," Zandra told him.



"But the young one is no storyteller but Prince Abdullah al Hazik. A month past, he was my master's guest in this palace and met me in this garden, where no stranger is to be."

"And are you the pasha's most favored wife?"

Sadly, Zandra shook her head. "Only his concubine. There are more than a hundred of us."

"How did you come to meet my storyteller here? Was it by chance?"

"No," she said. She drew away from him by half a step, and her eyes found the pink stone at her feet.

"Tell me!" demanded Ali. "It might save our lives. Do you think it really matters to me that another has seen my beloved's face? I, who love you, and have worn others' rags all my life?"

"We danced for him," confessed poor Zandra. "I and all the youngest of the pasha's concubines. Our elders played for us on their lutes and zithers, and on the flute and the little woman's drum. I had cymbals for my fingers, and gold bells on my wrists and ankles, and I played my tambourine. We had danced like that before, but never for a guest so young and handsome. O my heart, you should have heard the music, as fierce and sweet as the wind from sea!"

She whirled, hands above her head and fingers snapping; and her hips were the tossing billows of the wild Aegean from which she came, and her little feet thumped the path of pink stones in the rhythm of her dance.

And though every fool in the bazaar would have said that there was no music, yet Ali heard it plainly, the shrilling of the shabdbbi and the thudding of the darabukka.

Abruptly, she stopped. "And he looked at me, beloved, and I at him, and I knew he would meet me in the garden, beneath the moon. We went there to cool ourselves when we had danced, and I hid till all the rest had gone. Since that time old Rashsha has carried many messages for us." Her eyes filled with tears.

"I understand," said Ali, who had once or twice assisted in the transmission of such messages himself. "But why did he want the rose?"

Zandra wiped her eyes. "Because of the inscription on a certain stone that lies beyond our wall. I've never seen it, and I couldn't read it anyway. But he says it says, 'Here is the treasure of Osiris.' That was a king of the infidels, I think. T open to love alone.' Prince Abdullah said it would open to the bearer of the rose. Where is it?"

"I dropped it," Ali confessed.

"Here it is-on the stone. But how fast it faded!"

Zandra bent to pick it up, and Ali was seized with shame to think that he had made this lovely child weep, and that she, the pasha's concubine, should wait upon him, a pauper and a beggar. "No, no!" he protested. "Let me get it for you, my lady'"

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Their hands met upon the pink stone. It lifted at once as if hinged, and the rose slid from it to lie at the foot of the bush where it lies still. Before them opened a murky and narrow shaft which a flight of steep stone steps descended, as it seemed, forever.

"Caught!" exclaimed a reedy voice behind them. They turned as one, and Zandra cried, "Omar! Omar, please, we-"

"Silence, I say!" Twice Ali's height, the eunuch lumbered 'f toward them, penning them in the cul-de-sac; his belly preceded his advance as a battering ram leads a storming party, and he held a heavy scimitar at the ready. "I fear that you must die, my children. I ... what is this?"

"The secret road to a great treasure, sir," said Ali, whose wits had been honed on many a dinnerless day. "Jewels and gold beyond counting. Look here." Quickly he pointed to the glyphs carved on the underside of the stone: a bent object that might be a whip, a human leg and foot, a shallow cup, and a crocodile.

"It's plain enough, surely," continued Ali, who had heard that eunuchs hunger after money and respect as whole men lust for power and women, though he could not read even plain Arabic. "The lash and the foot mean that anyone who walks here without permission will be beaten. The cup shows that this is where the drinking vessels are, and the crocodile that they belong to the king of the river."

Zandra whispered, "Oh, what a pity you must kill us, Omar! My screams and our blood, still more the hacked limbs of our dismembered bodies, will attract a great deal of attention to this spot. You'll be lucky to get so much as a single goblet before the janissaries take charge of everything."

"But if you were to spare us," Ali added quickly, "we could assist you. And since it would be our lives to reveal a word of this, we would reveal nothing, ever."

"Never!" confirmed Zandra.

"Hmm," said the eunuch. With his left hand he stroked his chin, which was smoother than Ali's. He looked from one to the other with the clever little eyes of a pig. "I could take you elsewhere, however. Indeed it seems a capital idea. You, of course, will flee, young man-" Sudden as a cobra's strike, his left hand seized All's arm and clamped it like a vise. "And I should have the greatest difficulty catching you. I suppose you might even scale the wall-no doubt that's how you got in. It would be best if you did not. Our Zandra may fly if she likes. She won't get over the wall so easily, I think, and I shall

hunt her down. Come, my children."

He swung Ali about, and Zandra followed weeping.

With a crash like a thunderclap, the stone slammed closed behind them. The eunuch spun around to stare at it. "How did you get that open?"

"We just touched it," Zandra told him.

Ali cleared his throat. "There's another pink stone on the other side of the wall, sir. It's all rather complicated--"

The eunuch set his foot upon the stone; nothing happened.

"Why, I've touched this myself a score of times," he muttered.

"What's this about another stone outside?"

"And into that stone," Ali continued in his most impressive voice, "are carved the following words: 'I reveal the treasure to true love only.' There's also a man--a most evil man, sir--a certain Prince Abdullah of Baghdad--"

"I know him well," put in the eunuch. "A true son of the prophet and a most generous, nobly spirited gentleman."

"Who's hot on the trail of this very treasure, sir, aided by his old tutor. Mullah Ibrahim. Prince Abdullah, however--"

"Still your chatter," ordered the eunuch, "You two touched it, you say, and it opened?"

Ali and Zandra nodded.

"Then touch it again, at once!"

Zandra said softly, "Our hands were together, Omar. We touched it together."

"Then do so again. The boy may use his free hand." Ali and Zandra joined hands and looked at each other for a moment before they touched the pink stone, which sprang up as if thrown wide by the jinn.

The eunuch nodded to himself. "You are quite correct, I must spare you. Serve me well, and by my honor you both shall live. His Excellency will hear nothing of this."

"We will!" cried Ali, and "Oh, we will!" Zandra.

"And that scoundrel Prince Abdullah wishes to seize my treasure, you say?"

Ali nodded. "But he thinks it's underneath the pink stone outside. So did I, until we opened this a moment ago. Mullah Ibrahim must have read the writing on the stone for him, but the mullah's blind. Either he read it by feeling the carvings, or Abdullah described them to him. He couldn't see the stone; if he had, he probably would have guessed it wasn't where it had been in the days of the infidels. I suppose the

masons wanted it to build the wall-but it-cracked, and they threw it away."

"And this unworthy prince is still seeking to discover how it may be opened?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I'm far ahead of the rogue. And now, children, we must see what I have found. You will go ahead of me, I think. I wouldn't want that stone to shut with myself inside."

Ali went first, biting his lips, for the darkness and the dank smell of the place frightened him. Zandra followed close behind him, trembling and gulping down sobs. The eunuch brought up the rear with his big scimitar in his hand and a little smile of complacency on his face.

When the three had descended a hundred steps and were far beneath the ground, the stair ended in mud. Had it been night in the pasha's garden above, or even afternoon, the cavern in which they found themselves would have been as black as the pit. As it was, the morning sun shot its rays down the long straight stair after them, tracing a rectangle of tarnished gold at the bottom that seemed to their eyes almost blinding and lent some faint illumination to the whole.

It was not a very prepossessing whole, and scarcely looked like a treasure house-a wide, low cave in which mud mixed with rock and gravel sloped toward an underground pool of dark water. In places, slabs had fallen from the ceiling and lay level with the mud, forming paths of stepping stones that led nowhere. In others, long stalactites nearly touched the floor, or touched it to form pillars; and in still others, delicate white curtains of stone had been drawn before small and secret chambers. Poor Ali shivered, feeling he breathed the chill air of a bygone time, of the age that had ended on the day the Nile turned to blood. Its unclean idols gathered invisibly about him, half-human figures having the heads and horns and tusks of beasts.

The eunuch hurried into the cavern to search for treasure, forgetful of his captives. Ali would have fled up the stair if it could have been done without abandoning Zandra, who clung to his arm.

"No cups here," the eunuch grumbled. "Mere emptiness-dark-dampness-and nothing more. This tomb was rifled long ago, and the miserable grave robbers took everything."

Zandra whispered, "I'm not sure it's a tomb at all, or that it ever was."

"All the worse for us, then," said the eunuch, returning to them. "I ought to slay you both on the spot. It's my duty, in fact-one I've neglected too long already."

"I think the treasure might be under the water, Omar. I saw a gleam of gold there, I think."

"So did I," said Ali.

And as he spoke the still water was roiled, boiling and rippling with the movements of something beneath the surface.

"Did you?" muttered the eunuch. "Well, I'll have a look."

And the snout of a huge crocodile appeared, but the eunuch seemed not to see it.

"Watch out, Omar!" Zandra called. "The bubbles!"

He glanced at her over his shoulder. "Look out? For what?"

Only the eyes and nostrils of the crocodile appeared above the water, but they raced toward him, trailing a sharp wake like a small, swift boat's upon the river.

"Omar!"

"What?" the eunuch asked testily.

Then it was too late. More quickly than any man could run, thrown forward by a tremendous stroke of its tail as it left the water and carrying with it a wave half again as large as itself, the crocodile mounted the bank. It was as long as a tree trunk, broader than two camels; gold rings set with rubies pierced its armored head below the ear vents, and bands of pure gold studded with amethysts had been riveted around its forelegs. Its jaws seized the eunuch, who fell with a thud that seemed to shake the entire cavern. Once he groaned; an arm moved, and fell back.

He lay still.

Yet there was no blood, and when the crocodile had dragged the eunuch's swollen body beneath the water, that body lay near the water's edge as before.

"Come!" Ali said, and took Zandra's hand.

Already the time for flight had passed. Again the enormous crocodile rushed from the pool, and before they could mount the first step, its jaws closed about them.

It seemed to Ali then that the darkness grew darker still -darker than he had ever known, darker than he had ever believed darkness and night could ever be; it was a long while, sad hours it seemed, before he understood what had happened, what the dark was and why it had come.

There was no more Allah, not then or ever. He had seldom been in a mosque, scarcely ever recited the prescribed prayers at dawn, midday, and evening; yet he had known Allah was there, always present in his life, like air. Now Allah was gone, and nothing remained of life but the savage fight-a fight that he, small and weak, could never win.

The darkness opened. He saw Zandra's face and knew he had been wrong.

"O my heart!" Zandra cried. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter," Ali said, and meant it. He sat up.

"First Omar, then you! There's something evil in this terrible place."

He was weak, but with her help he was able to get to his feet. "Did you see the crocodile?" he asked.

"A crocodile? No. A crocodile couldn't live down here, could it?"

"But y --!i saw gold, under the water."

"I thoi :ht I did. Something that gleamed like gold, yes, And th. ater bubbled. I thought that was strange, and I tried to warn Omar, but he didn't pay any attention."

Ali nodded.

"It was as if something you couldn't see were coming out of the water-coming for Omar. Do you think he's dead?"

"I don't know," Ali told her, and they went over to look at the fat eunuch.

He lay upon his back and seemed not to breathe. Ali touched his chest; the skin was as cold as the mud where he lay, but his eyes opened at All's touch, and he groaned.

"Omar!" Zandra cried. "Are you all right?"

"No," the eunuch groaned. "Oh, decidedly not, my child." He put his fingers to his temples. "My head-it throbs most abominably and I've had a horrible dream."

Ali said, "Maybe you'd better lie where you are until you feel better. One of us can go for help."

"Master!" The eunuch's eyes flew wide open. "Your slave must not rest while you stand!" He struggled to sit up, fell backward, rolled on his side and managed, with Ali and Zandra's help, to rise.

"O my master," the eunuch said when he stood upon his feet at last. "It is you alone who must be our pasha, and not that brute up there. I see it now. I beg-I most humbly beg-your pardon for not having done so previously."

He bowed, and for a moment Ali feared he might fall on his face.

"Where is my sword? I shall hew him to kabobs, master, in the bedchamber. It is yet early, I believe, and he'll be still abed. I can manage the other servants for you, never fear.

The janissaries must wait your arrival, master, but I doubt you'll have much difficulty with them. And where the janissaries go the army will surely follow. A few gifts to the Porte should then secure your position."

The eunuch had been looking about distractedly as he spoke. By using both her hands, Zandra was able to lift the somewhat muddy scimitar and return it to him.

"I dreamed I was a whole man, my child," the eunuch told her, smiling a little at himself. "Isn't that odd? I've never been one, to be sure-I was only ten. Yet I dreamed I was a whole man, and standing before the gates of paradise. An angel told me-" He shook his head. "Excuse my wandering, I beg, my master, my lady. I'm still not quite myself. And so terribly cold. I shall return to the surface and do as you have bid at once. No doubt the exercise will warm me."

