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This is a dream, I said. *This whole journey has been a dream, a terrible trek that I have been making through the tortured country of my mind while I am lying safe in my trundle bed, secure in the warm womb of my home. Soon, I shall awake to the tread of milkman's feet and the familiar clatter of bottles. Soon, dawn will tiptoe into my room like a little child and touch my face with pink child's fingers, and the warmth of a new day will creep on padded kitten's feet through my window*—But the lies would not work. The journey I had set out upon was one from which there was no returning. My trundle bed was gone. . . .

Introductory Essay

by Fritz Leiber

Every fantasy writer is a sorcerer and each has his chosen field of magic. Each has the recipes he blends most skillfully.

My own novels, for example, happen to be satires with a touch of what Kingsley Amis has called "the comic inferno," such as *A Specter Is Haunting Texas* and *The Silver Eggheads,* or tales of danger and the shadows, such as *Conjure Wife, The Wanderer, The Big Time* and *Gather, Darkness!* When I write of love, it is a bright, dangerous and lonely thing, a diamond in the dark. I mention this much about myself to indicate the basis of my knowledge.

And I say that the field to which Robert F. Young has many times proven his claim is that of romantic love. The magic potion of which he is master creator is the love philter. Not harsh, uninhibiting alcohol, reality-cooling weed, nor mind-blasting LSD, but a far more delicate yet paradoxically more potent essence.

In the novel *Magic, Inc.* Robert Heinlein's brisk and charming elderly witch, Mrs. Jennings, explains:

"I just had to set a love philter off the fire—that's what took me so long."

"I'm sorry—"

'"Twont hurt it to wait."

"The Zekerboni formula?" Jedson inquired.

"My goodness gracious, no!" She was plainly upset by the suggestion. "I wouldn't kill all those harmless little creatures. Hares and swallows and doves—the very idea! I don't know what Pierre Mora was thinking about when he set that recipe down. I'd like to box his ears!

"No, I use Emula Campana, orange, and ambergris. It's just as effective."

Such, figuratively, is the delicate, heady philter that was sipped by Nicolette and Aucassin, by Heloise and Abelard, by Juliet and Romeo, by the Girl From the North Country and Bob Dylan, and which Robert F. Young dispenses in these often drear current days.

Yet his stories are not set in the Middle Ages, but chiefly in the far future, when spaceships traveling faster than light have carried mankind and girlkind to planets circling a thousand stars: new homes of civilization, lairs of decadence, pioneer planets, all with evocative names—Forget Me Not, Dior, Iago Iago, Black Dirt, Golden Grain, Potpourri, *Ciel Bleu*—the bright litany is long. It is also a future haunted by military dictatorship, by commercialism run riot, by hearts hardened against beauty, innocence, and any life that can't outgun the hunter.

In our times the story of romantic love is passe, supposedly. Although I first read Young's "The Dandelion Girl" in *The Saturday Evening Post,* it remains ironic that most of his stories have made their initial appearance in magazines of science fiction and fantasy rather than in magazines for lovers, and for girls and women. Perhaps the editors of the last believe that their readers are chiefly interested in heroes with big bank accounts, secure yet promising positions in blue-ribbon companies, or who are at least making their entry in Playboy's bright, cynical sports car and junior-executive, ribbon-necktied uniform of charcoal gray, rather than a poet's rainbow tatters or an idealist's shining armor. It is a ridiculous paradox that a writer's stories should be *too romantic* to suit those who are hucksters to women. And it is also a pity, yet one for which lovers will shed no tears.

For romantic love today has at most put on a mask—a small black velvet mask framed by two Cupid's bows aiming up and down—and speaks softer than ever, even wordlessly. Among others, and whether they (especially the young men) know it or not, and in spite of all their paganism, or perhaps because of it, the hippies are honoring and seeking romantic love. Why else the guitars, short robes and pageboy's hair? Why else the slim girls in their simple shifts, hair straight, longer still, a fine blonde, brown or black reedy curtain to be parted for the eye of a nymph?

Nor have the truly great novelists forgotten. In Jules Romains' *The Seventh of October,* the 27th and final volume of his panoramic *Les Hommes de Bonne Volonth* (along with Wassermann's *Kerkhoven* trilogy the last of the great, clear-visioned novel series, before obscurantism and grimness and the psychedelic jangle began closing in), Pierre Jallez, poet and journalist, centralmost of the multi-novel's heroes, speaks to Francoise Maieul, his destined true love, whom he has been unknowingly seeking ever since her birth:

"I had a vision—I can't tell you exactly what it was, but it had to do with a man and a woman, lovers, walking slowly on the canal bank, with their arms round each other's waist, with thoughts for nothing, for no one else, oppressed by the whole weight of the universe, and knowing that they were so oppressed. It wasn't that they were defying the universe so much as that they were conscious of a mood of exaltation produced in them by the nearness of unplumbable depths, by an almost religious sense of the miracle that they and their love represented in the swirling nothingness of the infinite . . . . "

Or, from the penultimate volune, *Francoise:*

"Imagine two persons, meant to meet from all eternity, but born, by some foolish twist of fate, a hundred years apart . . . .

This is the sort of amorous impasse which Robert F. Young delights in solving, especially if the hundred years are a thousand, or else a thousand light-years.

"Solving" is an important word here, for love stories with happy endings, if they are not pure cliche, are problem-solving stories. And problem-solving stories are the finest that science fiction has to offer us.

Downbeat stories, tales of social degeneration and atomic disaster, for instance, and almost all supernatural-horror stories, leave us at best with a thrilling shudder and a warning. The characters meet their problem, fail to solve it, and perish, unless the writer relents and lets one or two stumble dazedly away.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft, this century's profoundest writer of supernatural-horror stories (perhaps necessarily at its best a downbeat form), has written both of science-fiction and weird tales, "All that a marvel story can ever be is *a vivid picture of a certain type of human mood.* The moment it tries to be anything else, it becomes cheap, puerile, and unconvincing." And I find myself wondering whether, even with the word "marvel" omitted, writers as great as Chekhov and Katharine Mansfield might not have agreed with him. Of course Lovecraft's definition leaves out character exploration and development—and Lovecraft might have answered, "They are out of place in a marvel tale," or "In exploring my characters in such a story, I explore only myself, *my mood."*

Perhaps problem-solving is the more important element which Lovecraft did not see (fatalists and pessimists tend to be blind to it), or perhaps he dismissed it as "cheap and puerile"—the element which rescues people, worlds, or in the case of Young's stories, lovers. Young's youth and girl can be dashing toward inescapable destruction, infallible doom, yet he almost always finds some ingenious way to pluck them to safety at, or even after, the last moment. Or they, or one of therm, discover the way and find the strength. See especially in this volume such tales as "L'Arc de Jeanne," "Wish Upon a Star," "On the River," and "Little Dog Gone."

Young has the skill and willfulness to snatch a happy ending from the core of the blast of an atomic bomb.

Since he writes of honest lovers Young, like Tolkien, concerns himself with what is noble and youthful in mankind, rather than what is old and mean. Tolkien's bosom topic is friendship and the comradeship of adventurers. Young's is romantic heterosexual love. And sometimes when he writes wistfully of the long voyages between planets and the delight of touching earth again, he makes one recall Thomas Wolfe's nostalgia for lonely night trains and locomotive whistles sounding across the prairie.

Of Young's lovers, as in life, the girl always seems a little more important, representing the glamor and the ideal, while the young man carries the desire and the loneliness. Young portrays her with unfailing delicacy: her hair is like "a handful of sunlight." "Her cheek was cold as moonlight, soft as a flower." "She was light and shadow, leaf and flower; the scent of summer, the breath of night."

Is this jejune? I think not. Pierre Jallez describes Francoise Maieul in this fashion,

"She's like a lovely flame," he thought, "a black flame that draws to a white tip . . . or a Florentine statue walking at my side with just a touch of flamelike undulations. She is my little living flame, my poem in flesh and blood."

Romantic writers have a shared poetic language unchanging as moonlight, the ripple of water, the whisper of wind in the grass, and the pulse of young blood.

Young always finds the right word for his girl. If she be Russian, as she is in one of these tales, he refers to her as "dyevitza," a slimmer and more delicate word than the oftener seen "dyevooshka."

Young uses words skillfully, even cunningly, though never at the expense of clarity. Note the many uses "arrow" and "arc" are put to in the story "L'Arc de Jeanne."

And when the story demands, he becomes a prose poet fine as Ray Bradbury, but with a difference. Consider this passage from "To Fell a Tree," perhaps the best story in the book.

Good morning, madam, I'm in the tree-shade business. I deal in rare tree-shades of all kinds: in

willow-shade, oak-shade, apple-tree-shade, maple-shade, to name just a few. Today I'm running a special on a most unusual kind of tree-shade newly imported from Omicron Ceti 18. It's deep, dark, cool and refreshing—just the thing to relax you after a day in the sun—and it's positively the last of its kind on the market. You may think you know your tree-shades, madam, but you have never known a tree-shade like this one. Cool winds have blown through it, birds have sung in it, dryads have frolicked in it the day long—.

There has been little romantic love, beyond cliché, in science fantasy. One recalls some episodes by H. G. Wells, particularly the haunting novelette, "A Dream of Armageddon." Stanley Weinbaum decorated his ground-breaking interplanetary adventures with romances, and there is Lester del Rey's memorable "Helen O'Loy," besides several tales by Bradbury. Zenna Henderson and several others have done good work.

But it was left for Robert F. Young to develop to the full this area of fantasy and science fiction, the latter of which is—make no mistake—the literature of the future, if only because it takes into account modern technology and the impact of scientific advance on our lives, topics pointedly avoided by more highly touted writers, from Faulkner to Malamud to the 1967 Nobel winner Asturias. Fiction at its best involves *all* of society, *all* of the world—see Dickens, Tolstoy, and once more Romains—not merely some cultural or subjective backwater, some swirling "inner space." Perhaps, as Sherlock Holmes said, Niagara can be deduced from a drop of water, but my admiration is for the man who tackles Niagara, figuratively going over the falls in a barrel to do it.

Here is a good spot to note that romantic love is by no means Young's sole futurian preoccupation. He is a staunch conservationist, taking a firm stand against the pollution and waste of natural resources. This is one of the elements that makes "To Fell a Tree" such a great story, and one should not miss in it the fine counterpoint of the buffalo. Young is also an enemy of conformism, TV education, the growing power of the Pentagon and the population explosion, where every nation knows the tragic results of uncontrolled breeding and world-wide industrialization, yet no nation has the nerve to call a halt.

But even when Young deplores the engulfment of the countryside with tract housing, it is particularly because this will deprive lovers of the forest bowers, hilltops, brooks, lonely beaches, and other spots uncontaminated by exploitation for their meetings. He would, I am sure, sympathize with the sentiments of the nature-loving hero of *Rogue Male,* that towering adventure novel by Geoffrey Household:

My arrival was noticed only by a boy and girl, the inevitable boy and girl to be found in every dark corner of a great city. Better provision should be made for them—a Park of Temporary Affection, for example, from which lecherous clergymen and aged civil servants should be rigorously excluded. But such segregation is more easily accomplished by the uncivilized. Any competent witch doctor could merely declare the Park taboo for all but the nubile.

Yes, it is "the inevitable boy and girl" and their happy love that are the center of Young's fictions, whether the pair begins as youth and waif, or tramp and stripper (as two and a half of Young's heroines do in this book) and whether their final Eden be a whole new planet or the jobs of waitress and short-order cook in the same dingy restaurant.

As you read this book, think of

. . . the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages,

for whom Dylan Thomas made all his poems. Think of Thisbe and Pyramus, Chloe and Daphnis, Beatrice and Dante, Bess and Porgy, Jessica and Lorenzo, Annabel Lee and Poe, Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft, Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff. Think of Edna St. Vincent Millay writing

Small chance, however, in a storm so black,
A man will leave his friendly fire and snug

For a drowned woman's sake, and bring her back
To drip and scatter shells upon the rug.

or,

Not with libations, but with shouts and laughter
We drenched the altars of Love's sacred grove,
Shaking to earth green fruits, impatient after
The launching of the coloured moths of Love.

Still better, turn this page and let Young tell you.

Boy Meets Dyevitza

A thrilling news bulletin, dated September 11, 1996, was recently handed to me by an assistant who is too young to remember the star over Moscow, and it is toward him and others like him that the following history is directed. If it resembles fiction more than it does fact, the similarity is wholly intentional, for it is only through fiction that the past can be brought back to life.

* * *

When Gordon Andrews first saw the girl, he took it for granted that she was a Venusian—a natural enough assumption in view of the fact that he was on Venus. She was kneeling beside a small brook, humming a little tune and washing out a pair of stockings, and so intent was she on her tune and her task that she did not hear him when he stepped out of the forest behind her. Her bobbed hair was the color of horse chestnuts, and her clothing consisted of gray culottes, a gray blouse, black leather boots and a small gray kepi. The tune she was humming was a passage from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*.

Thus far, Gordon had taken Venus pretty much in his stride. The data supplied by the Venus probes during the early 60's, while obscure with regard to her cloud-cover, had conclusively disproved former theories to the effect that she lacked a breathable atmosphere and possessed a surface temperature of more than 100 degrees Centigrade, and had prepared him for what he had found—an atmosphere richer in oxygen content than Earth's, a comfortable climate, and a planet-wide sea, unbroken as yet save for an equatorial land mass no larger than a modest island. The data, by its very nature, had also prepared him for the possibility of human life. It had not prepared him, however, for a Venusian maiden on humming terms with *Swan Lake*. Small wonder, then, that he gasped.

The girl dropped her stockings and shot to her feet so fast that she would have toppled into the brook if he hadn't leaped forward and caught her arm. She had a heart-shaped face, and her eyes were the hue of harebells. At the moment they were filled with alarm. Presently, however, the alarm went away and recognition took its place. "Oh, it's you," she said, freeing her arm.

He took an involuntary step backward. "Me?" he said.

"Yes. Captain Gordon Andrews, of the United States Space Force, is it not? You look quite a lot like your photograph."

He could only stare at her. "I do?"

"Yes. I saw it in one of your materialistic capitalistic magazines." She stood up a little straighter—an act that brought her harebell-blue eyes on a level with the topmost button of his fatigue-alls. "I am Major Sonya Mikhailovna, of the Soviet Space Force, and my ship is in the next valley. *I* arrived here yesterday."

He got the picture then, and he felt sick. He should have known from her too-correct, slightly stilted English, from the military cut of her clothing. He should have known in the first place, for that matter. It

was the same old humiliating story. The manned Venus shot had been publicized for months before the actual launching, and he had been written up in every newspaper and magazine in the country. Articles had paid homage to his suburban upbringing, saluted his record at the Shepard Space Academy, praised his career as an orbital pilot, romanticized his bachelorhood, described how he liked his eggs, and inferred what a good catch he would be. Meanwhile, the Russians had gone quietly and systematically about their business, and at the precise psychological moment had pulled their usual unexpected coup. First it had been Laika, then Zrezdochka, then Gagarin, then Dymov, the first "Man in the Moon." Now it was Major Sonya Mikhailovna.

But why a woman? And why one so seemingly delicate that you marvelled at her ability to withstand the acceleration of take-off? Suddenly he got the whole picture, and he really felt sick. He could see the humiliating headlines—or rather, their English counterparts—in *Pravda:* SOVIET SPACE GIRL BEATS CAPITALIST COSMONAUT TO VENUS! USSR TRIUMPHS AGAIN!

"I suppose you picked up my ship on your radar while I was coming in, and fixed the time and location of my landing," he said bitterly.

Sonya Mikhailovna nodded. "My own arrival-time has already been officially recorded, but the announcement of my success had to be withheld until I could establish your arrival time and the exact time-difference could be computed. Soon now, the news of our glorious new victory will be released to the world."

She bent down, retrieved her stockings from the brook and wrung them out. Straightening, she hung them on a low-hanging branch of a nearby tree. They were cotton, he noticed, and there was a hole in one of the toes.

Suddenly she gave a start. Following the direction of her gaze, he gave one too. So did the man and the woman who had just emerged from the forest.

Since his arrival four hours ago, Gordon had been wondering—among a host of other things—whether the ultra-violet rays of the sun could penetrate the planet's thick cloud-cover. He saw now that they not only could, but did. The man and the woman were unquestionably members of a white-skinned race, and both possessed suntans so deep and golden that in contrast their dark blue eyes seemed even darker and their bright blond hair even brighter. Their white knee-length tunics augmented the effect, and in co-operation with their handsome faces, supplied them with a god-and goddess-like aspect. Unfortunately, this aspect was somewhat marred by their one concession to personal adornment—gleaming neckbands forged from a copper-like metal.

As neither native appeared to be armed, Gordon saw no cause for alarm, and after his initial surprise, he regarded them quite calmly. So did Sonya Mikhailovna. This time, however, the two Venusians did not reciprocate. Their eyes had grown wide, and now an unmistakable expression of disbelief settled upon their handsome faces. At length the man touched his own neck and then the woman's; then he pointed, almost accusingly, it seemed, toward Gordon and Sonya, and demanded something in an intelligible tongue.

Gordon proceeded to touch his own neck. Next he touched Sonya's ever so lightly of course. "Gordon," he said. "Sonya."

He was rewarded for his perspicacity by two horrified stares and a pair of hoarse gasps. Then before he could utter another word, the two Venusians turned and vanished into the forest.

He stared after them. So did Sonya Mikhailovna. "Did you know," he asked presently, "that Venus was inhabited?"

"Our scientists suspected that it might be." She shrugged. "Anyway, what does it matter now? By your stupid action you destroyed whatever chance we had of establishing friendly relations."

Gordon felt his face grow hot. "When you meet aliens, the first thing you always do is exchange names with them," he said. "Everybody knows that!"

"Everybody who reads your stereotyped science-fiction knows it, you mean. And after you find out their names, you say, 'Take me to your leader,' and their leader turns out to be a big, beautiful blond who is stacked. Well, I think I will be getting back to my ship."

"I don't see anybody stopping you," Gordon said.

She gave him a long look. In the roseate radiance of the Venusian afternoon, her face had a pink-checked little girl aspect. "In imperialistic idiom, that means, I suppose, that it is a matter of complete indifference to you what I do."

"It sure does," Gordon said. "Well, I'll be seeing you."

Leaving her standing by the brook, he re-entered the forest and struck out over the little hills that rolled back from the littoral like green inland waves to break riotously against the high ridge that encompassed the island's interior. In his initial enthusiasm, he had wandered farther from his ship than he had meant to, and he had been about to turn back when he had seen the girl. Now he had another reason for returning: a dark cloud was due to arrive over Washington in the very near future, and it was up to him to send out a bad-weather warning.

Multicolored flowers carpeted virtually every square inch of the forest floor; finch-like birds of rainbow hues darted overhead, leaving exquisite wakes of song; squirrel-like mammals spiraled tree trunks so swiftly that they were barely visible. Venus had turned out to be the Venus of the romantics, rather than the Venus of the scientists, and Gordon, who, for all his scientific training, was a romantic himself, found the eventuality exhilarating, even in his present doldrums. Perhaps when man reached Mars, he would find blue canals after all, no matter what the scientists said to the contrary, and fragile glass cities tinkling in cinnamon-scented winds.

The day was nearly done when he reached the cove, near the shore of which his spaceship stood, and darkness was upon him by the time he climbed the metal Jacob's ladder and stepped through the lock. (In blithe disregard of learned opinion, Venus's rotation period approximated Earth's; however, her cloud-cover brought about an abrupt and early departure of daylight.) In his haste, he did not bother to close the lock, but headed straight for the radio alcove and beamed the news of his historic meeting with Major Sonya Mikhailovna across the immensities to Space Force headquarters at New Canaveral, appending it with the information that the peoples of Earth could no longer consider themselves the sole inheritors of the solar system.

Owing to the distance involved, over five minutes elapsed before he received a reply. He was informed that the USSR had already released the news of the new space victory and that the Soviet premier had declared a national holiday in honor of the occasion. New Canaveral also provided him with an unsolicited thumbnail-biography of Major Sonya Mikhailovna. Her father Petr, was a famous Russian pianist, she was twenty-three years of age, unmarried, spoke six languages fluently, had a nodding acquaintance with eleven more, held a doctor's degree in anthropology, was an accomplished ballerina, and in the last Olympic games had won the gold medal in the gymnastics competition. She had been chosen for the Venus shot from a group of one hundred trained women volunteers, and the rank of major had been bestowed upon her in honor of her service to her country. Also—

Gordon heard the footsteps then, and whirled around. But the three Venusians who had crowded into the little control room were upon him before he could draw his pistol. They relieved him of it quickly and tossed it to one side; then two of them held him while the third covered his nose and mouth with a wet cloth that reeked of a cloying perfume. He blacked out in a matter of seconds.

A new day was dawning when he climbed out of the deep well of drug-induced unconsciousness and opened his eyes. His wrists and ankles were bound, and he was lying on a stretcher fashioned of lashed-together saplings. It was being carried by two gold-skinned Venusians, one of whom was the male member of the couple who had come upon him and Sonya the previous afternoon.

He raised his head. Apparently the perfume he had inhaled possessed only part of the properties of chloroform—in any event, he felt no ill effects. Turning his head, he discovered that his captors consisted of about two dozen natives, all told, and that every one of them wore a metal collar. Half of them were women, and one of the women was the one he and Sonya had seen the day before.

There was another stretcher just behind his own. Sonya Mikhailovna's face was hidden, but he could see her horse-chestnut colored hair. "Are you all right?" he called.

She did not answer. Clearly their captors had used the same drug on her that they had used on him, and she was still under its influence. A number of other things were also clear: the two original Venusians had been part of a larger group—an excursion party, perhaps—and after vanishing into the forest, they

had rejoined the main body and reported his and Sonya's presence. The decision to capture them must have been made shortly afterward.

The trees thinned out on Gordon's right, providing him with a glimpse of distant blue-misted hills and gray-blue sea and bringing home the realization that he was being borne along the lofty inland ridge that circled the island's interior. For the first time since he had opened his eyes, fear touched him. In less than two months, Venus would approach to within thirty million miles of Earth—the distance which the Space Force technicians had used in computing his return trajectory and in estimating the amount of fuel he would need. In all probability, Sonya's return trajectory and fuel-supply had been similarly computed and estimated, and if so, she was in the same boat he was. If they were kept captive for any length of time, they might not be able to return to Earth for another year, and while it was conceivable that they might be able to live off the land after their supplies gave out, it was far from likely.

Maybe, though, eating wouldn't be a problem. Dead people are as unable to eat as they are unable to tell tales.

The trees thinned out again—on his left, this time—and he saw a bowl-shaped valley far below. There were green fields and blue lakes, and scattered clusters of white buildings. Villages, no doubt. They weren't large enough to have registered on his viewscope during his orbit, but they were large enough to register on his retina now.

The faint trail which the Venusians had been following began zigzagging down the side of the ridge, and the going became more difficult. They kept glancing uneasily at the sky as though they momentarily expected it to fall down upon them. Gordon could discern no cause for their concern; as far as he could see, the sky was the same hazy pink it had been yesterday—but then, he was not a Venusian and consequently knew nothing about such matters.

At the foot of the ridge, the procession was joined by other natives, indicating that a courier had been sent ahead to herald its approach. All of the newcomers wore metal collars, and all of them looked at Gordon and Sonya briefly, then quickly glanced away. Sonya, Gordon saw, turning his head, had awakened, and was regarding her surroundings with eyes that seemed to have even more harebell-blue in them than before. "Are you all right?" he called again.

"Yes," she said, after a pause. "I am all right."

One of the nearer villages proved to be their captors' destination, and after passing between several neatly laid-out fields, the principal crop of which appeared to be a Venusian form of sweetcorn, the procession started down a narrow thoroughfare in the direction of a large circular stone building surmounted by a steeple-like chimney from which smoke arose in a tenuous blue-white column. The buildings on either side of the street were plain to the point of bleakness, the facades featureless save for oval windows and narrow doorways. Villagers were everywhere, and all of them, men and women alike, sported metal collars. Children, however, were noticeably absent, though once Gordon caught sight of a round, wide-eyed face in one of the oval windows. He had to look fast to see it, though, because an instant later a woman appeared and yanked the child back out of sight.

He was more bewildered than ever. Obviously, judging from their reactions, the Venusians considered him and Sonya to be guilty of some manner of immoral crime; but the only crime they had committed that he could think of was trespassing—and certainly trespassing couldn't be construed as *immoral.* What in the world *had* they done then?

The procession had reached the large circular structure and was filing through its vaulted entrance. Terraced tiers of stone benches encircled a small, flagstone-paved arena in the center of which were two altar-like stone blocks, placed about five feet apart. Just behind the blocks stood a primitive forge, and beside the forge stood an even more primitive anvil. A gold-skinned blacksmith was busily operating a pair of crude bellows.

Gordon and Sonya were placed on the blocks and strapped down by means of leather thongs. The tiers of benches filled rapidly, and an air of expectation rapidly permeated the smoky atmosphere. Gordon began to sweat—a reaction due partly, but not wholly, to the heat thrown off by the forge. Sonya's face was white. He tried to think of something reassuring to say to her, but for the life of him, he couldn't. Quite by accident, his eyes met hers, and to his consternation her cheeks changed from white to

pink, and she turned abruptly away.

The audience began to chant, and presently a man of noble mien appeared, bearing two strips of copper-like metal. He handed them to the blacksmith and then stepped back and took up a position equidistant from each block, after which he proceeded to look sternly down first into Gordon's face and then into Sonya's. Gordon couldn't see what the blacksmith was doing in the meantime, but judging from the sounds the man was making, he was busily occupied. Bellows wheezed and coals crackled, and metal clanged on metal as though a Venusian tarnhelm was in the works. Gordon knew perfectly well, however, that one wasn't and he wasn't particularly surprised when, a little while later, a water-soaked cloth was wrapped around his neck and was followed by one of the two metal strips. Steam rose from the wet cloth as the blacksmith held the two ends of the strip together until they fused, and even more steam arose when he tempered the resultant seam with a container of water. The job completed to his satisfaction, he removed the cloth and let the still-warm collar settle against Gordon's neck.

The other strip was similarly fused around Sonya's neck, after which the man of noble mien went into action. Raising his hand in a signal for the audience to cease its chanting, he launched a long sonorous speech, part of which he directed at Gordon and part of which he directed at Sonya. After a ringing peroration, during which he seemed to threaten each of them, he produced a pinch of white powder and sprinkled some of it over each of their heads. Finally he drew a long double-edge knife.

Well, this is it, Gordon thought. But it wasn't. The man of noble mien merely used the knife to cut their bonds; then, after untying the thongs that secured them to the stone blocks, he raised both arms in a gesture for them to stand up. Gordon massaged his legs before putting his weight on them, and Sonya followed the same precaution. He could hardly believe that they were still alive, but seemingly they were. And healthy too—if the pinkness of Sonya's cheeks was an accurate criterion.

The man of noble mien nodded his noble head in the direction of the entrance, and they accompanied him outside. Gordon did a doubletake when they stepped into the street. It was strewn with freshly picked flowers of every hue and description and lined by little children waving green twigs that resembled olive branches. He came to a staring stop. "Won't someone please tell me what's coming off?" he said.

Sonya stopped beside him. "Don't you really know?" she asked, her eyes fixed on a flower at her feet that was almost as red as her face had become.

"I know we're the focal point of some kind of ceremony—but what kind of a ceremony is it?"

Slowly Sonya raised her eyes. "It's a wedding ceremony," she said. "They—they married us."

The flower-carpet stretched all the way to the outskirts of the village, and so did the two lines of little children. Gordon stumbled along at Sonya's side, hopeful that he would wake up any second in the bachelor's barracks at New Canaveral. But the street stubbornly refused to dissipate, and so did the little children and the man of noble mien As for Sonya, much less than dissipating, she took on added detail, and the metal collar around her neck seemed to throw off flame after lambent flame, and each one was brighter than its predecessor.

The man of noble mien escorted them outside the village, then turned his back on them as though they no longer existed and returned the way he had come. After his passage, the little children broke ranks and began playing in the flowers. Gordon faced Sonya. "Now maybe you'll tell me *why* they married us," he said.

"I will tell you on the way back to our ships."

She did not speak again till they reached the top of the ridge. Then, after she got her breath back, she said. "They married us because, underneath their demigod exteriors, they are nothing more than bronze-age puritans. Yesterday, when the man and woman saw us standing together by the brook, they were bewildered because neither of us was wearing what to them is a universal symbol of marriage—a metal collar—and when you touched me, they were shocked. You see, in their society, no man and woman can be alone together unless they are married, and it is unthinkable for a man to touch a woman unless she is his wife, or some immediate member of his family."

"We could have been brother and sister," Gordon pointed out.

"Do I look like your sister?"

He had to admit that she didn't.

"Anyway," Sonya went on, "their trailing us to different houses must have convinced them and the rest of their party that we are not. In the eyes of the Venusians, you see, our spaceships are just that. Houses. Odd ones perhaps, by their architectural standards, but houses just the same. How else could a simple bronze-age culture interpret them?"

Gordon ducked beneath a blossom-laden bough. "How did you know they're puritans?"

"I didn't—at first. I merely assumed, from their reactions to us, that they must be. And then I got to thinking about how neither the sun nor the moon can be seen through the cloud-cover, and it occurred to me that their concept of one god must have come much earlier in their civilization than would have been the case on earth, owing to the fact that there could have been no intermediate phase of sun- or moon-worship. Perhaps, somewhere along the line, they had a Christ whose teachings they misinterpreted, and no doubt they have a version of Genesis similar to the Judaeo-Christian one—except that in theirs, the problem of creating the sun and the moon and the stars never arose. Anyway, now that they have married us, they are no longer interested in us. All that concerned them was our moral welfare ... It seems to be growing dark."

"It can't be," Gordon said. "It's only a little past noon. Which reminds me—I skipped breakfast, and supper too." He pulled two concentrated food biscuits out of his fatigue-all pockets. "I suggest that we stop for lunch."