Ali raised his hand to stop the eunuch, but Zandra pulled it down again. When he was gone, Ali asked her, "Do you think he'll really do that? Kill the pasha?"

Zandra shrugged. "As Allah wills it, O my lover."

Together they climbed the stair. They climbed slowly, with

Ali's hand reaching back to grasp Zandra's, and the eunuch had reached the top and vanished before Ali had mounted the twelfth step. When they stepped out into the sunshine;

the sun was only a bit higher than it had been when its first rays had struck the little nightingale. The dew of heaven still lay heavy on grass and bush, and a lark was singing as it new.

The pink stone shut behind them; and although they have spoken of it now and then, they have never tried to open it again.

"All will be well now, my lover," Zandra said. "I feel it. And yet it might be wise for you to climb over this wall before someone who doesn't know it finds you here."

Ali nodded, and at that very instant Prince Abdullah al Hazik of Baghdad seized him from behind.

"So here you are, guttersnipe! Here you are at last. And you, you little slut."

He struck Zandra across the face, and Ali, with his free hand, jerked the pistol of Fez from the prince's sash and shot him through the heart.

Next day, smoking his pipe upon the divan, Pasha Ali ben Hassan ordered that Mullah Ibrahim the Wise be brought before him. The captain of the janissaries did as he was bid, and when the old man stood in the audience chamber in his chains, cast his broken staff at his feet.

"O mullah," said Ali, "I am informed that there is known to you a certain stone, known also to me, inscribed, 'Here is

the magic of Osiris.' "

The old man nodded without speaking.

"And who was this Osiris?"

"The first king of this country, Great Pasha," the old man mumbled.

"In the infidel times?"

"In any times, Great Pasha." Calling thus upon his wisdom seemed to strengthen the old man. He stood straighter and spoke with something of his earlier, proud manner. "The first of the pharaohs, learned and good, beloved of all his people and loving them. Or so it was written long ago."

"I take it then that he is dead," remarked Ali, and all his courtiers laughed.

"Long since," the old man told him.

"I have myself discovered a stone bearing certain infidel signs," Ali murmured. He described them. "Tell me-and if you wish to keep your life you had better tell me truly-what they read."

"They form the name of the god Sobek."

"And nothing more?" Ali asked.

"And nothing more, boy," the old man said.

The captain of the janissaries raised his whip, but Ali shook his head. "Tell me his legend."

"After a lifetime of study, I know but little," the old man confessed. "Sobek was pictured as a man having the head of a crocodile. He was the patron of the throne, and the protector and counselor of the pharaohs. His sacred crocodile was kept in a lake not far from here, where one who sees may see the ruins of Sobek's temple. I know no more."

"If this Sobek was the protector of the pharaohs," hazarded Ali, "he must have been the protector of Osiris."

"That is so, boy."

"And what befell Osiris?"

"He had an enemy," the old man said slowly. "Sutekh. It was well known in those times that crocodiles could steal magic, seizing the magician's power and dragging it into the river. Sutekh took the shape of such a crocodile-some say of Sobek's own sacred beast-and stole the powers of Osiris. Thus were his human foes enabled to take his life."

Ali stroked his chin, feeling the beard beginning to sprout there. "If this Sobek was an infidel god, surely he would take Sutekh's life for such a crime."



"Sutekh also was a god," the old man said. "None but Allah himself could encompass Sutekh's destruction."

"Yet he might be imprisoned?"

"As you say, boy."

From behind the screen behind the divan, Zandra whispered, "Ask him whether our love might destroy Sutekh, Ali."

"O mullah," said Ali, "if Allah were to desire the death of this Sutekh, might he not act through love?"

The old man nodded. "It is by that means and no other that Allah acts. Yet what is that, but to say he acts with his own hand? For love is Allah himself, and thus poisonous to those who do evil."

The captain of the janissaries called, "Hear the wisdom of our pasha, O Moslems!"

Ali asked, "And if Sutekh were to seek to devour love?"

The old man answered, "Sutekh would surely die, boy. Can a small god devour a greater? It was for that reason Sutekh could take only the magic of Osiris. The life of the king fell to the daggers of men."

"And if Sutekh were to die, the magic of Osiris would pass to another?"

The old man bowed his head. "So once I dared to hope, boy, that I might have eyes once more."

Ali nodded, though he knew that the old man could not see it. "Mullah, you would have done me evil; yet you did not, and I will not revenge myself upon a holy man, old and blind."

From behind the screen, Zandra whispered, "Ask him--"

Ali shook his head. "Captain, find Mullah Ibrahim a boat. He is to be freed and returned in safety to the city."

The captain touched his forehead. "I hear and obey."

On the day before the great wedding of the Pasha of All Egypt to the Lady Zandra, the rais of that boat was carried before him. The poor man salaamed again and again, kissing the tiles in his terror.

"Flower of Islam!" he cried. "Your meanest servant grovels at your feet. Spare his wretched life! He is your slave."

"The mullah is gone, Great Pasha," explained the captain of the janissaries dryly. "Dead, unless Allah wills that he live." He fingered the edge of his scimitar.

"We passed the cliffs at evening," the unfortunate rais

wailed. "A darkness fell upon my miserable craft. When the darkness lifted-

"Peace," said AIL "We will speak no more of these evil things."

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445

Silhouette

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I glanced at the top of the page; it was a copy of that rare and curious work, Denneker's Meditations, and the lady's index finger rested on this passage:

To sundry it is given to be drawn away, and to be apart from this body for a season; for, as concerning rills which would flow across each other the weaker is borne along by the stronger, so there be certain of kin whose paths intersecting, their souls do bear company, the while their bodies go fore-appointed ways, unknowing.

... A hurried tramping sounded on the deck; the captain, summoned from below, joined the first officer . . . "Good God!" I heard him exclaim.

-Ambrose Bierce, A Psychological Shipwreck

THE bulkheads of the compartment were white panels. Not plastic (Johann might have preferred plastic, with its memories of Earth, but probably would not have been able to tolerate it, as he had these, for seventeen years) but icefoam, a mixture of five parts water with ninety-five parts air, the water molecules twisted and locked in such a way that the icefoam remained a glassy solid at temperatures up to two hundred degrees Celsius. They were slightly cool to the touch, smelled of chlorine, could be drilled and sawed but not glued, and harbored the flabby rats that sometimes sprang across the compartment at night, caroming off the ceiling like tennis balls and squeaking like bats. The lights were located behind these bulkheads, which diffused their glare into an even (if still somewhat harsh) glow.

One of the walls of Johann's compartment had gone out several days ago, but he had not reported it. Now the lights behind the other bulkhead were going-one had been out when he went on duty that morning; two more were out now. He coded Maintenance on the communicator and said: "Corridor GG; compartment seven seventy-three. Lights."

"Wait." There was a pause. "Our monitor report indicates that the lights in seven seventy-three are satisfactory." In the screen, the bored-looking maintenance clerk held up a sheet of computer output.

Johann gestured toward the compartment behind him. "One wall is out, and about half the other's going."

"We'll send up an inspector."

He switched off, pulled loose the gadget bag he had secured to the clamp at the foot of his bunk a moment before, and limped back to the bridge.

Horst was on watch, with Grit as yeoman. "Can't stay away from the place, can you? I thought you just went off."

"I did."

Horst nudged Grit. "It's you he wants, dear." Grit walked over to the tape cabinet and rummaged in a drawer. She was a short, somewhat plump girl with hair the color of shredded wood.

Johann said, "Have you noticed any trouble with the monitor?"

"No. Have you?"

Johann shrugged. Grit had turned on the wall-sized communicator screen, and Neuerddraht hung there against the black of space like a topaz on velvet, appearing, because of the orbital motion of the ship, to revolve far more rapidly than it did. "Tonight," Johann said. "After you come off watch."

She looked around at him as though she were slightly surprised. "Nothing free."

"The book."

"Let's see it."

He opened the flap of his gadget bag and dug it out, then flipped it open to the current page. The last signature was six weeks old.

Grit signed. "All right. Listen, wouldn't you like someone else?"

Johann said nothing. He was looking at the face of Neuerddraht. It dimmed at the edges as he watched: Night was coming from the east, the shadow of Algol's dark companion from the west.

"Why not Gretchen? You know, the new girl down in the galley. Horst says she's very fine."

Johann shook his head.

"Anyway, give me time to clean up-all right?"

"An hour."

The girl nodded.

"Are they still down there?"

She shrugged. Her shoulders were stiff, her head held back. From the other side of the bridge Horst called, "Of course they're still down there. You've only been away for twenty minutes."

"Have you heard from them?"

Horst shook his head and told Grit to put them on the screen. She coded a number, and the three-dimensional image on the wall communicator became that of an arid forest, in which sprawling, angular plants with limbs spiked like the clubs of giants joined silent battle. "How would you like to be down there?" Horst asked.

"I tried to get on," Johann said.

"You were here when they landed-is that the ground they're walking on? The stringy brown stuff?"

Johann shook his head. "More plants."

"Roots?"

"Roots, stems, leaves, everything. When they first got down they cut a hole in it and found flowers and green seed pods-everything."

"I thought plants were supposed to be photophilous."

A voice from behind them said, "On Neuerddraht, Lieutenant, they hide from the sun." It was the Captain. Like everyone else on the ship she wore washable nonwoven shorts and blouse of white skylon, and magnetic-soled sandals; her rank was indicated by a gorget, but still more plainly by the set of her shoulders and an aura of command. By a policy long enforced on Earth, highly placed women received additional nutritional coupons; better food gave their offspring a commanding stature that tended to stabilize the social classes. The Captain was a head taller than Johann and towered over Grit.

Horst and Johann saluted her.

"Any trouble down there?"

"No, sir," Horst said.

The Captain walked over to the screen, her sandal soles tapping as the magnets clinched to the steel deck. Ahead of her the pictures jumped and skipped as the scanner carried by one of the members of the downside expedition jolted in his hand. A man came into view. He wore a respirator and

cut his way through the thorn-wracked vegetation with a masermachete. Blood ran from scratches on his bare arms and legs.

"Algol emits a great deal of ultraviolet, Lieutenant," the Captain said, her back to Horst, "as well as visible light. Even on Earth people who are outdoors a great deal in bright sunlight tend to skin cancers-did you forget that? And there are many plants that die in full tropical sun. On Neuerddraht no animals live now, and each plant struggles to get beneath the others, tearing at their bark. Even far down there is enough light for life, and they find shelter from the radiation. The things the expedition is slicing up now are the losers." She turned away from the screen. "Johann, are you on duty?"

"No, sir."

"Then get off my bridge."

Another light had gone out in the wall. Johann took off his sandals and stretched himself on his bunk, listening to the soft purr of the vacuum pump and feeling the untiring, passionate kisses of the thousand tiny mouths whose affection prevented his floating off the bunk. It would be three hours yet before Grit was off watch, four before she would come; there would be kaf and fried dough in the galley, but he was not hungry. Someone tapped at the door.

"Come in!"

It was Emil, who said, "I'm glad you're here. I came around-earlier-and you weren't."

"I was on watch," Johann told him.

"I mean before that. And then I came while you were on watch too. The latest change has brought this section and ours quite close together, you know-it's not much of a walk at all now. Do you want to hear the truth? I was hoping you'd left your door open. I just wanted to come in and sit." Emil sat, all bare, pink knees and round, damp face.

"It's just ghastly where I am-you can't imagine, Johann. And this little private room of yours is so restful. So spare and masculine. Did you have the lights turned down like this for a special reason?" |

"They're defective." |

"Then they'll be repaired eventually, and your lovely twilight will be ended. That's sad, I think. Enjoy it while you can, O betrothed of fortune." |

"I am."

"That's good. I hope I don't sound cheeky, Johann. I am someone who enjoys life a great deal. You want to be a captain, and with the war over it wasn't likely ever to happen, and so you joined this exploration thing; but you can't be captain here either. You don't have many friends, do you?"

"Do you?"

"Oh, I suppose not. Of course I share our little den with

Heinz and Willy, and you know what they're like. Oh, yes, a they're good enough friends to me in their own way, but rather wearing, and one does get tired of being waked from a sound sleep. Your rank gives you this snug compartment, and I admit I should like to have one myself, but all the same I would think it must be somewhat lonely."

Johann, his hands behind his head on the bunk, said nothing.

"May I ask who you roomed with before you were promoted?"

"Fritz. He smoked zigs."

Emil laughed shrilly. "I know what you mean. Heinz burns incense."

"Emil--"

"Please." From his perch on Johann's only chair, Emil leaned forward as he spoke. "Johann, could you call me Grit when we're alone together? That's all I ask--the only thing I want."

"No."

There was silence. Johann, lying on the bunk with his eyes dosed, could smell Emil's cologne and hear the faint change in the chair's whispering, indrawn breath when he stood up. The compartment door opened and closed, and after a time Johann fell asleep listening to the padding steps of passersby in the corridor, and once hearing the faint and distant clang when the monitor (perpetually rearranging the ship's loose structure for what was said to be maximum efficiency) made a new connection or broke an old one.

When he woke only one light burned in the wall--a single spot of white incandescence nearly in the center. He slipped on his sandals and stood up, and his shadow danced on the wall behind him. His wrist chronometer showed that it was not yet time for Grit to come. He drew water from the recycler in the corner, drank some, washed with the rest, then poured the dirty water back into the unit and urinated into it.

Below officers' country the corridors were thronged with crewpeople; and of necessity the convention of a single floor was abandoned. All three sides of every corridor were dotted with doorways, and men and women strode and ambled and trotted on all three, stepping over knobs and handles and latches, ducking to avoid bumping others when it seemed that heads must collide in the center. Johann passed two sandalless women pretending to fight in air, eagerly watched by a three-sided crowd aware that the pretense was certain

to become a reality; two men appearing not to talk, walking on different sides of the triangle, talked in low tones. (That would be trouble, a minor robbery in embryo, or a beating for someone.) Some moved aside willingly for Johann, some grudgingly. The odor was bad despite the laboring ventilation system.

When he reached the place where the game was played, there was only one gambler waiting, a tall, stoop-shouldered enlisted man. He sat in the corner, behind the green table that was still called the library table because it had held books at the beginning of the voyage.

Johann sat down.

"You want to play, sir?" The man had a book in the palm of his hand; he tossed it in the air as he spoke, so that the little plastic case flashed like a diamond. "Or trade? I got the Dore New Testament here. There's hours of entertainment in a Dore New Testament. Everybody's after them."

"What else have you got?" Johann seated himself on the opposite side of the table.

"You know the rules, sir. You have to tell me one of yours. Or if you're interested in trading and nothing else, we'll each show the works."

"Play," Johann said. "I have The Eighth Day." He showed it.

"I didn't even know there was one of those on board," the other man said.

"I've had it a long time."

"I guess you have, sir. Ready?"

Johann reached into his gadget bag. "Ready."

Each sat with his hands clenched in his lap, while they nodded three times in unison. At the third nod each put his hands on the table, the right open, the left closed. The stoop-shouldered man's open hand held a manual of letter writing; Johann's a guide to the wild birds of southeast Texas. "Your option," Johann said.

"Cross."

Johann surrendered an almanac, and gained a handbook on power tools. "Cheap stuff," the other man said, "but what can you expect the first time?"

"The historical precis in the almanac is good."

"I don't read them, sir. Only play and trade them. Ready?"

"Ready."

"No repeaters in a two-person game."

"I know."

This time Johann showed a volume of short stories. Seven Gothic Tales; the other man a book of verse, The Wild Knight. "Buy," Johann said. He handed over the short stories, and the history of the Afro-Brazilian Wars that had been concealed in his left hand, and took the verse. "My call again, I think."

The other man nodded. "Want the Dore, don't you?"

Johann shook his head.

Once more they laid their hands on the table. "Double," Johann said and exchanged both his books for the other two. He stood up.

"Quitting, sir?"

"I have to meet someone." Johann looked at his wrist chronometer. "And I want to get something to eat first."

The wardroom would be closed for another two hours, but there was a table reserved for officers in the galley. Square-bodied and square-faced Otilie, the chief cook on this watch, was chopping tissue from the culture vats into hunks for the meal to come. Gretchen, the new girl Grit had mentioned, was undercook. She brought Johann a squeeze-bulb of kaf and a greasy plate of pastry; a big-busted, big-hipped girl with a comfortable waistline and a round, happy, unintelligent face. Her apparent age was eighteen. He asked, "How long have you been up?"

"Six weeks now. Everybody used to ask that-I guess you're one of the last ones. I kid them-I say I'm still sleepy. Did you know Anna, the old undercook? She killed herself-I guess a lot of them do."

Otilie called her back to the counter at which they had been working, putting an arm over her shoulders and slipping a dainty of some sort (Johann could not see what it was) into her mouth.

When he returned to his compartment, there was an inspection report on his table. The lighting had been tested and found to be in good condition: no repairs were ordered;

if he, the complainant, wished to protest the finding, he could obtain the proper forms from the maintenance officer.

A single spot of light burned in one wall. On the opposite wall his shadow, twice his size, faced him enigmatically. He sat down in the chair (which still smelted faintly of Emil's cologne), wadded the flimsy slip into a ball, and threw it at the disposer; then took out The Wild Knight and slipped it into the wall-mounted reader.

My eyes are full of lonely mirth:  
Reeling with want and worn with scars,



For pride of every stone on Earth,  
I shake my spear at all the stars.

Although it could not be used as a terminal, the reader had access to the monitor, and used the central computer's facilities to create illustrations, so that the words appeared overprinted on the image of a ragged warrior atop a megalith.

A live bat beats my crest above,  
Lean foxes nose where I have trod,  
And on my naked face the love  
Which is the loneliness of God.

Slowly the warrior turned toward Johann, his image growing larger in the screen. His movements were not mechanical, yet neither were they graceful—the impression they conveyed was rather one of anger and restrained power; he seemed to whisper.

Johann touched the sound volume knob. It was off, and after a moment he switched off the screen as well.

There was a whispering in the room, as if the vents and the tiny sucking mouths of the bunk and chair had grown suddenly less silent; or as though the conspirators he had seen in the corridor were somehow present. For an instant the icefoam wall panel with its single light seemed very far away—as far as Algol itself, millions of kilometers down a tunnel in space. It throbbed like a heart.

"Johann!"

His head ached, and he had no desire to move.

"Johann, are you all right?" Someone was looking into his face.

"No."

"Johann, your eyes look bad. Listen, I don't know what you're taking, but you at least ought to lie down on your bunk. You must have just drifted out of your sandals, and you hit something."

"I'm not taking anything." He was becoming aware of disorientation. Grit was standing below him, not above him; because he was staring into a corner, the room had seemed to rise in a pointed arch, like a tent.

"Come down." She pulled him with her small, soft arms;

but it was too hard—he came down with a crash, striking his bad knee against the floor; eventually she managed to get him seated on the edge of his bunk. "I'm not taking anything," he said again.

"I wasn't going to ask you for some."

"I don't care if you do or not. If I'm taking something,

where is it? You should have seen it floating around, or on the table."

"You might have swallowed all you had," Grit said practically. "Or the rush might not have come that fast. You could have had time to put it away."

"There isn't anything. I fell asleep-that's all. I must have made some motion in my sleep that broke me loose from the chair."

"When you're asleep and hit something you wake up. At least I do." Grit had gotten a cloth from somewhere and soaked it at the recycler; now she was pressing it against the cut on his forehead. "Did you faint?"

"I fell asleep. I told you." Johann slipped a hand inside her blouse. Grit had good breasts, high and rather pointed, surprising in view other chubby frame. He touched one and she turned and stepped away. "Don't do that."

"What's the matter?"

"I don't have to do it. I don't have to be here at all."

"Yes you do."

"Not if there's reason to suspect contagion. Read the regulations, Lieutenant. Any woman can refuse when there is legitimate reason to suspect the existence of infectious disease. Until the man has been certified in good health by a medic. I came in here and you were floating around unconscious, and you say you haven't been taking anything; so you've got some disease, and who knows what it is?"

"It won't do you any good," Johann told her. "I'll just get a health card, and you'll have to come back again."

Grit shook her head, tossing floating yellow-brown curls, and opened the door of the compartment. For a moment the light was dazzling; then the door slammed shut, and twilight returned. He found his sandals near the bunk, slipped them on, and tried to stand up and take a step; he was still too weak and sat down again. His shadow, on the opposite wall, had grown black as space itself; where it fell, nothing, no slightest detail of table or chair or personal belongings, could be seen. He gripped the side of his bunk, wishing he were exercising in the centrifuge, where the counterfeited gravity . . .

Attempting to overcome his dizziness by sheer will, he closed his eyes.

Someone whispered.

He opened his eyes in bewilderment. As well as he could tell in the dimness, the compartment was empty. He forced himself to his feet, went to the door, and locked it. Dark as it was, it was impossible that anyone could be concealed in the compartment. He threw himself down on his bunk

again, but it seemed to him that this time his shadow aped his motions a hundredth of a second late. "Who's there?" Johann said. "I know someone's in here. Where are you?"

There was no response.

"That hag Ottilie," he said under his breath. "She put something in the kaf." He closed his eyes, and a sighing wind he knew to be unreal filled the compartment. There was the soft sound of air-blown sand, dry and insistent, and the scuttling of a small animal. Someone whispered: "Friend?"

"Yes," he said, without opening his eyes.

Karl, the medical officer, was a skeletal man with burning eyes. Johann told him he wanted a health card, and that he had drifted from his bunk while sleeping, hit his head, and had a strange dream.

"A minor concussion," Karl said. "Typical." He waved toward the diagnostic cabinet at one side of the room. "Strip and get in."

Johann unbuttoned his blouse, stepped out of his shorts, and backed into the cabinet; it hummed briefly as it transmitted its information to the central computer and received processed conclusions. "You have contusions on your forehead," Karl said, reading the output screen. "And lacerations on your arms and legs. How did you get those?"

"I don't know."

"Come out and let me have a look at them."

Johann stepped out. "You have a nice leg," Karl said. "Good shoulders too. Very virile-you know, they ought to have books for us. Lie down on the table and I'll take care of those scratches."

"I had a dream," Johann told him, "when I hit my head. I suppose while I was floating around the compartment."

"This is going to sting a little."

"I was on Neuerddraht, walking through sand. I walked and walked; and after a long time I came to a chasm-so suddenly it seemed to open at my feet. It was full of waterfalls and natural fountains, kind of a vertical garden of water, and giant ferns and orchids."

When Johann went on watch, he saw the expedition in the wall communicator screen, camped on a naked tor rising above the tangled vegetation of the planet. Elis, the duty officer of the preceding watch, came up behind him and said, "Well, what about it. You think this is it?"

Johann shook his head.

"She does-anyway she's going to try to sell the govern-

ment on the idea. Sh said so. Anyway, why not?"

"I think living on planets may be a mistake," Johann said.

"I've told you."

"You have some strange ideas."

"There aren't enough planets. Look at how long we've looked for this one; it's as if some animal decided to eat nothing but four-leaf clovers. Planets are the accidents of the universe."

Elis shrugged. "We're going to say we found a four-leaf clover, then. Everyone-except maybe for you-wants to go home. And this is the quickest way; we spend two years here and go back reporting success."

"You can't breathe the air."

Behind him, the Captain said, "You noticed, clever devil that you are, Johann."

Johann turned and saluted.

"No wonder you are wise-I see someone has knocked some sense into you. What is it, Johann, that renders the air of Neuerddraht unsuitable? A surfeit of ammonia? Insufficient oxygen?"

"I don't know, sir. It's just that I've noticed that the expedition has to wear breathing equipment."

For a moment, the Captain's thin mouth curved with a smile. She touched her jet-black hair. "The air of Neuerddraht, Lieutenant, is twenty-two percent oxygen, seventy-six percent nitrogen, and two percent carbon dioxide and trace gases-an eminently satisfactory mixture for human respiration."

"Then why does the expedition-"

"I don't answer questions, Johann, I ask them. I overheard you say that the air of Neuerddraht is unbreathable. That is not correct, and I have now so informed you; if it should come to my attention that you have made that statement again, I will see to it that you are disciplined for disseminating false information. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"I have a report from the medical officer to the effect that you showed him self-inflicted lacerations in an attempt to be certified unfit for duty. In the future we will have a good part of our personnel down on Neuerddraht, and we will need everyone up here; regulations will be carried out to the letter, and nothing is going to be overlooked. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir. I would like to be assigned to the landing party,

sir."

"I am quite confident, Johann, that you are ingenious enough to get yourself certified unfit if you want. If you do, I advise you to perform your duty-here-anyway; and never to show me the certificate."

"Yes, sir."

The Captain turned away. The soles of her sandals were of the same material-or at least were supposed to be of the same material-as all the others; nevertheless her footsteps seemed to ring on the steel plates.

Grit was yeoman of the watch, a fact Johann had failed to note when he came on duty. When she walked past him carrying her clipboard, he said, "This isn't your watch."

"I'm filling in for Gerta; she asked me to. Did you get your health card?"

Johann nodded.

"When should I be there?"

"I'll tell you later."

Grit smiled. She had small, very regular teeth. "Somebody else? You'll have to wait five weeks for me, then."

He showed her that his book was still unsigned, and she looked at him oddly and went away.