They sat down side by side beneath a tree with blue blossoms shaped like Dutchman's-breeches hanging from its boughs. They were halfway down the opposite slope of the ridge now, but Sonya's ship was still many hours away, and his was an hour farther yet. They ate silently for awhile.

Then, "There is one thing that puzzles me," Sonya said. "Yes?"

"Why did they marry us so soon? Why was there such a need for haste?"

"You made it clear enough. They misinterpreted our behavior and were shocked out of their self-righteous puritanical skins."

She shook her head. "Shocked, yes—but not enough to have rushed us through a ceremony that under ordinary circumstances would have required days of preparation. There must have been another reason." Suddenly she glanced up through the foliage at the sky. "It *is* growing dark."

There was no longer any denying the fact. The roseate radiance of the youthful afternoon had transmuted to a sort of gray murk; moreover, the air had grown appreciably colder. Gordon stood up. "I think we'd better be on our way," he said. "It's going to rain."

A good three hours passed, however, before he felt the first drop. He and Sonya were in the hills now, and the ridge was far behind them. The rain was gentle, but it was persistent too, and both of them were soaked before another hour had gone by. "We will go to my ship," Sonya said, brushing back a rain-wet strand of horse-chestnut colored hair from her forehead. "It is much closer than yours."

Somehow her offering him shelter in a Soviet ship did not strike him as being in the least incongruous. And when, a moment later, he slipped his arm around her waist, that didn't seem incongruous either. And when she permitted it to remain there, even *that* didn't seem incongruous. For some crazy, mixed-up reason life seemed singularly devoid of incongruities all of a sudden. And amazingly forthright and simple. The rain was extremely penetrating—so penetrating, in fact, that it penetrated his skin as well as his clothing. And it had a curious lulling effect. No, that wasn't the word. A curious soporific effect. No, that wasn't the word, either. Well, what word was it, then?

He couldn't call it to mind till after they reached Sonya's ship and were standing at the base of the Jacob's ladder. By then it was too late. By then he was gazing softly down into her eyes, and she was gazing softly up into his, and the world was well on its way toward being well lost.

He tried to force himself to step back and regard the situation with the cold and objective eye of a scientist, to evaluate this strange and wondrous quality that fell in the form of rain and to tie it in with the Venusians' motivation in marrying him and Sonya posthaste. In vain. All he could think of was the tune she had been humming by the brook and the hole he had seen in one of her cheap cotton stockings. And then she was in his arms and he was kissing her rain-wet lips, and Washington and Moscow were forgotten place-names on a map that had no more meaning than the paper it was printed on.

The rain continued to fall. Softly, gently. Insistently. It sang soft songs in the leaves. It murmured; it

whispered. It laughed.

It did not cease till morning. After starting back to his ship, Gordon mentally rehearsed the report which he and Sonya had agreed to send to their respective headquarters. It described briefly how they had been captured and released, but discreetly made no reference either to the wedding ceremony or to the rain. They had unanimously agreed that the situation was complicated enough without complicating it further.

He had gone less than half a mile when his collar began to press against his throat. Thereafter the pressure increased with every step he took, till finally he came to a semi-strangled stop. It was as though he had reached the end of an invisible leash.

The pressure lessened after he backed up a few paces, went away altogether after he backed up a dozen more. There was only one explanation. The metal from which his and Sonya's collars—as well as those of the Venusians—had been forged, possessed magnetic properties unknown to terrestrial metals, and the attraction between objects fashioned from it grew progressively stronger as the square of the distance between them *increased.* Either the Venusians had disciplined this attraction so that it was limited to objects fashioned from the same stock, or the ore from which the metal was processed was naturally subdivided into small magnetically independent veins. Gordon did not know which was the case, but there was one thing he did know; when the Venusians married you, they meant business.

He began retracing his steps back to Sonya's ship. Halfway there, he saw her running toward him. Her white face told him that her collar had been giving her a hard time too, and that she had arrived at a conclusion similar to his own. "Gordon, what are we going to do?" she gasped when she came up to him.

"We'll get them off some way," he reassured her. "Come on—I've got the necessary tools in my ship."

He tried all morning before he gave up. The collars were impervious to his best shears, and his hardest file failed to scratch their surface. Using his acetylene torch was out of the question.

He sat disconsolately down on the ground several feet from one of the landing jacks. Sonya sat down beside him. "We won't be able to go back at all now," she said. "Neither your ship nor mine can carry us both, and there's no way we can occupy more than one of them at a time."

Gordon sighed. "I suppose we could radio for help," he said presently. "But if we did, we'd have to tell them everything that happened. I'm afraid they'd be sort of skeptical about the rain. Of course, we could leave that part out—but I'm afraid they'd be skeptical about the collars too. In fact, I don't think they'd even believe us. They'd simply jump to the conclusion that we've fal—that we don't want to return and would order us back on the double the minute maximum juxtaposition occurred. No, if we radio for help, we've got to have a good concrete reason for doing so—one that they'll be able to understand and believe."

Sonya managed a wan smile. "I—I can just see myself standing before the Council of Ministers, blaming what happened on the rain," she said.

Gordon laughed, "And I can just see myself standing before a congressional investigating committee, explaining about the collars." He began to feel better. A situation that could lend itself to humor could not be wholly hopeless. "Here's what we'll do for now," he went on. "We'll radio back the report we agreed upon, and then we'll go on with our work as though nothing is wrong. Sometimes problems solve themselves; but just in case this one shouldn't, and we can't go back, we'll build a cabin so we'll have some place to live."

Sonya's eyes sparked like a little girl's. "Let's build it by that little brook," she said. "Where—where we first met."

"Fine," Gordon said.

* * *

During the ensuing weeks, they spent their mornings gathering data and their afternoons working on the cabin. They took time out to analyze a sample of rain water, but it evinced no unusual qualities.

Gordon was not surprised. Shortly after landing, he had tested a sample of Venusian water for drinking purposes, and with the same result. Clearly, the quality that had undermined their inhibitions originated in the cloud-cover, and evaporated soon after it reached the ground.

After the cabin was finished, they began going on afternoon-hikes into the hills, tramping through idyllic woods, talking and laughing, exclaiming now and then at unexpected patterns of flowers, starting at sudden rainbow-flights of birds. They saw but few Venusians, and the few they did see ignored them. One afternoon they found a fern-bordered pool beneath a white-skirted waterfall, and after that they came there everyday to swim. Sonya's skin darkened to a deep gold, and looking at her, Gordon sometimes found it hard to breathe. Every so often the sky darkened, and rain fell; but the rain was superfluous now. And as for the invisible magnetic chain that bound them together, that had been supplanted by another invisible chain that was ten times as strong.

And yet the original one still remained, and the problem it represented grew more and more acute as their scheduled departure-times approached. They desperately needed a good practical reason to give their respective governments for not returning to Earth—and quite providentially at the very last moment (though it seemed anything but providential at the time) they discovered that they had one. Or rather, Sonya did. On the morning of the day she was scheduled to undergo the rigors of acceleration, she regarded Gordon shyly across the little breakfast table he had built. "I—I am going to have a baby," she said.

The news, when it arrived in Moscow, had something of the impact of a hydrogen bomb, and when it leaked through a hitherto unsuspected crevice in the Kremlin, there was a sort of chain-reaction throughout the entire Soviet Union. It was at this point in his political career that the Soviet premier discovered a universal truth: people the world over, whether they be communistic or capitalistic, have a very large soft spot in their hearts when it comes to babies.

That spring, Venus outshone herself, and hung in the evening sky over Moscow somewhat in the manner of the star over Bethlehem. The premier had a haunted look on his face when he appeared before the Council of Ministers. He was not alone. The Ministers had haunted looks on their faces too. What did you *do* when you had to cope with a forthcoming space baby who would be half capitalist and half communist and who was already adored by the whole world? The premier did not know. But there was one thing he did know; in the last analysis, any party is the people, and while you can con the people into believing that black bread is white bread and that caraway seeds are caviar, you cannot con them into believing that a child conceived on the Planet of Love by a Russian girl and an American boy is any thing other than a harbinger of peace.

So in the long run, what the premier did was the only thing he could have done. He arranged a summit meeting with the president of the United States and the prime minister of Great Britain, and for the first time in history, the East and the West really got together. The threat of war could not, of course, be totally eliminated at such short notice; but a number of aggravations that could precipitate a war could be eliminated—and were. This accomplished, the three leaders drew up plans for a super three-man spaceship to be built posthaste by the best engineers the three nations could supply, and unanimously agreed that the pilot would be English, the obstetrician, Russian, and the nurse, American.

It has been said that after the meeting, the Soviet premier and the president of the United States got together and began thinking up names. This is extremely doubtful. Anyway, if they did, they were wasting their time, for Sonya Mikhailovna and Gordon Andrews had already taken care of the matter. The name they chose is well-known today—except, perhaps, by those for whom this history has been recorded. Which brings us back to the aforementioned news bulletin. In common with most news bulletins, it has about as much poetry in it as an old shoe, but its message shines forth with a radiance that excels even the radiance cast by the star over Moscow.

Geneva, Switzerland, September 11, 1996—The young Russo-American ambassador-at-large, Petr Gordonovitch Andrews, announced this morning that his peace plan has been accepted by all major and minor powers, and that the war that has threatened mankind for the past half century can no longer occur.

* * *

Star Mother

That night her son was the first star.

She stood motionless in the garden, one hand pressed against her heart, watching him rise above the fields where he had played as a boy, where he had worked as a young man; and she wondered whether he was thinking of those fields now, whether he was thinking of her standing alone in the April night with her memories; whether he was thinking of the verandahed house behind her, with its empty rooms and silent halls, that once upon a time had been his birthplace.

Higher still and higher he rose in the southern sky, and then, when he had reached his zenith, he dropped swiftly down past the dark edge of the Earth and disappeared from sight. A boy grown up too soon, riding round and round the world on a celestial carousel, encased in an airtight metal capsule in an airtight metal chariot ...

Why don't they leave the stars alone? she thought. *Why don't they leave the stars to God?*

The general's second telegram came early the next morning: *Explorer XII doing splendidly. Expect to bring your son down sometime tomorrow.*

She went about her work as usual, collecting the eggs and allocating them in their cardboard boxes, then setting off in the station wagon on her Tuesday morning run. She had expected a deluge of questions from her customers. She was not disappointed. "Is Terry really way up there all alone, Martha?" "Aren't you *scared,* Martha?" "I do hope they can get him back down all right, Martha." She supposed it must have given them quite a turn to have their egg woman change into a star mother overnight.

She hadn't expected the TV interview, though, and she would have avoided it if it had been politely possible. But what could she do when the line of cars and trucks pulled into the drive and the technicians got out and started setting up their equipment in the backyard? What could she say when the suave young man came up to her and said, "We want you to know that we're all very proud of your boy up there, ma'am, and we hope you'll do us the honor of answering a few questions."

Most of the questions concerned Terry, as was fitting. From the way the suave young man asked them, though, she got the impression that he was trying to prove that her son was just like any other average American boy, and such just didn't happen to be the case. But whenever she opened her mouth to mention, say, how he used to study till all hours of the night, or how difficult it had been for him to make friends because of his shyness, or the fact that he had never gone out for football—whenever she started to mention any of these things, the suave young man was in great haste to interrupt her and to twist her words, by requestioning, into a different meaning altogether, till Terry's behavior pattern seemed to coincide with the behavior pattern which the suave young man apparently considered the norm, but which, if followed, Martha was sure, would produce not young men bent on exploring space but young men bent on exploring trivia.

A few of the questions concerned herself: Was Terry her only child? ("Yes.") What had happened to her husband? ("He was killed in the Korean War.") What did she think of the new law granting star mothers top priority on any and all information relating to their sons? ("I think it's a fine law ... It's too bad they couldn't have shown similar humanity toward the war mothers of World War II.")

It was late in the afternoon by the time the TV crew got everything repacked into their cars and trucks and made their departure. Martha fixed herself a light supper, then donned an old suede jacket of Terry's and went out into the garden to wait for the sun to go down. According to the time table the general had outlined in his first telegram, Terry's first Tuesday night passage wasn't due to occur till 9:05. But it, seemed only right that she should be outside when the stars started to come out. Presently they did, and she watched them wink on, one by one, in the deepening darkness of the sky. She'd never been much of a one for the stars; most of her life she'd been much too busy on Earth to bother with things

celestial. She could remember, when she was much younger and Bill was courting her, looking up at the moon sometimes; and once in a while, when a star fell, making a wish. But this was different. It was different because now she had a personal interest in the sky, a new affinity with its myriad inhabitants.

And how bright they became when you kept looking at them! They seemed to come alive, almost, pulsing brilliantly down out of the blackness of the night ... And they were different colors, too, she noticed with a start. Some of them were blue and some were red, others were yellow . . . green ... orange . . . .

It grew cold in the April garden, and she could see her breath. There was a strange crispness, a strange clarity about the night, that she had never known before ... She glanced at her watch, was astonished to see that the hands indicated two minutes after nine. Where had the time gone? Tremulously she faced the southern horizon ... and saw her Terry appear in his shining chariot, riding up the star-pebbled path of his orbit, a star in his own right, dropping swiftly now, down, down, and out of sight beyond the dark wheeling mass of the Earth . . . She took a deep, proud breath, realized that she was wildly waving her hand and let it fall slowly to her side. Make a wish! she thought, like a little girl, and she wished him pleasant dreams and a safe return and wrapped the wish in all her love and cast it starward.

Sometime tomorrow, the general's telegram had said—

That meant sometime today!

She rose with the sun and fed the chickens, fixed and ate her breakfast, collected the eggs and put them in their cardboard boxes, then started out on her Wednesday morning run. "My land, Martha, I don't see how you stand it with him way up there! Doesn't it get on your *nerves?"* ("Yes ... Yes, it does.") "Martha, when are they bringing him back down?" ("Today . . . *Today!")* "It must be wonderful being a star mother, Martha." ("Yes, it is—in a way.")

Wonderful ... and terrible.

If only he can last it out for a few more hours, she thought. If only they can bring him down safe and sound. Then the vigil will be over, and some other mother can take over the awesome responsibility of having a son become a star

If only ...

The general's third telegram arrived that afternoon: *Regret to inform you that meteorite impact on satellite hull severely damaged capsule-detachment mechanism, making ejection impossible. Will make every effort to find another means of accomplishing your son's return.*

Terry!—

See the little boy playing beneath the maple tree, moving his tiny cars up and down the tiny streets of his make-believe village; the little boy, his fuzz of hair gold in the sunlight, his cherub-cheeks pink in the summer wind

Terry!—

Up the lane the blue-denimed young man walks, swinging his thin tanned arms, his long legs making near-grownup strides over the sun-seared grass; the sky blue and bright behind him, the song of cicada rising and falling in the hazy September air

Terry . . .

—probably won't get a chance to write you again before take-off, but don't worry, Ma. The Explorer XII *is the greatest bird they ever built. Nothing short of a direct meteorite hit can hurt it, and the odds are a million to one ...*

Why don't they leave the stars alone? Why don't they leave the stars to God?

The afternoon shadows lengthened on the lawn, and the sun grew red and swollen over the western hills. Martha fixed supper, tried to eat, and couldn't. After awhile, when the light began to fade, she slipped into Terry's jacket and went outside.

Slowly the sky darkened and the stars began to appear. At length *her* star appeared, but its swift passage blurred before her eyes. Tires crunched on the gravel then, and headlights washed the darkness from the drive. A car door slammed.

Martha did not move. *Please God,* she thought, *let it be Terry,* even though she knew that it couldn't possibly be Terry. Footsteps sounded behind her, paused. Someone coughed softly. She turned

then

"Good evening, ma'am."

She saw the circlet of stars on the gray epaulet; she saw the stern handsome face; she saw the dark tired eyes. And she knew. Even before he spoke again, she knew

"The same meteorite that damaged the ejection mechanism, ma'am. It penetrated the capsule, too. We didn't find out till just a while ago—but there was nothing we could have done anyway ... Are you all right, ma'am?"

"Yes. I'm all right."

"I wanted to express my regrets personally. I know how you must feel."

"It's all right."

"We will, of course, make every effort to bring back his ... remains . . . so that he can have a fitting burial on Earth."

"No," she said.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am?"

She raised her eyes to the patch of sky where her son had passed in his shining metal sarcophagus. Sirius blossomed there, blue-white and beautiful. She raised her eyes still higher—and beheld the vast parterre of Orion with its central motif of vivid forget-me-nots, its far-flung blooms of Betelguese and Rigel, of Bellatrix and Saiph ... And higher yet—and there flamed the exquisite flower beds of Taurus and Gemini, there burgeoned the riotous wreath of the Crab; there lay the pulsing petals of the Pleiades ... And down the ecliptic garden path, wafted by a stellar breeze, drifted the ocher rose of Mars.

"No," she said again.

The general had raised his eyes, too; now, slowly, he lowered them. "I think I understand, ma'am. And I'm glad that's the way you want it . . . The stars *are* beautiful tonight, aren't they."

"More beautiful than they've ever been," she said.

After the general had gone, she looked up once more at the vast and variegated garden of the sky where her son lay buried, then she turned and walked slowly back to the memoried house.

L'Arc de Jeanne

Infantry Unit No. 97 of Drop XVI had landed on the north bank of *Le Fleuve d'Abondance* and deployed along the base of the alluvial slope that gave access to the Provencal. Plateau. Once the 97th gained a foothold on the plateau, the fall of *Fleur du Sud,* the key city of *Ciel Bleu's* southern hemisphere, would be assured.

The commander of the 97th, jubilant over the success of his part of the Drop, radioed his position to the GGS *Ambussadress,* the orbiting flagship from which O'Riordan the Reorganizer was supervising the first phase of the tenth and final campaign of the so-called Second Civil War. O'Riordan was delighted over the news and ordered that the city be taken at once. Soon, he reflected, *Ciel Bleu* would be as helpless as the nine other secessionist planet-states and the omnipotence toward which he had directed his political sights six years ago on Earth when he destroyed the nucleus of the religio-political Psycho-Phenomenalist Church and established the Galaxi-Government would be his.

Strafe rifles at ready, the 97th started up the alluvial slope. Blue beret-like helmets were set at jaunty angles; crimson battle-fatigues took on the hue of blood in the morning sunlight. The season was spring and-a brisk wind was blowing out of the south. It was inconceivable that *Fleur du Sud* could muster sufficient forces to defend itself.

Nevertheless, when the 97th breasted the slope, it found itself confronted by an army of defenders. But it was a ragged army indeed, and even distance could not hide the fact that it was comprised primarily of old men, housewives, and boys. Earlier that morning, the main contingent of Drop XVI had landed far to the north, decoying the troops that had been stationed near *Fleur du Sud* away from the

city. The battle appeared to be in the bag.

The 97th girded itself and prepared to charge. And then the ragged ranks of the defenders parted and a figure mounted on a magnificent black stallion rode through, and advanced across the plateau. The figure was that of a girl—a girl clad in shining white armor and carrying a shining bow in her left hand and a shining arrow in her right. Her head was bare and her light-brown hair streamed behind her in the morning wind. Her face, white and blurred by distance, was like a flower.

The 97th paused. It consisted of veterans of nine planetary wars, and yet whispers rustled through its ranks like frightened leaves.

Two hundred meters from the beginning of the slope, the black stallion came to a stop. The girl fitted her shining arrow to her shining bow and drew the bowstring back. In the dead silence the bowstring sang, and the arrow stabbed into the sky. Up, up it soared into the nonpareil blue, to pause, finally, high above the 97th. But it did not fall back down to Earth. Instead, it became a bolt of blue-bright lightning. Thunder sounded then, and the sky above the slope grew as dark as death. It began to rain.

The rest of the sky remained a serene and cloudless blue, and sunlight lay upon the plateau like golden grain.

The rain intensified. It came down in sheets; in torrents. It became a wall of falling water. The 97th's officers screamed to their men to charge, but the men were already mired in mud up to their ankles. The edge of the plateau gave way, and the whole slope began to slide.

Desperately, the 97th tried to fight its way to safety, but it was part of a river of mud now—a vindictive merciless river in which the men could only flounder as it bore them ineluctably into the swollen waters of another river—Le *Fleuve d'Abondance*. Officers, noncoms, privates—all suffered the same ignominious fate; but *Le Fleuve d'Abondance,* even in a swollen state, was anything but a raging torrent, and all gained the safety of the opposite shore.

They lined up like bedraggled rats along the bank and counted their blessings and their dry cigarettes. The commander radioed a description of the debacle—and its authoress—to the orbiting *Ambassadress;* then he withdrew his men behind a nearby ridge, deployed them, and smoked a damp cigarette while he awaited instructions from O'Riordan.

O'Riordan was no stranger to history. He spotted the analogy right away, and it was the analogy as much as the threat of the meteorological warfare that gave him pause. He knew what a modern Maid of Orleans could do for the relatively primitive people of *Ciel Bleu*—knew that even without a weapon that influenced the weather, she could very well inspire them to a point where he would have to bomb them into submission, and in the process lay waste to property that he already considered his own. So he gave orders not only that the 97th be picked up and returned to the orbiting fleet, but that the rest of Drop XVI be picked up and returned as well; then, for the time being, he turned over the campaign to Smith-Kolgoz, his Chief of Intelligence.

In less than a week, Smith-Kolgoz had a report ready for him—and a plan.

Raymond D'Arcy, Decoder 2nd class, GGS *Watchdog,* had never attended a council of war before. Nor had he ever before been on board the *Ambassadress.* He felt diffident and a little afraid.

The *Ambassadress* was a city in the sky. In the city, in addition to the crew, dwelled O'Riordan himself, his advisors, his arbiters, his bodyguards, his Ministers of War, his Chiefs of Staff, his Secret Police, his Civilian-Control Corps, his Reorganization Corps, his Intelligence Corps, his personal cuisine, and his mistresses, valets, manicurists, barbers, and physicians.

In both shape and color the flagship resembled a monstrous orange. The orange hue, however, was not a true color but resulted from the reflection of the starlight on the special alloy that constituted the hull. There were seven decks altogether, the centermost and largest of which contained the units that housed the executive, administrative, and judicial departments, and their respective personnel-suites. The units encircled a large open area called the Green where real trees and genuine grass grew, and the trees and the grass in turn encircled an asphalt plaza.

The decks were connected by companionways and elevator shafts and each level was equipped with high-speed conveyor-corridors. In addition, the levels had boat bays that could easily be reached in time of an emergency and whose size and whose number of escape boats were in ratio to the dimensions of

the deck. Artificial gravity was constantly maintained by intra-deck attractor-coils and the ship's power unit was located on Deck No. 1 where no one, except the *Ambassadress's* maintenance men, ever ventured.

The Council of War Chamber was part of the executive unit and overlooked the Green. D'Arcy stood at one of the open casements, looking wistfully down at trees and grass and golden puddles of artificial sunshine. There were flowers growing in hydroponic parterres and hidden tapes supplied a nostalgic background of melodic birdsong. He tried to distinguish the various calls and warbles, but the voices in the room behind him made the task impossible. Presently he realized that one of the voices was directed toward him. "Over here, D'Arcy—O'Riordan's on his way down."

D'Arcy approached the long council table and took the seat that the council-co-ordinator had indicated. There was a glass of water in front of him, and he drank some of it. His throat still felt dry. He was uncomfortably aware of the row of important faces across the table; his own face struck a discordant note in a similar row on his own side of the table. There was the sound of a door opening and closing. It was followed by a thunder-clap of silence. "All rise!" the council co-ordinator commanded. All did.

D'Arcy had seen O'Riordan on telecasts, but he had never seen him in person. He was a small dynamic man with a flat face and bright brown eyes. He did not look his sixty-odd years. His face was ruddy, with hardly a wrinkle showing, if you discounted the intense crows' feet at the corners of his eyes. His hair was sandy and faintly flecked with gray. Even in the gorgeous blue and gold trappings of a supreme commander, he still managed to look like what he was—a one-time pauper who, by dint of peasant shrewdness and determination, had become a political prince.

Flanked by flint-faced bodyguards, he entered the room and seated himself at the head of the council table. "All sit!" the council co-ordinator cried. All did.

O'Riordan puffed a cigar to life and looked up and down the two rows of faces. His eyes flickered faintly when they met D'Arcy's, alighted finally on the sharp-featured visage of the Chief of Intelligence. "All right, Smith-Kolgoz—let's hear what you've found out."

Smith-Kolgoz stood up. "I think it will be best, your Magnificence, if we hear the report directly from the man who prepared it—Leopold McGrawski, Director of Field Operations."

A burly man in mufti got to his feet. Smith-Kolgoz sat down. MCGRAWSKI: "We were successful in tracing the girl your Magnificence, and I assigned three experienced ship-to-ground agents to investigate the case. They subsequently discovered that her name is Jeanne Marie Valcouris and that she lives all alone in a cave in *Le Bois Feerique. Le Bois Feerique* is a sizable woods located near a bucolic village named Baudelaire, which lies on the Provencal Plateau some fifty kilometers to the north of *Fleur du Sud.* She is known to its inhabitants as *la Pucelle du Bois Feerique,* and had it not been for your Magnificence's decision to suspend hostilities temporarily, thereby making it impossible for her to put in an appearance on other battlefields, the cognomen by now would have attained planet-wide circulation, and she would be firmly entrenched in the minds of her countrymen as an anti-denationalization Psycho-Phenomenalist heroine. As matters stand, the religio-patriotic zeal which she might have awakened still slumbers.

"Like most *Ciel Bleu* villages, Baudelaire is backward and bucolic and stubbornly adheres to the anti-progressive spirit of the French colonists who took over the planet three centuries ago. Jeanne Marie Valcouris' mother died while giving birth to her and her father died nine years later, at which time Jeanne Marie was consigned to a small Provencal-subsidized orphanage on the outskirts of the village. Up until the age of twelve she behaved normally enough and then, unaccountably, she ran away and hid herself in *Le Bois Feerique.* The orphanage officials finally located her—she was living in a natural cave and appeared to be in excellent health —but when they tried to take her back to the orphanage, she did something that frightened them so thoroughly that they fled from the forest and never bothered her again. Exactly what she did, we were unable to ascertain, but it seems that even prior to the Battle of *Fleur du Sud* the inhabitants of Baudelaire regarded her as an evil witch. Since the battle they have altered their viewpoint and now regard her as a good witch, but they are hardly less reluctant to enter *Le Bois Feerique.*

"There appears to be considerable justification for their attitude. A number of them claim to have overheard her talking to trees and flowers, and the several who were bold enough to question her claim that she told them that it wasn't trees and flowers she was talking to but 'voices in her head.' They—"

"Voices?" O'Riordan interrupted.

"Yes, your Magnificence. Obviously she is suffering from audio-visual hallucinations of the type generally associated with acute malnutrition. We know that she was brought up a strict Psycho-Phenomenalist, and I think we may safely conclude that she is a fanatic, and fasts for weeks at a time. Under circumstances such as that, it would be strange if she *didn't* hear voices and see visions."

"But the bow," O'Riordan said. "Where did she get the bow?"

MCGRAWSKI: "I'm sorry to say that we were unable to find out, your Magnificence. She carries it with her wherever she goes and there is always a quiverful of arrows on her shoulder. Assuming that a weapon capable of precipitating an isolated cloudburst would be capable of any number of things, I instructed the ship-to-ground agents not to let her see them except when absolutely necessary and not to provoke her in any way. Perhaps if they could have entered her cave when she was absent from it, they might have been able to learn more, but—"

O'RIORDAN: "But why couldn't they enter it? What was there to stop them?"

SMITH-KOLGOZ (hastily getting to his feet): "I ordered them not to, your Magnificence. After they located her, I devised a plan for abducting her that would entail a minimum of risk, and I didn't want to take a chance of tipping our hand ahead of time. Moreover, to carry out the plan successfully, I knew I would need to know as much about the girl's personality as possible, so I ordered the agents to concentrate on the villagers who knew her before she ran away from the orphanage and to question them exhaustively about her likes and her dislikes, her habits, and her attitude toward life. You *do* want her abducted, don't you, your Magnificence?"

O'RIORDAN: "Of course I do."

SMITH-KOLGOZ: "Good. Here then, your Magnificence, is what I've done thus far. First, I fed the data which the agents brought back into the *Ambassadress's* computer, together with the following command: 'Describe the sort of male which a female of this type would be most susceptible to—physically, emotionally, and intellectually.' Next, I correlated the computer's subsequent description with the dossiers of all the men in the fleet—a task of no mean magnitude, I can assure you, your Magnificence, but well worth the trouble. Naturally I couldn't narrow my choice down to one man on the data alone—the human animal simply isn't that varied. But on the basis of other qualifications, I was able to pinpoint the one who was most likely to succeed in carrying out the abduction. In my judgment he has an optimum chance of inspiring affection in this girl; then love, then trust. And once he has accomplished this, it will be child's play for him to obtain possession of her bow, and even possible for him to talk her into accompanying him voluntarily back to the *Ambassadress.* And if he is unable to talk her into accompanying him voluntarily, he can always resort to force."

Smith-Kolgoz paused. He made D'Arcy think of a puppy that had just retrieved a stick thrown by his master and expected to be patted on the head for his prowess. But O'Riordan remained unmoved. "And just who is this irresistible member of the male species?" he asked coldly, eyeing D'Arcy with open contempt.

"D'Arcy, stand up," Smith-Kolgoz said.

Diffidently, D'Arcy did so.

"Raymond D'Arcy, Decoder 2nd class, GGS *Watchdog,* your Magnificence," Smith-Kolgoz went on. "Not only does he possess the essential qualities I mentioned before, but he is the descendant of *Ciel Bleu* immigrants and has an excellent idiomatic command of the language. If we provide him with a believable story, give him the necessary directions to find the cave, and night-sled him into *Le Bois Ferique,* I am certain that in two weeks' time, he'll be able to deliver both Jeanne Marie Valcouris and her bow and arrows into our hands."