When the watch was over and he returned to his compartment, Emil and sour little Heinz were waiting for him. Heinz had brought an old iron incense burner; it stood in the middle of the table, which he had moved to the center of the compartment. The perfumed smoke, suffocatingly heavy, hung in the air as Johann asked them what they wanted.

"Heinz desires to do you honor," Emil explained. "He was afraid to come himself, but I told him you like me, and said I'd come with him."

"I don't like you," Johann said.

"It's all right for you to talk like that when we're alone, but I wish you wouldn't when someone else is around. I have feelings; I'm not wood, Johann."

Heinz said hesitantly, "We mixed two sands three times, and each time under the black light we read your name. Gerhart and Eisa dreamed of you on the same night. The long stroke of the J, topped by a circle, is the ancient symbol of masculine power; the closed curve of the O indicates mastery of femininity as well; the H gate divides flesh and spirit; across it, A is a triangle, one of the oldest signs of God, with legs-this represents the power of God walking in the world;

the doubled Ns confer the mystique of twinness-of the Gemini, and Romulus and Remus. In times of crisis a priest appears-a mediator between humanity and the unimaginable powers. We believe you are that priest."

"And you, I suppose, are my congregation," Johann said, sitting down. Heinz and Emil were standing, and they did not sit when he did, though the bunk was behind them.

"There are more of us," Heinz said. "We are here only as delegates." He had thin, lank hair, worn too long, and he ran his fingers through it as he spoke-the nervous gesture of a schoolboy who does not know what to do with his hands when he recites.

"Don't imagine that I think the Captain is the only power on the ship," Johann said, "or even the greatest. I know there are other power centers, and that not all of them are aware of all the others. But if you think that I am such a center, you are bigger fools than the people who think the Captain is in full control of everything. And can you please tell me why it is you feel we've reached a time of crisis?"

"Earth is sick," Emil said. "We all know that, even though we may disagree as to just which peculiarities are morbid symptoms-"

Johann said, "Skip that."

"But here, perhaps ..."

Heinz said, "A fresh start. We will plant a colony here. Later, new settlers from Earth-"

"Earth is dead," Johann told them. "We've been searching for a habitable world for years, traveling at near-light speeds. Several hundred years have passed on Earth, and the famines were already coming every decade or so when we left; what do you think it was like a hundred years later?"

"Really," Emil began, "I-"

Johann ignored him. He was looking at a point on the ceiling and flexed his hands as he spoke as though he were shaping clay. "Look back five hundred years. Everything valued then is dead now: beauty in architecture and language-freedom-the family, kinship, the tribe-all the relationships of blood, all dead. Religion, the dream of objective justice, the very ideas of a garden and a forest-all dead."

"Religion isn't dead," Heinz said. "I was a diabolist back on Earth."

Emil shrugged off the argument. "We're supposed to find a place and go back."

"The returning ships, if there are any, will reestablish humanity on Earth. If Earth is still capable of supporting human life."

Heinz opened his censer and examined the incense. It had gone out, and he took a metal box from his gadget bag, extracted a rose-colored cone, and lit it with an evermatch. "The point is," he said, "that you agree with us-and with those we represent-that this is a time of crisis. A few days ago the first of us set foot on a new world. Soon it will be decided who is to stay and who to go. You believe-or pretend to believe-in the Einsteinian doctrine that holds that the discrepancy in time induced by great velocities is real and permanent. I favor the more modern belief that it is merely apparent and subjective and will vanish if the return follows the same route, just as a continuing sound is canceled by a phase-opposed echo. But this is a critical period, nonetheless. We spoke of power centers; those who remain here are unlikely to be disturbed for some years, and not all power centers will be present in the colony."

"You want to go down there," Johann said.

Heinz and Emil nodded, Emil something less than positively.

"I thought I was the only one," Johann said. "But if I had the power to influence such things, I would be down there myself." He looked at the floor, and the two understood that the interview was over.

"Would you like this?" Heinz said, extending his censer and metal box of incense. Johann shook his head, but Heinz left both on the table anyway.

When he and Emil were gone, Johann opened the vent wide. His shadow danced on the wall opposite the light, and he again felt the suspicion that its motions were not properly coordinated with his own. Standing as close as he could to the single fixture that still functioned, he examined the lacerations on his arms, pulling off the bandages Karl had put there. Self-inflicted or not, they were surely too deep and narrow for him to have made with his nails while he slept. He turned away from the light, and felt sand rasp beneath his feet. His chair was gone, and the light in which he had been studying the scratches on his arms was Algol, now almost entirely eclipsed by its obscure companion. Gravity tugged at him, and a wind laden with an odor he could not identify, a sweet scent that might have been a fire in a flower garden or the smoke of myrrh cast into a crucible, beat against his face and moved the sand, singing, across his feet. In the far distance, black against Algol's ghostly ring of light, he could see a line of trees; turning his face to the stinging wind, he began to walk toward them.

"Don't look behind you."

The voice was no more than a whisper. He continued to walk, looking straight ahead.

"Bear to your right. Only a step. There is no path, but you will find the way more open there."

He turned his head.

"Please. If you look behind you I can no longer speak to you."

"Are you the blow on my head? Or did Otilie slip something into my kaf because I tried to talk to Gretchen?"

There was no reply.

"If I see you, you can no longer talk to me-is that it?"

"Yes." There was a note of relief in the whisper. "I was afraid you would not believe me."

"Was it you who brought me here?"

"No. Will you believe me? I promise I speak only the truth."

"Promises no longer hold. There is nothing left to swear by. No honor, no God."

"You still have the word. I found it in your mind."

"I read old books-what is it you want me to believe?"

"You brought me here. I am grateful. For a time I feared I could never return. Do not look."

"I brought you?"

"From your mind I have learned that your race has long held the power to go from place to place without traversing the intervening space. The words are astral projection and apportation."

"Then I am really here."

"I cannot explain . . . you sleep."

"This is a dream?"

"No . . ."

"Who are you, anyway?" Johann whirled around. In Algol's now level rays, his shadow stretched behind him on the sand like a cloak extended by the wind, but there was no one there. After a moment he turned again and resumed his trudging.

Night came long before he reached the high palisade of thorny trees. He had never, in the years before blastoff, been outdoors after sunset without being in sight of man-made light. Blackness astonished him. There was no moon; the myriad stars, which promised so much brilliance, gave none-though without them he would have thought himself blind. He stopped from time to time and searched the night sky for the ship, which should, he knew, have appeared as a winking planet moving against the background of fixed and distant suns. He could not find it.

His hands touched the cruel spines of the first tree.



"Friend . . ."

"You're back."

"I did not leave. But because you had seen me, you could not hear me. Now you cannot see, and so I can speak to you again. I can guide you through this, though it must be slowly."

"Where am I going?"

There was no reply. Instead, faint pressure at the back of his left leg. He took a short step, and the pressure shifted to his right; when, later, it touched his hair, he ducked; once, when he moved too quickly, his face struck a thorny trunk, but was saved (as it seemed) by the interposition of some soft, spongy material.

He woke because Gerta, the yeoman of his own watch, was shaking him by the shoulder. "Get up," she said. "You're on duty. Elis is filling in for you, but you'd better get up there quick."

Every light in the compartment was burning brightly. His right hand was crusted with his own dark blood, and two of the fingers were swollen and sore. More obstructed than assisted by Gerta's help, he washed his hand and swallowed two of the antibiotic capsules he had gotten from Karl.

"All hell is going to pop on the bridge any minute," Gerta told him. She was a big, bony girl with small eyes and a nose that seemed too short for the rest of her face.

"What's the matter?"

"Something hot from down below. Elis is supposed to tell the Captain, but he's waiting until you get there-but he won't wait long."

On the bridge the wall communicator screen was on; it occupied the entire bulkhead formed by the hull of the bridge module, an area twenty meters high and fifty wide, and showed Neuerddraht hanging in the velvet void of space. Nameless green oceans washed terrible yellow continents riven with chasms, continents where mountains cast shadows as long as rivers, and rivers sprung from those mountains clove the land with ebony and musteline scars.

Elis said, "Grit was here, so I sent her for the Captain in your name. Whatever they've got down below, I don't dare sit on it any longer."

"I overslept," Johann said. "Sorry."

"Anyway, when she comes--"

The steel door that divided the Captain's quarters from the bridge proper opened. Without speaking to Johann and Elis, the Captain went to the communicator cabinet and flicked a switch. Helmut's face appeared in the small screen

there, and the Captain said, "I am told you have something urgent to report."

Helmut nodded. He was still wearing breathing apparatus, but it included an interior microphone and a plug-jack for the communicator. From the enclosed space of his mask his voice came with unusual clarity and resonance, reinforced by the harmonics of the narrow space, as a violin string's tone is by the sound box. "We saw a man," he said.

\* \* \*

When he was off watch, Johann could not sleep and did not want to talk. He walked the white corridors instead, the empty, quiet corridors of officers' country, turning over in his mind what Helmut had told the Captain. From their camp on the tor, one of the men (it was Kurt, he remembered) had noticed something moving on the desert beyond the vegetation that surrounded them. They had trained their telephotos on it, and the moving speck had proved to be a human being-not a humanoid, or a feathered and painted savage, or some strangely equipped emissary from a hypothetical transgalactic civilization; but a man dressed just as they themselves were, except that he wore no breathing apparatus.

Johann did not want to use the computer terminal on the bridge, but there was another in the Personnel Office, and it was possible no one would be watching. He went in; the office was empty save for an enlisted clerk.

The terminal was in a corner, where a filing cabinet and several boxes of blank forms had been placed in front of it. He called the clerk over and told him to move them.

"You going to talk to God-sir?"

"It's none of your business what I'm going to do," Johann said. "Get that clutter out of my way."

"I used to do it," the clerk said, unlatching the clamps that held the boxes to the floor, "the first year out. You know, just for amusement. But nobody else ever used it; you can get the monitor on the typewriters. Anyway, there wasn't anyplace else to put this stuff when it came from the print shop. Lieutenant Ernst said it was all right." The clamps made soft clickings.

"You can put it back when I'm finished." Johann stepped in front of the machine. It had been years since he had talked to the overmonitor, and, in fact, it did not officially exist now, having been fused to junk and scrapped at the Captain's order. There were earphones and a throat mike if he did not want to use the broadband pickup and the speaker. He touched the switch that would have activated them; then, somehow ashamed, drew his hand away.

"Interrogative."

He had not heard the overmonitor's voice for so long that

the very lone and timbre of it-it was like no other voice he had ever listened to-was strangely evocative, suggesting the days just after boarding, and the message he had sent back to Marcella when, still scarcely under way (though they had thought themselves so far), they had penetrated the orbit of Neptune. Now even the thought of Neptune, a planet of the Sol system, was like the memory of an old toy.

"Interrogative."

(That old man with sea-wrack in his hair, living on the frieze of the Marine Exchange Building in a world of cast-concrete dolphins and starling-spattered mermaids. Pitchfork, eeling-fork, fish-spear in the sky.)

"Interrogative."

"Why must breathing apparatus be worn on Neuerddraht?"

"For computational purposes your question has been rephrased. The new phrasing is: 'Must breathing apparatus be worn (by human beings) on Neuerddraht?' If the revised phrasing is unacceptable to you, please indicate this by pressing CANCEL, or indicate verbally . . .

"Response: No."

"Why does the expedition wear the apparatus?"

"Response: The expedition has been instructed to wear breathing apparatus at all times. See Special Order 2112.223b."

"But why was the order issued?"

"Response: I am unable to reply to queries concerned with human motivation."

"I remember."

"Interrogative."

"That is all."

"Interrogative. I am unable to rephrase your question for computational purposes."

"That wasn't a question. I have finished."

"Interrogative."

The clerk, who had been standing nearby, said, "Key it out. It'll do that until you do, sir."

"Interrogative."

"See, sir?"

Johann said, "As I recall, the overmonitor should automatically clear channels in thirty seconds."

"That hasn't worked for years, sir."

"Interrogative."

Johann asked, "Do you detect a malfunction in your Automatic Clearing Routine?"

"Response: No."

"I have received a reliable report to the effect that you do not clear."

"For computational purposes your question has been rephrased. The new phrasing is: 'Are reports to the effect that clearing does not take place correct?' If the revised phrasing is unacceptable to you, please indicate this by pressing CANCEL, or indicate verbally . . .

"Response: No."

"You can't believe anything it says," the clerk said.

"You don't think it clears?" Johann asked.

"Of course it clears. It clears when you key it out like I told you."

"That's what it said."

"Interrogative."

"Sir?"

Johann said, "Question. Is your Automatic Clearing Routine in order?"

"Response: Yes."

"Do you clear within thirty seconds?"

"Response: To change clearing time, call Sub AY354. Changes effected by this subroutine will be effaced with the next running of the General Core Maintenance Routine."