O'Riordan shook his head. "Oh, no, Smith-Kolgoz—the girl, yes; but not the weapon. The weapon, we don't want. Because you see, Smith-Kolgoz, this whole caper may have been designed for no other reason than to trick us into taking the bow and arrows on board the *Ambassadress,* and either or both

could be a force that, once it was set in motion, could reduce us to a state of paralysis or turn us into a bunch of mindless puppets. Surely you've heard of the Trojan Horse, Smith-Kolgoz, and surely I don't need to point out to you that while the *Ambassadress* isn't Troy, its 'fall' would mean the end of the Galaxi-Government, for the simple reason that to all intents and purposes, it *is* the Galaxi-Government."

Smith-Kolgoz's sharp-featured face had reddened. "The —the analogy failed to occur to me, your Magnificence," he said lamely. And then, "But what *should* we do with the bow and arrows, sir?"

"Bury them where they won't be found. After *Ciel Bleu* surrenders, I'll have them dug up and analyzed."

All this while O'Riordan hadn't once taken his eyes from D'Arcy's face. Now he said, "Doesn't it strike you, Smith-Kolgoz, that you're sending a boy on a man's mission?"

Smith-Kolgoz smiled ingratiatingly. "I must confess, your Magnificence, that at first it gave me pause. And then I realized that it wasn't a man's mission after all, but a boy's, and that essentially I was dealing with a new variation of an age-old love-story plot. Boy meets girl; boy makes girl; boy takes girl."

D'Arcy was a black-belt karate champion. He could clean and jerk over twice his own weight. He could chin himself ten times in succession with either hand. He had been decorated three times with the Barred Spiral for bravery above and beyond the call of duty. The margins of his palms were as hard as boards, and he could deliver a judo chop with the force of a sixteen-pound sledge. He felt his face grow hot, but he said nothing.

At length, O'Riordan said, "Do you think you can bring her back, boy?"

D'Arcy nodded. He did not trust himself to speak.

O'Riordan's eyes traversed the two rows of faces. "I think we should put the plan in operation. Anyone disagree?"

Heads shook in ludicrous unison. There was a chorus of sycophantic "No, sirs!" O'Riordan grunted and stood up. "All rise!" the council co-ordinator cried. All did.

To Smith-Kolgoz, O'Riordan said, "I want him in those woods before the passage of the next dawn belt." To D'Arcy, he said, "I'll give you ten days. If you haven't radioed to be picked up by then, I'll come down and do the job myself." He turned his back on the council table. "We'll see about those voices of hers," he muttered. "And if she wants to be Joan of Arc so bad, we'll let her be Joan of Arc." He stomped out of the room.

When she heard the voices for the first time, Jeanne Marie Valcouris was twelve years old.

There were two of them, and after a while, they told her whose voices they were. The gentle one was St. Rachel de Feu's; the authoritative one, Joseph Eleemosynary the almsgiver's. Joseph Eleemosynary was the founder of the Psycho-Phenomenalist Church and had been dead for one hundred and twenty years. Rachel de Feu was the first Psycho-Phenomenalist saint. She had been dead for seventy-six years.

In the beginning the voices were disembodied, but it wasn't long before they acquired faces. As Jeanne Marie had never seen a picture of either Rachel or Joseph, it is not surprising that neither visage bore the slightest resemblance to the original. As Jeanne Marie "saw" it, Rachel's face was round and sweet, with gentle blue eyes and lips that loved to smile. Joseph's face was young and handsome—dashing in a boyish sort of way. He had curly black hair and disturbing dark eyes. His complexion was slightly swarthy but very very clear. Sometimes it was hard for Jeanne Marie to tell which face she liked best.

Go into *Le Bois Ferique,* Joseph "said" when they became better acquainted, and Rachel de Feu and I will find a cave for you to live in and help you fix it up like a little house and show you how to do all sorts of wonderful things.

Jeanne Marie didn't even hesitate. She didn't like it at the orphanage. She never had. She missed her father too much and kept thinking about him all the time and couldn't keep up with her lessons. So she went into the woods and Joseph and Rachel found a cave for her and showed her how to turn it into a regular little house by thinking through her hands. They called the process "psychotelluricism," but she thought of it as "think-making." It was an ability that the inner hierarchs had developed shortly before O'Riordan the Reorganizer had seized power from the Psycho-Phenomenalist Church and massacred

them with radiation guns, Rachel de Feu explained. O'Riordan, when he heard about the process, had scoffed at it, saying that he didn't believe *anyone* could create solid objects by intellectual power alone to say nothing of semi-solid objects that could affect a person's emotions; but just the same, Rachel added, Jeanne Marie must be sure not to tell anyone that *she* had the ability.

After they showed her how to think-make the cave-house, they showed her how to think-make things to put in it —chairs, tables, dressers, rugs, drapes, lamps, a teleradio set, an escritoire, a self-regulating stove for the kitchen, a fireplace-furnace for the living room, a washer-drier for the utility room—and, most important of all, how to think-make things to eat. Oh, it was the most marvelous experience she had ever had! It was as though her fingers had little minds of their own and as though her hands were little factories that could produce anything under the sun. Rachel de Feu said that that wasn't the way it worked at all—that it was the energy she and Joseph Eleemosynary furnished her with that did the trick. This psychic energy, Rachel said, drew the necessary elements out of the ground and the air, combined them, and turned them into whatever Jeanne Marie wanted to make.

When the officials of the orphanage came into *Le Bois Feerique* and tried to get Jeanne Marie to return with them to the orphanage, Rachel and Joseph helped her to make gouts of smoke of the most horrendous shapes imaginable appear out of thin air and caused sparks to shoot from her fingers and fire to come out of her ears. The officials were so startled they nearly jumped out of their shoes and Jeanne Marie had never seen anyone run so fast in all her born days. After that, they left her alone, and people began calling her a witch. She didn't mind being called a witch, and if what she was, was a witch, she was glad of it. She had never had so much fun in her life.

When she was fifteen, Rachel and Joseph put her to work making a bow and arrows. The bow turned out to be the most beautiful thing imaginable. It was like a shaft of sunlight that someone had bent and strung with a bowstring made of morning mist. The arrows were scarcely less beautiful—and a good deal more remarkable. They were silver in hue, and so tenuous you had to look hard just to see them. She must take the bow with her everywhere she went, Joseph told her, and the arrows too. She made a little quiver out of daylight, darkness, sand, dust, time, hopes, dreams, wood, metal and a dozen other things and kept it slung over her shoulder except when she slept at night; then she kept it hanging on the bedpost next to her head, beside the golden bow.

When she was sixteen, Rachel and Joseph set her to work on an even more fascinating project—the manufacturing of a doll. Jeanne Marie was enchanted; she had never had a doll before, and wanted one more than anything else in the world. Day by day the doll grew—not rapidly, but very very slowly, for it was an extremely complicated piece of work. Jeanne Marie had had no idea it was so difficult to make a doll, not even such a big one, or that so many different things went into' one. The list of elements—even the few she could identify—made her head swim. But such a doll it turned out to be! No girl had ever had a doll that could remotely compare to it. Its very uniqueness was probably the reason that Rachel de Feu told her to enlarge the cave and set aside a special secret place for it. Jeanne Marie did better than that: she made a regular little room and furnished it with a bed, two chairs, a vanity, a dresser, and a little throwrug. By the time the project was completed, she was eighteen years old and had almost, but not quite, outgrown her need for dolls.

Her next project was a suit of armor, and compared to the doll-project was a relatively simple one. The purpose of the suit, Joseph "said," was twofold: to protect her from harm and to exert a psychological influence on the enemy. She made it out of stardust and metal and a hundred other things and when it was finished, she tried it on. It was as bright as the sun and as weightless as a cloud.

And now, Joseph and Rachel "said" in unison, the time has almost come, and you must go into the village of Baudelaire and take with you one of the golden combs you made for your hair and trade it for the most beautiful black horse you can find. And Jeanne Marie did, and she named the horse after St. Hermann O'Shaughnessy, the second Psycho-Phenomenalist saint. Then she thought-made a stable for him in the side of the hill next door to her own cave, and everyday, except when it rained, she went riding in the woods.

And now, Joseph Eleemosynary "said" one day, the time *has* come; and Jeanne Marie, knowing full well what he meant, had donned the shining suit of armor, mounted St. Hermann O'Shaughnessy, and

ridden proudly over the Provencal Plateau and entered the city of *Fleur du Sud.* Up and down the streets she rode in the morning light, crying, "Come and follow me, and I will lead you to victory over the forces of O'Riordan that threaten from the south. Come and help me save the Church of the Psycho-Phenomenalists from the powers of darkness." And St. Hermann O'Shaughnessy pranced and danced, and the people came out into the streets and cheered and when she set out toward *Le Fleuve d'Abondance,* they formed a ragged vanguard for her; and when the time came, she rode through the vanguard and launched a shining arrow into the sky, and the rain had come down in great torrents and washed the enemy away. And Jeanne Marie had returned to her cave in *Le Bois Feerique* to await her next Call.

One expected woods to be lovely in spring, but not as lovely as these woods were. D'Arcy, clad in *Ciel Bleu* peasant garb, still shivering from the pre-dawn dampness, rejoiced.

Leaving the clearing in which the pilot of the ship-to-ground sled had deposited him just before the passage of the dawn belt, he set forth into pleasant shadows and warm shafts of sunlight. Some of the trees were like fathers and some were like mothers and some were like little boys and girls. All lived together in a big happy family, green arms intertwined or green fingertips touching. Dawn dew was scattered like diamonds on the forest floor, and in the branches, real birds sang.

He proceeded on a straight course till he came to a brook; then he turned right and began walking upstream. The brook came from the hills, and it was in the hills, overlooking the little stream, that Jeanne Marie's cave was. The three ship-to-ground agents who had made the reconnaissance had briefed him before he departed and told him everything he needed to know.

About the terrain, that is.

Oh, they had told him about Jeanne Marie Valcouris, too, but he suspected that there were many things they hadn't told him about her because there were bound to be many things they hadn't found out about her.

She liked to walk, they had said, and she liked to run and play. She loved to go horseback riding through the woods. As a young girl she had been an avid reader. Her marks at the orphanage school had been about average and probably would have been higher if she had taken an interest in her studies. She liked to wear bright-colored clothes, and she loved brushes and combs and was forever combing her hair. She was very religious, and during her years at the orphanage, she had said her mystics morning, noon, and night.

D'Arcy was at a loss to understand why these things should make her physically, emotionally, and intellectually susceptible to him, but who was he to argue with the *Ambassadress's* computer?

The matter drifted from his mind, unable to compete with the distractions afforded by his surroundings. Pastel-colored flowers grew along the bank, ephemerally outlining the footsteps of a playful morning breeze. The brook sang as it purled over chalk-white pebbles, and now and then the shiny shards of fish could be seen, darting this way and that in the pellucid water. Foliage filtered sunlight lay upon the ground like scattered pirate's treasure.

A kilometer lay behind him. Halfway through another, he heard hoofbeats. They grew rapidly louder, overflowing the aisles and the bowers and the shady byways. Presently the brook broke out into a large clearing, and D'Arcy stepped into bright sunlight. Simultaneously, on the opposite side of the clearing, a horse and rider appeared.

He paused, but made no attempt to conceal himself. The horse was a black stallion and the rider was a girl wearing a blue skirt and a red blouse with white stripes. A golden bow hung on her right shoulder and the tufts of arrows showed above her left. She was both barefoot and hatless, and her light-brown hair was caught back from her face with a red ribbon. Her face made him think of a flower that had just opened its petals to the sun.

She rode right up to him and said, *"Bonjour, monsieur."*

"*Bonjour, mademoiselle*," he said back. "You must be *La Pucelle du Bois Feerique*."

She smiled, and little lights danced in her eyes. They were the same shade of brown her hair was, and there was a dimple in her left cheek. She was just beginning to lose the ripe fullness of adolescence and was on the verge of becoming a woman. "My name is Jeanne Marie Valcouris," she said, "and I am a

witch."

"So I've heard," he said.

"And you are not afraid?"

He grinned. "Why should I be afraid of a good witch? I can understand why I should be afraid of a bad one—yes. She could turn me into a newt or a toad, but a good witch could only turn me into something better than what I am, and I would be better, instead of worse, off."

Jeanne Marie laughed. Then she grew silent, and the attentive expression on her face indicated that she was listening, although what she was listening to he could not imagine. At length she said, "The voices like you. I'm glad, because I like you too."

"The 'voices'?"

"Joseph Eleemosynary and Rachel de Feu." Jeanne Marie slid down from the black horse, landing lightly on her bare feet. "And this is St. Hermann O'Shaughnessy. I think he likes you too."

St. Hermann O'Shaughnessy nickered. D'Arcy ran his fingers through the animal's black mane. "It's nice to know I've got so many friends," he said.

Remembering what McGrawski had said about malnutrition-produced hallucinations, he took a good look at the girl's face. Like her body, it bespoke a well-fed healthy female who, if she had ever fasted at all, hadn't done so for at least a month. Another explanation would have to be found for the voices.

But it wasn't up to D'Arcy to find it. His province was to abduct Jeanne Marie, not to find out what made her tick. "My name is Raymond D'Arcy, and I'm lost," he went on, somehow managing to make the second part of the statement sound as truthful as the first. "But even if I weren't lost, it wouldn't make much difference, because I couldn't go anywhere anyway. Last night while I was waiting for the air-diligence to Moliere, I was hit over the head and robbed, and when I came to, I found myself lying in a clearing in these woods."

The falsehood had been supplied by Smith-Kolgoz, who had insisted that a peasant girl like Jeanne Marie would be less apt to question a cliche than she would an original lie. Apparently he was right, for she made no attempt to check the story out by examining the bump on the side of the head which D'Arcy had had the pilot of the ship-to-ground sled administer to him. On the other hand, she seemed inordinately interested in D'Arcy's face and incapable of taking her eyes from it. He had no way of knowing that it bore a startling resemblance to Joseph Eleemosynary's—Jeanne Marie's version, that is—nor that at that very moment Rachel de Feu was saying, "He certainly seems like a nice enough young man, child—why don't you help him?"

Jeanne Marie needed no second invitation. "Come, Raymond," she said, "and I will fix you something to eat at my house. It's only a little ways from here."

She set off along the brook, leading St. Hermann O'Shaughnessy. Guiltily, D'Arcy walked along beside her. "I have a very lovely house," she said, "wait'll you see. Some people would call it a cave, but they would be surprised. Of course," she added, "I've never invited anyone inside before."

He took advantage of their proximity and got a good look at the bow. Aside from discovering that it had been formed from an alloy which he couldn't identify and which left painful afterimages on his retina, he ended up no wiser than he had been before. A scrutiny of the arrows netted him even less. All he could see of them were notched ends and their silvery tufts, and somehow he got the impression that he wasn't seeing even that much of them.

He wanted to question her about the unusual weapon. But decided to defer doing so till a later date.

For some time now, the ground on either side of the brook, excluding the flower-pied terraces that bordered the water, had been rising. Soon, tree-clad successions of hills appeared, and the hillsides grew more and more abrupt. When at length the girl, D'Arcy, and St. Hermann O'Shaughnessy came opposite the cave, D'Arcy didn't even know it was there. The trees by this time had given way to vinelike growths and it wasn't till Jeanne Marie parted a curtain of these vines that he saw the opening. She parted another curtain, and he saw St. Hermann O'Shaughnessy's cave-stable. The floor was lined with hay, and there was a manger for him to eat out of and one for him to drink out of. He even had a light to see by—a self-perpetuating pinup lamp with a pink shade.

She left Hermann on the terrace to graze—he was such a stay-at-home, she said, that she didn't even

bother to tether him except at night—and escorted D'Arcy into her cave-house. He was astonished when he saw the interior. There were four rooms and a closet—at least he assumed that the door in the bedroom gave access to a closet—and each room was completely furnished. Walls and ceilings were composed of fine-grained natural wood; the floors were tile, and strewn with throwrugs. The lights were of the self-perpetuating type, and each of the appliances had its own self-perpetuating motor. Running water was provided by subterranean pressure-pipes leading up from the brook.

Jeanne Marie seated him at the kitchen table and got eggs and bacon out of a little refrigerator that looked for all the world like a hope chest, and while the bacon was sizzling on the stove, she made coffee. She had a cup with him after he finished eating, and when he asked her how in the world a slip of a girl like her had been able to transform an ordinary cave into a house fit for a princess, she smiled. "I can't tell you," she said, "because it's a secret." And then, astonishingly, "Would you like to live here with me?"

He tried not to stare at her, but he wasn't altogether successful. Surely, he thought, she can't be *that* naive. It seemed almost a shame to take advantage of her. "What do your voices think of the idea?" he countered.

"Oh, they are all for it. I can fix a place for you to sleep on the sofa. It's quite large, and I'm certain you'll be quite comfortable. Also, I'll think—I'll make you some pajamas, and some trousers and shirts. Would you like another cup of coffee?"

"Thanks," said D'Arcy weakly.

Living in *Le Bois Feerique* with Jeanne Marie Valcouris, he discovered presently, was a little like being a child all over again and living—really living, that is—in one of the make believe worlds your nine- or ten-year-old mind had devised.

Long before his coming Jeanne Marie had invented all sorts of games to amuse herself, and now she made the necessary changes in the rules to permit two people to play. Three, if you counted St. Hermann O'Shaughnessy, for he was an indispensable part of many of them. In addition to the games, there were picnics in idyllic clearings and long and leisurely walks back into the wooded hills. Morning was invariably at seven and the hillsides were just as invariably dew-pearled; and in Jeanne Marie's heaven, at least, all was right with the world.

Evenings, they spent sitting at the base of the vine curtain that covered the cave-house mouth, looking at the stars and commenting now and then on the various happenings of the day. Some of the stars they looked at were planets—*Ciel Bleu* had eleven sisters—and some of them were the ships of O'Riordan's fleet. The latter were easily distinguishable from the others, not only because of their perceptible movement but because they followed a perfect equatorial path. They looked like an attenuated diamond necklace held together by an invisible string. The flagship was the pendant, and was distinguishable from the other diamonds by its size and its orange hue. It reminded D'Arcy of a moon sometimes, and in a way it was a moon—an artificial moon with a man in it who wanted to conquer the cosmos.

Jeanne Marie would look at the flagship again and again from the moment it rose in the northeast to the moment it set in the northwest. But when he commented on her interest she said that it wasn't she who was interested but Joseph and Rachel. "They see and hear through me," she explained. "So whenever they are interested in something, I let them look or listen to their hearts' content."

He gazed into her eyes, searching them for some sign of guile, but he saw nothing except tiny stars—stars no less lovely than the ones that swam high above her head. It embarrassed him that he himself had brought them into being. Yes, she was in love with him already, Jeanne Marie was. The computer had been right. But ironically he felt nothing for her except a brotherly affection. It was better that way, he supposed—it made what he had to do a lot easier.

Wherever she went, her bow and quiver of arrows went too. One day he asked her why they were such an inseparable part of her, pointing out that she never tried to bring down any of the small game that frequented the region, and she answered him, saying that Joseph and Rachel had instructed her to keep them with her at all times, as they had many magic properties, any one of which would protect her from harm.

D'Arcy had a sudden hunch. "Did Rachel and Joseph help you make the bow and the arrows?" he

asked.

She nodded reluctantly. "Yes."

He didn't for one minute believe her, but it was perfectly possible that she believed herself. "And the cave house and the furniture?"

Another reluctant nod.

He grinned. "What would happen if I touched the bow?" he asked. "Would I turn into a grasshopper?"

"Of course not," she laughed. "But if I shot an arrow at you, there's no telling what might become of you. Not," she added hurriedly, "that I'd dream of doing such a thing."

One afternoon when they were walking in the woods, they became separated and D'Arcy was unable to find her. Reasoning that she would probably head back to the cave, he set out in that direction. But although he walked fast, he saw no sign of her. By the time he reached the cave, he was half convinced that something had happened to her.

He went inside and called her name. No answer. Was she hiding on him, perhaps? Frequently she did such things; indeed, hiding on each other was one of the games they played. He looked under the sofa. He went out into the kitchen and peered behind the stove. He searched the utility room. Finally he entered the bedroom and looked under her bed. There was nothing there except one of the pairs of shoes she disdained to wear.

Straightening, he found himself staring at the door to her closet. He snapped his fingers. He'd bet any money she was hiding behind it, concealed, probably, among multicolored dresses, blouses, and skirts. Grinning, he seized the knob, intending to turn it quickly and throw the door wide open. But the knob refused to turn. Looking at it closely, he saw that it was equipped with a fingerprint-lock and that the lock had been depressed.

Frowning, he left the room. None of Jeanne Marie's other doors was equipped with a print-lock—why, then, had she chosen to make a single exception? Was it because she kept her suit of armor in the closet and didn't want him to see it? Now that he came to think of it, she had never mentioned her role in the Battle of *Fleur du Sud.* Maybe she was ashamed of what she had done.

He was inclined to doubt it, which meant he would have to look elsewhere for an answer. Then, emerging from the cave, he saw Jeanne Marie coming out of the woods, and he was so relieved to see her and to know she was all right that he forgot all about the incident.

On another occasion when he was walking in the woods —alone, this time—he wandered into a deep, gloomy hollow and came upon two skeletons. They were stretched out side by side beneath a granite overhang and one of them—judging from its more delicate bones—was that of a woman. There were several rotted wisps of clothing in evidence, and near the man lay a small brass disk. D'Arcy picked it up. It was thickly corroded, but after scraping away the verdigris with his pocket knife, he saw that it was a Psycho-Phenomenalist identification tag. According to it, the man's name had been Alexander Kane. The name rang a bell in D'Arcy's mind, but for the life of him, he couldn't remember where he had run across it before.

It also struck a note of incongruity. On *Ciel Bleu,* as on all nationalist planets, the inhabitants bore names strictly in keeping with their common ancestry, and whatever else it might be, "Alexander Kane" wasn't French.

Before leaving the hollow, D'Arcy pocketed the disk, and when he got back to the cave, he showed it to Jeanne Marie and told her about the skeletons. "I have seen them," she said. "They have been there for many years. But I never go near them."

"Are you afraid of them?"

She shook her head. "I—I don't think so. But Rachel and Joseph have expressly forbidden me to visit that part of the forest unless I absolutely have to."

Why? D'Arcy wondered. But he didn't ask the question aloud. For one thing, he doubted very much whether Jeanne Marie knew the answer herself, and for another, he still refused to take the voices seriously and was reluctant to give them credence by discussing them. They were Smith-Kolgoz's problem anyway not his. And if not Smith-Kolgoz's—O' Riordan's.

But the problem wouldn't leave him alone, especially this new aspect of it. Why, he kept wondering over and over, should two voices in Jeanne Marie's mind—assuming there really *were* two voices in her mind—be afraid of two harmless sets of bones?

That night as he lay sleeping on the sofa, a low voice awakened him. It was O'Riordan's and its source—or at least its apparent source—was the miniature receiver-transmitter concealed in D'Arcy's wristwatch. "Two more days to go, D'Arcy. Just thought I'd remind you."

D'Arcy was incredulous, not only because O'Riordan had deigned to radio him personally but because he had lost all track of time. In one way, it seemed as though he had only been in *Le Bois Feerique* for a few days; in another, it seemed as though he had been there all his life.

"You there, D'Arcy?" O'Riordan demanded.

"Yes—yes, sir."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it," said the man in the moon. "Everything going according to schedule?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I'll expect to hear from you within the next forty-eight hours then. If I don't, you can expect to hear from me. And remember—before you leave, bury that bow and those arrows. Deep—and where nobody will find them."

The man in the moon signed off.

That was the end of D'Arcy's sleep for that night. When dawn came, he was still battling with his conscience, but he had it pretty well under control. In a way, he would be doing Jeanne Marie a favor by abducting her. Idyllic or not, a forest was no place for a young lady to live in. Charming or not, a cave was not a fitting habitat for a young girl. O'Riordan's arbiters were six sycophants clad in long black robes that made them look like bears and when O'Riordan said "Dance!" the bears danced; but according to the rules agreed upon at the Deimos Convention, Jeanne Marie could not be tried as a war criminal, and while O'Riordan would definitely try her for something, her sentence should be slight. And when *Ciel Bleu* was conquered—as it would be within a month—she would be turned over to an appropriate department of the new government, which would re-educate her, rehabilitate her, and find a suitable place for her in the new society.

That afternoon, he radioed the *Ambassadress,* gave the coordinates of the cave, and arranged to be picked up two hours before the next dawn belt passed over *Le Bois Feerique.* He and Jeanne Marie spent the day rambling through the woods, alternately riding St. Hermann O'Shaughnessy or walking along side by side, with St. Hermann bringing up the rear. She had packed a picnic lunch, and they ate in a woodland glen several kilometers from the cave. Curious from the beginning as to how and where she obtained her food supply, D'Arcy finally got around to asking her point-blank. He expected her to smile and say it was a secret, and that was precisely what she did.

If it hadn't been for two considerations, he would have sworn that she was capable of psycho-telluricism. But, like O'Riordan, he believed psycho-telluricism to be nothing more than a my th that the Psycho-Phenomenalist hierarchy had invented in order to frighten the enemies of the Church; and even if he had believed it to be something more than a myth, he still wouldn't have deemed Jeanne Marie capable of it, because its first prerequisite was a genius-level IQ and its second, the availability of a "parasynthetic mind" of similar IQ level with which "ideal rapprochement" could be both attained and maintained.

Darkness was beginning to gather when they got back to the cave. After putting St. Hermann O'Shaughnessy to bed, they sat down on the hillside and watched the stars come out. The "moon" rose above the horizon right on schedule. On its next pass, a moonbeam would come sliding down the dark and awesome slope of space and take D'Arcy and Jeanne Marie away.

D'Arcy tried not to think about it, only to discover that he had no volition in the matter. That night, before going to bed, he set his mental alarm-clock for two hours after midnight. Arising, he dressed in darkness; then he crept into the bedroom where Jeanne Marie lay lost in sleep in the pale radiance of the nightlight that hung above her bed. Deftly, he lifted the bow and the quiver of arrows from the bedpost. As he did so, she stirred and turned on her side, facing in his direction. He stood there tensely, not daring to move, expecting her to open her eyes at any moment. But her eyes remained closed, and presently she

sighed softly, as though still deep in sleep. Relieved, he tiptoed from the room, through the living room, and out into the night.

He buried the bow and arrows in the hollow where the two skeletons lay, reasonably certain that no one ever came there. By the time he got back to the cave, the *Ambassadress* was rising above the horizon again. He sat down in front of the vine-curtain to await the arrival of the moonbeam.

He saw it presently. It was like a falling star. Down, down, it fell, drifting toward *Le Bois Feerique* now; now homing in on the co-ordinates he had supplied. At length the little craft settled down on the flower-pied terrace that bordered the brook.

The transparent nacelle opened and the pilot climbed out. Spotting D'Arcy, he came over and asked him if he needed any help. "No," D'Arcy said, and got up and went into St. Hermann O'Shaughnessy's stable and untied him. "Good bye, old buddy," he said, patting the animal on the croup. "Jeanne Marie and I are going away, and I'm afraid we won't be back."

Leaving the stable, he entered the cave-house. As he stepped into the bedroom, he thought he heard a muffled sob, but he must have been mistaken because Jeanne Marie appeared to be fast asleep. He shook her gently by the shoulder, marveling at the cool smoothness of her skin. "Get up and get dressed, Jeanne Marie," he said when she opened her eyes.

"Is something wrong, Raymond?" she asked. And then, "Where is my bow? Where are my arrows?"

"You mustn't ask questions, Jeanne Marie. You must trust me and do as I say. You do trust me, don't you?"

Her face was inscrutable in the dim radiance of the night-light. "Yes, Raymond, I trust you completely."

Hating himself, he waited while she dressed; then he led her out of the cave. It wasn't until she saw the ship-to-ground sled that she appeared to guess the truth, but he had a firm grip on her arm and when she tried to break away, she got nowhere. He forced her into the sled and sat down beside her. "I'm sorry, Jeanne Marie," he said. "I hope someday you'll try to forgive me."

She did not look at him, nor did she say a word. The pilot got behind the controls and closed the nacelle, and the little craft rose above *Le Bois Feerique* and became a moonbeam once again.

NOW HEAR THIS/NOW HEAR THIS/NOW HEAR THIS GGS AMBASSADRESS:

10 9/MONTH, 2353

SUBJECT: TRIAL AND SENTENCING OF ONE JEANNE MARIE VALCOURIS, CHARGED WITH INVOKING THE FORCES OF NATURE AND USING THEM TO SUPPLEMENT THE LEGALIZED WEAPONS OF CIVILIZED WARFARE.

FINDINGS: 1) THAT THE FORCES OF NATURE, WHEN USED AGAINST MAN, CONSTITUTE AN ACT OF GOD, AND THAT SUCH AN ACT IN THE TIME OF WAR IS CONTRARY TO THE RULES LAID DOWN BY THE DEIMOS CONVENTION; 2) THAT A CRIME OF THIS MAGNITUDE CANNOT BE ATONED FOR THROUGH ORDINARY PUNITIVE PROCEDURE; 3) THAT JEANNE MARIE VALCOURIS DID KNOWINGLY COMMIT THIS CRIME AND IS LIABLE FOR IT; AND 4) THAT THE VOICES WHICH JEANNE MARIE VALCOURIS CLAIMS TO HEAR ARE AUDIO-VISUALIZATIONS SIMILAR TO THOSE DESCRIBED BY FRANCIS GALTON, CIRCA A.D. 1883, AND HAVE NO BEARING ON HER CRIME.

SENTENCE: JEANNE MARIE VALCOURIS, HAVING STEADFASTLY REFUSED TO REVEAL TO THIS COURT THE TRUE NATURE OF THE WEAPON WHICH SHE EMPLOYED AGAINST THE 97TH INFANTRY UNIT OF DROP XVI AND THE IDENTITY OF THE PERSON OR PERSONS WHO SUPPLIED IT, SHALL, AT 0945 HOURS ON THE MORNING OF 11 9/MONTH, 2353, BE ESCORTED FROM THE AMBASSADRESS'S BRIG TO THE GREEN AND THERE BE SECURED TO A WOODEN STAKE, WHICH SHALL IN THE MEANTIME HAVE BEEN ERECTED ON THE PLAZA, AND BE BURNED ALIVE BEFORE A BATTERY OF RADIO-TELEVISION TRANSMITTERS WHICH WILL CARRY HER IMAGE AND HER SCREAMS INTO EVERY LIVING ROOM ON CIEL BLEU.

ALL OFF-DUTY PERSONNEL ARE REQUESTED TO ATTEND.

D'Arcy was horrified.

Four hours had elapsed since he had turned Jeanne Marie over to Smith-Kolgoz and he had spent them wandering about the Green, waiting for someone to remember his presence and arrange for his return to the *Watchdog.* When the incredible announcement had appeared on the plaza's teletype screen, he had been sitting under a nearby tree, thinking of *Le Bois Feerique.*

His first impulse was to storm O'Riordan's heavily guarded suite and kill the man with his bare hands. He had badly underestimated the Reorganizer's ruthlessness and his resourcefulness and he had forgotten that the laws of war, like all laws, could be manipulated to fit any and all situations and to effect whatever result the manipulator desired to bring about. Jeanne Marie had provided O'Riordan with an ideal means of bringing the inhabitants of *Ciel Bleu* to their knees, and he had intended to burn her at the stake all along, whether she revealed the secret of the bow and arrows to him or not.

But D'Arcy did not act on the impulse. To have done so would have resulted not in O'Riordan's death but his own, and Jeanne Marie would have been no better off than she had been before. His only logical course of action was to concentrate his energies on rescuing her, and this he proceeded to do.

He was already in the right place. All he had to do was to conceal himself and wait till the right moment. Night and day were strictly differentiated on the *Ambassadress,* and every evening at 1800 hours the artificial sunshine that bathed the Green during the day automatically diminished itself to a pale glow that resembled starlight, and every evening at the same time, the taped birdsong that provided the sonic background for the daylight hours automatically gave way to the taped pipings and stridulations of insects. He waited till after the metamorphosis took place; then he found a secluded bower and settled down for the night, praying that his presence on board the *Ambassadress* would go unremembered for at least another sixteen hours.

He did not try to sleep, but sat in stony silence, wondering why it had taken him so long to see O'Riordan for what he really was. D'Arcy's myopia was inexcusable, for he had read history, and history was full of O'Riordans. Some of them had worn deerskins and some of them had worn tunics and some of them had worn oriental raiment and some of them had worn uniforms and some of them had worn hair shirts and some of them had worn Brooks Brothers suits; but every one of them had been a member of the same fraternity and all of them had placed power on a pedestal, and the ruthless methods they had employed to acquire it were comparable only to the ruthless methods they had employed to keep it.

Toward "dawn" D'Arcy chose a strategically located tree, climbed into its branches, and ensconced himself on a leafy limb that arched over the path down which the brig wardens would lead Jeanne Marie some three hours and forty-five minutes hence. It was his plan to wrest the girl from them, head for the nearest boat bay, board one of the escape boats, plummet to the surface of *Ciel Bleu,* and land in *Le Bois Feerique.* There he would dig up the bow and arrows and employ them in Jeanne Marie's defense. It was an ambitious undertaking to say the least, but it was the only chance he had.

At 0700 hours the ship's carpenters showed up and began erecting a wooden stake on the plaza. Around it, they piled synthetic fagots that would burn with ten times the intensity of ordinary wood. After they left, the radio-television techs came around and set up their transmitting equipment. Finally, the maintenance crew appeared, cut a vent in the "sky" directly above the stake, installed a powerful suction fan, and ran two hundred feet of intra-deck ventilation-tubing to the nearest exhaust lock. All was now in readiness for the auto-da-fe.

Toward 0900 hours the Green began to fill with O'Riordan's advisors, his arbiters, his bodyguards, his Ministers of War, his Chiefs of Staff, his Secret Police, his Civilian-Control employees, his Reorganization employees, his Intelligence agents, his personal cuisine, and his mistresses, valets, manicurists, barbers, physicians, and the off-duty members of the *Ambassadress's* crew. The atmosphere should have been one of horror. It was nothing of the sort. There was laughter and there was levity; there were dirty jokes and there were dirty digs. A male member of the reorganization corps pinched a female member of the civilian-control corps; a barber stole a kiss from a manicurist behind a weeping willow tree; a homosexual physician struck up a conversation with a homosexual chief of staff. An intelligence agent broke out a fifth of Scotch. Blessed are the sycophants and the civil-service seekers, D'Arcy thought, for they shall inherit the cosmos.

He was hungry and he was tired, and his arms and legs were cramped from clinging to the limb. But he was hardly aware of any of these things. He knew only hatred and disgust.

A little after 0900 hours O'Riordan himself appeared, flanked as always by his bodyguards. Two of the guards carried a brocaded armchair, and after the party made its way through the crowd to the edge of the plaze, the two guards set the chair on the ground and O'Riordan seated himself. He was wearing a snow-white uniform with epaulettes the color of blood and he was smoking a long cigar.

D'Arcy's hands had flattened of their own accord and turned themselves into deadly weapons. He forced them to relax; forced himself to go on clinging to the limb. His one remaining mission in life was to rescue Jeanne Marie, not to assassinate O'Riordan.

At length a silence swept the Green, and looking up the path he saw her approaching. Her light-brown hair fell in disarray about her winsome face; her gaudy peasant garb made a vivid splash of color upon the verdant background. As always, she was barefoot.

Accompanying her were three burly brig wardens armed with numbguns. D'Arcy raised himself to his hands and knees and when the quartet was directly beneath him, he sprang.

Alighting on the shoulders of the warden who was bringing up the rear, he dispatched the man with a powerful chop to the side of the neck. He was upon the second warden before the fellow had a chance to turn all the way around. He sent him crashing to the path with a sledge-hammer rabbit punch.

By this time, warden no. 3 was in the process of drawing his numbgun. D'Arcy brought a board-like hand down on the man's forearm, shattering the bone, and the numbgun went flying. Catching it with one hand, D'Arcy seized Jeanne Marie's wrist with the other. "Come on," he said, "we'll have to run for it!"

To his amazement, she held back. "Why are you still here?" she gasped. "Why weren't you returned to your own ship?"

He wondered vaguely, way in the back of his mind, how she had found out that he didn't belong on this one. But he did not pursue the mystery. "Never mind," he said. "Come on!"

"No, no—you don't understand!"

Angrily, he picked her up and slung her over his shoulder. She was surprisingly heavy for so slight a girl, but it wasn't her weight that hampered him—it was her frenzied attempts to free herself. "For heaven's sake, Jeanne Marie," he cried, "do you *want* them to burn you?"

"Yes, yes!" Abruptly she ceased struggling and went limp. "But you don't understand and I can't make you in so short a time. Oh, it's hopeless!"

He was running now. Behind him and to his left and to his right, people were shouting and screaming. Secret police popped onto the path to bar his way, but he numbgunned them down before they had a chance to bring their own weapons into play. The trees thinned out, and he came to the esplanade that bordered the administrative sector. Turning right, he pounded toward the red-lit entrance of the boat-bay corridor. After he passed through it, he and his burden were borne swiftly to their destination. Arriving in the bay, he closed the heavy emergency doors and sealed them. Until such time as they could be burned through, he and Jeanne Marie were safe.

The bay contained eighteen escape boats altogether. They stood side by side on an automatic launcher and the first one was already in position before the self-operating locks. He carried Jeanne Marie over to it and lowered her into the cockpit; then he climbed in after her and closed the nacelle. He leaned forward to inspect the controls. He glimpsed the descending wrench out of the corner of his eye. Where she had obtained it, he did not know. Probably she had found it on the seat. He had a hunch even before he tried to dodge that he was too late, and he was right. The stars that presently swam before his eyes burned almost as brightly as the stars that lay upon the face of night, and the darkness that followed them was almost as black as space.

D'Arcy had been knocked out before; consequently, when he regained consciousness a subjective second later, he suspected that objectively he had been out for a far longer period of time.

A brief survey of his surroundings more than confirmed it.

The escape boat hung like a tiny ornament on the vast Christmas tree of space. Behind it—perhaps a hundred kilometers distant—hung the larger ornament of the *Ambassadress,* and backgrounding the flagship was the largest—and by far the loveliest—ornament of all: *Ciel Bleu.*

It wasn't difficult to figure out what had happened. After striking him with the wrench, Jeanne Marie had programmed a course on the a.p., climbed out of the escape boat, and launched the craft into space.

Buy why? And how had a simple peasant girl managed to carry out such a sophisticated operation?

His head ached fiercely and his thoughts kept tripping over one another's feet; nevertheless, he found an answer to the first question. Jeanne Marie had wanted to get him out of the way so that she could allow herself to be recaptured ... and burned.

He now had another "why" to contend with—a rather large and horrible one.

Like all escape boats, the one in which he had been jettisoned was equipped with a radio-television unit. The receiver was already tuned to the *Ambassadress's* channel; it remained but for him to activate the screen. With trembling fingers he did so.

He recoiled. The burning was already in progress.

Frenziedly he halted the headlong flight of the escape boat and turned the craft around, all the while aware that he was acting out of blind instinct and that Jeanne Marie was beyond earthly aid.

Abruptly the screen went blank.

He fumbled with the tuning mechanism, not because he wanted to bring the hideous scene back to life, but because he felt somehow that he had to. But the screen refused to co-operate and he picked up nothing but snow.

Presently he became aware of a strange brightness. It was all around him in the cockpit, but the cockpit was not its source. Raising his eyes, he looked through the transparent nacelle ... and turned his gaze quickly away.

Where the *Ambassadress* had been, a nova was in the process of being born.

Shocked, he changed the escape boat's course. The shock had a cleansing effect on his mind, and after it passed, he found himself possessed of a clarity of thought he had never known before. He took the two skeletons he had stumbled upon in *Le Bois Ferrique* and tied them in with the voices Jeanne Marie's mind. Then, for the sake of deduction, he assumed not only that the Psycho-Phenomenalist hierarchs had really developed psycho-telluricism but that they had used it as a stepping stone to yet another mental milestone: the ability to concentrate awareness and will in the intellect and achieve a sort of transcendant existence, or ens; and to separate the ens from the flesh.

It was common knowledge that when O'Riordan had overthrown the terrestrial Psycho-Phenomenalist Church, he had employed radiation guns to destroy its hierarchs. It was also common knowledge that a few of the hierarchs, although fatally burned, had managed to escape to the outlying planets of the pre-reorganization empire where Psycho-Phenomenalism had obtained a firm if primitive, foothold. O'Riordan had never pursued them for the simple reason that to all intents and purposes, they were already dead.

Having proceeded thus far, it was now a simple matter for D'Arcy to remember who Alexander Kane was—or rather, who he had been. He was one of the hierarchs who had escaped—and his wife, Priscilla Kane, had escaped with him.

It was now possible to piece together what must have happened. Arriving on *Ciel Bleu,* Alexander and Priscilla had known that they had but a few days to live and that consequently their only means of thwarting O'Riordan and bringing about his eventual defeat was through their entia. This meant that they would have to find a host, because their entia were capable of moving only a limited distance through space, and even though capable of telepathy, incapable of functioning effectively without eyes and ears. Either Alexander or Priscilla had remembered the Joan of Arc legend, and the plan had been born. Jeanne Marie had represented an ideal host and after transforming themselves into entia, Alexander and Priscilla had abandoned their decaying bodies in *Le Bois Feerique* and taken up residence in her mind. Masquerading as her protectors, they put their plan into action. The bow and arrows they had helped Jeanne Marie make had been a decoy designed to distract O'Riordan's attention from the real Trojan Horse—Jeanne Marie—and once on board the *Ambassadress,* Alexander and Priscilla had waited till the psychological moment, transformed their entia into pure energy, and blown the *Ambassadress*—and themselves and Jeanne Marie—to Kingdom Come.

D'Arcy leaned forward and rested his head on the control panel. He remained in that position for a long time. At sporadic intervals, shudder after shudder racked his body. When at last the reaction passed, he straightened, and punched out the co-ordinates of *Le Bois Feerique* on the a.p. Finally he deflected the lever marked "Full Speed."

Why did D'Arcy return to *Le Bois Feerique?*

Who can say? Perhaps because he was still curious about the bow and arrows and not altogether certain that "Joseph Eleemosynary" and "Rachel de Feu" had caused the cloudburst that had washed the 97th into *Le Fleuve d'Abondance.* Perhaps because he wanted to visit Jeanne Marie's cave-house and put her things in order.

He would have had to return to *Ciel Bleu* in any event, for mere moments after the destruction of the *Ambassadress,* the remainder of the demoralized fleet had departed for Earth.

He put up the bow and the arrows first. Then, leaving the escape boat in the little clearing where he had brought it down, he walked through the woods to the cave-house. Before going inside, he glanced into St. Hermann O'Shaughnessy's stable. It was empty.

The cave-house was empty too. He had expected it to be, of course, but just the same he experienced a tightness in his chest as he walked through the quaint little rooms.

He stepped softly into the bedroom. He looked at the empty bed. "Forgive me, Jeanne Marie," he whispered.

Suddenly he noticed that the door he had tried in vain to open a week ago was no longer closed. But it did not lead to a closet. It led to another room.

Wonderingly, he stepped through the doorway. The room was almost identical to the one he had just left. There was a bed, a vanity, a chest of drawers; a little throwrug upon the floor ... Had Jeanne Marie had a twin sister perhaps?

No, not a twin *sister* …

D'Arcy already knew the truth when he stepped out of the cave-house into the morning sunlight and saw the girl on horseback emerging from the woods on the opposite side of the brook. When she got her eyes on him, her face lit up like a little sun, and she sent the black stallion plunging through the stream and slid from his back the moment he reached the bank. St. Hermann O'Shaughnessy nickered a happy hello and Jeanne Marie cried, "Raymond, you came back! Be—before Joseph and Rachel went away with you, they said you probably would, but I was afraid you might not, and oh, Raymond, I'm so glad to see you again!"

D'Arcy's voice wasn't quite as steady as he would have liked it to be. "Then you're not mad at me for—for—"

"For stealing my doll? Of course I'm not. Joseph and Rachel said that it was all part of the plan—that was why they had me put it in my bed that night and hide in the other room. I didn't know then what the doll really was, or what they were going to do. Will—will they be back, do you think?"

D'Arcy shook his head. "No, Jeanne Marie."

Tears trembled in the corners of her eyes and one of them escaped and twinkled down her cheek. "I am sorry. They were very nice."

"Yes," D'Arcy said, "and very brave."

Brave, yes—but not quite as omnipotent as he had thought. The doll that they had brought to life had been the bomb—not they themselves. They had merely been the detonator.

"Before they left my mind," Jeanne Marie said, "they made me promise them something." She selected an arrow from the quiver and placed it in D'Arcy's right hand "They told me that if you came back, I should have you shoot this arrow into the air. They said that that was part of the plan, too, only they didn't say 'plan' then—they said 'plot."

"All right," D'Arcy said, "I will."

And he did. The arrow went up and up and up ... and then it turned around and came streaking straight back toward him. He leaped to one side, but it merely made the necessary adjustments in its course to reach its predetermined target. He felt nothing as it entered his chest and penetrated his heart. Nothing he could put his finger on, anyway.

Abruptly the bow disintegrated and disappeared. So did the arrow transfixed in his heart. So did the rest of the arrows.

When next D'Arcy looked at Jeanne Marie, he saw a beautiful woman instead of a pretty girl—the very woman for whom he had been searching all his life and had never been able to find. Before he knew what had happened, she was in his arms and he was kissing her.

"Joseph Eleemosynary" and "Rachel de Feu" had believed in happy endings.

On the River

Farrell was beginning to think that he had the River all to himself when he saw the girl. He had been traveling downstream for nearly two days now—River days, that is. He had no way of knowing for certain, but he was convinced that River time had very little to do with real time. There were days and nights here, yes, and twenty-four hours elapsed between each dawn. But there was a subtle difference between time as he had known it once and time as he knew it now.

The girl was standing at the water's edge, waving a diminutive handkerchief. It was obvious that she wanted him to pole over to the bank. He did so, forcing the raft out of the sluggish current and into the shallows. Several yards from shore it nudged bottom, and he leaned on the pole, holding the raft in position and looking questioningly at the girl. It surprised him to discover that she was young and attractive, although it shouldn't have, he supposed. Assuming that he had created her, it was only logical that he would have made her pleasing to the eye; and assuming that he had not, it was illogical to conclude that merely because he had reached the age of thirty, it was necessary for someone else to reach the age of thirty in order not to want to go on living. Her hair was only a shade less bright than the splash of afternoon sunlight in which she stood, and she wore it very short. A scattering of freckles lightly dappled the bridge of her delicate nose and the immediate areas on either side. She was willowy, and rather tall, and she had blue eyes.

"I'd like to share your raft," she said across the several yards of water that separated her from him. "My own broke loose during the night and drifted downstream, and I've been walking ever since dawn."

Her yellow dress was torn in a dozen places, Farrell noticed, and the slender slippers that encased her feet had already reached the point of no return. "Sure," he said. "You'll have to wade to get on board, though. This is as far in as I can get."

"I don't mind."

The water came to her knees. He helped her up beside him; then, with a strong thrust of the pole, he sent the raft back into the current. The girl shook her head as though her hair had once been long and she had forgotten that it had been cut, and wanted the wind to blow it. "I'm Jill Nichols," she said. "Not that it matters very much."

"Clifford," Farrell said. "Clifford Farrell."

She sat down on the raft and removed her shoes and stockings. After laying the pole aside, he sat down a few feet from her. "I was beginning to think I was the only one making the journey," he said.

The wind was moderate but brisk and was blowing upstream, and she faced into it as though expecting it to send her hair streaming behind her. The wind did its best, but succeeded only in ruffling the almost-curls that fringed her pale forehead. "I thought I was all alone, too."

"The way I had it figured," Farrell said, "the River was the product of my imagination. Now I see that it can't be—unless you're a product of my imagination also."

She smiled at him sideways. "Don't say that. I thought you were a product of mine."

He smiled back at her. It was the first time he had smiled in ages. "Maybe the River's an allegorical product of both our imaginations. Maybe this is the way you thought it would be, too. Drifting down a dark-brown stream, I mean, with trees on either hand and the blue sky above. Did you?"

"Yes," she said. "I've always thought that when the time came, it would be like this."

A thought struck him. "I took it for granted that because I'm here voluntarily, you are too. Are you?"

"Yes."

"Maybe," he went on, "two people visualizing an abstract idea by means of the same allegory can make that allegory come to life. Maybe, down through the years and without our being aware of it, we brought the River into existence."

"And then, when the time came, cast ourselves adrift on it? But where is the River? Surely, we can't still be on earth."

He shrugged. "Who knows? Reality probably has a thousand phases mankind knows nothing about. Maybe we're in one of them ... How long have you been on the River?"

"A little over two days. I lost time today because I had to go on foot."

"I've been on it almost two days," Farrell said.

"I must have been the first to com—the first to cast myself adrift then." She wrung out her stockings and spread them on the raft to dry. She placed her bedraggled slippers beside them. She stared at the articles for some time. "Funny the way we do such things at a time like this," she said. "Why should it make any difference to me now whether my shoes and stockings are wet or dry?"

"I guess we're creatures of habit," he said. "Right up to the very end. Last evening, at the inn where I stayed the night, I shaved. True, there was an electric razor available; but why did I go to the trouble?"

She smiled wryly. "Last evening, at the inn where I stayed the night, I took a bath. I was going to put up my hair, but I caught myself just in time. It looks it, doesn't it?"

It did, but he didn't say so. Nor did he gallantly deny the fact. Somehow, small talk seemed out of place. The raft was drifting past a small island now. There were many such islands in the River—bleak little expanses of sand and gravel for the most part, although all of them had at least one tree. He glanced at the girl. Was she seeing the island, too? Her eyes told him that she was.

Still he was not convinced. It was hard to believe that two people—two people who did not even know each other, in fact—could have transformed the process of dying into an allegorical illusion so strong that it was indistinguishable from ordinary reality. And it was harder yet to believe that those same two people could have entered into that illusion and have met each other for the first time.

It was all so strange. He felt real. He breathed, he saw; he experienced pleasure and pain. And yet all the while he breathed and saw and experienced, he knew that he wasn't actually on the River. He *couldn't* be on the River, for the simple reason that in another phase of reality—the *real* phase—he was sitting in his car, in his garage, with the motor running and the garage doors closed.

And yet somehow, in a way that he could not fathom, he *was* on the River; drifting down the River on a strange raft that he had never built or bought and had never even known existed until he had found himself sitting on it nearly two days ago. Or was it two hours ago? Or two minutes? Or two seconds?

He did not know. All he knew was that, subjectively at least, almost forty-eight hours had passed since he had first found himself on the River. Half of those hours he had spent on the River itself, and the other half he had spent in two deserted inns, one of which he had found on the River bank at the close of the first afternoon and the other of which he had found on the River bank at the close of the second.

That was another strange thing about the River. It was impossible to travel on it at night. Not because of the darkness (although the darkness did impose a hazard), but be cause of an insurmountable reluctance on his own part—a reluctance compounded of dread and of an irresistible desire to interrupt his ineluctable journey long enough to rest. Long enough to find peace. But why peace? he wondered. Wasn't it peace toward which the River was bearing him? Wasn't the only real peace the peace of oblivion? Surely by this time he should have accepted a truism as basic as that.

"It's beginning to get dark," Jill said. "There should be an inn soon." Her shoes and stockings had dried, and she put them back on.

"We'll watch for it. You keep an eye on the right bank, and I'll keep an eye on the left."

The inn was on the right bank, built almost flush with the water's edge. A low pier protruded a dozen feet into the stream, and after securing the raft to it with the mooring line, Farrell stepped onto the heavy planking and helped Jill up beside him. So far as he could see, the inn—on the outside, at least—was not

particularly different from the two he had already stayed overnight in. It was three-storied and square, and its tiers of windows made warm golden rectangles in the gathering dusk. The interior proved to be virtually identical too, give or take a few modifications—Jill's work, no doubt, since she must have collaborated on the creation. There was a small lobby, a bar, and a large dining room; a gleaming maple staircase curved upward to the second and third floors, and electric lights burned everywhere in the guise of counterfeit candles and imitation hurricane-lamps.

Farrell glanced around the dining room. "It looks as though you and I are slaves to American Colonial tradition," he said.

Jill laughed. "We do seem to have a lot in common, don't we?"

He pointed to a glittering juke box in the far corner of the room. "One of us, though, was a little mixed up. A juke box doesn't belong in an American Colonial setting."

"I'm afraid I'm the guilty party. There was a juke box just like that one in the inn where I stayed last night and in the inn where I stayed the night before."

"Apparently our inns vanish the minute we're out of sight. At any rate, I saw no sign of yours ... I still can't help wondering whether we're the only force that holds this whole thing together. Maybe, the moment we're de—the moment we're gone—the whole business will disappear. Assuming of course that it has objective existence and *can* disappear."

She pointed to one of the dining-room tables. It was covered with an immaculate linen tablecloth and was set for two. Beside each place, a real candle—real, that is, to whatever extent it was possible for objects to be real in this strange land—burned in a silver candlestick. *"I* can't help wondering what we're going to have for dinner."

"The particular dish we happen to be hungry for most, I imagine. Last night I had a yen for southern-fried chicken, and southern-fried chicken was what I found waiting for me when I sat down."

"Funny, how we can take such miracles in our stride," she said. And then, "I think I'll freshen up a bit."

"I think I will too."

They chose rooms across the hall from each other. Farrell got back downstairs first and waited for Jill in the dining room. During their absence, two large covered trays and a silver coffee set appeared on the linen tablecloth. How this had been brought about, he could not fathom; nor did he try very hard. A hot shower had relaxed him, and he was permeated with a dream-like feeling of well-being. He even had an appetite, although he suspected that it was no more real than the food with which he would presently satisfy it would be. No matter. Stepping into the adjoining bar, he drew himself a short beer and drank it appreciatively. It was cold and tangy, and hit the spot. Returning to the dining room, he saw that Jill had come back downstairs and was waiting for him in the lobby doorway. She had repaired her torn dress as best she could and had cleaned her shoes, and there was a trace of lipstick on her lips and a touch of rouge on her cheeks. It dawned on him all of a sudden that she was positively stunning.

When they sat down at the table, the lights dimmed, and the juke box began to play. In addition to the two covered trays and the silver coffee set, the magic tablecloth had also materialized a mouth-watering antipasto. They nibbled radishes by candlelight, ate carrots Julienne. Jill poured steaming coffee into delicate blue cups, added sugar and cream. She had "ordered" sweet potatoes and baked Virginia ham, he had "ordered" steak and French fries. As they dined, the juke box pulsed softly in the ghostly room and the candle flames flickered in drafts that came through invisible crevices in the walls. When they finished eating, Farrell went into the bar and brought back a bottle of champagne and two glasses. After filling both glasses, he touched his to hers. "To the first day we met," he said, and they drank.

Afterward, they danced on the empty dance floor. Jill was a summer wind in his arms. "Are you a professional dancer?" he asked.

"I was."

He was silent. The music was dream-like, unreal. The big room was a place of soft lights and pale shadows. "I was an artist," he went on presently. "One of the kind whose paintings no one buys and who keep themselves going on scraps of hopes and crusts of dreams. When I first began to paint, I thought

that what I was doing was somehow noble and worthwhile; but a schoolboy conviction can't last forever, and finally I recognized and accepted the fact that nothing I would ever paint would justify my having gone without even so much as a single helping of mashed potatoes. But that's not why I'm on the River."

"I danced in night clubs," Jill said. "Not nice dances, but I was not a stripper."

"Were you married?"

"No. Were you?"

"Only to my work, and my work and I have been divorced for some time now. Ever since I took a job designing greeting cards."

"It's funny," she said, "I never thought it would be like this. Dying, I mean. Whenever I pictured myself on the River, I pictured myself on it alone."

"So did I," Farrell said. And then, "Where did you live, Jill?"

"In Rapids City."

"Why, that's where I lived too. Maybe that has something to do with our meeting each other in this strange land. I—I wish I had known you before."

"You know me now. And I know you."

"Yes. It's better than never having gotten to know each other at all."

They danced in silence for a while. The inn dreamed around them. Outside, beneath stars that had no right to be, the River flowed, dark-brown and brooding in the night. At length, when the waltz to which they were dancing came to an end, Jill said, "I think we should call it a day, don't you?"

"Yes," Farrell said, looking down into her eyes, "I suppose we should." And then, "I'll wake at dawn—I know I will. Will you?"

She nodded. "That's part of it, too—waking at dawn. That, and listening for the falls."

He kissed her. She stood immobile for a moment, then drew away. "Good night," she said, and hurried from the room.

"Good night," he called after her.

He stood in the suddenly empty room for some time. Now that she had gone, the juke box played no more and the lights had brightened and taken on a cold cast. He could hear the River, hear it whispering a thousand and one sad thoughts. Some of the thoughts were his, and some of them were Jill's.

At last he left the room and climbed the stairs. He paused in front of Jill's door. He raised his hand, knuckles turned toward the panel. He could hear her in the room beyond, hear per bare feet padding on the floor and the rustle of her dress as she slipped out of it for the night. Presently he heard the faint whisper of sheets and the muffled creak of springs. And all the while he heard these sounds, he heard the soft, sad susurrus of the River.

At length his hand fell to his side, and he turned and stepped across the hall and let himself into his own room. He closed the door firmly. Love and death might go together, but love-making and dying did not.

The sound of the River grew louder while he slept, and in the morning it was a steady murmur in his ears. Breakfast was eggs and bacon and toast and coffee served by ghosts, and gray words spoken in the gray light of dawn. With the rising of the sun he and Jill cast off, and soon the inn was far behind them.

A little mist midday, they heard the roar of the falls.

It was a gentle roar at first, but it grew louder, decibel by decibel, and the river narrowed and began flowing between bleak gray cliffs. Jill moved closer to Farrell, and Farrell took her hand. Rapids danced around them, drenching them at sporadic intervals with ice-cold spray. The raft lurched beneath them, turned first this way and that at the whim of the River. But it did not capsize, nor would it, for it was the falls that stood for death—not the rapids.

Farrell kept glancing at the girl. She was staring straight ahead of her as though the rapids did not exist, as though nothing existed except herself, Farrell, and the raft. He had not expected death to come so soon. He had thought that life, now that he had met Jill, would linger on. But apparently this strange country which they had somehow brought into being had no function save to destroy them.

Well, destruction was what he wanted, wasn't it? A strange encounter in a strange land could not

have changed that, any more than it could have changed it for Jill. A thought struck him, and, raising his voice above the gurgling of the rapids and the roar of the falls, he asked, "What did you use, Jill?" "Gas," she answered. "And you?"

"Carbon monoxide."

They said no more.

Late in the afternoon, the River widened again, and the cliffs gradually gave way to gently sloping banks. Beyond the banks vague hills showed, and the sky seemed to have taken on a bluer cast. The roar of the falls was deafening now, but apparently the falls themselves were still a considerable distance downstream. Maybe this wasn't the last day after all.

It wasn't. Farrell knew it the minute he saw the inn. It was on the left bank, and it appeared a little while before the sun was about to set. The current was swift now, and very strong, and it required the combined efforts of both him and the girl to pole the raft in to the small pier. Breathing hard, and soaked to the skin, they clung to each other till they caught their breaths. Then they went inside.

Warmth rose up to meet them, and they rejoiced in it. They chose rooms on the second floor, dried their clothes, made themselves presentable, and joined each other in the dining room for the evening meal. Jill had a roast-beef dinner and Farrell had scalloped potatoes and pork chops. He had never tasted anything so delicious in all his life, and he savored every mouthful. Lord, but it was good to be alive!

Astonished at the thought, he stared at his empty plate. *Good* to be alive? Then why was he sitting in his car with the motor running and the garage doors closed, waiting to die? What was he doing on the River? He raised his eyes to Jill's, saw from the bewilderment in them that the face of all the world had changed for her, too, and knew that as surely as she was responsible for his new outlook, he was responsible for hers.

"Why did you do it, Jill?" he asked. "Why?"

She looked away. "As I told you, I used to dance in night clubs. Not nice dances, but I wasn't a stripper either—not in the strict sense of the word. But even though my act could have been far worse, it was still bad enough to awaken something in me that I didn't know existed. Anyway, one night I ran away, and not long after that I joined a convent."