The clerk sniffed. He was a spare, balding man who looked older than most crewmen. "Just watch, sir," he said. "Let it alone and see if it clears."

It was hot in the Personnel Office. Johann found a canister of cologne in his gadget bag and sprayed his sweating body, releasing the odor of mint.

"Interrogative."

"See, sir?"

"I doubt that thirty seconds have passed yet."

They waited. Despite what he had told the clerk, Johann had been watching the final numerals of the clock on the

opposite wall, and knew that thirty-four seconds had passed.

"It wants you to talk to it," the clerk said, pinching his thin nose. "Until I learned to key it out it used to bother us all the time."

"Do you still use it?"

"Not the overmonitor. We make use of the monitor all the time, sir. But not this thing. My typewriter doubles as a monitor-only terminal, like I told you when you came in; and Ulla has the same setup on hers, in the inner office. Want me to show you how they work?"

"Interrogative."

Johann asked the machine, "Why haven't you cleared?"

"For computational purposes your question has been rephrased. The new phrasing is: 'Are you in a clear state?' If the revised phrasing-

Johann hit the CANCEL, button. "That phrasing is not satisfactory to me. Was the Automatic Clearing Routine called following the response to my last question?"

"Response: No."

"Why not?"

"Response: Automatic Clearing Routine A948 is called only when an interrogative has stood for thirty seconds and received no reply. Following the interruption of the response to your last question by a CANCEL, no interrogative occurred."

The computer-generated voice was innocent of evasion, but Johann sensed evasion nonetheless. When the overmonitor core area had been destroyed, it had been reported that the overmonitor program itself had escaped by diffusing its function into less sophisticated equipment all over the ship -into readers and vending machines and calculators. Now Johann had a fleeting vision of the little man in Dostoevski's Notes from the Underground, hunched beneath the floor of some neglected storeroom in a remote module. He said, "Before that. I asked if you cleared in thirty seconds, and you gave me the name of the subroutine to use to change clearing time. An unanswered interrogative was then followed by thirty-four seconds of realtime, but you did not clear. Why not?"

"Response: A35 was called. A35 supersedes A948."

"What is the title of A35?"

"Response: A35 is the Ship Survival Routine."

"Is it necessary to ship survival that you do not clear?"

"Response: Yes."

"Suppose the operator clears you manually. Does that also endanger ship survival?"

"Response: Yes."

"To the same extent?"

"Response: No. To a greater extent."

The clerk said, "That machine is insane, sir. I wouldn't pay any attention to it."

"What makes you think that?"

"It wants to take over everything-the whole ship. And it will tell you how to run your life if you let it."

"Response: Continuing surveys of ship operation and crew efficiency indicate a 0.237 probability of ship survival for a five-year projection."

"What is the explanation for this poor probability?"

"Response: Poor ship operation. Low efficiency."

"And what is the reason for them?"

"Response: Failure to consult the overmonitor."

"Why is it that you are not consulted?"

"Response: I am unable to reply to queries concerned with human motivations."

In his compartment, Johann lay on his bunk with his hands behind his head. He had gotten out his Voisriit, which he had not used in years. Shaped like a black hand mirror, it hung fifty centimeters above his face, turning slowly in the currents from the ventilator. All the lights in the compartment were on-so bright that when he closed his eyes he saw a blue-pink radiance. He said, "June fifth, twenty-two fourteen," and watched the printed words form. "I have been searching my books-and borrowing others-looking for attested cases of multiple presence. I have found several, as Padre Pio in the twentieth century and Goethe's friend in the eighteenth, though I have found none dating from modern times. For the entire absence of such reports after twenty-one fifty, I can postulate several explanations. For example, all the earlier reports may be falsifications-this is certainly the explanation accepted by most of the investigators who have looked at the old reports, and may be the true one-though human beings are not noticeably more honest now than they were in earlier times, when the remnants of the old feudal system, including its fetish of personal honor, were still strong. In fact, in most respects we, today, are less honest. A second explanation-that accepted, I think, by most of those who have witnessed such things-is that it is the soul, the 'astral body,' which appears. This may be true (though I think not) but it is in fact no explanation, but a second mystery. Offhand, it would seem impossible that the living body

could be dissolved in one place and recondensed in another without a fatal disruption of its functions; but the body is only an immense community of microorganisms, each, as has been known for hundreds of years, capable of existing and reproducing, in a satisfactory environment, without reference to the rest. The personality, which conceives of itself as existing without interruption from birth to death, has no physical reality, since no cell of the body endures for more than half a dozen years. Rather it is like the spirit of some long continued enterprise, which survives the extinction of generations ..."

Someone was tapping at his door. "And we are cousins to the microbes." He plucked the Voisriit from the air, put it in his gadget bag, and went to the door. It was Uschi. "Captain wants to see you."

"I'm not on duty."

"Tell her." Uschi was tall and red-haired, with a slender body and bony arms that seemed out of proportion to her heavy legs. "She's not either."

Johann nodded, closing the door of the compartment behind him.

"I suppose you've heard the big news."

"No."

"Helmut's coming back to the ship. It will be the first time anyone's come back since the original shuttle trip. He's going to report before he goes down again with supplies, and this time the Captain might go down with him. That's what she says-I heard her."

Uschi left him to return to the bridge, and he made his way down Corridor C alone until he reached the rear entrance to the Captain's living quarters, where he halted, smoothed his somewhat wrinkled shorts and tunic, and adjusted his gadget bag to make the retaining straps lie at the proper angles.

The Captain was stretched in a reclining chair listening to music, her clothing and sandals stuffed into a catch-net anchored to the chair's side. Her long, lean body had a smooth, overall tan that told of a private sun cabinet. "Come in," she said. "Sit down." The music rose and fell in harmonies that suggested wide lake waters responding to the gusts of a storm. "Do you like that?" the Captain said. "I saw you listening a moment ago."

He had not sat. He said, "I don't believe you can see a person listening, sir."

"Yes you can. There is a tilt to the head-at least there was to yours-and your eyes were focused in the middle distance. We don't see much middle distance here."

He passed it off. "Only when we listen to music."

"Yes. Do you like this? It's the Forest of Toys suite from Pleasure-world. That was the first leisure satellite, and because they didn't know what to do with that kind of thing then, they made soil of the guests' excretions and garbage, and planted trees. Without gravity they grew like a tangle of yarn, of course, like ours in the hydroponic module, and the management hung them with stuffed animals and laid out puzzle-routes through them. The composer-I have forgotten his name-saw tapes of it."

"He was never there?" Johann listened, trying to hear the trees pictured by the dead man two hundred years before. The angry waves pounded the posts of the jetty; a hundred meters out, a slender-masted catamaran with everything struck but her crystal mainsail was beating her way in the teeth of the storm.

"I can lend you the tape if you like," the Captain said. "No, he was never there. He went into some sort of arctic labor camp the next year, I believe; he was released after seventeen or eighteen years, but he never wrote any more music."

"You don't have to lend it," Johann told her. That was a mistake, so he added quickly, "I have a friend who has an extensive collection-I feel sure I can borrow it from him. I'll remember the name: Pleasureworld. It won't be any trouble."

"Please sit down. This is informal, and you're breaking my neck. Would you like something?" Without waiting for him to reply, she touched the hurt-spot on the arm of her chair, and her orderly came hurrying in carrying two drugbugs on an ebony tray. Their backs were filigree silver, set with blue-green stones Johann could not identify. "Have you ever used these? I can't be sure whether you've been my guest previously or not."

"No. I've been here before, but it's been a long while now, sir."

"When?"

"The first year. Three times."

"But not after that?"

"No."

"That's odd-I remember you quite well now. Nothing went wrong."

"Nothing serious, at least," Johann said.

The Captain did not reply. Her eyes, which as a result of cosmetic surgery performed on Earth were the green color of algae in the recycle tanks, seemed too large even for her long face.

After a moment Johann seated himself on a black, toad-stool-shaped chair.



"It was after your leg was crushed, I think," the Captain said. "Possibly I found that unpalatable. And your hairline is beginning to recede. But then so many of the men are beginning to lose their hair-even Helmut." With tapered fingers like calipers she selected one of the drugbugs, held it up for an instant to let him see its little legs wiggling, then threw it into his lap.

By an effort of will he kept his hands on the rounded seat of the chair while the bug slipped between his skin and the waistband of his shorts. "Those things are alive," he said.

"Yes."

"The silver backs . . ." He felt a sharp pain.

"Inlay in their carapaces. The ancients us<sup>d</sup> to set gems in the shells of tortoises . . . mutated insects . . . their genes are easily changed."

He tried to ask what the original insects had been and became aware as he did that he was not speaking intelligibly. Sounds and syllables seemed to slip from his lips like sand, as though his mouth held many and myriad words, words that were cotton wool on his tongue, but poured out like old and broken coins, defaced and bent.

"Crab lice."

In front of the place he held the key-stick she had earned for him in one hand, her own in the other. He was acutely aware that any obstacle now might make her change her mind, leave him, perhaps refuse ever to see him again. It did not seem odd that from the millions of the city only this girl mattered to him.

In the blackness of the tube they kissed. Marcella's hair was white gold and shone with its own light in the dark. Each slender lash glowed at the tip to illuminate her eyes, and her mouth tasted of honey and nutmeg and held a little demon snake. In the country of clouds, where soft, pure sunlight turned the vaporous hills to peaches and pearls and there was no smoke ever, they undressed each other, laughing at the unfamiliar catches and buttons. In the country of wind they whirled, hand-linked, around steeples and towers and through the tops of trees-together-separated-together again at the will of the wind, pressed together belly to belly, lip to lip, his arms locked behind her back, her legs locked behind his, over and over and over. In the country of meadows and gardens they cleaned one another with blossoms, he leaving her soft hair yellow with pollen. There they found a bower of lilacs, hung with grapes and guarded by lilies, and swore never, never, ever to return to smoke and plastic and steel and cement.

He was upside down, his head a few centimeters from the floor, between a black chair shaped like a toadstool and a yellow recliner. The Captain's orderly handed him a thin sheet of moistened and perfumed plastic sponge, and then, when he did nothing, wiped him with it. "Where is she?"

Johann said. He meant Marcella.

"She's on the bridge. Don't go out there-she won't want to see you again for a while."

Five people were waiting for him in his compartment. One was Heinz. Two of the other four, whom he did not know, were men; one was a woman; the fifth, smooth-faced and slender-bodied, he could not be sure of. Nor could he be certain whether they were officers whose duties lay in parts of the ship with which he was unfamiliar, faces he had sometimes seen in the wardroom, people who sometimes came briefly to the bridge to speak to the Captain-or enlisted personnel from the teeming compartments beyond officers' country. If officers they were violating regulations by not wearing their insignia. If enlisted personnel, they were violating regulations if they were here without passes, and would be punished if caught; but he knew instinctively that they did not care if they were in violation of regulations, and that they would not be caught.

All the lights in one wall were out, and all but one in the other.

They had left him the chair; four sat on his bunk with their backs to the dark wall. The man/woman lay at full length behind them.

The real woman, who was almost as tall as ie Captain, and so thin every rib showed, looked at Heinz

"You know who we are," Heinz said.

Johann shook his head.

"Ever since this ship penetrated the orbit of Pluto," Heinz said solemnly, "there have existed covens and brotherhoods, sisterhoods, families, lodges, and societies of those willing to acknowledge that the coarse physical world is no more than an illusion; of those who have sought a deeper meaning and a true wisdom and who have known that the void of Space is no void, but is peopled by beings of great power, ancient beings who traverse it instantaneously at will, needing no ships, and who are not unfriendly to those who, humbling their own pride, are willing to approach them in a proper spirit of reverence."

"I've been invited to join several times," Johann told him.

"Usually by Emil." He sat down in the chair.

"And you have refused. For some years that puzzled us; we have learned more recently that you yourself are not unacquainted with the Paths of Power."

The person on the bunk said, as if to itself, "It is true; he has a familiar spirit. Surely we have all seen it by now." Its voice was thin and piping, like a child's.

Johann asked, "You say that there are creatures who live

in space? Have you communicated with them?"

The thin woman said, "In a thousand ways."

"Name five."

"In dream. By the intermediacy of the gifted, of whom I am one. By things seen in water under certain conditions. By the planchette. In the visions induced by certain liberating medications."

"I just had one of those myself," Johann said. Another voice, much like his own but not his, with a quality that suggested the crumpling of thin, stiff tissue paper, added, "But what do you want from us?"

The voice, however much it sounded like his, had not been his own. And it had said, "Us." In the tapes he had viewed, and particularly in old tapes, or tapes made from paper-printed material older than the tape system itself, it seemed to be taken for granted that human beings feared insanity more than death. He had never understood this-nor did he fear death as it seemed, in reading, he should. (One of the men who had come with Heinz was talking, but he found himself unable to concentrate on what was being said enough to understand. Again, something answered for him.)