She was silent for a while, and so was he. Then she said, looking at him now, "It's funny about a person's hair—what it can come to stand for, I mean. I wore my hair very long, and it was the most essential part of my act. The only decent part, because it covered my nakedness. Without my knowing what was happening, it came to symbolize for me the only really decent quality I possessed. But I didn't tumble to the truth until it was too late. With my hair, I had been able to live with myself. Without it, I felt unfit to live. I—I ran away again—to Rapids City this time—and I got a job in a department store and rented a small apartment. But a decent job wasn't enough—I needed something more. Winter arrived, and I came down with the flu. You know how it weakens you sometimes, how depressed you can feel afterwards. I—I—"

She looked down at her hands. They lay on the table before her, and they were slender and very white. The sad susurrus of the River filled the room, muting the throb of the juke box. Backgrounding both sounds was the roar of the falls.

Farrell looked down at his own hands. "I guess I was sick, too," he said. "I must have been. I felt empty. Bored. Do you know what true boredom is? It's a vast, gnawing nothingness that settles around you and accompanies you wherever you go. It comes over you in great gray waves and inundates you. It suffocates you. I said that my giving up the kind of work I wanted to do wasn't responsible for my being on the River, and it wasn't—not directly. But my boredom was a reaction, just the same. Everything lost meaning for me. It was like waiting all your life for Christmas to come, and then getting up Christmas morning and finding an empty stocking. If I could have found something in the stocking—anything at all—I might have been all right. But I found nothing in it, absolutely nothing. I know now that it was my fault. That the only way anyone can expect to find something in his Christmas stocking is by placing something in it the night before, and that the nothingness I saw around me was merely a reflection of myself. But I didn't know these things then." He raised his head and met her eyes across the table. "Why

did we have to die in order to meet each other and want to live? Why couldn't we have met like other people — in a summer park or on a quiet street? Why did we have to meet on the River, Jill? Why?"

She stood up, crying. "Let's dance," she said. "Let's dance all night."

They drifted onto the empty dance floor and the music rose around them and took them in its arms—the sad and the gay and the poignant songs that first one of them and then the other remembered from the lifetimes they had cast aside. "That one's from the Senior Prom," she said once. "The one we're dancing to now," he said a short while afterward, "dates from the days when I was still a kid and thought I was in love." "And were you in love?" she asked, eyes gentle upon his face. "No," he answered, "not then. Not ever—until now." "I love you, too," she said, and the tune took on a softer note and for a long while time ceased to be.

Toward dawn, she said, "I hear the River calling. Do you hear it, too?"

"Yes," he said, "I hear it."

He tried to fight the call, and so did she. But it wasn't any use. They left the ghosts of themselves dancing in the dawn-light and went down to the pier and boarded the raft and cast off. The current seized them greedily and the roar of the falls took on a triumphant tone. Ahead, in the wan rays of the rising sun, mist was rising high above the gorge.

They sat close together on the raft, in each other's arms. The roar was a part of the air they breathed now, and the mist was all around them. Through the mist, a vague shape showed. Another raft? Farrell wondered. He peered into the ghostly vapor, saw the little trees, the sandy shore. An island ...

Suddenly he understood what the islands in the River represented. Neither he nor Jill had truly wanted to die, and as a result the allegory which they had jointly brought to life and entered into contained loopholes. There might be a way back after all.

Springing to his feet, he seized the pole and began poling. "Help me, Jill!" he cried. "It's our last chance."

She, too, had seen the island and divined its significance. She joined him, and they poled together. The current was omnipotent now, the rapids furious. The raft lurched, heaved, wallowed. The island loomed larger through the mist. "Harder, Jill, harder!" he gasped. "We've got to get back—we've *got* to!"

He saw then that they weren't going to make it, that despite their combined efforts the current was going to carry them past their last link with life. There was one chance, and only one. He kicked off his shoes. "Keep poling, Jill!" he shouted, and, after placing the end of the mooring line between his teeth and biting into it, he leaped into the rapids and struck out for the island for all he was worth.

Behind him, the raft lurched wildly, tearing the pole from Jill's grasp and sending her sprawling on the deck. He did not know this, however, till he reached the island and looked over his shoulder. By then, there was just enough slack remaining in the line for him to belay it around a small tree and secure it in place. The tree shuddered when the line went taut, and the raft came to an abrupt stop several feet from the brink of the falls. Jill was on her hands and knees now, trying desperately to keep herself from being thrown from the deck. Gripping the line with both hands, he tried to pull the raft in to the island, but so strong was the current that he would have been equally as successful if he had tried to pull the island in to the raft.

The little tree was being gradually uprooted. Sooner or later it would be torn out of the ground and the raft would plunge over the falls. There was only one thing to do. "Your apartment, Jill!" he shouted across the whiteness of the rapids. "Where is it?"

Her voice was barely audible. "229 Locust Avenue. Number 301."

He was stunned. 229 Locust Avenue was the apartment building next to the one where he lived. Probably they had almost run into each other a dozen times. Maybe they *had* run into each other, and forgotten. In the city, things like that happened every day.

But not on the River.

"Hold on, Jill!" he called. "I'm going the long way around!"

To travel from the island to the garage required but the merest flick of a thought. He came to in his car, head throbbing with misted pain. Turning off the ignition, he got out, threw open the garage doors,

and staggered out into the shockingly cold winter's night. He remembered belatedly that his hat and coat were in the back of the car.

No matter. He crammed his lungs with fresh air and rubbed snow on his face. Then he ran down the street to the apartment building next door. Would he be in time? he wondered. He could not have been in the garage more than ten minutes at the most, which meant that time on the River moved at an even faster pace than he had thought. Hours, then, had already passed since he had left the island, and the raft could very well have gone over the falls.

Or had there really been a raft? A River? A girl with sun-bright hair? Maybe the whole thing had been a dream—a dream that his unconscious had manufactured in order to snap him back to life.

The thought was unendurable, and he banished it from his mind. Reaching the apartment building, he ran inside. The lobby was deserted, and the elevator was in use. He pounded up three flights of stairs and paused before her door. It was locked. "Jill!" he called, and broke it down.

She was lying on the living room sofa, her face waxen in the radiance of a nearby floor lamp. She was wearing the yellow dress that he remembered so well, only now it was no longer torn. Nor were her slender slippers bedraggled. Her hair, though, was just the way he remembered it—short, and trying to curl. Her eyes were closed.

He turned off the gas in the fireless circulating heater that stood against the wall, and he threw open all of the windows. He picked her up and carried her over to the largest one and let the sweet-life-giving air embrace her. "Jill!" he whispered. "Jill!"

Her eyelids quivered, opened. Blue eyes filled with terror gazed up into his face. Slowly, the terror faded away, and recognition took its place. He knew then that there would be no more Rivers for either of them.

Neither Do They Reap

The Sheep

Helen was painting "Meadow at Arles" when Dan got home from play. "That old thing again!" he said, taking off his hat and coat and handing them to the robutler. "Why don't you paint something different for a change?"

Helen deactivated the electronic paint-set and turned and faced him. "Because it's pretty, that's why," she said. "I like to paint pretty things." She brushed back a strand of chestnut hair that had fallen over her forehead, using the back of her wrist the way she had seen a girl artist do once on 3V. The effect, however, was marred by the sulky expression that had settled on her face.

Dan came over and kissed her. "All right, so it's pretty. You don't have to get mad."

His cheeks were rosy from the March wind, and his boyish smile was warm; the artificial dimple on his chin gave his face a clean-cut masculine look. It was one thing to get mad at Dan and quite another to stay mad at him; moreover, Dr. Cherub, the 3V marriage counselor, said that wives should show more consideration for their husbands when they came home from a hard day at the office. Helen matched his smile with one of her own and kissed him back. "I'm not mad," she said. "Why don't you play a piece on the organ while I fix supper?"

"All right," Dan said. He went over to the organ and sat down in the operator's seat. "What are we having?"

"Chicken yummy." Helen removed her artist's smock, wadded it up and threw it into the paper-eater, and tied a gay little apron around her waist. Then she went out into the kitchen and gave Big Bridget her order.

"Very well, ma'am," Big Bridget said, her banks of multicolored lights flashing on and off and her neon blood coursing vividly through her glass-tube veins. "Two chicken yummies coming up."

At the console, Dan punched out NOLA on the selector-panel, and when the opening keys lit up, placed his fingers in the numbered positions. Presently there was a little click, and he began to play.

He paid little attention to the music, concentrating on his fingers instead. It fascinated him the way they flew over the keyboard in response to the electronic stimuli. He had heard that a long time ago people used to play non-automatic organs, moving their fingers from one combination of notes to another by following sequences of little black specks on a sheet of paper. But he didn't believe it for one minute. Anybody with any sense could see that such an operation was impossible. It stood to reason that if you were looking at the specks, you couldn't look at your fingers, and if you couldn't see your fingers, how in the world could you move them to the right keys?

His fascination was short-lived: the organ, like all the other pieces of entertainment equipment he and Helen owned, was beginning to bore him. Halfway through Nola he turned it off and went out to the kitchen to see how supper was coming. Just as he stepped through the doorway, two bowls brimful of steaming yummy emerged from Big Bridget's culinary tract and came to rest on her horizontal apron.

He and Helen carried them into the living room and ate in front of the wall-size 3V screen. The Catastrophe—cast had just come on, and a big strato-liner was plunging earthward, trailing a stream of black smoke. They watched intently, spooning the chicken-flavored porridge into their mouths without taking their eyes from the screen. Catastrophe—casts could be fun.

Presently the liner began glowing a dull red. Little figures of passengers could be seen leaping from its escape hatches and trailing in its fiery wake like singed flies. The earth rose up as though eager for the imminent impact. A mountain range came into view, a forest, a green valley; a distant megalopolis. For an ecstatic moment it appeared as though the liner would plunge into the megalopolis, but such did not turn out to be the case; it crashed into the valley instead. A monstrous flower bloomed, its black petals shot with vivid streaks of red. The detonation filled the apartment; the smell of smoke and roasted flesh blended with the aroma of chicken yummy. The announcer's voice followed, garnishing the incident with the number of deaths, promising more spectacular incidents to come.

Dan spooned the last of his chicken yummy into his mouth, swallowed it. "How come they never fall into a megalopolis?" he said peevishly.

Helen yawned. "I don't know," she said. Then, remembering Dr. Cherub's exhortations to the effect that wives should take more interest in their husbands: "How were things at the office today, dear?"

Dan's reaction cast doubt on Dr. Cherub's omniscience. "Awful," he said. "Just plain awful!" He got to his feet and began walking back and forth. "The same old thing, day after day," he went on. "We haven't had any new entertainment equipment come in for weeks now. All we've got to amuse ourselves during break time is that old Dodger—Yankee game that came in over a month ago!"

"But I thought you liked to play baseball."

"I do, but not on that old field." He stopped pacing and stood before her. His lower lip protruded slightly, ruining the effect of the dimple on his chin. "Mickey Mantle has a short circuit and can't even hit a home run any more, and this afternoon when I had the Yankees, he missed a pop-up fly with the bases loaded!" He shook his head despondently. "Sometimes I don't think the company loves us any more, keeping such outdated equipment around!"

"Hush, you shouldn't say such things! Of course they love you."

"Well they certainly don't act it. When a man plays as hard as I do two days a week, week in, week out, he's entitled to a little consideration. The least they could do is get Mickey Mantle fixed." Dan began pacing back and forth again, and a little robotic terrier came out of a little door in the wall and started jumping around his legs. "I get so bored sometimes!"

"You get bored!" Helen said. "What about me?" Dr. Cherub appeared in the recesses of her mind and shook an admonishing finger at her, but she'd had just about enough of Dr. Cherub, and she turned her back on him. "How do you think I feel sitting around this apartment all day with nothing to do but paint and play the organ!"

"But you can at least go to the Playpen."

"You know yourself that no new games have come into the Playpen for months. What would be the sense of my going there? Why, last weekend you wouldn't go there yourself."

He couldn't deny it. "You're right," he said. "When it comes to getting us new games, the government is just as bad as the company." The little terrier stood up on its hind legs and placed its forepaws on his knees. It barked with artificial ecstasy. Dan kicked it into the corner. "That's the whole trouble with this country," he said. "No new games!"

"Let's write a letter to the president," Helen said, standing up. "He'll do something about it."

Dan looked dubious. "I don't know. We've already written him twice, and he didn't do anything." He sighed. "Sometimes I don't think he loves us any more either!"

"Oh, but he must love us. Didn't he say so on his last 3V chat? Why, he even said that maybe next year we could have babies!"

"Oh, he always says that," Dan said, "but it never comes true." The little terrier was crawling out of the corner on its belly, and he drew back his foot for another kick.

Helen stopped him. "It's my turn," she said, catching the dog a good one on the side of the head. It rolled over and over, yelping realistically. She felt better. "Sure, that's what we'll do," she said. "We'll write a letter to the president."

"Well . . . all right," Dan agreed.

They approached the writing machine diffidently. For some reason it always gave them a feeling of inferiority. Helen turned it on. "We—we'd like to write a letter," she said.

The writing machine hummed. "To whom?" it asked.

"To—to the president."

"One moment, please." There was a brief pause while the writing machine adjusted its wave-lengths to the proper pattern, then: "Proceed, please."

"Dear—dear Mr. President," Helen said. "We—we haven't got anything to do. Could—could you please think up some new games for us to play? Signed: Dan and Helen Smith."

She turned triumphantly to Dan. "There, that ought to do it!" she said.

The Herdsmen

Haines released the phone and watched it crawl back into its little oubliette and close the door behind it. He raised his eyes from the table and traversed the faces of his three assistants: hog-jowled Morganstein's, cold-eyed Repp's, downcheeked Trask's. "The old man," he said. "Another spate of letters. 'Please think up some new games for us to play!' I wonder what they'd say if they knew we can't think up any more."

"Did it ever occur to you," said Trask, "that if we gave them the chance, they just might be able to think up some of their own?"

"Yes, it did occur to me," Haines said, "and I filed the thought under Notions, Idiotic." He spread his eloquent hands on the tabletop. "For they sow not, Trask. Neither do they reap ... Morganstein?"

"If the birth quota could be re-established for just one more round—" he began.

Haines shook his head. "One more round would finish us off for good. Even if we could feed them, there would be too few deaths by the time they reached mating age for us to house them. Repp?"

Repp said, "Since we've run the gamut of games and seemingly can't come up with any new ones, why not try diverting them by souping up the catastrophe-casts?"

Haines shook his head again. "We can't soup them up any more. They're already comprised of fifty percent violence and fifty percent bloodshed."

Repp's thin smile was a crevice on his glacial face. "There's a way," he said. He paused, looking at Haines.

Haines nodded. "Let's have it."

"Previously," Repp began, "we've followed tradition to a T in regaling our charges via communications media. That is, we've given them the age-old thrill of seeing someone else get it in the neck, the while carefully avoiding any reference to the possibility that their own necks might be in danger. Since both our events and our locales are fictitious, and since we've dispensed with place-names—no one ever really paid much attention even in the old days to localities: it was the event itself that

counted—our adherence to tradition has involved no strain either upon our consciences or our intellectual resources. When we wish to inundate a section of a coast with a tidal wave, for example, we need merely to make sure that the particular dwellings on our model are of a type no one lives in any more in order to allay whatever fears those of our audience who dwell in coastal areas may have concerning their own skins. Or, when we wish to employ a cyclone, we need merely confine it to a small town in order to eliminate any thought of personal danger from our viewers' minds, because even though none of them is aware that small towns no longer exist, he still knows that he lives in a megalopolis, and consequently he can sit back, relax and enjoy himself."

Repp paused, his cold eyes flicking from face to face. Presently: "I propose," he said, "that we instruct the miniature-effects department that the next time they create a tidal wave, they launch it upon a miniature coastal megalopolis; that the next time they create a cyclone, they send it through a miniature inland megalopolis; and that the next time they create a strato-liner disaster, they bring the liner down, not in a valley or a forest, but in a megalopolis street—preferably a crowded one."

Trask was on his feet. "Why, that's horrible! The people will think—"

Haines motioned him down. "Let Repp finish what he has to say."

Again a crevice of a smile appeared on Repp's cold countenance. "Trask has said it for me," he said. " 'The people will think—' They will think they are in danger—and that is precisely what we want them to think. They will think that it is their section of the megalopolis that the strato-liner is about to crash into, the cyclone invade, the tidal wave inundate. They're too jaded to obtain satisfaction from events that do not involve them personally. In order for them to be affected, they must experience fear and horror directly instead of vicariously. And once they have experienced them a few times, they'll be more than glad to go back to their games, outdated or not."

Morganstein nodded, his chin sinking into his fat jowls. "It might be worth a try," he said.

Trask's boyish face was pale. He looked wildly around the table. "It smacks of the punishment the Tsar enacted upon a group of socialists in nineteenth-century Russia," he said in a shrill voice. "Are you familiar with the incident, gentlemen? If not, I'll enlighten you. The Tsar sentenced the socialists to death, had the death sentence read to them, had the cross given them to kiss and had the dagger broken over their heads. The first three were then lined up before the firing squad, but before the execution could take place, retreat was sounded and the prisoners were informed that the Tsar had granted them amnesty. One of them went insane."

"But the others did not," Repp said drily. "And if I recall correctly, Dostoevski was one of the others. Perhaps we can thank the incident for *The Brothers Karamazov*." He looked at Haines. "What's your reaction?"

Haines rubbed a gray-specked temple, a gesture both Repp and Morganstein had come to associate with indecision on the part of their chief. He was silent for some time. Then: "It's true: emotional crises do create changes in men, and perhaps the Tsar was the involuntary patron saint of *The Brothers*. But we have no Dostoevski's today. I'm thinking of the prisoner who went insane."

Repp said, "The same sensitivity that was present in Dostoevski and made it possible for the experience to deepen and broaden him was also present in his intellectually weaker fellow-prisoner, and it was this quality, forced to stand alone, that drove the latter insane. I submit that not only do we not have any Dostoevski's today, we do not have any insane-prone 'fellow-prisoners' either."

"And I submit," Trask said, "that while we may have no Dostoevski's or insane-prone 'fellow-prisoners,' we do have the Tsar who sentenced them, and I submit further that he is sitting right here with us now!"

Haines looked at him a little wearily. "Repp is sitting here for the same reason you are sitting here, Trask—to do a job. If it happens to be a job that rarely lends itself to ideal solutions, the job, not he, is to blame. I am inclined to agree with Morganstein: I, too, consider the suggestion worth a try."

Trask was on his feet again. "I won't countenance it! I'll go to the old man. I'll—"

"Sit down, Trask," Haines said. He said it quietly, but his unassailable authority honed his words and made his gray eyes bleak. Trask sat down.

"Now," Haines went on, "I'll fill in the background which the schools you attended apparently but

inadequately sketched for you. First of all, neither we, nor the generations of idea-men who preceded us, created the society we administer to. It created itself.

"It created itself by repeatedly electing men into office who it knew would give it what it wanted, and by religiously shunning all ideas that were contrary to its preconceived notion of what it wanted to be. Its three basic goals were security, conformity and materialistic comfort, and eventually it achieved all three.

"There is a price for everything. The price Agamemnon paid for Troy was Clytemnestra's treachery; the price Napoleon paid for Moscow was Waterloo; the price Japan paid for Pearl Harbor was Hiroshima; the price our society paid—and is paying—for its three ideals is sterility. I do not mean the voluntary physical sterility which its own over-propagation of itself has forced it to accept: I mean the mental and spiritual sterility which renders its members incapable of creating anything for themselves, which forces them to rely on the increasingly few of their number in whom the creative spark re-appears in each generation. Granted, this has always been true; but never was it true on such a grand scale. The mass of men have always stood around waiting for the creators to dream up new diversions, but originally a reasonable proportion existed between creator and receiver. But now, thanks to the five-day weekend and the concomitant atrophying of creativity, it exists no longer. You and I and Morganstein and Repp are responsible for the morale of almost a billion people; we are the only creators this generation has thus far been able to provide. We must do their sowing for them, but the barrenness of their minds is such that no matter what we sow, the crops will be stunted.

"Don't misunderstand me, Trask. Theoretically, leisure is a priceless commodity. But when you lack the necessary background to employ it advantageously, when, even worse, you lack the desire to employ it advantageously, it becomes a monster. Our job is to combat that monster to the best of our abilities. It is a bogy man at the nursery door, and we must keep the door secured with whatever means are at our disposal, and we can't afford to be critical of those means simply because they fail to live up to an outdated inapplicable idealism. I repeat: I consider Repp's suggestion worth a try. We'll take an official vote. Morganstein?"

"For."

"Repp?"

"For."

"Trask?"

"Against."

"For," Haines said. He spoke into the intercom: "Get me the miniature-effects department," he said.

The Gray Pastures

Don Newcombe wound up slowly. Duke Snider backed a little closer to the center field fence. It was the bottom half of the ninth and the score read *New York 1, Brooklyn 2*. The count was 3 and 2, with two men down and the bases empty. Mickey Mantle was at bat.

Don Newcombe took his time. The miniature diamond gleamed in the light of the miniature sun. The pitch, when it finally came, was a curve that broke low over the outside corner of the plate. Mickey Mantle swung furiously but he missed by a mile.

"Darn!" Dan said. "He never should have swung at that one. I can't understand why they don't get him fixed!"

"You just picked the wrong team, that's all," Harry, who worked in the office next to him, said. "You were outclassed. Anyway, it's just as well he did strike out: we wouldn't have had time to go into extra innings."

Dan's lower lip began to protrude. "He's got a short-circuit, I tell you. The Yankees can beat the Dodgers any day!"

At this point the chimes signaling the end of the afternoon break sounded, and the two men left the big recreation hall and returned to their tiny offices. The other employees followed suit. In his office, Dan sat down at his narrow desk and stared at the slot in the wall from which, one half hour hence, his card, coded with the production figures of the subterranean automation sector to which he was assigned,

would emerge. While he waited, he doodled on his desk blotter. The blotter, he noticed, was almost completely covered with previous doodles, and he made a mental memo to requisition a new one.

At length the Go-Home chimes sounded, and after saying hello and good-bye to the employee who occupied the office during the second shift, he headed for the time clock. It was Tuesday, and when he dropped his card into the "out" slot, his paycheck emerged from the slot just beneath.

He joined the line of depositors in the bank next door. Finally his turn came, and he fed his check cheerfully to the mechanical teller. The teller took care of everything: mortgages, taxes, utilities, medical expenses, groceries, insurance, clothing and games. Fifteen cents change tinkled in the return cup, and Dan picked it up, pocketed it and walked out.

There must be a surplus in his games account by now, he thought bitterly. At least no new ones had been delivered to the apartment recently. He wondered if any had come into the Playpen. Probably not. And here he was with a whole weekend to kill!

Frustration fell into step with him on the speed-walk and accompanied him all the way to the apartment. It was still with him when he went into the living room and kissed Helen. She was watching a documentary on 3V, and as it was a little too early for supper, he joined her. The documentary dealt with one of the birth riots of the early twenty-first century. The Varbleu Case. Mrs. Varbleu had given birth to quintuplets and she and her husband had been arrested: the documentary concerned itself primarily with the events that ensued their imprisonment in the local jail. Dan had seen it before, but he liked lynchings, so he didn't mind watching it again. Some of his frustration departed as the big crowd gathered in front of the jail, and by the time the jail door had been burned through with an acetylene torch, he was almost his normal self again. The acetylene torch lent the double lynching a unique flavor. Ordinarily the mob just strung the culprit or culprits up after a superficial beating, but you could do a lot of things with an acetylene torch that you couldn't do with your fists and your fingernails. Along toward the end, Mr. and Mrs. Varbleu were begging to be hanged—especially Mrs. Varbleu. Dan didn't blame her much, considering the job they'd done on her, but she should have thought of that before.

"What would you like for supper, dear?" Helen asked after Mrs. Varbleu's screams had died away.

He sighed. "Any new dishes?"

She shook her head. "They never come out with anything new any more—you know that. How about some Lamb's Delight?"

"I suppose," he said.

While she was giving the order to Big Bridget, he played "Flight of the Bumble Bee" on the electronic fiddle. Usually the rendition left him with a feeling of accomplishment, but tonight he felt nothing but dissatisfaction. Lately there had been an emptiness in him, and no matter what he did to fill it, it kept growing bigger and bigger.

As usual they ate in front of the 3V screen in order to catch the Catastrophe-cast. It opened with a strato-liner bursting into flames and plunging earthward. "What, another one?" Dan said disgustedly.

"The same old jazz all the time," Helen said. "They're even running out of new ways to kill people!"

The disaster followed the same lines as the similar disaster of a week ago had followed—till near the end. There was the same red glow when the liner reached the atmosphere, the same fly-like wake of singed passengers. The same—

No, not quite the same. The megalopolis wasn't in the distance this time. It was in the foreground. It was so close, in fact, that you could see the apartment levels, the speed-walks, the streets; the people scurrying for cover— Dan leaned forward, a spoonful of lamb-flavored porridge halfway to his mouth. "Say—" he began.

"Why—why it looks as though it's going to crash into a populated area for a change!"

"Darned if it doesn't!" Dan said.

And sure enough, it did. Apartment levels splintered. Flames shot up everywhere. People screamed. Ambulances wailed. Black smoke, veined with red, roiled darkly heavenward. An acrid stench crept into the room, lending the illusion that the crash had occurred less than a block away, but neither Dan nor Helen got up to look out the window. As a matter of fact, they did not once take their eyes from the screen till the scene faded out, and then they did so only briefly because a cyclone scene took its place.

Another megalopolis was involved—or perhaps the same one; there was no way of telling, as one megalopolis looked pretty much like another. After the cyclone, a tidal wave took over; then an earthquake; finally a hurricane.

Dan threw his cardboard bowl and spoon into the disposal chute and stood up. He yawned. "What are we going to do tonight?" he asked. And then, remembering that the weekend was coming up: "And tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow?" The thought weighed him down, and when the little robotic terrier, sensing his mood, came out of the wall and ran toward him, he kicked it heartily. "I suppose no new games came in at the Playpen."

Helen shook her head. "Not a single one."

"Darn! And after we wrote to the president, too!"

"Maybe it takes time to manufacture them—"

"In this day and age? They could make them in a week, easy."

"You—you don't suppose, do you?—" Helen began.

"Suppose what?"

"You don't suppose they can't think up any new ones, do you?"

Dan's face went blank. When the little dog crept out of the corner and fawned at his feet, he didn't even remember to kick it. He sat down instead. "But that can't be! I'd sooner believe that the president didn't get our letter."

"All right," Helen said, "let's write him another. And send it Special Delivery."

"All right, let's."

They approached the writing machine together, the little terrier barking at their heels. Dan paused long enough to turn around and kick it back into the corner, then he joined Helen at the machine.

She turned it on. "We—we'd like to write a letter—" she began ...

The Wilderness

Haines raised his eyes from the little trap door which the phone had just closed behind itself. He met Repp's questioning gaze. "The old man," he said bitterly. "Another spate of letters."

Repp's disappointment was almost tangible. "Still discontented, eh?"

"They want new games and that's it." Haines sighed. "We'll just have to come up with some, or we're done."

Trask was triumphant. "They're more sensitive than you gave them credit for being. I knew it wouldn't work."

Haines regarded him sourly. "I wish they were sensitive," he said. "But the sad fact is that they've been coddled so long that they simply can't conceive of anything unpleasant happening to themselves—and by extension, to their own megalopolises."

Morganstein said, "Maybe it's too soon to expect results. Maybe we should give the new casts a little longer to take effect."

"Oh, we'll give them a chance," Haines said. "But the result is foregone. In a few days time they'll have forgotten the casts they're viewing are any different from the ones they viewed before, and be more bored than ever. Games are the only answer."

"How about a cat to go with their dog," Morganstein suggested. "When kicking the dog doesn't help, they can kick the cat—or maybe step on its tail."

"Games," Haines repeated. "Nothing else will work. We've got to keep them occupied—not simply alleviate their frustrations." He looked around the table. "Any ideas?"

No one spoke.

"All right," he went on, "we'll try something different. Instead of trying to ideate en masse, we'll adjourn and see if we can't come up with something separately. Tomorrow morning we'll pool our ideas."

He lingered in the conference room after the others had gone. It was night, and through the enormous window he could see the lights of Megalopolis 6 glittering like a golden swarm of fireflies en route to

nowhere.

He went over and stood before the window so that he could obtain a better view of them. He had seen the lights countless times, and always before they had depressed him; tonight, however, his reaction to them was somehow different. Presently he recognized the symptoms that invariably accompanied the birth of an idea, and he gave full rein to his thoughts.

Once, green land had flourished where the lights now gleamed; green land and trees. He saw part of the land presently—a lush green meadow—and he saw the trees palisading it. A splendid buck stepped into the meadow—a six-pointer—and paused and raised its head. Abruptly there was the sound of a shot, and a tenuous coil of smoke arose from a nearby thicket. The buck gave a leap, began to run. It seemed to run right into the ground. Its magnificent head plowed a furrow in the earth; its legs thrashed, but it did not get up.

A hunter stepped from the thicket. He pumped another slug into the buck. The buck lay still.

Today you gave them dogs to kick. It was a commendable substitute, but it wasn't like stalking and bringing down a deer. The sense of satisfaction wasn't there; the sense of fulfillment. You couldn't strap the dog on your fender and park your car outside a tavern and go inside and drink and brag with the proof of your braggadocio visible for all to see. For one thing, you had no car, and for another, your friends and acquaintances had spite-dogs the same as you did and knew as well as you did that it required no particular prowess to kick them into insensibility.

True, you had all the time in the world to hunt—but what was there to hunt? And if there were anything to hunt, hunting would of necessity be banned for the simple reason that there would be too many hunters, just as private ownership of vehicles had been banned for the simple reason that there were too many drivers.

In the end it all boiled down to three simple words: too many people.

Too many people and not enough work to keep them occupied. No work at all, really, except for the pitiful sinecures they held, and called "play"

If there were real jobs for them to do, would they be satisfied then?