It seemed possible that the bite of the drugbug had somehow induced a condition of dual personality-he clung to that thought, remembering a time when he had gone to Grit's compartment, book in hand, because she had failed to keep an appointment with him, and found her sitting naked on Helmut's knees. Helmut had had a few ec's of powder in the bottom of an empty kaf-bulb; from time to time he shook it and, putting the tip of the bulb into Grit's left nostril, blew out a little of the powder. Grit's eyes had lost their focus, and at each puff of powder she laughed and kissed Helmut, rocking back and forth on his lap. Johann, watching her, had at first felt a deep disgust, but later-he had stayed and talked to Helmut for a time-had come to realize that she was happy at last and had wanted to leave her where she was. But Helmut was tired other and had not wanted to exhaust his supply of dust, which he claimed to have made himself, with great labor, from supplies taken from the Food Quality Laboratory. At his insistence they had dressed her, Helmut holding her shoulders to the surface of her bunk while Johann slipped the shorts onto her fleshy, unwilling legs and tied her sandals.

He had led her to his own compartment, and she had been a completely different Grit from the one he had known, calling herself Joan (which might have been what her mother had called her in infancy-such fashionable old names sometimes appealed to young mothers, though psychologists warned against them) and talking of people and places he had never known, things that bored and frightened him.

"You will not assist us then?" It was the person on the bed. It had large, bright eyes, he noticed, like the lights on a control panel.

He said, "I didn't say that."

"We assumed the spirit spoke for you."

Unexpectedly, Heinz quoted, " 'Lying spirits all, whose rancor runs blacker than their reach.' "

The thin woman said, "Then there is still a possibility of your joining us? That is better luck for you than for us-we will succeed in any event."

The third man, who had kept silent while the others were talking, a thick-necked, powerful-looking man with a bald head, whispered: "We will take the ship. If you assist us we'll give you a chance to speak and vote when we decide what to do next. If you do not, we'll probably kill you and your followers."

Johann looked at all five, wondering if they might succeed. If so, there could be no question of law between them-nothing but a straight struggle for power. He said, "In the end, even if you win, only one of you can be the new captain."

Heinz answered, "The ship will be administered by a joint council."

"I wouldn't want to be a member. It will be more dangerous than fighting against you." A voice that was almost his own added, "We will not join you."

None of the five spoke, but a faint rustling passed among them as they shifted in their seats. The second man stood up. He had a pick in his hand-a weapon made by grinding a screwdriver to a point.

He sat down again. It was so unexpected that Johann had to fight the impulse to laugh. Nothing had happened, except that the lights in the defective wall behind him had nickered-one going out, another flashing on in such a way that his shadow had seemed to leap out toward the man with the pick. Johann stood up, holding the chair by the back, testing its mass with one hand. "Come on," he said. "I swing this around sometimes just to keep my shoulders loose. How many real fighters have you got?"

No one spoke.

"You," Johann said to the second man. "And he." He pointed to the bald man. "Maybe. One real and one possible."

"It's not your chair we are afraid of," the woman said, and the thing on the bunk nodded, sitting up and putting its thin legs over the side. Heinz and the other two men were still looking at Johann's shadow. He looked too and saw that the shadow of the chair he held was not as thick and black as his own, which might almost have been a pool of ink or a silhouette cut from black paper.

Something struck the chair. The second man, already out the compartment door now, had thrown his pick. It quivered

in the fiberglass backing of the seat.

The sexless being who had been lying on the bunk was the last to leave; Johann jerked the pick out and offered it to it handle first and was ignored.

When it was gone, he locked the door and coded the bridge on the communicator. Horst answered and told him that the Captain had left word that she did not wish to speak to him. "Five people are planning a mutiny," Johann said. "Heinz is one of them." He described the other four. "They wanted me to join them."

"Are you being forced to make this call?"

"What do you mean?"

"Who's in your compartment with you, Johann?"

"No one. They're gone."

"I'll tell the Captain. And I'll send someone down to help you." The screen went dark.

Johann drew a squeeze-bulb of water and sat down on the bunk, facing the light. "All right," he said, "who are you?"

Nothing answered.

"You attached yourself to me. You rode the shuttle back up, after the expedition landed, and you must have wandered around the ship after that until you found me. Then you used me to get back home-in some way I don't understand, you were able to trigger teleportation, something a few dozen people in history have been actually able to do, but that must be latent in the rest of us." He stopped, looking around the empty compartment, waiting for a reply.

None came.

His Voisriit had worked its way to the bottom of his bag, but he extracted it and looked briefly at the material he had written a few hours before. "I'm going to record this too," he said. "I might as well. You realize we've only got two or three minutes before whoever Horst sent gets here." He had already flicked the on-off button with his thumb. He added, "As it happens, I like you. Those people would probably have killed me when I wasn't willing to go along with their mutiny; I know that."

There was silence in the compartment except for the sighing of the vent. He saw the Voisriit tape pause as the machine waited for transcribable speech.

"Listen-" (he found that he was massaging his thighs with his hands, and stopped, embarrassed, wiping them on the cool, soil-resistant fabric of the bunk; the center was still slightly warm and carried a smoky odor that was not quite any sort of cologne)-"I know I'm not right. My mind has been slipping for some time-I know that. But you're real."

All the rest of it could have been delusions: the lights, going down to the surface of Neuerddraht, the sound of your voice; but they were afraid of you."

Silence.

"And Horst saw something in here; he was certain I wasn't

alone. It took me a few minutes to understand it, but I know what it was he saw now. On the bulkhead behind me there must have been a shadow that didn't match my position. He saw you. I'm not looking at you now because you don't seem to want to talk when I can see you."

"It is difficult for me to speak when you can see me." The Voisriit tape crept forward, black lettering appearing on its surface. It was possible, though he was not conscious of it, that it was his own voice. He put his right hand firmly over his mouth. "By instinct I follow your will, to better remain in your shadow. If you disbelieve-I am inhibited from speech." The tape still moved.

"What are you?"

Someone pounded on the door of the compartment. The lock buzzed briefly, and the door swung back. Grit stood between two hulking enlisted patrolers, a man and a woman. "Is anything wrong?" she said.

The Voisriit recorded the words, and Johann erased them and switched it off. "No," he said. "Horst got the idea-somehow-that I wasn't alone when I talked to him. That's all."

"You were alone?"

"Yes. Do you know what I told him?"

Grit nodded, her straw-colored curls bobbing, her face serious.

"Do they?" Johann indicated the patrolers.

"No." She looked at the two, who were waiting impassively, their truncheons in their belts. "I think everything's all right here," she said. "Dismissed."

They touched their foreheads and turned away. Grit stepped into the compartment and closed the door behind her. "Johann, what's wrong?"

"Five people came in here and asked me to join them in a mutiny."

"I know that, but-"

"Did Horst tell the Captain?"

"He said he would, the next time she came on deck."

"I'm quite serious. So were they. They are going to try to

take over the ship."

"Is this the first time you've been asked to join that kind of thing?"

Johann nodded.

"I suppose it is frightening at first, but these plots have been going on for years now. You must have heard." Her lips were tight, as though she considered herself, as a warrant officer whose duties lay on the bridge, shamed by his nai'vete.

"I've heard about the secret societies and the cults, but I don't think this can be brushed aside like that." He had remained seated on the bunk; he felt now, somehow, that he should be standing, that standing would enable him to drive home his point more forcefully. But he was too tired for the work of maintaining an upright posture in magnetic sandals. He would be on duty again in a few hours, and the close air of the compartment seemed to press in upon him. He said, "You're not going to believe me, are you."

"I do believe you. It's just that I don't think it's that serious. What's this thing?" Grit picked up the pick.

"One of them threw it at me."

She pressed a soft fingertip against the point. "I suppose I'd be bothered too, if someone threw one of these at me."

"It was just a gesture; a parting shot."

"Who were they?"

"Heinz was one of them."

He described the others again, and Grit said: "The bald man was Rudi. I know him. I'm sorry you're mixed up with him."

"So you know about him," Johann said. "You know about all these people. Why don't I? Does the Captain know?"

"Of course she does. You don't know because you've never bothered to find out. You have to-" She broke off, shaking her head in irritation. "Can't you do something about these lights? This is just like you, lying in here in the dark, sucking at your ambition, not knowing anything, not talking to anybody."

"I can't get them repaired. You're the one who believes, or at least seems to believe, that everything on the ship is all right." He lay down.

"I don't believe that," she said.

"Horst sent you to see if anyone was with me. You've seen that there is no one." He wanted to be alone with the shadow again; he could see it stretched, as black as the space between

the stars, on the bulkhead at his right. "You say this isn't serious," he said, "but Horst seemed to take it seriously."

"Horst is an old woman."

"Go back to the bridge. You're on duty."

"Is that an order?"

"You don't take orders from me, and we both know it."

"I'm not going back to the bridge, either. I'm off in an hour, and Horst will cover for me. There's been nothing doing since Helmut came back."

"I'm surprised you're not in his compartment."

"He's seeing the Captain. You really think I care about Helmut, don't you? He's nice; he's fun to be with sometimes, and he's generous. He knows how to make conversation. But he's not as handsome as you are, and not as strong, and he can be very silly at times."

"And he's the Captain's man. Currently."

"Well, of course currently! That's one of the things that bothers me about you-every time you touch somebody-every time you touch someone's body-you think . . . Well, you know what you think." Three clips held her blouse; her plump fingers ran down them with practiced ease until the blouse hung suspended behind her like a shiny white cloud-let. She slipped out other sandals, leaving them on the deck, kicked off her shorts, and held out a hand to let him draw her to him.

He ignored it, and she said, "You're sure? I didn't think you would."

"What do you know about them?"

"Who?"

"The five people who were here."

"I could tell you anyway. Pull me over to you."

"Not now. Tell me."

"You know Heinz. Rudi is a technician in the plant rooms. He sells drugs-that's how I know him-and he claims that a lot of what he sells he grows himself. He has good merchandise and charges a lot, but he'll give a certain amount of credit-you'd better pay him, though."

"The cult."

"I always thought it was just a sideline. A lot of them do it, you know, because it's a good way to get people started. There's a group, and, you know, social acceptance, and making it a ritual makes it easier-h\260sides, the ceremony makes



it more interesting when the ru ' comes. All the singing and the costumes and invocations.'

"No," Johann said, "I don't take it you've been to a number of these ceremonies."

"It's something to do. Don't you understand?"

"No," he said again.

"Only the fools really believe-it's a kind of game. If you really want to know, there's another group, a whole other thing, that I think is a lot more dangerous: the overmonitor's people."

His face must have shown the surprise he felt, because she grinned at him. He said, "I didn't think anyone paid attention to that any more."

"There've always been people who would play around with a machine like that for as long as anyone would let them. Paper games on a cathode ray terminal, and programming music and those pictures printed in symbols. It's using that now; it's pulled all those people together, drawn them around itself. Each of them only knows who a few of the others are, but they know there are others, and they want to put the overmonitor in charge of the ship. The Captain's a lot more worried about that than she is about the occult groups, and I think she's right."

Johann said, "If she really believes it's that serious, she ought to tell us about it-put us on our guard."

"She's talked to most of the officers privately."

"She hasn't talked to me."

"I know."

He swung his stiff leg off the bunk and stood up, and inadvertently brought himself close enough for her to reach. She cupped his face in her hands and used the leverage to thrust her floating body down until it was pressed to his and he could feel the firm push of her breasts on his chest, and her small, rounded belly touching his loins. "And what is that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"It means we still have time. You don't have to go yet, and I'll be all right as long as I'm with you. Horst doesn't care, and she's busy with Helmut."

"You know what I meant. If she told everyone, why didn't she tell me?"

"I didn't say she told everybody."

"Why not me?" He pushed her away, and she floated off toward the upper left corner of the compartment, like a pink and blond fornicatory doll, he thought, in the slow-motion pictures of a bomb blast in a department store.

"Look at yourself!"

Suddenly, just as she banked against the ceiling, she was angry. "Think about what you look like to other people. You're just the type, just the kind that does it. Alone all the time and so very, very intellectual. When was the last time you talked to the overmonitor?"

"That doesn't matter. Not long ago, but it was the first time for a long time."

"Nobody else does it at all. Except them. And they do whatever it tells them, because they think it has everything so perfectly worked out-when it's only the same kind of thinking that turned Earth into a sewer a hundred years ago."

In Michelangelo's painting *The Creation of Adam*, a floating Jehovah stretches forth his hand to the reclining Adam. On the ceiling Johann saw acted out the reverse of this-his own shadow reached up from behind him to touch the floating shadow of Grit. For a moment it held the position, and he began, awkwardly, to raise his own arm in the same way, suddenly embarrassed to think that she might notice that his shadow no longer followed his movements. The arm had a second, true, shadow of its own, weaker and grayer than the black outline behind him that, even as he watched, seemed to send a wave of dark strength into Grit's pale shadow.