Haines shook his head. It was useless even to contemplate the question. Machines worked and people played, and that was all there was to it.

But suppose there were jobs, though. Suppose . . . suppose there were make-believe jobs!

Suppose there were a game called WORK. A board you moved pieces on. A square that said, PUNCH THE CLOCK; one further on that said, YOU GET A RAISE, ADVANCE FIVE SQUARES; another that said, THE BOSS WANTS TO SEE YOU, GO BACK THREE SQUARES

Or better yet, suppose that every megalopolis sector had a make-believe factory with make-believe machines in it where off-duty "office workers" could spend their weekends. You'd need space for that, though, and space was scarce. The little of it that wasn't taken up by apartment buildings was pre-empted by Playpens

Playpens!

Haines thoughts leaped ahead. Deliberately he brought them to a halt. The problem still wasn't solved. Sure, the Playpens would make excellent make-believe factories, and they could be converted in less than a week; but factories were for men. There were still the women to be considered. He concentrated. He went way back, back to the days before automation. He visualized a housewife getting up, going into the kitchen and giving Big Bridget an order for—no, not giving Big Bridget an order, but lighting the kitchen stove. He saw her after her husband had left for "work"; she was dumping the breakfast bowls into the disposal chute ... no, she was carrying them over to the kitchen sink. She was going to wash them!—

Haines could contain himself no longer. Two giant strides took him over to the intercom. "Get me Morganstein, Repp and Trask!" he shouted. "Quickly!"

The Promised Land

The Playpen was all lit up. In the foyer a huge gleaming clock was attached to the wall with a rack of

cards on either side of it. Dan found his number after some difficulty and shoved his card into the slot just beneath the clock face. There was a thrilling *tling*, and when he pulled it out, the numerals 0700 were stamped on it. He placed it under his number on the other rack and went into the plant proper. Hundreds of men were already there, working at the plastic machines that stood at angles along either wall. It gave Dan a proud feeling to know that soon he would be similarly engaged.

Presently the foreman came up to him and escorted him over to a big plastic turret lathe. He showed Dan how to turn it on and how to rotate the turret. Dan set his brand new lunch pail on an adjacent bench and listened attentively. "Now here's the idea," the foreman said. "We're making parts for strato-jet engines, and we're in production. The part you're machining is the dripple." He took a cylindrical plastic object out of a nearby box and held it up for Dan to see. Then: "You take it like this, see, and put it in the chuck and tighten it. You bore it first, then you hone it, then you ream it, and finally you chamfer it. After you go through those four operations, you take it out, set it on the bench, and mark down `1' on this production chart here. Get it?"

Dan nodded.

"Of course there's no such thing as a real dripple," the foreman went on, "and even if there was, it couldn't be machined on a plastic turret lathe. But it's going to make a swell game, don't you think?"

"I'll say," Dan said, taking another dripple out of the box and securing it in the chuck. He bored, honed, reamed, chamfered, and took it out again. The foreman handed him the production chart and he marked down "1." "Say, you catch on fast," the foreman said.

Dan beamed.

He was still beaming when he punched out eight hours later and went home. Helen was beaming, too. "Wait'll you see, wait'll you see!" she said, pulling him into the kitchen.

There was a plastic stove, a plastic sink with running water, a plastic washing machine, a plastic ironing board and a plastic iron. The stove was placed in such a way that its backless oven was flush with Big Bridget's apron. "I want to show you something," Helen said, reaching into the oven and withdrawing two bowls of chicken yummy. "See what I cooked for supper!"

"Say, this is going to be a swell weekend!" Dan said. "Me working at the plant and you housekeeping and cooking my meals."

Helen gave an ecstatic sigh. "Just think," she said. "Five whole days and nothing to do but work!"

To Fell a Tree

And this delightful herb whose living green
Fledges the river's lip on which we lean-
Ah, lean upon it lightly! for who knows
From what once lovely lip it springs unseen!
—THE RUBAIYAT

The First Day

Just before the treeman's lift began to rise, Strong swung it around so that his back would be toward the trunk. The less he saw of the tree during the initial phase of his ascent, the better. But the lift was little more than a triangular steel frame suspended vertically from a thread-thin winch cable, and before it had risen a hundred feet it swung back to its original position. Whether he liked it or not, the tree was going to be with him right from the start.

The trunk was about fifteen feet away. What it made Strong think of most was a cliff, a convex, living cliff, with bark-prominences eight to ten feet long and fissures three to four feet deep—an arboreal

precipice rising into a green and majestic cloud of foliage.

He hadn't intended to look up, but his eyes had followed the sweep of the trunk of their own volition. Abruptly he lowered them. To reassure himself, he looked down into the shrinking village square at the familiar figures of his three companions.

Suhre and Blueskies were standing on one of the ancient burial mounds, smoking morning cigarettes. Strong was too high to see the expressions on their faces, but he knew that Suhre's stolid features were probably set in stubborn resentment and that Blueskies was probably wearing his "buffalo-look." Wright was about a hundred feet out from the base of the tree, operating the winch. His face would be essentially the same as it always was, a little pinched from worry, perhaps, but still embodying that strange mixture of gentleness and determination, still unmistakably a leader's face.

Strong raised his eyes to the houses surrounding the square. They were even more enchanting seen from above than from below. Omicron Ceti's red-gold radiance lay colorfully on chameleon rooftops, danced brightly on gingerbread facades. The nearer houses were empty now, of course—the village, within a three hundred yard radius of the tree, had been vacated and roped off—but looking at them, Strong got the fanciful impression that pixies had moved in during the night and were taking over the household chores while the villagers were away.

The thought amused him while it lasted, but it did not last long. The convoy of huge timber-carriers that moved into the square and parked in a long waiting line sent it scurrying.

Once again he confronted the tree. He was higher now, and the trunk should have become smaller. It had not—at least not perceptibly. It still resembled a convex cliff, and he felt more like a mountain climber than he did a treeman. Looking up, he saw the first limb. All he could think of was a horizontal sequoia growing on the vertical slope of a dendritic Everest.

Wright's crisp voice sounded over the tree-to-ground radio hookup, the receiver and minuscule batteries of which were attached to Strong's left ear lobe: "Seen any dryads yet?"

Strong tongued on the tiny transmitter attached to his lower lip. "Not yet."

"If you do, let me know."

"Like hell! That long blade of grass I drew gave me exclusive treerights, remember? Whatever I find up here is mine!" Wright laughed. "Just trying to help out."

"I don't need any help, thanks. What's my height?"

There was a pause. Strong watched the cigarette-size figure of Wright bend over the winch-control panel. Presently: "One hundred and sixty-seven feet. Another hundred and twenty more and you'll be even with the first limb . . . How do you feel?"

"Not bad."

"Good. Let me know if anything goes wrong. The least little thing."

"Will do." Strong tongued off.

It was growing darker. No, not darker, Greener. The little sunlight that filtered down through the countless strata of foliage in a pale, chlorophyllic glow deepened in hue in ratio to his ascent. Tree-fright touched him, but he dispelled it by applying an antidote he'd learned in treeschool. The antidote was simple: *concentrate on something, anything at all.* He took inventory of the equipment attached to the basebar of the lift: tree-pegs, tree-rations, blankets; tree-tent, heating unit, peg-hammer; cable-caster, cutter, first-aid pack; climbing belt, saddle-rope, limb line (only the ringed end of the limb line was attached to the bar—the line itself trailed down to a dwindling coil at the tree's base), Timkin-unit, tree-tongs, canteen ...

At length the lift drew him into the lower foliage. He had expected the leaves to be huge, but they were small and delicate, reminiscent of the leaves of the lovely sugar maple that once had flourished on Earth. Presently he came opposite the first limb, and a flock of scarlet hahaha birds derided his arrival with a chorus of eldritch laughter. They circled around him several times, their little half-moons of eyes regarding him with seeming cynicism, then they spiraled out of sight into the upper branches.

The limb was like a ridge that had torn itself free from a mountain range to hover high above the village. Its branches were trees in their own right, each capable, were it to fall, of demolishing at least one of the houses the colonists loved so dearly.

Why, Strong wondered for the dozenth time, had the original inhabitants of Omicron Ceti 18's major continent built their villages around the bases of such arboreal monsters? The Advance Team had stated in its report that the natives, despite their ability to build beautiful houses, had really been very primitive. But even so, they should have realized the potential threat such massive trees could pose during an electrical storm; and most of all they should have realized that excessive shade encouraged dampness and that dampness was the forerunner of decay.

Clearly they had not. For, of all the villages they had built, the present one was the only one that had not rotted into noisome ruin, just as the present tree was the only one that had not contracted the hypothetical blight that had caused the others to wither away and die.

It was the Advance Team's contention that the natives had built their villages close to the trees because the trees were religious symbols. But, while the fact that they had migrated en masse to the "death-caves" in the northern barrens when the trees began to die certainly strengthened the contention, Strong still found it difficult to accept. The architecture o the houses suggested a practical as well as an artistic race of people, and a practical race of people would hardly commit self-genocide just because their religious symbols turned out to be susceptible to disease. Moreover, Strong had removed trees on a good many newly-opened planets, and he had seen the Advance Team proved wrong on quite a number of occasions.

The foliage was below him now, as well as above and around him. He was in a world apart, a hazy, greenish-gold world stippled with tree-flowers (the month was the Omicron Ceti 18 equivalent of June and the tree was in blossom), inhabited only by himself and the hahaha birds, and the insects that constituted their diet. He could see an occasional jigsaw-patch of the square through the intervening leaves, but that was all. Wright was out of sight; so were Suhre and Blueskies.

About fifteen feet below the limb over which he had made his original cable-cast, he told Wright to halt the winch. Then he detached the cable-caster from the base-bar, fitted the butt to his shoulder and started the lift swinging back and forth. He selected the highest limb he could see, one about eighty feet up, and at the extremity of one of his swings on the winch side of the tree, he aimed and squeezed the trigger.

It was like a spider spitting a filament of web. The gossamer cable drifted up and over the chosen limb, and its weighted end plummeted down through leaf and flower to dangle inches from his outstretched fingers. He caught it on the next swingback and, still swinging, pressed it against the apex of the lift-triangle till its microscopic fibers rooted themselves in the steel; then he snipped the "new" cable free from the caster with his pocket-snips and returned the caster to the base-bar. Finally he increased the arc of his swing till he could grasp the original cable, which slanted down through the foliage to the winch. He held on to it long enough to squeeze together the two cables—the "old" and the "new"—till they automatically interspliced, and to sever the bypassed section.

The slack in the "new" cable caused the lift to drop several feet. He waited till the swing diminished sufficiently, then told Wright to start the winch again. The infinitesimal Timkens coating the thread-thin cable began rolling over the "new" limb, and the lift resumed its upward journey. Strong leaned back in his safety belt and lit a cigarette.

That was when he saw the dryad.

Or thought he did.

The trouble was, the dryad talk had been a big joke. The kind of a joke that springs up among men whose relationships with real women are confined to the brief intervals between assignments.

You didn't believe it, you told yourself; you knew damned well that no matter what tree you climbed on whatever planet, no lovely lady elf was going to come skipping down some leaf-trellised path and throw herself into your yearning arms. And yet all the while you were telling yourself that such a thing was never going to happen, you kept wondering in the dark outlands of your mind where common sense had never dared set foot, whether some day it *might* happen.

All during the voyage in from Earth and all during the ride from the spaceport to the village, they had tossed the joke back and forth. There was—if you took credence in Suhre's and Blueskies' and Wright's talk . . . and in his own talk too —at least one dryad living in the last giant tree on Omicron Ceti 18, and

what a time they were going to have catching her!

All right, Strong thought. You saw her. Now let's see you catch her.

It had been the merest glimpse—no more than a suggestion of curves and color and fairy-face—and as the image faded from his retina, his conviction faded too. By the time the lift pulled him up into the bower where he'd thought she'd been, he was positive she would not be there. She was not.

He noticed that his hands were trembling. With an effort he steadied them. It was ridiculous to become upset over a prankish play of sunlight on leaf and limb, he told himself.

Then, at 475 feet, he thought he saw her again.

He had just checked his elevation with Wright when he happened to glance toward the trunk. She appeared to be leaning against the bark, her long leg braced on the limb he had just come abreast of. Tenuous of figure, pixyish of features, golden of hair. She couldn't have been over twenty feet away.

"Hold it," he told Wright in a low voice. When the lift stopped rising, he unfastened his safety belt and stepped out upon the limb. The dryad did not move.

He walked toward her slowly. Still she did not move. He rubbed his eyes to clear them, half-hoping she would not. She went on standing where she was, back propped against the trunk, long legs braced on the limb; immobile, statuesque. She wore a short tunic woven of leaves, held in place by a strap looped over her shoulder; delicate sandals, also woven of leaves, interlaced halfway to her calves. He began to think she was real. Then, without warning, she twinkled out of sight.

There was no other phrase for it. She did not walk away or run away or fly away. In the strict sense of the word, she did not even disappear. She was simply there one second and not there the next second.

Strong stood still. The exertion he had expended to gain the limb and walk along it had been negligible, and yet he was sweating. He could feel sweat on his cheeks and forehead and neck; he could feel it on his chest and back, and he could feel the sweated dampness of his tree-shirt.

He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his face. He took one step backward. Another. The dryad did not re-materialize. There was a cluster of leaves where she had been, a patch of sunlight.

Wright's voice sounded in his eareceiver: "Everything all right?"

Strong hesitated a moment. "Everything's fine," he said presently. "Just doing a little reconnaissance."

"How's she look?"

"She—" He realized just in time that Wright was referring to the tree. He wiped his face again, wadded up the handkerchief and replaced it in his pocket. "She's big," he said, when he could trust his voice. "Real big."

"We'll take her all right. We've had big ones before."

"Not this big we haven't."

"We'll take her anyway."

"I'll take her," Strong said.

Wright laughed. "Sure you will. But we'll be here to help you, just in case ... Ready to 'climb' again?"

"In a minute."

Strong hurried back to the lift. "Let her go," he said.

He had to cable-cast again at around 500 feet, and again at around 590. At about 650 the foliage thinned out temporarily and he was able to make a cast of better than one hundred and fifty feet. He sat back to enjoy the ride.

In the neighborhood of 700 feet, he dropped off his tree-tent, blankets and heating unit on a wide limb, and tied them down. The sleeping was always better in the big branches. As his height increased, he caught occasional glimpses of the village. Foliage below, but he could see the outermost ones, and beyond them the chemically enriched fields that stretched away to the horizon. The fields were at low ebb now—gold-stubbled with the tiny shoots of recently sown wheat, an endemic variety unequalled elsewhere in the galaxy. But by mid-summer the tide would be full and the colonists would reap another of the fabulous harvests that were turning them into first-generation millionaires.

He could see the specks of housewives puttering in backyards, and gyro-cars crawling like beetles through the streets. He could see children the apparent size of tad-poles swimming in one of the artificial

lakes that were a feature of each block. All that was missing from the scene was a painter painting a house or a roofer repairing a roof. And for a good reason: *these* houses never ran down.

Or hadn't, up till now.

The wood and the carpentry that had gone into their construction was without parallel. Strong had been inside only one building—the native church that the colonists had converted into a hotel—but the owner, who was also mayor of the village, had assured him that the hotel, basically, was no more than a larger and more ornate counterpart of the other buildings. Strong had never seen such flawless woodwork before, such perfect paneling. Everything was in perfect balance, unified to a degree where it was impossible to tell where foundation and underpinning left off and floor and wall began.

Walls blended into windows and windows blended into walls. Stairways didn't simply descend: they rippled down like wood-grained rapids. As for artificial lighting, it emanated from the very wood itself.

The Advance Team, in classifying the natives as primitive, had based its conclusion largely—and perhaps stupidly, Strong thought—on the fact that they had not learned how to use metals till late in their ethnological tenure. But, the eagerness of the colonists to preserve the one remaining village (which the Department of Galactic Lands had permitted) indicated that the miracles the natives had been able to perform with wood more than compensated for the miracles they had been unable to perform with iron and bronze.

He made three more cable-casts before abandoning the lift, then, standing on the limb beneath the one over which he had made the final cast, he buckled on his climber's belt and attached the articles he would need to its snap-locks. Finally he transferred the end of the limbline from the base-bar to the snap-lock nearest his right hip.

His approximate height now was nine hundred and seventy feet, and the tree had tapered to the proportions of the long extinct American elm. He moved in on the limb to the trunk, fashioned a safety belt out of his saddle-rope and snubbed himself into "walking" position. Then, leaning back at a forty-five degree angle, he "walked" around the trunk till he could obtain a clear view of the overhead branches.

He chose a centrally located crotch, about seventeen feet up, for the limbline, then coiled the first nine or ten feet of the line into a lineman's loop and pulled up about thirty feet of slack. He had to turn sideways on the trunk to make the throw, but he got it off perfectly, and the coil, which comprised the nucleus of the loop, soared through the crotch and unwound down to where he could easily reach the ringed end.

He returned to the limb, untied his safety belt, and climbed the double line to the crotch. Omicron Ceti 18's lighter gravity had reduced his 180 pounds Earth-weight to a feathery 157 ½: he did not even draw a deep breath.

After notifying Wright, he settled himself comfortably, detached the V-shaped Timken-unit from his belt and clamped it into place in the crotch. He opened the unit and laid the limb line over the near-frictionless bearings, then closed the unit and locked it. Although he could not see what was taking place on the ground, he knew that Wright was directing the relocating of the winch, the sinking of new winch-anchors, and the substitution of the limbline for the winch-cable. The winch-cable, unneeded for the moment, would be secured to the base of the tree by means of a tree-peg.

After testing the Timken-unit by pulling the limbline back and forth several times, Strong attached the tree-tongs to the line's ringed end. Then he looked around for a good saddle-crotch. He found one presently. It was about fifteen feet above him and its location promised him excellent access to the area he was concerned with—the section ninety feet down from the top of the tree where the limbs began exceeding the one hundred foot limit Wright had set as maximum crest-length.

After making the throw, he "snaked" the rope down till he could reach it, and tied his saddle. The instruction manual they gave you at treeschool had a lot to say about saddles: about the double bowline tied on the shorter length that provided you with a seat, and the tautline hitch—tied round the longer length with the slack from the bowline—that gave you maneuverability. The manual had a lot to say about saddle-technique, too: told you how to descend by putting your weight in the seat and exerting pressure on the top of the hitch; warned you always to feed the slack through the hitch after you climbed to a higher level or when you were walking in from a tonging. If you used it right, the manual said, your saddle

was your best friend.

Strong didn't slip into the seat right away. He declared a ten-minute break instead. Leaning back in the limbline crotch, he tried to close his eyes; but the sun got in them, the sun and the leaves and the tree flowers, and the bright blue patches of sky.

The saddle-rope hung down like a silvery liana from the lofty crotch of his choosing, swayed gently in the morning breeze. The crotch was about twenty feet below the highest point of the tree, or over a thousand feet above the ground.

The figure was hard to assimilate. He had climbed a good many tall trees; some of them had even run as high as five hundred feet. But this one made them seem insignificant. This one was over a thousand feet high.

A thousand feet! ...

The swaying saddle-rope took on a new meaning. He reached over and touched its knurled surface. He glanced up along its double length. Almost before he knew it, he was climbing; hand over hand at first, then intertwining his feet in the rope and letting it glide between them as he raised his body, "standing" in it while he obtained new hand-holds. Enthusiasm joined his exertion; his blood coursed warmly through his body; his senses sang. He climbed leisurely, confidently. When he reached the crotch, he pulled himself into it and looked upward.

The trunk rose into a final bifurcation some ten feet above. He pressed the tiny studs that released the steel spurs contained in the insteps of his tree-boots and stood up. He placed his hands on the dark gray bark. At this height the trunk was less than a foot in diameter and was as smooth as a woman's throat. He raised his left foot and brought it down on an angle. Hard. The spur sank deep into the wood. He put his weight on his left foot and raised his right. He sank the second spur.

He began to climb.

Even if you closed your eyes, you could tell when you were nearing the top of a tree. Any tree. The crest swayed more and more as your height increased; the trunk grew smaller beneath your hands; the warmth of the sun intensified as the foliage thinned out around you; your heart beat in ever faster cadence ...

When he reached the final crotch, Strong slipped one leg through it and looked down upon the world.

The tree was a green cloud, seen from above now rather than from below—a vast green cloud that obscured most of the village. Only the outlying houses were visible along the lacy periphery. Beyond them the "Great Wheat Sea"—as he had come to call it in his mind—rolled soundlessly away to the horizon.

"Archipelago" would have been a better metaphor than "sea." For there were "islands" wherever you looked. "Islands" of rotted villages, sometimes surmounted by the gaunt gray lighthouse of a dead tree, sometimes littered with the gray debris of a fallen one. "Islands" of storage bins built of durable steel-foil; "islands" of equipment sheds built of the same material and filled with the sowing-copters and lightweight combines the colonists had leased from the Department of Galactic Lands.

Nearer the village there were other, smaller "islands": the sewage disposal plant; the incinerator; the crematory. Finally there was the brand new "island" of the lumber mill, where the colonists hoped to salvage the wood from this tree.

In a way the tree would be a harvest in itself, for wood was dear on Omicron Ceti 18—almost as dear as it was on Earth. But they wouldn't be getting it for nothing, Strong thought; not if you figured the goodly sum they were going to have to shell out to Tree Killers, Inc. for the tree's removal.

He laughed. He had little sympathy for the colonists. He knew as well as Blueskies what they were doing to the soil, what Omicron Ceti 18 would look like half a century in the future. Sometimes he hated them

But he found it hard to hate them now. He found it difficult to hate at all, with the morning wind fluttering his tree-shirt and the morning sun fingering his face and the vast blue sky spread out around his shoulders and the whole world spread out beneath his feet.

He lit and smoked a cigarette, and it tasted good on the top of the world, in the wind and the alien

sun. He smoked it down till it stung his fingers, then ground it out on the instep of his boot.

When he raised his hand, there was blood on his forefinger and thumb.

At first he thought he had cut himself, but when he wiped the blood away there was no sign of a cut or even a scratch. He frowned. Could he possibly have injured his foot? He leaned forward . . . and saw the redness of his instep and the bloody, dripping spur. He leaned farther forward . . . and saw the bloody trail his spurs had left on the smooth gray trunk. Finally he realized that it wasn't his blood at all

It was the tree's.

The foliage twinkled in the sun and the wind, and the trunk swayed lazily back and forth. And back and forth and back and forth

Sap!

He had begun to think that the word would never assert itself, that its false synonym would pre-empt his mind forever.

Sap . . .

It didn't *have* to be transparent. If the right pigments were present, it could be any color—any color under the sun. Purple. Green. Brown. Blue. Red—

Blood-red . . . .

There was no reason to assume that, simply because a certain characteristic was present in ordinary trees, it necessarily had to be present in this one. There was no arboreal law that said a tree's juice *had* to be colorless.

He began to feel better. Red sap, he thought. Wait'll I tell Wright!

But he didn't say a word about it to Wright when, a moment later, Wright contacted him.

"Almost ready?" Wright asked.

"Not—not quite. Doing a little reconnaissance."

"Quite a favorite occupation of yours this morning."

"In a way."

"Well, since you're going to keep the dryads all to yourself, I won't try to muscle in. Too high for a middle-aged treeman like myself to be climbing, anyway. The reason I called was to tell you we're knocking off for chow. I suggest you do the same."

"Will do," Strong said.

But he didn't. He had tree-rations in his pocket, but he had no appetite to go with them. Instead, he sat quietly in the crotch and smoked another cigarette, then he descended the trunk to the saddle-rope crotch. Quite a bit of the sap got on his hands and he had to wipe it off on his handkerchief.

He retracted his spurs, intertwined his feet in the middle-rope and "skinned" down to the limbline-crotch. He paused there long enough to slip into his saddle, then he "burned" down to the end of the limbline, and attached the tongs to his belt. The first one hundred-footer was about twenty feet below him. He "burned" the rest of the way down to it, the limbline trailing behind him, and started walking out. The limb was quite large at its juncture with the trunk, but it tapered rapidly. When he judged he had covered two thirds of its length, he affixed the pointed tongs into the wood, adjusting them so that when the limbline tightened, they would get a firm bite on the limb.

The action had a calming effect, and when he tongued on his transmitter, he was his usual tree-self, and automatically lapsed into the mock-formal mode of address he and Wright sometimes used in their tree-to-ground exchanges:

"Ready when you are, Mr. Wright."

There was a pause. Then: "You don't believe in long noonings, do you, Mr. Strong?"

"Not when there's a tree the size of this one staring me in the face."

"I'll turn on the winch. Sound off when the slack is out."

"Will do, Mr. Wright."

In its present position the limbline straggled back along the limb to the trunk, then up the trunk to the limbline-crotch. When the winch went into action, it rose into a sagging arc ... a less pronounced arc ... a straight line. The limb quivered, creaked—

"Hold it, Mr. Wright."

He walked back to the trunk, feeding his saddle-slack through the tautline hitch. At the trunk, he put his weight into the seat and "burned" down till he was even with the underside of the limb. Then he leaned back in the saddle and drew his pistol-shaped cutter. He set the beam for ten feet and directed the muzzle at the bottom of the limb. He was about to squeeze the trigger when he caught a hint of curves and color on the periphery of his vision. He glanced out to where the limb's leaf-laden branches brushed the noonday sky

And saw the dryad.

"We're waiting for the word, Mr. Strong."

Strong swallowed. Sweat had run down from his forehead into his eyes. He wiped them on his shirtsleeve. He still saw the dryad.

She was half sitting, half reclining, on a bough too small to support her weight, and her wispy garment blended so flawlessly with her leafy surroundings that if it had not been for her pixy-face and golden limbs, and her gentle shock of yellow hair, he would have sworn he was not really seeing her at all; and even as it was, he almost would have sworn, because her face could have been a newly-opened flower, her limbs graceful patterns of golden wheat showing through the foliage, and her hair a handful of sunlight.

He wiped his eyes again. But she refused to disappear. He waved to her, feeling like a fool. She made no movement. He waved to her again, feeling even more like a fool. He tongued off his transmitter. "Get out of there!" he shouted. She paid no attention.

"What's the holdup, Strong?" Wright's impatience was evident both in his tone of voice and in his dropping of the mock-formal "Mr."

Listen, Strong said to himself: You've climbed hundreds of trees and there wasn't a single dryad in any of them. Not one. There's no such thing as a dryad. There never was such a thing. There never will be. In this tree or any other tree. And there's no more dryad out there on that limb than there's champagne in your canteen!

He forced his eyes back to the underside of the limb towards which his cutter still pointed. He forced himself to squeeze the trigger. A slit appeared in the wood; he could almost feel pain. He tongued on his transmitter. "Up," he said. The limbline twanged as it tightened; the limb sighed. He deepened the undercut. "Up," he said again. This time the limb rose perceptibly. "Now keep a steady strain, Mr. Wright," he said, and brought the invisible beam of the cutter slowly up through the wood tissue, freezing the molecular structure inch by inch. The limb rose up and back, separating from the stud. By the time he finished the cut, it was hanging parallel to the trunk and was ready to be lowered.

"Take her down, Mr. Wright!"

"Will do, Mr. Strong!"

He remained where he was while the limb passed, severing the larger subsidiary branches so that there would be less chance of its hanging up. When the final section came opposite him, he scrutinized it closely. But he saw no sign of a dryad.

He noticed that his hands were trembling again, and looking past them he saw something that made them tremble more: the cutter-beam had temporarily frozen the stub, but the sun was shining full upon it now, and blood was already beginning to ooze from the wound

No, not blood. Sap. Red sap. My God, what was the matter with him? All the while he kept his eyes on the limbline so that he could notify Wright in case the limb became hung up. But the limb proved to be co-operative: it slipped smoothly through the lower branches and after a while, he heard Wright say, "She's down, Mr. Strong. I'm raising the line again." And then, in a shocked voice: "Did you cut yourself, Tom?"

"No," Strong said. "That's sap you're looking at."

"Sap! I'll be damned!" Then: "Suhre says it looks pink to him. Blueskies, though, says it's a deep crimson. What does it look like to you, Strong?"

"It looks like blood," Strong said. He swung around to the other side of the trunk, out of sight of the stub, and waited for the end of the line to come within reach. While he waited, he gave the next limb down a good reconnaissance, but he saw no dryad lurking in any of its bowers. By the time he was

set-up for the next cut, some of his confidence had returned and he had half forgotten about the "blood."

And then the second limb began its downward journey, and he saw the new "blood" oozing from the new wound, and he was sick all over again. But not quite so sick this time: he was becoming inured.

He severed and sent four more limbs down in quick succession. He was lucky on all of them: not a single one became hung up. You *needed* luck when you delimbed a tree from the top down rather than from the bottom up and for that reason the top-to-bottom method was never used except in rare cases such as the present one, where the nearest houses were so close that the utmost care had to be taken in removing the lower, longer limbs. As the utmost care could not be taken if overhead growth interfered with their being drawn straight back against the trunk, the easier bottom-to-top method was out for Strong.

He was able to remove eight limbs before it became necessary to move the winch to the opposite side of the tree. After the winch-shift he removed eight more. An excellent afternoon's work in any treeman's book.

At quitting time Wright made the traditional offer: "Want to come down for the night?"

Strong made the traditional refusal: "Like hell!"

"The custom of staying in a tree till it's finished shouldn't apply to a tree the size of this one," Wright said.

"Just the same, it does," Strong said. "What's for chow?"

"The mayor's sending you over a special plate. I'll send it up in the lift. In the meantime, climb in, and as soon as we change cables, you can ride down as far as your tree-tent."

"Will do."

"We're going to sleep at the hotel. I'll keep my eareceiver on in case you need anything."

The mayor didn't arrive for half an hour, but the plate he brought proved to be worth waiting for. Strong had spent the time setting up his tree-tent, and he ate, now, sitting cross-legged before it. The sun had set, and the hahaha birds were wearing scarlet patterns in the foliage and screaming a raucous farewell to the day.

The air grew noticeably colder, and as soon as he finished eating, he got out his heating unit and turned it on. The manufacturers of outdoor heating units took a camper's morale as well as his physical comfort into consideration. This one was shaped like a small campfire and by adjusting a dial you could make its artificial sticks glow bright yellow, deep orange, or cherry-red. Strong chose cherry-red, and the heat emanating so cheerfully from the tiny atomic batteries drove away some of his loneliness.

After a while the moons—Omicron Ceti 18 had three of them—began to rise, and their constantly changing patterns on leaf and limb and flower had a lulling effect. The tree, in its new mood, was lovely. The hahaha birds had settled down for the night, and as there were no singing insects in the vicinity, the quiet was absolute.

It grew rapidly colder. When it was so cold he could see his breath, he withdrew into his tent and pulled his "campfire" into the triangular doorway. He sat there cross-legged in cherry-red solitude. He was very tired. Beyond the fire, the limb stretched out in silver-patterned splendor, and silver-etched leaves hung immobile in the windless night ...

He saw her only in fragments at first: an argent length of leg, a shimmering softness of arm; the darkness where her tunic covered her body; the silvery blur of her face. Finally the fragments drew together, and she was there in all her thin pale loveliness. She walked out of the shadows and sat down on the opposite side of the fire. Her face was much clearer now than it had been those other times—enchanting in its fairy-smallness of features and bluebird-brightness of eyes.

For a long while she did not speak, nor did he, and they sat there silently on either side of the fire, the night all around them, silver and silent and black. And then he said:

You were out there on the limb, weren't you? . . . And you were in the bower, too, and leaning against the trunk.

In a way, she said. *In a way I was.*

And you live here in the tree

In a way, she said again. *In a way I do.* And then: *Why do Earthmen kill trees?*

He thought a moment. *For a variety of reasons, he said. If you're Blueskies, you kill them because killing them permits you to display one of the few heritages your race bequeathed you that the white man was unable to take away—your disdain for height. And yet all the while you're killing them, your Amerind soul writhes in self-hatred, because what you're doing to other lands is essentially the same as what the white man did to yours ... And if you're Suhre, you kill them because you were born with the soul of an ape, and killing them fulfills you the way painting fulfills an artist, the way creating fulfills a writer, the way composing fulfills a musician.*

And if you're you?

He discovered that he could not lie: *You kill them because you never grew up,* he said. *You kill them because you like to have ordinary men worship you and pat you on the back and buy you drinks. Because you like to have pretty girls turn around and look at you on the street. You kill them because shrewd outfits like Tree Killers, Inc. know your immaturity and the immaturity of the hundreds of others like you, and lure you by offering to provide you with a handsome green uniform, by sending you to treeschool and steeping you in false tradition, by retaining primitive methods of tree-removal because primitive methods make you seem almost like a demigod to someone watching from the ground, and almost like a man to yourself.*

Take us the Earthmen, she said, *the little Earthmen, that spoil the vineyard; for our vineyards are in blossom.*

You stole that from my mind, he said. *But you said it wrong. It's 'foxes,' not 'Earthmen.'*

Foxes have no frustrations. I said it right.

. . . Yes, he said, *you said it right.*

Now I must go. I must prepare for tomorrow. I'll be on every limb you cut. Every falling leaf will be my hand, every dying flower my face.

I'm sorry, he said.

I know, she said. *But the part of you that's sorry lives only in the night. It dies with every dawn.*

I'm tired, he said. *I'm terribly tired. I've got to sleep.*

Sleep then, little Earthman. By your little toy fire, in your little toy tent . . . Lie back, little Earthman, and cuddle up in your warm snug bed

Sleep . . .

The Second Day

The singing of hahaha birds awakened him, and when he crawled out of his tent, he saw them winging through arboreal archways and green corridors; through leaf-laced skylights, and foliaged windows pink with dawn.

He stood up on the limb, stretched his arms and filled his chest with the chill morning air. He tongued on his transmitter. "What's for breakfast, Mr. Wright?"

Wright's voice came back promptly: "Flapjacks, Mr. Strong. We're at table now, stashing them away like mad. But don't worry: the mayor's wife is whipping up a whole batch just for you ... Sleep good?"

"Not bad."

"Glad to hear it. You've got your work cut out for you today. Today you'll be getting some of the big ones. Line up any good dryads yet?"

"No. Forget the dryads and bring around the flapjacks, Mr. Wright."

"Will do, Mr. Strong."

After breakfast he broke camp and returned tent, blankets and heating unit to the lift. Then he rode the lift up to where he'd left off the preceding day. He had to lower both the saddle-rope and the limbline; the saddle rope because of its limited length, the limbline because its present crotch was, too high to permit maximum leverage. When he finished, he started out on the first limb of the day.

He paced off ninety feet and knelt and affixed the tongs. Then he told Wright to take up the limbline slack. Far below him he could see houses and backyards. At the edge of the square the timber-carriers

were drawn up in a long line, ready to transport the new day's harvest to the mill.

When the line was taut, he told Wright to ease off, then he walked back to the trunk and got into delimbing position. He raised the cutter, pointed it. He touched the trigger.

I'll be on every limb

The dream rushed back around him and for a while he could not free himself. He looked out to the limb's end where the leaf-embroidered subsidiary branches twinkled in the sun and the wind. This time he was surprised when he did *not* see a dryad.

After a long while he brought his eyes back to where they belonged, and re-aimed the cutter. *For all men kill the thing they love,* he thought, and squeezed the trigger. *By all let this be heard.* "Take her up, Mr. Wright," he said.

When the limb was being lowered, he moved out of the way and severed the larger subsidiary branches as it passed. Most of them would hang up in the foliage below, but eventually they would end up on the ground as he worked his way down the tree. The end branches were too small to bother with and when they came opposite him, he turned away to inspect the next limb. Just before he did so, one of the soft leaves brushed his cheek.

It was like the touch of a woman's hand. He recoiled. He wiped his cheek furiously.

His fingers came away red.

It was some time before he realized that there had been blood—no, not blood, sap—on his fingers *before* he had wiped his cheek; but he was so shaken by then that the realization did little good, and the little good it did do was cancelled when he moved back to check the limbline and saw the "blood" welling out of the new stub.

For an insane moment all he could think of was the stump of a woman's arm.

Presently he became aware of a voice in his mind. "Tom," the voice said. "Tom! Are you all right, Tom?" It dawned on him that it was Wright's voice and that it wasn't in his mind at all, but emanating from his eareceiver.

"Yes?"

"I said, 'Are you all right?' "

"Yes . . . I'm all right."

"It took you long enough to answer! I wanted to tell you that the lumber mill superintendent just sent word that all the wood we've removed so far is half-rotten. He's afraid they won't be able to salvage any of it. So watch your step, and make sure your limbline crotches are solid."

"The tree looks healthy enough to me," Strong said.

"Maybe so, but don't trust it any further than you have to. It doesn't add up in more ways than one. I sent several samples of the sap to the village lab, and they say that in its crude state—that's before it goes through the photosynthesis process—it contains an unusually high concentration of nutrients, and in its elaborated stage—that's after it goes through the photosynthesis process—it consists of twice as many carbohydrates and twice as much oxygen as even a healthy thousand-foot tree needs to sustain itself. And not only that, they say that there's no pigment present that could possibly account for the sap's unusual color. So maybe we just imagine we're seeing `blood'."

"Or maybe the tree induces us to imagine we're seeing `blood,' " Strong said.

Wright laughed. "You've been consorting with too many dryads, Mr. Strong. Watch yourself now."

"Will do," Strong said, tonguing off.

He felt better. At least he wasn't the only one who was bothered by the "blood." The next cut did not bother him nearly so much, even though the stub "bled" profusely. He "burned" down to the next limb and started out upon it. Suddenly he felt something soft beneath his foot. Glancing down, he saw that he had stepped on a flower that had fallen either from the crest or from one of the limbs he had just removed. He stooped over and picked it up. It was crushed and its stem was broken, but even dying, it somehow managed to convey a poignant suggestion of a woman's face.

He attacked the tree, hoping that action would blunt his perceptions.

He worked furiously. Sap got on his hands and stained his clothing, but he forced himself to ignore it. He forced himself to ignore the tree-flowers, too, and the leaves that sometimes caressed his face. By

noon he had cut his way down past the limb where he had spent the night, and above him nearly three hundred feet of stubbed trunk rose into the foliaged crest.

He made a few swift calculations: the crest represented about ninety feet; the distance from the ground to the first limb was two hundred and eighty-seven feet; he had de-limbed nearly three hundred feet. Roughly, then, he had about three hundred and fifty feet to go.

After a brief lunch of tree-rations, he went back to work. The sun was blistering now, and he missed the limbs and leaves that had shaded him yesterday. He had to keep moving his saddle-rope to lower and lower stub-crotches, but the length of the lower limbs made moving the limbline unnecessary. He was a little awed, despite himself, at their size. Even when you knew that the line you were using *couldn't* break, it was unnerving to watch so thin a cable pull a two- to three-hundred-foot limb from a horizontal to a vertical position and then support if while it was being lowered to the ground.

The tree "bled" more and more as his downward progress continued. The "blood" from the upper stubs kept dripping down into the lower branches, smearing limbs and leaves and making his work a nightmare of incarnadine fingers and red-splotched clothing. Several times he came close to giving up, but each time he reminded himself that if he did not finish the job, Suhre, who had drawn the second longest blade of grass, would; and somehow the thought of Suhre's insensitive fingers manipulating the cutter beam was even more unendurable than the "blood." So he persisted, and when the day was done, he had less than two hundred feet to go.

He pitched his tent on the topmost lower limb, some five hundred feet down from the crest, and asked Wright to send up water, soap and towels. When Wright complied, he stripped, soaped himself thoroughly, and rinsed the soap suds away. After drying himself, he washed out his clothes in the remaining water and hung them over the campfire. He felt better. When Wright sent up his supper—another special plate prepared by the mayor's wife—he ate cross-legged before his tent, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. By the time he finished, his clothes were dry, and he put them on. The stars came out.

He opened the thermo-cup of coffee that had accompanied his meal and smoked a cigarette between sips.

He wondered if she would come tonight.

The night grew chill. At length the first moon rose, and before long her two silvery sisters came too. Their argent radiance transformed the tree. The limb on which he sat seemed part of a huge configuration of limbs that formed the petals of a massive flower. And then he saw the stubbed and ugly trunk rising out of the flower's center and the metaphorical illusion collapsed.

But he did not turn his eyes away. He stood up instead and faced the trunk and looked up at the cruel caricature he had created. Up, up he looked, to where the crest showed dark and lustrous against the sky, as lovely as a woman's hair ... There was a flower tucked in her hair, he noticed; a lonely flower glowing softly in the moonlight.

He rubbed his eyes and looked again. The flower was still there. It was an unusual flower, quite unlike the others: It bloomed just above the highest crotch—the crotch where he had first seen her blood.

The moonlight grew brighter. He located the limbline-crotch up there, and followed the limbline down with his eyes to where he had secured it after the day's operations. He reached out and touched it and it felt good to his fingers, and presently he began climbing in the moonlight.

Up, up he went, his biceps knotting, his laterals swelling against his shirt. Up into moonlight, into magic. The lower branches dwindled into a silvery mass beneath him. When he came to the saddle-rope crotch, he pulled the rope free and coiled and slung it over his shoulder. He felt no tiredness, knew no shortness of breath. It wasn't until he reached the limb line-crotch that his arms became weary and his breathing rapid. He coiled a lineman's loop and threw it through a stub-crotch some fifteen feet above his head. Eight more throws brought him up to the original saddle-rope crotch. His chest was tight, and his swollen muscles throbbed with pain. He released his spurs and started up the final section of the trunk. When he reached the highest crotch, he saw her sitting on an overhead bough, and the flower was her face.

She made room for him on the bough, and he sat down beside her, and far below them the tree spread out like a huge upended umbrella, the lights of the village twinkling like colored raindrops along its leaf-embroidered edges. She was thinner, he saw, and paler, and there was a sadness in her eyes.

You tried to kill me, didn't you? he said, when his breath came back. *You didn't think I could make it up here.*

I knew you could make it, she said. *Tomorrow is when I'll kill you. Not tonight.*

How?

I—I don't know.

Why should you want to kill me? There are other trees—if not here, then in some other land.

For me there is only one, she said.

We always make jokes about dryads, he said. *Myself and the others. It's funny though: it never occurred to any of us that if there was such a thing as a dryad, we'd be the most logical people in the galaxy for her to hate.*

You don't understand, she said.

But I do understand. I know how I'd feel if I had a home of my own and somebody came around and started tearing it down.

It isn't really like that at all, she said.

Why isn't it like that? The tree is your home, isn't it? Do you live in it all alone?

. . . Yes, she said. *I'm all alone.*

I'm all alone, too, he said.

Not now, she said. *You're not alone now.*

No. Not now.

Moonlight washed down through the foliage, spattering their shoulders with silver drops. The Great Wheat Sea was silver now, instead of gold, and a dead tree in the distance showed like the silver mast of a sunken ship, its dead branches empty booms where foliage sails had fluttered, in summer sunlight and warm winds, on spring mornings when the first breeze came up, on autumn afternoons before the frosts ...

What did a dryad do, he wondered, when her tree died? *She dies, too,* she answered, before he had a chance to ask.

But why?

You wouldn't understand.

He was silent. Then: *Last night I thought I dreamed you. After I awoke this morning, I was sure I dreamed you.*

You had to think you dreamed me, she said. *Tomorrow you'll think you dreamed me again.*

No, he said.

Yes, she said. *You'll think so because you have to think so. If you think otherwise, you won't be able to kill the tree. You won't be able to stand the sight of the 'blood.' You won't be able to accept yourself as sane.*

Perhaps you're right.

I know I'm right, she said. *Horribly right. Tomorrow you'll ask yourself how there can possibly be such a thing as a dryad, especially one that speaks English, especially one that quotes poetry out of my mind; especially one that has the power to entice me into climbing over five hundred feet, at the risk of my life, just so I can sit on a moonlit limb talking to her.*

Come to think of it, how can there be? he said.

There, you see? It isn't even morning yet, and already you're beginning not to believe. You're beginning to think again that I'm nothing more than a play of light on leaves and limbs; that I'm nothing more than a romantic image out of your loneliness.

There's a way to tell, he said, and reached out to touch her. But she eluded his hand and moved farther out on the bough. He followed, and felt the bough sag beneath him.

Please don't, she said. *Please don't.* She moved farther away, so pale and thin now that he could hardly see her against the starred darkness of the sky.

I knew you weren't real he said. *You couldn't have been real.*

She did not answer. He strained his eyes—and saw leaf and shadow and moonlight, and nothing more. He started moving back toward the trunk, and suddenly he felt the bough bend beneath him and heard the sound of fibers parting. The bough did not break all at once. Instead it bent in toward the tree and he was able, just before it snapped free, to throw both his arms around the trunk and to cling there long enough to sink his spurs.

For a long time he did not move. He listened to the diminishing swish of the bough's passage, heard the prolonged whisper of its journey through the foliage far below, the faint thud as it hit the ground.

At last he started down. The descent was unreal, seemed endless.

He crawled into the tent and pulled the campfire in after him. His tiredness buzzed in his brain like a sleepy swarm of bees. He wanted desperately to have done with the tree. To hell with tradition, he thought. He'd finish the delimbing, then Suhre could take over.

But he knew he was lying in his teeth; that he'd never let Suhre touch a cutter beam to so much as a single branch. Felling *this* tree was no job for an ape. Felling *this* tree was a job for a man.

Presently he fell asleep, thinking of the last limb.

The Third Day

It was the last limb that nearly got him.

Noon had arrived by the time he had severed the others, and he stopped to eat. He had hardly any appetite. The tree, limbless and graceful for the first two hundred and eighty-seven feet, stubbed and grotesque for the next six hundred and forty-five, green and symmetrical for the remaining ninety, made him sick just to look at it. Only the thought of Suhre climbing into those dying branches made it possible for him to go on. If the thing you loved had to be killed, then it were best for you yourself to do it; for if mercy could be a part of murder, certainly a lover was best qualified to bestow it.

The first limb had finally become the last limb, and extended almost five hundred incongruous feet over the square and the village. After he finished eating, he started walking out on it. When he had paced off three hundred and thirty feet, he affixed the tongs. They were the largest pair the company owned, and, while light, were extremely unwieldy. But he finally got them set up the way he wanted them, and he paused a moment to rest.

The limb was narrow enough at this point for him to see over its edge. He had quite an audience: Wright and Suhre and Blueskies of course, and the timber-carrier drivers; and in addition there were hundreds of colonists, clustered in the streets beyond the roped off area, looking up with wondering faces. Somehow their presence failed to give him the gratifying thrill amateur audiences usually gave him. Instead he found himself wondering what they would do if he were to drop the limb straight down. It would be good for at least a score of houses, and if he were to jump-cut it, it would be good for half that many more.

Abruptly he realized his apostasy and tongued on his transmitter: "Take her up, Mr. Wright."

The tightened limbline lent the effect of a suspension bridge supported by a single cable. He walked back to the trunk, and when he reached it, got into delimbing position. He drew and aimed his cutter. As he squeezed the trigger, a flock of hahaha birds erupted from the foliage at the limb's end. "Take her up some more, Mr. Wright."

The limb groaned, rose slightly. The hahaha birds flew three times around the trunk, then soared up into the crest and out of sight. He cut again. It was the sunward side of the tree, and the sap began to ooze out of the slit and trickle down the trunk. He shuddered, cut some more. "Keep a steady strain, Mr. Wright." The limb rose, inch by inch, foot by foot. Awesomely, monstrously. Some of the others had been giants; this one dwarfed them. "A little faster, Mr. Wright. She's twisting my way."

The limb steadied, rose back, back toward the trunk. He stole a glance below. Suhre and Blueskies had finished cutting the last limb he had sent down into sections small enough for the carrier-winches to handle, and were watching him intently. Wright was standing by the tree-winch, his eyes focused on the rising limb. The square down there had a reddish cast. So had the three men's clothing.

Strong wiped his face on his stained shirtsleeve and returned his attention to the cut. He tried to concentrate on it. The limb was almost perpendicular now, and the critical moment had arrived. He wiped his face again. Lord, the sun was hot! And there was no shade to protect him. No shade whatsoever. Not a vestige, not a mote, not an iota of shade . . .

He wondered what price tree-shade would bring if there were an acute shortage of it throughout the galaxy. And how would you sell it if you had some to sell? By the cubic foot? By the temperature? By the quality?

Good morning, madam I'm in the tree-shade business. I deal in rare tree-shades of all kinds: in willow-shade, oak-shade, appletree-shade, maple-shade, to name just a few. Today I'm running a special on a most unusual kind of tree-shade newly imported from Omicron Ceti 18. It's deep, dark, cool and refreshing–just the thing to relax you after a day in the sun–and it's positively the last of its kind on the market. You may think you know your tree-shades, madam, but you have never known a tree-shade like this one. Cool winds have blown through it, birds have sung in it, dryads have frolicked in it the day long—

"Strong!"

He came out of it like a swimmer coming out of the depths of the sea. The limb was swinging darkly towards him, twisting free from the stub along the uneven line of his undercut. He could hear the loud ripping of wood tissue and the grinding sound of bark against bark. He saw the "blood."

He tried to leap out of the way, but his legs had turned to lead and all he could do was watch the relentless approach and wait till those tons and tons of solid fiber broke completely free and descended upon him and blended his blood with their own.

He closed his eyes. *Tomorrow is when I'll kill you,* she had said. *Not tonight.* He heard the heavy *thungg* as the limbline tautened beneath the full weight of the limb, and he felt the tree shudder. But he knew no crushing impact, no scraping of smashed body against the trunk. He knew nothing but the darkness of his closed eyelids and the feeling that time had ceased to pass.

"Strong! For God's sake get out of there!"

He opened his eyes then. The limb, at the last moment, had swung the opposite way. Now it was swinging back. Life returned to his legs, and he scrambled and clawed his way around the trunk. The tree was still shuddering and he was unable to brace himself in his saddle, but he managed to cling to the bark-prominences till the shock-waves died away. Then he worked his way back around the trunk to where the limb was swinging gently back and forth on the end of the limb-line.

"All right, Strong. That's all for you. I'm grounding you right now!"

Looking down, he saw Wright standing by the winch, hands on hips, gazing angrily up at him. Blueskies had taken over the winch-controls, and Suhre was buckling on his climber's belt. The limb was rapidly nearing the ground.

So I'm grounded, Strong thought.

He wondered why he didn't feel relieved. He'd wanted to be grounded, hadn't he?

He lay back in his saddle and looked up at his handiwork: at the macabre stubs and the disembodied crest. There was something beautiful about the crest, something unbearably beautiful. It was more gold than green, more like a woman's hair than limbs and leaves

"Did you hear me, Strong? I said you were grounded!"

Suddenly he thought of Suhre climbing up into those lovely golden tresses, defiling them with his brutal hands; raping them, destroying them. If it had been Blueskies he wouldn't have cared. But Suhre!

He lowered his eyes to the limbline-crotch. The last limb had reached the ground by now, and the limbline was no longer in motion. His eyes traced its silvery length down the trunk to where it hung several feet away, and he reached out and grasped it and climbed it to the top of the stub he had just created. He slipped out of his saddle, pulled the rope down, coiled and slung it over his shoulder

"I'm telling you for the last time, Strong!"

"To hell with you, Wright," Strong said. "This is *my* tree!"

He started up the limbline. Wright cursed him steadily for the first hundred feet, changed to a more conciliatory tone when he passed the halfway mark. Strong paid no attention. "All right, Tom," Wright

said finally, "finish it then. But don't try to climb all the way to the crest. Use the lift."

"Shove the lift," Strong said.

He knew he was being unreasonable, but he didn't care. He wanted to climb; he wanted to use his strength; he wanted to hurt his body; he wanted to know pain. He began to know it some two hundred feet down from the limbline-crotch. By the time he reached the crotch he knew it well. But not as well as he wanted to know it, and, without pausing, he coiled a lineman's loop, threw it through an overhead stub-crotch, and continued his ascent. It took him three more throws to make the first crest-limb, and he pulled himself gratefully into leafsweet coolness. His muscles screamed and his lungs burned and his throat felt like caked mud.

When some of his strength returned, he drank sparingly from his canteen, then he lay quietly in the coolness, not thinking, not moving, not feeling. Vaguely he heard Wright's voice—"You're a damned fool, but you're a good treeman, Mr. Strong!" But he was too exhausted to answer.

Gradually the rest of his strength returned, and he stood up on the limb and smoked a cigarette. He looked up into the foliage, located his original saddle-rope crotch, and threw for it. From the crotch he began a systematic scrutiny of the crest. He didn't really expect to find her; but before he made the first topping he had to *know* that she wasn't there.

Hahaha birds eyed him with half-moon eyes. Tree-flowers bloomed in bowers. Sun-dappled leaves quivered in a little breeze.

He wanted to call out to her, but he didn't know her name. If she had a name. Funny he'd never thought to ask her. He stared at unusual twists of limbs, at unique patterns of leaves. He looked long at tree-flowers. If she was not here, she was nowhere

Unless, during the night, she had left the tree and hidden herself in one of the vacated houses. But he did not think she had. If she was real and not his fancy, she would never leave her tree; and if she wasn't real and was his fancy, she *couldn't* leave her tree.

Apparently she was neither: the crest was empty—empty of her flower-face, her leafy tunic, her wheat-hued length of leg and arm; her sunny hair. He sighed. He didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed. He had dreaded finding her because if she'd been in the crest, he wouldn't have known what to do. But now he knew that he had dreaded *not* finding her, too.

"What are you doing up there, Mr. Strong? Saying good bye to your dryad?"

Startled, he looked down into the square. Wright and Suhre and Blueskies were a trio of almost indistinguishable specks. "Just looking her over, Mr. Wright," he said. "The crest, I mean. There's about ninety feet of her, think you can handle that much all at once?"

"I'll take a chance, Mr. Strong. But I want the rest in fifty-foot sections, as long as the diameter of the trunk permits."

"Stand by then, Mr. Wright."

The crest, when it fell, seemed to bow goodbye to the sky. Hahaha birds erupted from it, streaked in a scarlet haze toward the horizon. It floated down to the ground like a green cloud, and the swish of its leaves was like the pattering of a thousand summer raindrops.

The tree shook like the shoulders of a woman sobbing.

"Well done, Mr. Strong," Wright said presently. "Now as nearly as I can estimate, you can get about eleven fifty-footers before the increasing diameter of the trunk rules them out. Then you'll have to take two one hundred-footers. If you drop them right, they shouldn't give us any trouble. That'll leave some two hundred feet for the base-cut, and you'll have to fell it so that the last fifty feet comes down in one of the village streets; we'll figure that out when you get down here. So in all, then, you've got fourteen more cuts to make. Think you can finish up today?"

Strong looked at his watch. "I doubt it, Mr. Wright."

"If you can, fine. If you can't, we've got all day tomorrow. Just don't take any chances, Mr. Strong."

The first fifty-footer nosed into the black soil of the square, paused a moment, then toppled on its side. The second followed in its wake—

And the third and the fourth—

It was funny, Strong thought, the way physical activity kept everything sane and in place. He found it

hard to believe now that less than half an hour ago he had been looking for a dryad. That less than twenty-four hours ago he had been talking to one . . .

And the fifth and the sixth—

On the seventh, his pace began to slow. He was nearing the half-way mark and the diameter of the trunk had increased to nearly thirty feet. Snubbing himself to it was no longer possible, to get into topping position, he had to drive tree-pegs and run his improvised safety-belts through the slot in their end. But the slower pace gave Suhre and Blueskies a chance to cut the increasingly larger sections into suitable dimensions for the carriers. They had fallen behind; now they were beginning to catch up. The colonists, according to Wright, had given up hope of salvaging the wood and were piling it in a cleared area well away from the mill, preparatory to burning it.

Earlier in the afternoon a wind had sprung up. Now it began to die. The sun grew hotter; the tree "bled" more and more. Strong kept glancing down into the square. With its red-tinted grass and stub-gored sod, it had some of the aspects of a charnel house; but he was hungry for the feel of earth beneath his feet, and even "blood"-stained ground looked good to him.

He squinted repeatedly at the sun. He'd been in the tree nearly three days now, and did not relish spending another night in its branches. Or rather, in its stubs. But he had to admit after he finished the final fifty-footer, that he was going to have to. By then the sun was almost out of sight beyond the Great Wheat Sea, and he knew he couldn't possibly drop even the first hundred-footer before darkness fell.

The lowest stub upon which he now stood was roomy enough for twenty tree-tents. Wright cable-cast over it (the lift had been lowered earlier in the afternoon, and the winch-cable reeled in), and sent up his supplies and supper. Supper turned out to be another of the mayor's special plates. After setting up his tree-tent, Strong picked at the food indifferently; his appetite of yesterday was gone.

He was so tired that he didn't even wash–though Wright had sent up soap and water, too–and when he finished eating, he lay back on the coarse bark and watched the silver rising of the moons and the pale whispering into life of the stars. This time when she came, she tiptoed up and sat down beside him and gazed into his face with her blue sad eyes. The whiteness of her skin shocked him, and the thinness of her cheeks made him want to cry.

I looked for you this morning, he said. *I couldn't find you. Where do you go when you disappear?*

Nowhere, she said.

But you must go somewhere

You don't understand, she said.

No, he said. *I guess I don't. I guess I never will.*

Yes you will, she said. *Tomorrow you'll understand. Tomorrow will be too late.*

Tonight is too late. Yesterday was too late. It was too late before you even climbed into the tree.

Tell me, he said. *Are you a member of the race that built the village?*

In a way, she said.

How old are you?

I don't know, she said.

Did you help to build the village?

I built the village alone.

Now you're lying, he said.

I never lie, she said.

What happened to the original race?

They grew up. They ceased to be simple. They became complex and sophisticated, civilized. And as they became civilized, they began ridiculing the customs of the ancestors as being all ignorance and superstition, and they set up new customs. They made things of iron and bronze, and it took them less than one hundred years to destroy an ecological balance that not only had helped to keep them alive but had supplied them with a reason to live–a reason so strong that it was almost a life-force. When they discovered what they had done, they were horrified; but they

made the discovery too late.

And so they died?

You've seen their villages.

Yes, I've seen their villages, he said. *And I've read in the Advance Team's report about the death-caves in the northern barrens into which they crawled with their children to die. But what about this village? They could have saved this one in the same way we are by removing the tree.*

She shook her head. *You still don't understand,* she said. *In order to receive, one must also give: that was the law they broke. Some of them broke it sooner than others, but eventually all of them broke it and had to pay the penalty.*

You're right, he said. *I don't understand.*

Tomorrow you will. Tomorrow everything will be clear.

Last night you tried to kill me, he said. *Why?*

I didn't try to kill you. You tried to kill yourself. Today was when I tried to kill you.

With the limb?

With the limb.

But how?

It doesn't matter. All that matters is, I didn't. Couldn't.

Where will you go tomorrow?

Why should you care where I go?

I do.

You couldn't possibly be in love with me

How do you know I couldn't be?

Because– Because

Because I don't think you're real?

You don't, do you? she said.

I don't know what to think, he said. Sometimes I think you are, some times I think you aren't.

I'm as real as you are, she said. *Though in a different way.*

He reached up abruptly, and touched her face. Her skin was soft and cold. As cold as moonlight, as soft as a flower. It wavered before his eyes; her whole body wavered. He sat up, turned towards her. She was light and shadow, leaf and flower; the scent of summer, the breath of night. He heard her voice. It was so faint he could hardly make out her words: *You shouldn't have done that. You should have accepted me for what I was. Now you've spoiled it. Now we must spend our last night together, alone.*

So you weren't real after all, he said. *You were never real.* No answer.

But if you weren't real, I must have imagined you, he said. *And if I imagined you, how could you tell me things I didn't know?*

No answer.

He said: *You make what I'm doing seem like a crime. But it isn't a crime. When a tree becomes a menace to a community, it should be removed.*

No answer.

Just the same, I'd give anything if it didn't have to be this way, he said.

Silence.