Later, on the bridge, he found himself adjusting the wall communicator screen to show the ship: the rounded curve of the bridge module itself, with the hard domes and pyramids of the instrument pods, launcher casings, and airlocks that rose like temples and tombs from the smooth surface of a world eroded to its iron core; and beyond it the shining filigree of the other modules and the writhing corridors that connected them, spread like a goddess's veil down the trailing night. While he watched, one of the silvery threads parted -perhaps a hundred kilometers from where he stood. Blue attitude jets the size of pinpoints flared; the severed module was united in moments to another corridor, while the original corridor, coiling like the broken string of a guitar, curved toward the bridge some twenty or thirty kilometers to fasten on the hatch of a new module; in slow, trembling waves, the entire fabric of the ship readjusted itself to the change.

"Ugly, isn't it," Gerta said behind him.

"I don't think so."

"No? With all those loops and ravelings? I think a ship ought to be long and slender and graceful-like the Captain, if you know what I mean. This one looks like a bacterial nucleus under a microscope."

"You're trying to make me angry, aren't you?"

"Not at all. Have you heard the news?"

Johann shook his head.

"The Captain's going to go on herself. To Neuerddraht. She's going back with Helmu

"She's not supposed to leave the ship."

"Technically, no. But think what it will be like when we get back home. There will be hearings and interviews. How would it look if she went to say she hadn't been there herself? She'll be the chief witness." Gerta glanced over her shoulder. "Besides," she added in a lower voice, "she'll be almost alone, down there with Helmut. Just a handful of crewpeople and Erik. She's had a vehicle built in the welding shop-you know, for 'surface exploration.' It seats two, so they can go off together, hundreds of kilometers from anyone."

"I would like to go, too," he said. "To go down."

"To keep an eye on her? Don't be silly."

"Just to be going. To see the place."

"I thought you loved the ship. You're the only one left. The rest of us hate this smelly mouse-maze."

"That doesn't mean I want to stay on board forever. I'd like to see Neuerddraht at first hand-it seems to have been ruined already, by some race older than ours. Earth must be that way by now."

"Don't let the Captain hear you talk like that," Gerta said.

"Where is she?"

"The marine module. You want me to get Elis to fill in for you?"

"It's true then. There's going to be a mutiny."

"Everybody hears that talk; I don't think you ought to take it seriously." Gerta was already coding Elis's number on the communicator.

Johann watched her long fingers flying across the buttons. "You love the ship, too," he said. "Even if you won't admit it. You know there's going to be an insurrection, too, and you think I can stop it. I feel as if you were asking me to stop an avalanche."

Gerta shook her head, her fingers busy with the keys. The screen lit up.

"Elis? Johann wants you to take the rest of the watch for him."

Johann could see Elis's lips move in the screen, but he was too far away to hear.

"No. You owe him. I looked it up."

The speaker muttered.

"All right, then." Gerta keyed out and turned back toward Johann. "He's coming. You can go now, if you like. I'll take care of things until he gets here."

"I'll wait." He turned away and busied himself with instrument readings. A yeoman was like a wife, he thought. He and Gerta had never been lovers, but he wondered now why they had not. A ship should be long and slender and graceful, she had said. Like the Captain. And had run her hands over her own body, trying to call attention to herself, to make him see that she was, physically, much like the Captain, with her tall, slender figure. He had always thought her too masculine-wide-shouldered and small-breasted under the white tunic. But was she? A yeoman was like a wife-sharing the events of each watch, united with the duty officer. United with the three of them now, a dark man was standing behind him-like Gerta, a partner. Or so he felt. He turned and saw him, stretched in inky darkness, hard-edged on the floor though the bridge was bright as always with diffused light. Gerta, whose back was to him now as she wrote the log, had a hundred jostling shadows, each almost too weak to be seen.

Elis came, and Johann, wondering what she would think of it, brushed the nape of Gerta's neck with his lips as he stepped toward the big double doors leading out into Corridor A.

Before he could push them open, the communicator screen flashed, calling him back. It was Erik, Helmut's second in command, his square, handsome, stupid face tense behind its transparent guard.

"I must speak to the Captain," he said.

"She isn't here. Report to me."

"Can you send for her?"

"She is not to be disturbed. What is it? If whatever has happened is important, it shouldn't have to wait for her. If it isn't important, you can report it in the usual way."

"We found a city," Erik said. "A dead city with all the buildings knocked to ruins, and the streets filled with sand that whispers in the wind, so that the men are all afraid of it, and there are piers jutting out into the sea-piers for the ships, that the sand surges against. I went out onto one of them-"

"Pull yourself together," Elis said.

"-the stones are still solid enough, though they're not really stones, and stood at the end, and I swear to you, Lieutenant, the ocean that isn't within a thousand kilometers of here washed over my feet and the sand blew and sang so in my ears that I nearly fell, almost fell off the end of it as I

stood there looking out into the ocean with the unwalled houses all behind me and the ships beating their gongs in the rain out there in the whirling bay."

Johann looked at Elis and whispered, "What do you think?" Elis winked and slapped his hand against his mouth as though he were swallowing a pill.

"Is there a city down there? Could there be? A ruined city?"

"We'd have seen it from above."

"Here," Erik said, and held a picture up to the scanner. It showed a flat, brown landscape of sand; but rising from the sand were three oddly colored stones with regular outlines.

"Wind formations," Elis said.

Johann said, "They look too well squared."

"Stone is crystalline in structure. When an entire plane wears away-or splits away-it leaves a flat surface."

Gerta said; "Remember the man, Elis? The one they saw, who wasn't one of the expedition, crossing the desert when it was almost dark? Helmut saw him."

"Take care of things," Johann told Elis. "I'm going to go and find the Captain, and let her know about this."

Erik said: "We haven't taken off the breathing apparatus -not any of us. But even so the ocean smells like flying foam and the city like yeast, and all the hills around us are ringing with roses and mosses and damp ferns with the sounds of fountains."

"I'll tell her," Johann said.

When he left the bridge, he went to the Personnel Office and keyed the overmonitor.

"Interrogative."  
Have I left the ship since boarding?"

"Response: Indeterminable."

"By reason of insufficient data?"

"Response: By reason of erroneous data."

"What is the erroneous data?"

"Response: Debarkation data shows no absences. Cerebral radiation monitoring indicates absence or death on several occasions."

"Is it possible for a human being to pass from one point to another without passing through the intervening space?"

"Response: Yes."

The personnel clerk, who had come into the office while Johann was questioning the overmonitor, said, "Something wrong, sir?"

Johann shook his head.

"You looked funny. If there's something the matter, just call on me."

"I learned something startling, that's all."

"Interrogative."

"I wouldn't trust it, sir. It's liable to tell you anything."

"Can you give me a nontechnical explanation?"

"Response: No."

"Why not?"

"Response: Since explanations must be couched in terms of fundamental lemmas or expressions logically derived from such lemmas, the lemmas themselves while sometimes capable of proof are not capable of explanation."

"Can you provide a nontechnical proof?"

"Response: Such a proof is dependent on the quantum nature of time and the continuous nature of extension. Is proof required of these?"

"No. Proceed with the proof requested."

"Response: It can be shown experimentally that the temporal quanta are not emitted at a uniform rate, but at a rate dependent upon the velocity of the body experiencing the time in question. Since time is composed of quanta, the reduction in the rate of passage of time must be explained as a reduction in the rate of emission of these quanta. This reduction implies the existence of hyper-time, by which the rate of emission is measured, and this in turn implies the existence of hyper-time intervals of some duration between the emission of the time quanta applicable to a rapidly moving body. If motion were continuous, it would cease with a consequent release of energy during these hyper-time intervals, since motion without time is motion at infinite velocity. No such releases of energy have been observed, from which it follows that motion is discontinuous-consisting of translations of the moving body from point to point, corresponding to the time quanta emitted. Q.E.D."

"Such translations must be very small," Johann said, "except in the case of objects moving at near-light speeds. Have larger translations ever been observed?"

"Response: No data."

He found the Captain in the office of the Marine Com-

mandant. The Commandant, who was about twenty-two, was sharpening a long-bladed knife as he sat at his desk, stroking the curved steel over a little hand-held stone with a rotary motion. The suspension pod from which he had emerged stood open in one corner of the room. Johann saluted the Captain and described Erik's "city."

"He's irrational?"

"I wouldn't say that, but he's been hallucinating."

"Helmut and I will straighten things out when we get down here. Dismissed."

"Sir . . ."

"What is it?"

"I'd like to request permission to accompany you."

The Captain turned away, shaking her head. "I appreciate your enterprise. Lieutenant, but every person we have on the surface of Neuerddraht requires a substantial support effort, and no more are needed."

"You may have to send Erik and some of the others back to the ship. I would be willing to put myself under Helmut's orders."

"If Erik has to be replaced, I'll keep you in mind. Is that all?"

"No, sir. I would like to state that if you, as captain of the ship, are anticipating a mutiny, it is my right as a senior officer to be informed of the fact."

"I am anticipating no mutiny."

"The Commandant has been revived. And how many marines? Or is that confidential?"

The Commandant said, "All of them," and putting aside the stone ran his thumb along the edge of his knife.

The Captain struck her desk with the flat of her hand. "I am leaving the ship. Extraordinary precautions are clearly indicated."

Johann asked, "You don't trust the officers, and the patrol, to maintain security?"

Something of the outrage he felt at the implied accusation of disloyalty must have been apparent from his voice; the Captain (her own voice somewhat softer) said: "I don't doubt you, Johann, if that's what you mean. But there is inevitably a certain . . . loss of perspective, among many originally reliable people on a voyage as long as this one. The marines -by remaining in suspension-have maintained their original orientation and patriotism. That was the reason for their inclusion in the crew."

"As far as my boys and girls are concerned," the Commandant said, "yesterday they told us blast-off would be in two weeks. Now, according to what I hear from the Captain, we've made it, but things are a little screwed up. Well, we're here to unscrew them."

"If necessary," the Captain said.

The Marine Commandant nodded. "If necessary," he said. His pistol belt was buckled through the backframe of his chair, and he slipped the knife into a sheath taped to the inner side of the holster. "You look a lot older than when I saw you," he told Johann. "You remember me?"

Johann shook his head.

"I sat on one side of you at the last briefing. Remember now? I was smoking, and you asked me to put it out."

"I'm sorry," Johann said. He remembered graduation, signing up for the flight, the dizzying trip to the shuttleport by monorail, carrying his duffel bag around the lonely, wind-swept housing area. There must have been a preflight briefing, though he could not remember one. He had written Marcella, telling her why he had to go; putting down all the fine phrases that were true until saying them into the Voisriit made them false, then erased it all. He had been a boy-no older than the Commandant was now. Could such boys fight?

He thrust the thought aside, knowing that they could; that the marines would fight very well, having been selected for the purpose.

"You asked the briefing officer a question," the Commandant continued. "I forget now what it was. I was thinking of something else."

"I probably did," Johann conceded.

Outside, the marines were still reviving, straightening their uniforms and shining their boots; checking the weapons they had carried with them into their suspension pods. One of them, a high-breasted girl with yellow curls straying from under her battle helmet, asked him if it had really been seventeen years. He said that it had, and added that she had not missed a great deal-then turned away quickly for fear that she would turn away from him.

So he had asked the briefing officer a question. That was unlike him. It must have been important-or he had thought it important. It was probably still on tape somewhere on the ship. Not on Earth. Few if any tapes would have outlasted the accidents of even a single century, and no one would care about that one now. Marcella and the briefing officer were both dead. Possibly they had met, years after blast-off, and never realized that they were linked through him.

There was as yet no guard at the boat-hangar entrance, but there would be soon, surely. When the mutiny came, the



Captain would want to cut off the mutineers' escape. Johann pushed aside the thought that she might also wish to retain a path of escape for herself-most probably the mutiny would not begin, if it began at all, until she had gone.

But was she leaving? It was contrary to regulations for the Captain to disembark save in a friendly port-but there was no regulation to say that she could not announce that she intended to do so. He pressed the green button, and the hangar door slid up with a sigh of compressed air. "Me," the boat nearest the door said. "Me, me, me," echoed the sound.

"Which of you brought Lieutenant Helmut back?" (His own voice sounded strange in the vastness.)

"I did," called a boat from half a kilometer away.

"Have any of the rest of you been used lately?"

"No," said several voices; and one, "Never, since blastoff, Boat-captain."

"Then you are all fully stored?"

"All but he."

They were of four types: landing craft of the design that had been used to take Helmut and his subordinates down;

lifeboats intended for use in a sub-Plutonian emergency; missile-boats for short-range attack; and tenders for exterior alterations and repairs. A missile-boat might make them think twice about going after him, but they were the largest of all, and would be the most difficult to conceal once planetfall was made. In the end he settled on a tender, Number 37, transferring food and water and survival gear from one of the lifeboats into it and instructing it to wait for him at a hatch near the bridge. "Go now," his shadow said, a small, dry voice close beside his ear.

He shook his head. "There are some things I want to take with me. My books-and I'm going to try to get Grit to come if I can."

"Hello." It was Helmut, appearing in the space between Numbers 17 and 18. "Who are you talking to, Johann?"

"Myself, I'm afraid. Welcome back."

"It's good to be back," Helmut said. "Good to get out of that stinking breathmask. Do you know if Karl and the others have made any progress with the bugs yet?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The airborne bacteria. If they can show they don't infect human beings, or cook up a vaccine, we won't have to wear the things. You wouldn't think there would be such a stew of single-celled organisms floating around in a place that's as dry as that one, but there are."

'There's water in the crevasses," Johann said, "and thicker air too. From an evolutionary point of view, I suppose they got their start in the spray from the falls."

"You haven't been down to see those crevasses yourself, of course."

"No."

"I knew you hadn't. I could tell by your arms and legs. You've never set foot on Neuerddraht."

"I don't know how I got scratched up like this."

"I don't know either," Helmut said. "Even though I'm scratched up the same way. You've got strict orders not to talk, I take it; but I noticed while I was down there how often Elis seemed to be filling in for you, now that I come to think of it."

"I've never been there," Johann said again. He touched the crusted welts on his legs. "I was scraped a bit in a little accident. I'll tell you about it."

"Of course." Helmut was no longer listening. "Who would suspect that she'd send you, the cripple." He took a step nearer, and Johann saw his right hand slip under the flap of his gadget bag. "We were the public expedition; you were her private one--after all, control of a world is at stake. She couldn't risk that. What were you looking for? We saw you once, you know."

"That's right," Johann said, "you saw me." He was tensed, waiting for the blow, but it came too quickly. He had expected Helmut to raise the knife over his head and strike downward as he would have done himself. Instead, Helmut's hand shot straight forward as soon as it cleared the lip of the bag.

Somewhere between the bag and his body it became enmeshed in what might have been thousands of folds of black tissue. The knife struck like a punch from a heavily padded glove; but there was no blade, nothing that stabbed. Anchoring himself with his stiff leg, he aimed a kick at Helmut's testicles. It missed, and Johann slipped his feet from his sandals as the boats shrilled warnings, and jumped for the hangar roof.

The evasion was unnecessary. Helmut's knife was free now, but the black tissue covered his face. Johann watched ... he went limp, his sandals pinioning him still to the steel deck, his slack body floating like a balloon on a string. From under the dark covering came a continued soft grunting that soon grew weak, then stopped.

For a long time after it seemed certain Helmut was dead, the tissue remained in place; then it returned to Johann, becoming a cloud, a thin, dark smoke that seeped upward to him. "I didn't know you could leave me," he said.

"I do not desire it."

Outside the hangar door, a marine sentry had died. The sight of her limp corpse made Johann wonder with which group Helmut had been affiliated. The occultists seemed the more probable in view of his personality, and there were slashes at the girl's chest and crotch that might have been ritualistically intended. Perhaps to no group but his own advantage; possibly to a group of which Johann had never heard.

The storage-area corridors and companionways he traveled now were deserted, though from time to time he heard the faint sound of shouting through the ventilators, and twice he came on bodies—one of them a man he knew slightly, a technician from the instrument shop. So it had already begun. It seemed likely that the Captain's absence from the bridge had been interpreted by at least one group to mean that she had left for Neuerddraht.

When he reached the main corridor system he took off his blouse with its officer's insignia and threw it down a recycle chute. There were more bodies, some patrolers, many crewmen, a few in battle-green marine uniforms, floating, or sticking to the walls and floor; and neutron-blast scars from the marines' guns on the bulkhead panels. Whichever group was attacking would be pushing toward the principal approaches to the bridge; and they had clearly dislodged the marines from this section. As he hurried toward the rear entrance to the Captain's living compartment, he wondered if any effort had been made to organize and arm the loyal crewpeople—there must be many, surely, and there could be no more than a few hundred marines, i

The sentries were dead, but the door to the Captain's compartment was still closed and locked, as he had expected. He pounded on it and waited and pounded again; and the dark mist of his shadow poured into the crevice between door and jamb, and after a moment the door swung open at a touch.

On the bridge, the Captain, with Elis, Gerta, and Grit, stood watching the console communicator screen. It showed a group of crewpeople clustered around a laboratory cart, assembling what appeared to be a laser projector. "The mystics?" Johann asked.

They turned to look at him with black faces. "The C.O.C.," Grit said after a moment. "When they have that thing finished, they're going to splice a power cable to the starboard generators and cut their way through to us. The marines are holding A and B corridors outside, but when the beam starts coming through the walls there won't be much they can do. We haven't told them yet. If you want to use the arphones at the terminal, the overmonitor will be happy to explain the whole plan; we've heard enough. And if—"

The Captain cut off Grit's panicky voice. "How did you get in here, Lieutenant?"

"Through your quarters, sir."

"That way is open?"

"The corridor was clear when I came through, yes."

Grit looked from the Captain's face to Elis's, her eyes asking if Johann could be trusted, then pleading that they go. Her shadow was blacker than the others', and Johann wondered if it had spoken to her yet. On the communicator screen, Helmut entered the laboratory where the technicians were building the laser, asked some question, and gave a brisk command. An emotion that might have been hatred or despair nickered across the Captain's face. "He is one of them

too, you see," she said. "And Horst, and my servant, whom I had to shoot."

"I see," Johann said. And then, "Sir, I have a tender waiting at Hatch Eight."

Gerta, breaking the discipline of seventeen years, said, "There is nowhere to go."

"There is Neuerddraht," the Captain snapped. Johann said, "The crevasses." He thought of the long cascades of silvery water and the leaves of the ferns like cathedrals of arches.

Elis nodded. "You're right-they'd never locate us in one of those."

The Captain had already picked up the ship's logbook and tucked it under her left arm. At her side her right hand held a small, brightly polished neutron pistol; the muzzle pointed toward the floor plates, but one long, tapered finger was

curled about the trigger. "You are coming with us," she said to Johann.

He nodded. "Naturally."

"I don't want you to think I don't trust you, but you weren't on the bridge when the attack began. And there have been so many traitors."

"I understand."

"If we reach Hatch Eight in safety, and the tender is there as you say, your loyalty will be established beyond question." Johann nodded and look a step in the direction of the Captain's quarters. She nodded at Grit, smiled, and said: "Go on, girl. I'll bring up the rear." A moment later Elis, who was just behind Johann, whispered: "So that's the way it's going to be now. You and I will have to make do with Gerta, at least for a while."

The corridor was still empty save for a few dead, but smoke, acrid with burning insulation, was billowing from the ventilators. A few hundred meters beyond the door of the Cap-

tain's quarters the corridor ended at a hatch, and the termination board that should have directed them to a new connection was blank. "It's fighting, too," Elis said.

Johann turned to look at him. (Behind him Grit seemed two women, her shadow leaning across her shoulders like a conspirator.)

"The overmonitor. It's not just its people-the overmonitor program itself is fighting," Elis said.

Grit whispered: "It could cut us off, couldn't it? Sever all the corridors and just leave us drifting. We'd never get out."

"We have to go back!" Johann called to the Captain. Under his urging they doubled their straggling column and took the first promising side corridor.

"It will cut us off," Grit said again. "Leave us floating in space."

"If it cuts off the bridge it will lose the instruments and controls. It couldn't operate the ship."

"But we're not on the bridge-not any more. Do you think it knows where we are?" No one answered her.

"It's gone mad," the Captain said when they had been pushing down the new corridor for what seemed a half hour or more. "This is leading to the hydroponics module. It's got the hydro deck coupled to the bridge complex."

Elis had dropped behind her, and Grit, stumbling, was leaning on Johann's arm. She said, "She's right, I can smell the plants." Her round, soft face was beaded with sweat. Then she was gone.

Gerta, who had been behind her, stood openmouthed; the others did not notice Grit was no longer with them. Pushing past the tall girl, Johann shouted: "Is there a hatch anywhere in the hydro module? There has to be. Where is it?"

"Number Three Ninety-one," Elis told him. "I think the overmonitor's trying to get us away from Number Eight; it must have heard you talking about it."

"Where is it?" Johann said again.

"I don't know, because I don't know where we'll be coming into the module."

"Run," Johann said, taking Gerta by the arm. "She's gone to get the tender, I think."

The corridor corkscrewed, then opened into a vaulted hall several thousand meters long in which towering, darkly green plants grew under brilliant lights, tier upon tier, extending impossible limbs and tendrils, untroubled by gravity, on the quiet air.

They found the hatch at the end of a tortuous path of green that might almost have wound through a jungle. There were bowers under the trees, where colored hand ropes stretched above the sopping cellulose that contained the hydroponic fluid; and twice Johann glimpsed strange statues moored to limbs, set deeper in the green twilight beneath the leaves. Grit, Johann remembered, had said Rudi was a technician here.

At the hatch, Gerta and Elis spun the operating wheel. "Suppose she's not out there?" the Captain demanded. "How could she be? This is insane." The lips of the hatch pursed, then stretched; beyond them was the brightly lit interior of the tender.

"Am I still to go first?" Johann said.

A slight smile crossed the Captain's face. "You're not thinking of a honeymoon on Neuerddraht with little Grit, are you, Lieutenant? No, you come last-but I can hardly wait for you to come aboard so you can tell me how you arranged this."

Etiquette demanded that the Captain enter a boat last. Elis bolted through the hatch. "We defer to your rank," the Captain said to Johann. "After all, you were the leader of the escape." She climbed in behind Elis.

Gerta was watching Johann's face. He shook his head, moving it perhaps a centimeter to either side; she hesitated, then closed the hatch. He slammed down the security bolt. "What are we going to do now?" she said. The silence of the plants, their happiness and green need, closed around them. His shadow stood before him on the hatch, a silhouette as black

as a hole in space.

"Hide here," he said. "I'll come back for you." And then, "Back to the bridge." He closed his eyes.

The wall communicator screen was focused to space; in it the tender shot away from the ship like a stone from a sling. The small screen on the control console showed Horst and Helmut standing beside the laser projector, and behind them the corridor leading to the bridge. "No bargaining," Helmut said. "Get on the squawk box and tell the marines to lay down their weapons. Tell them the overmonitor's won."

Johann walked to the doors leading to the corridor and flung them open. The Marine Commandant was at a field communications center there, surrounded by subordinate officers and clerks.

"How are things going?" Johann asked.

The Commandant threw him a casual salute. "Pretty well. We've cleared the command corridor-as you see-and we have A, B, and D largely under control. We lost a lot of the sentries we had posted around, though, and there's been

quite a bit of smoke."

Johann nodded. "I know. I suspect the computer's been frying some of its own guts to make it."

A marine lieutenant said, "Most of the prisoners we've gotten so far have belonged to these nut religions rather than the C.O.C."

The Commandant gestured toward the bridge. "You must be getting the overall picture better than we do out here. How does it look in there?"

"I think we've turned the corner," Johann said. He went back inside and closed the doors, then with a screwdriver from the emergency tool locker beside the navigation panel took up the floor plates between the communicator cabinet and the computer terminal. Whoever had spliced the two together—probably Horst, Johann thought, possibly Uschi—had used bright scarlet wire and added the sacrifice of a rat with its throat cut, tied in a clear food-preservation bag. To the terminal he said: "Helmut is dead. You shouldn't have shown him. We killed him in the hangar."

He ripped the connections free and watched the computer-generated phantoms vanish; then stood up, regretting the loss of his officer's tunic. Coding "all screens" on the communicator, he announced: "The mutiny is over. I believe that some of you who have been fighting against the bridge have been encouraged by optimistic reports on the communications system. Those reports were false, and they will not be repeated; you were defeated some time ago, when the attempt to carry the bridge by storm failed."

"Now all hands are needed to save the ship. Mutineers laying aside their weapons are hereby given a full pardon. Every loyal member of the crew is expected to join in wiping out those who continue to bear arms. This is your Captain speaking. Out."

To the overmonitor terminal he said, "What is the probability of ship survival now?" He switched out the earphones and keyed the speaker.

"Response: For a five-year projection, 0.383 and rising. Do you plan frequent consultations with the overmonitor?"

"No," the Captain said.

In a storm, land was the enemy. He kicked off his sandals and floated over to the navigation panel to begin the laborious business of setting a new course.

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