Anything at all

The space beside him remained empty. He turned, finally, and crawled into his tent and drew his campfire in after him. His tiredness had turned him numb. He fumbled with his blankets with numb fingers, wrapped them around his numb body. He drew up his numb knees and hugged them with his numb arms.

"Anything at all," he murmured. "Anything at all . . ."

The Fourth Day

Sunlight seeping through the tent-wall awoke him. He kicked free of his blankets and crawled out into the morning. He saw no scarlet winging of hahaha birds; he heard no morning birdsong. The tree was silent in the sunlight. Empty. Dead.

No, not quite dead. A cluster of leaves and flowers grew green and white and lovely by the entrance of the tent. He could not beat to look at them.

He stood up on the stub and breathed deeply of the morning air. It was a gentle morning. Mist was rising from the Great Wheat Sea and a scattering of cirrus clouds hung in the bright blue sky like new-washed laundry. He walked to the end of the stub and looked down. Wright was oiling the winch. Suhre was cutting up the last fifty-footer. Blueskies was nowhere in sight.

"Why didn't you wake me, Mr. Wright?"

Wright looked up, located his face. "Thought you could stand a few extra winks, Mr. Strong."

"You thought correctly ... Where's the Amerind?"

"The buffalo caught up to him again. He's drowning them at the hotel bar."

A two-wheeled gyro-car pulled into the square and a plump man carrying a basket got out. The mayor, Strong thought. Breakfast. He waved, and the mayor waved back.

The contents of the basket proved to be ham and eggs and coffee. Strong ate hurriedly, then collapsed his tent, folded it, and sent it down on the lift along with his blankets and campfire. He got ready for the first cut. It would be considerably less than one hundred feet because the stub was centered on the three hundred foot mark. It came off perfectly, and he "burned" down in his saddle for the second. This one would have to go at least one hundred and twenty feet in order to leave the maximum of two hundred for the base-cut. He estimated the distance carefully.

After notching the section on the side Wright wanted the fall, he worked his way around toward the opposite side of the trunk, playing out his saddle-rope as he went. The bark-prominences and the fissures made the operation relatively simple, and he even paused now and then to look down into the square. The square was closer now than it had been for days, and it and the houses and the streets looked strange from his new perspective, as did the hordes of colonists watching from beyond the vacated area.

Wright informed him when he was directly opposite the center of the notch, and he drove a tree-peg. It took but a moment to transfer his saddle from the overhead stub-crotch to the peg-slot. He leaned back in the seat, braced his feet against one of the bark-prominences, and began the cut.

He began it gingerly. He was working with thousands of tons and the least miscalculation could bring those thousands of tons down upon him. The trouble was, he had to cut above the tree-peg, and to do so he had to hold the cutter at arm's length above his head, at the same time keeping the line of the beam at right angles to the trunk.

It was a tricky operation and demanded good eyesight and excellent judgment. Ordinarily Strong possessed both, but today he was tired. He didn't have any idea quite how tired till he heard Wright shout.

It was the bark-prominences that had thrown him off. He realized that instantly. Instead of using the whole of the visible trunk in estimating his beam-angle, he had used only a limited area and the prominences in that area weren't true. However, the realization did him no good: the one hundred and twenty foot section was already toppling towards him, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

It was like clinging to the face of a cliff and seeing the entire top section start falling outward in a slow but inevitable arc that would eventually enclose him between earthen jaws. The jaws were wood in this case, but the analogy was basically accurate: the fate of a gnat squeezed between two handfuls of earth differs but little from the fate of a gnat squeezed between two sticks.

He felt nothing; terror had not yet had time to take root. He watched wonderingly while the falling section blotted out the sun and turned the fissures between the bark-prominences into dark caves. He listened wonderingly to a voice that he was sure was emanating from his own brain, but which could not be emanating from his own brain because it was too sweet and poignant to have his mind as a source-place.

Into the fissure. Hurry!

He could not see her; he wasn't even sure it was her voice. But his body responded, squeezing itself into the nearest fissure, squirming back as far as it could go. Another second and the effort would have been wasted, for the moment his shoulder touched the backwall of the fissure, the upended butt of the section came thundering down tearing his tree-peg out by the steel roots; roaring, crashing, splintering, finally passing from sight.

The fissure filled with sunlight. Except for himself, it was empty.

Presently he heard the heavy *thud* as the section struck the ground. Another, more prolonged, *thud* followed, and he knew that it had landed head-on and then fallen lengthwise into the square. He waited almost hopefully for the sounds of splintering wood and breaking glass and the other sundry sounds houses make when a heavy object drops upon them, but he heard nothing.

The fissure had no floor. He was holding himself in position by pressing his knees against one wall while pressing his back against the other. Now he inched his way to the mouth and peered down into the square.

The section had landed on an angle, plowing a huge furrow in the earth, gouging out ancient burial artifacts and bits of human bones. Afterwards it had toppled back away from the nearer houses. Wright and Suhre were running up and down its length, looking for his mangled body. He heard himself laughing. He knew it was himself; not because he recognized his voice, but because there was no one else in the fissure. He laughed till his chest hurt and he could barely breathe, till there was no more hysteria left in him. Then, when his breath came back, he tongued on his transmitter and said: "Are you looking for me, Mr. Wright?"

Wright went rigid. He turned, looked up. Suhre followed suit. For a moment no one said a word. At last Wright raised his arm and wiped his face on his shirtsleeve. "All I got to say, Mr. Strong," he said, "is that you got a good dryad watching over you." And then: "Come down, man. Come down. I want to shake your hand!"

It got through to Strong finally that he *could* go down; that his work, except for the base-cut, was finished.

He pulled up his dangling tree-peg, re-drove it, and "burned" down the saddle-rope in fifty foot spurts. He cut the last spurt short, slipped out of the seat, and leaped the final few feet to the ground.

The sun was at meridian. He had been in the tree three and one half days.

Wright came up and shook his hand. So did Suhre. At length he became aware that he was shaking hands with a third party. The mayor had returned, bringing special plates for everybody this time plus a set of collapsible tables and chairs.

"We'll never forget you, my boy," he was saying, his dew-lapped jaws jiggling. "We'll never forget you! I called a special meeting of the board last night on your behalf, and we voted unanimously to erect a statue of you in the square after the stump had been burned out. We're going to inscribe the words, 'The Man Who Saved Our Beloved Village' at its base. Quite a heroic inscription, don't you think? But it's no more than you deserve. However, today—tonight, I want to express my gratitude in a more tangible way. I want you—and your friends, too, of course—to be my guests at the hotel. Every thing will be on the house."

Suhre said: "I've been waiting to hear those words!" Wright said: "We'll be there." Strong didn't say anything. Finally the mayor released his hand, and the four of them sat down to dinner. Steaks brought all the way from the southern hemisphere, mushrooms imported from Omicron Ceti 14, tossed salad, green peas, fresh bread, apricot pie, coffee.

Strong forced the food down. He had no appetite. What he really wanted was a drink. Many drinks. But it was too soon. He still had one more cut to go. Then he could drink. Then he could help Blueskies drown the buffalo. On the house. "The Man Who Saved Our Beloved Village." Fill her up, bartender. Fill her up again. *I did not wear my scarlet cloak,* bartender. *For blood and wine are red,* bartender. *And blood and wine were on my hands when they found me with the dead, the poor dead woman whom I loved and murdered in her bed ...*

The mayor had an excellent appetite. His beloved village was safe now. Now he could sit by his fire and count his credits in peace. He wouldn't have to worry any more about the tree. Strong felt like the

little Dutch boy who had thrust his hand in the hole in the dike and saved the burghers' houses from the sea.

He was glad when the meal was over, glad when Wright leaned back in his chair. "What do you say, Mr. Strong?" "I say let's get it over with, Mr. Wright."

They got up. The mayor took his table and chairs, climbed in his gyro-car and joined the other colonists beyond the danger area. The village sparkled in the sunlight. The streets looked as though they had just been scrubbed, and the houses with their elaborate decor, looked like gingerbread fresh from the oven. Strong stopped feeling like the little Dutch boy and started to feel like Jack the Giant-Killer. It was time to chop down the bean-stalk.

He took up his position at the base of the trunk and began the notch. Wright and Suhre stood just behind him. He cut the notch carefully so that the trunk could not fail to fall in the direction Wright had designated. He cut it deep and true, and when he finished, he knew the trunk would obey him. He walked around to its opposite side, Wright and Suhre following. No one spoke. It felt strange to be walking on solid ground. He kept expecting to feel the tug of the saddle-seat against his buttocks, the drag of the limb-line on his belt. The tips of his boots were red, he noticed. Red from the "blood"-drenched grass.

He took up his final position and raised his cutter. He squeezed the trigger. *The coward does it with a kiss,* he thought, *the treeman with a sword.* A slit appeared in the fissured trunk. Its edges began to redden. *The most modern of swords, manufactured in New America, Venus, and guaranteed never to become dull—*

Never to show mercy.

"Blood" ran down the bark, discoloring the grass. The invisible blade of the cutter swung back and forth and back and forth. The two hundred foot stub that once had been a tall proud tree shuddered. Slowly it began its passage to the ground.

There was the prolonged swishing sound of the descent; the thick and thunderous sound of the descent's end; the quick brief trembling of the earth ...

The surface of the massive stump grew bright red in the sunlight. Strong let the cutter fall to the ground. He circled the stump, stumbling now and then, till he came to the building-high length of the fallen stub. It had dropped just as he had wanted it to, its uppermost section landing neatly between two of the rows of houses. But he did not care about the houses any more. He had never cared about them really. He continued walking, gazing steadfastly at the ground. He found her presently, near the edge of the square. He had known he would find her if he looked hard enough. She was sunlight and meadow flower, a transient pattern of grass. He could not see all of her—only her waist and breasts and arms and lovely dying face. The rest of her was crushed beneath the stub: her hips, her legs, her small, leaf-sandaled feet—"Forgive me," he said, and saw her smile and nod her head, and saw her die; and the grass come back, and the meadow flower, and the sun.

Epilogue

The man who had saved the beloved village placed his elbows on the bar that had once been an altar, in the hotel that had once been a church. "We've come to drown the buffalo, mayor," he said.

The mayor, who in honor of the occasion had taken over the duties of bartender, frowned.

"He means," Wright said, "that we'd like a round of drinks."

The mayor beamed. "May I recommend," he said, "our finest Martian bourbon, distilled from the choicest maize of the *Mare Erythraeum?"*

"Bring it forth from your cob-webbed crypt and we'll try it," Strong said.

"It's an excellent bourbon," Blueskies said, "but it won't drown buffalo. I've been on it all afternoon."

"You and your damned buffalo!" Suhre said.

The mayor set glasses before Wright and Strong and Suhre, and filled them from a golden bottle. "My glass is empty also," Blueskies said, and the mayor filled his, too.

The townfolk, out of deference, let the treemen have the bar to themselves. However, all the tables

were occupied, and every so often one of the colonists would stand up and propose a toast, to Strong in particular, or to the treemen in general, and all of them—men and women alike—would stand up and cheer and empty their glasses.

"I wish they'd go home," Strong said. "I wish they'd leave me alone."

"They can't leave you alone," Wright said. "You're their new culture-god."

"Another bourbon, Mr. Strong?" the mayor asked.

"Many more," Strong said. "'To drug the memory of this insolence—'

"What insolence, Mr. Strong?"

"Yours for one, you little earthman, you. You fat contemptible little earthman!"

"You could see them coming out of the horizon beneath the cloud of the dust their hooves threw up," Blueskies said, "and they were beautiful in their shaggy majesty and as dark and magnificent as death."

"Take us the earthmen," Strong said, "the fat little earthmen, that spoil the vineyard; for our vineyards are in blossom—"

"Tom!" Wright said.

"May I take this opportunity to tender my resignation, Mr. Wright? I shall never murder another tree. I am finished with your putrescent profession!"

"Why, Tom?"

Strong did not answer. He looked down at his hands. Some of his bourbon had spilled on the bar and his fingers were wet and sticky. He raised his eyes to the backbar. The backbar was the rear wall of the reconverted native church and contained a number of exquisitely carved niches formerly used to display religious articles. The niches contained bottles of wine and whiskey now—all save one. That one contained a little doll.

Strong felt a throbbing in his temples. He pointed to the niche. "What—what kind of a doll is that, mayor?"

The mayor faced the backbar. "Oh, that. It's one of the carved figurines which the early natives used to keep over their hearths to protect their houses." He took the figurine out of the niche, carried it over to where Strong was standing, and set it on the bar. "Remarkable workmanship, don't you think, Mr. Strong? . . . Mr. Strong?"

Strong was staring at the figurine—at its graceful arms and long slim legs; at its small breasts and slender throat; at its pixy-face and yellow hair; at the green garment of delicately carved leaves adorning it.

"The correct term is 'fetish,' I believe," the mayor went on. "It was made in the image of their principal goddess. From the little we know of them, it appears that the early natives believed in her so fanatically that some of them even claimed to have seen her."

"In the tree?"

"Sometimes."

Strong reached out and touched the figurine. He picked it up tenderly. Its base was wet from the liquor he had spilled on the bar. "Then—then she must have been the Goddess of the Tree."

"Oh, no, Mr. Strong. She was the Goddess of the Hearth. The Home. The Advance Team was wrong in assuming that the trees were religious symbols. We've lived here long enough to understand how the natives really felt. It was their houses that they worshipped, not the trees."

"Goddess of the Hearth?" Strong said. "The Home? ... Then what was she doing in the tree?"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Strong?"

"In the tree. I saw her in the tree."

"You're joking, Mr. Strong!"

"The hell I'm joking! She *was* the tree!" Strong brought his fist down on the bar as hard as he could. "She *was* the tree, and I killed her!"

"Get hold of yourself, Tom," Wright said. "Everybody's staring at you."

"I killed her inch by inch, foot by foot. I cut her down arm by arm, leg by leg. I *murdered* her!" Strong paused. Something was wrong. Something that should have happened had failed to happen. Then he saw the mayor staring at his fist, and he realized what the wrongness was.

When his fist had struck the bar, he should have felt pain. He had not. He saw why: his fist had not rebounded from the wood—it had sunk into the wood. It was as though the wood were rotten.

He raised his fist slowly. A decayed smell arose from the ragged dent it had made. The wood *was* rotten.

Goddess of the Hearth. The Home. The Village.

He swung away from the bar and made his way across the table-crowded floor to the street-wall. He threw his fist as hard as he could at the polished, exquisitely grained wood. His fist went through the wall.

He gripped the lower edge of the hole he had made, and pulled. A whole section of the wall broke free, fell to the floor. The stench of decay filled the room.

The colonists were watching with horrified eyes. Strong faced them. "Your whole hotel is rotting away," he said. "Your whole goddam village!"

He began to laugh. Wright came over and slapped his face. "Snap out of it, Tom!"

His laughter died. He took a deep breath, expelled it. "But don't you see it, Wright? The tree? The village? What does a species of tree capable of growing to that size need to perpetuate its growth and to maintain itself after it has attained its growth? Nourishment. Tons and tons of nourishment. And what kind of soil! Soil enriched by the wastes and the dead bodies, and irrigated by the artificial lakes and reservoirs that only a large community of human beings can provide.

"So what does such species of tree do? Over a period of centuries, maybe even millenia, it learns how to lure human beings to its side. How? By growing houses. That's right. By growing houses right out of its roots, lovely houses that human beings can't resist living in. You see it now, don't you, Wright? You see now, don't you, why the crude sap carried more nutrients than the tree needed, why the elaborated sap was so rich in oxygen and carbohydrates. The tree was trying to sustain more than just itself; it was trying to sustain the village, too. But it couldn't any longer—thanks to the eternal selfishness and the eternal stupidity of man."

Wright looked stunned. Strong took his arm and they walked back to the bar together. The faces of the colonists were like gray clay. The mayor was still staring at the ragged dent in the bar. "Aren't you going to buy the man who saved your beloved village another drink?" Strong asked.

The mayor did not move.

Wright said: "The ancients must have known about the ecological balance—and converted their knowledge to superstition. And it was the superstition, not the knowledge, that got handed down from generation to generation. When the race matured, they did the same thing all races do when they grow up too fast: they completely disregarded superstition. And when they eventually learned how to use metals, they built sewage disposal systems and incinerators and crematories. They spurned whatever systems the trees had provided and they turned the ancient burial grounds at the trees' bases into community squares. They upset the ecological balance."

Strong said: "Without knowing it. And when they finally found out, it was too late to restore it. The trees had already begun to die, and when the first tree *did* die and the first village started to rot away, they were appalled. Probably the love of their houses had been inbred in them so strongly that without their houses they were lost. And apparently they couldn't even bear to see their houses die. That's why they migrated to the northern barrens. That's why they either starved or froze to death in the death-caves or committed mass-suicide ..."

Blueskies said: "Fifty million of them there were, the great, shaggy, magnificent beasts, dwelling on the fertile plains where now the Great North American Desert lies. And the grass that sustained them was green, and they returned the grass to the earth in their dung, and the grass grew green again. Fifty million! And when the white men finished the slaughter, five hundred remained."

Wright said: "This must have been one of the last villages to go 'modern.' Even so, the tree must have been dying for years before the colonists came. That's why the village is rotting away so fast now."

Strong said: "The tree's death accelerated the deterioration-process. There probably won't be a house standing in another month . . . But the tree might have lived another hundred years if they hadn't been so anxious to preserve their damned real estate. It takes a long time for a tree the size of that one to

die ... And the color of the sap—I think I understand that now, too. Our consciences provided the pigment ... In a way, though, I think she ... I think it wanted to die."

Wright said: "The colonists will still exploit the land. But they'll have to live in mud huts while they're doing it." Strong said: "Perhaps I performed an act of mercy—" Suhre said: "What're you two talking about?"

Blueskies said: "Fifty million of them. *Fifty Million!"*

Wish Upon a Star

. . . all our intuition is nothing but the representation of phenomena; .... the things which we intuit are not in themselves the same as our representations of them in intuition, nor are their relations in themselves so constituted as they appear to us; and . . . if we take away the subject, or even only the subjective constitution of our senses in general, then not only the nature and relations of objects in space and time, but even space and time themselves disappear .. .

—Immanuel Kant, CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON

I walked the lower city streets for hours, not knowing I walked at all. It was late afternoon when I reached the ghetto, and the November sky was beginning to lower when I came to the hut which Acktus and I shared.

I couldn't, I wouldn't believe that the picture I had seen beneath the Strip Theatre marquee represented the girl I had been dreaming about for over eight and a half years. I *refused* to believe that my goddess of the void was really nothing more than an aristo-militarist's mistress, a sordid bubble walker exhibiting her body on the ramp for the ego-gratification of her owner.

Acktus seemed to sense my mood when I entered the hut. But his grotesque face remained impassive, and he asked no questions. He merely got up from his chair by the table, lit the lantern suspended from the corrugated iron roof, and then sat down again. I removed my ragged coat and sat down at the other side of the table.

I told him about the picture. The long walk had aggravated my bad leg and the new pain blended with the agony of my thoughts. When I finished, Acktus showed no surprise. He showed no sympathy either. He merely said: "You should be happy now, Alan. Now you *know* that your 'Dream' girl is real."

I shook my head. "I saw her picture," I said. "Not *her.* And it was a cheesecake poster, not a photograph. I simply can't accept it as evidence of her reality."

"You can't because you don't want to. You idealized this girl; you endowed her with all the qualities you want to find in a woman. And now that you think she has failed to live up to your idealization of her, now that you suspect that she cannot possibly possess any of the qualities that you forced on her, you are unable to accept her. But I'm afraid you're going to have to, Alan. Logically she couldn't be anything else than what she is, and we should have guessed long ago that if she existed in this reality at all, she had to exist as the bubble walker-mistress of an aristo-militarist."

The yellow light of the lantern illuminated only the prominent features of the face across the table from me. The eyes were shadowed by the tufted cornices of eyebrows, the cheeks eclipsed by the protruding ledges of cheekbones. It was a Neanderthalic rather than a noble face just as the shoulders below it were anthropoid rather than human; yet Acktus was the most brilliant metaphysician of his era—a twenty-first century Kant, sans Koenigsberg and sans publisher.

Presently he said: "Tell me the Dream again, Alan."

"At first it was little more than a sensation of nothingness combined with an awareness of extreme velocity," I began. "That was over eight and a half years ago ..."

I had repeated the words so many times that I knew them by heart. The enervated words, the silly stick-words that collapsed to the ground when you tried to build with them; words too lackadaisical to convey the horror and the beauty and the poignancy of the reality I knew by night and tried to forget by

day.

I must have experienced the initial phase of the Dream for almost a year before I realized that my eyes—in the dream-reality—were closed. But even when I opened them, I had only partial vision. I could see two vague human figures, one close beside me, the other some distance away and presumably facing me. Then I found that by concentrating I could make out one of the figures.

The process took weeks and innumerable Dreams, but at last I learned that my nearer companion was a beautiful girl, clad in a blue coat and a white dress, whom I had never seen before.

Her eyes were closed and she did not open them for a long time. When she did open them, she stared at me for a long time—Dream after Dream after Dream—and I guessed that she was concentrating on me the way I had concentrated on her. When she finally saw me, she seemed puzzled, and it was clear that she didn't know me any more than I knew her; that she had never seen me before.

All of us seemed to be adrift in a grayish nothingness. There was no light, no darkness. Except for the distance separating our bodies, there was no space. Yet, despite the absence of light, I could see, and despite the spacelessness, I had an awareness of motion, a conviction that I was traveling at extreme velocity from one point to another point.

It was nearly a year after I first "opened my eyes" that I began to see the third figure. Its chest was narrow, its limbs long and straight. Its clothing was that of an aristo-militarist, and as more and more details came into focus, I saw that the breast of the gray, form-fitting coat was spattered with blood.

The face appeared to me as a reddish blur at first, then resolved into a pulpy mass interspersed with flecks of gray. Even then the full horror of the situation did not occur to me, and it was not till I saw the absence of forehead, eyes, nose, mouth and chin that I realized that this was not a face at all, but what had remained after the face had been torn away.

The girl seemed to realize at about the same time I did that our Dream companion had no face, because her own face turned white, her body became rigid, and her lips parted in a soundless scream. Her eyes became glazed, and it was many Dreams later before they cleared again. When they did clear, they focused on me, and neither of us had ever looked at our grisly companion again.

Although we had tried to communicate many times, the Dream was soundless and our communication was limited to the reading of each other's lips. But I had never been able to grasp anything but the simplest of monosyllabic words, and the girl's receptivity seemed to be no better.

But the lack of sound was only a minor anomaly. The Dream differed from ordinary dreams in much more striking ways. It was continuous throughout sleep—if I could trust my own judgment—and it occurred every time I fell asleep, even if I dropped off only for a moment. And while it had continually evolved as to detail, becoming more and more vivid through the years, its basic structure had never altered.

Recently I had become aware of a growing change in myself—my dream-self. Perhaps this change had begun long before; perhaps it had had its beginning in the first occurrence of the Dream. I did not know. I only knew that in the Dream-reality my bad leg was healing, that it had almost become a normal limb. And recently I had become aware of another change in myself—my real self. I had had an increasing sense of turned around realities; a growing conviction that my existence in the Dream was my true existence, and that my existence in the decadent world which the aristo-militarists had created was the Dream .. .

The hut was unheated, but I could feel cold sweat on my forehead, and I raised my hand and wiped it away. Outside, a wind had sprung up in the ghetto streets, and I could hear the restless rustling sound of scuttering leaves.

I looked across the table at Acktus, hoping that my telling him the Dream for perhaps the hundredth and one time had evoked the insight he had been waiting for. If it had, his cliff-like face gave no sign.

"You still don't know, do you," I said.

A smile touched his ugly lips. "I am a little like you, Alan," he said. "You know that the picture you saw beneath the marquee this afternoon is unquestionably a representation of the girl you've been dreaming about for all these years. But you do not want your 'Dream' girl to be a bubble walker, therefore you reject the knowledge. And I know that your Dream is directly related to my work in

ontology, but I will not accept the knowledge because it conflicts with my preconceived theories. Instead I reject it, and I will go on rejecting it until the relationship becomes so evident that I can reject it no longer."

"But what *is* the relationship?"

"For the moment it isn't necessary that you should know. It is more important, first, that you assimilate your unwanted knowledge. When you have done so, return here and I will make an attempt to assimilate mine. If both of us succeed, I will be in a better position to impart the nature of the relationship, and you will be in a better position to receive it."

"In other words, you want me to go to the Strip Theatre and watch this girl go through her routine."

Acktus nodded. "There's no other way for you to see her, and you've got to establish in your own mind whether she is or is not the girl in the Dream." He raised his arm, glanced at the ring-watch on his hirsute forefinger. "1930 hours," he said. "If you hurry you can catch the whole performance."

II

It was late in November and the wind was raw, but the old civilslave woman standing beneath the marquee was selling violets just the same. However, they were paper violets, no more incongruous in the lower city than the ratio of troops to civilslaves, or the popularity of an entertainment the essence of which was frustration.

I paused before the picture, reluctant to enter the theatre. The mixed crowd of the lower city flowed round me like a polluted river. Above my head the lewd red lettering on the marquee spelled out THE GODDESS DIANE. The lettering was repeated, without benefit of neon, at the base of the picture.

It was a life-size picture, the theatre artist's three dimensional conception of the featured bubble walker—or strip goddess, to employ the more euphemistic term. There was a hint of poetry in the lithe long legs and graceful hips, in the burgeoning of half concealed breasts and the flowering of white shoulders. And the face—

The emotion I had experienced that afternoon, when I had first seen the picture, returned. My chest tightened and I heard the loud silent pounding of my heart. The face was hard and sophisticated, not soft and compassionate the way I was used to seeing it in the Dream. But the hair was the same, a soft dark brown, and the wide apart eyes were the same too, a June sky blue. And while the sensitive mouth was shaped into a brazen smile, there was a hint of tenderness still lingering on the lips, and an intimation of girlish dimples still clung to the painted cheeks.

She had to be the same girl. It was futile to deny it any longer. And the Strip Theatre, as Acktus had implied, was the logical place for her to be. Like all beautiful women, she had been appropriated by an aristo-militarist and now was being exhibited on the ramp for the ego-gratification of her owner. But, try as I would, I still couldn't accept the knowledge.

For years the girl in the Dream had been a shining symbol of everything civilization had lost, my solitary touchstone with I wanted her to remain that way.

I entered the theatre and found a seat in the pit. It was a rear seat but quite close to the outermost curve of the crystalline ramp. Above me the loges formed a lofty semicircle, and glancing up I saw the aristo-militarists reclining in their anachronistic chaise lounges, sipping rare wine from thin-stemmed glasses. Jeweled scabbards blazed in the radiance of antique chandeliers; telescopic monocles twinkled. Jaded faces were flushed with anticipation.

I knew the real reason for that anticipation. An aristomilitarist exhibiting his mistress before his men might at first seem to be an exaggerated throwback to the pseudo-democracy of the Pre-Fallout army. Actually it was nothing of the sort. He exhibited his mistress solely for the benefit of his ego: his men, and the civilslaves who shared the pit with his men, could see and desire her, but only he could *have* her.

Just before the theatre lights dimmed, I saw Desteil, the Commanding Officer of the city. His loge was almost directly above me, and I had to crane my neck to see his decadent face. I had always made a practice, whenever I glimpsed him in a crowd, to look into his eyes and tell him as well as I could,

without benefit of words, exactly what I thought of him and the system that had spawned him.

I had desecrated him with a glance many times. I desecrated him now. But if he was aware of my existence, his pale blue eyes did not betray the fact, and presently the lights dimmed and I turned my attention to the stage.

The curtains parted, and a blue light-bubble formed upon the dark stage, revealing the chorus. When the first strains of the *Libido* overture emanated from the loudspeakers, they began their mincing walk around the ramp.

The light-bubble accompanied them, bathing their half-naked bodies in indigo mist. They were beautiful girls, the property of the lower ranking aristo-militarists, but carefully culled from the cities, the collective farms and the ghettos. I could feel the soundless sigh that rippled through the pit as the enlisted men and the civilslaves hopelessly contemplated the unattainable.

After the bubble-walk of the chorus the first strip goddess appeared. She wore the usual sequence of gossamer scarfs and each time she removed one, she tossed it contemptuously into the pit for the enlisted men and civilslaves to fight over. The procedure was timed so that the removal of the final scarf coincided with her return to the stage and the closing of the curtains.

But even before she left the stage, I knew that she wasn't the goddess Diane.

The next girl wasn't Diane either, or the next. The featured bubble walker usually came on last. I sat through a monotonous series of colored lights and mincing walks, my bitterness mounting. I wanted to get up and leave, I wanted to retain what little remained of my idealism, but I did not move from my seat. I had to know, regardless of the disillusionment the knowledge might contain, whether the girl in the picture was really the girl in the Dream.

Presently there came a pause in the performance. Then a series of crashing elevenths ushered in the final movement of the *Libido* and the curtains parted, revealing a golden girl standing in a mist of purest golden light.

I knew then that the goddess Diane and the girl in the Dream were one and the same girl.

She started around the ramp. She walked slowly, not mincingly the way the others had walked, but sedately and with grace. She removed the first scarf and it floated from her fingers like a pale moth.

I watched her approach, drinking in the reality of her; the taste was not bitter as I had thought it would be, but sweet and intoxicating, for there was a dignity about her that raised her high above her tawdry surroundings, that isolated her from the way of life that had been forced upon her.

When she reached the outermost curve of the ramp, she paused a moment, freed another gossamer scarf and tossed it into the pit. As she did so, her eyes touched mine.

The theatre artist, I saw then, was responsible for the sophistication of the face in the picture. Certainly there was no sophistication in the face swimming above me in the gold mist of the light-bubble. This face was soft and compassionate the way I knew it in the Dream, with no brazen smile deforming the tender lips or conflicting with the summer blue of the eyes.

Now, meeting mine, those eyes went wide, first with shock, then with disbelief. Abruptly she lowered them and a blush darkened the gold of her neck, rose like a flame to her cheeks. She turned then, and resumed her walk. But the slowness was gone from her gait, and although the audience screamed for new vistas of her flesh, she did not remove a single scarf, and presently the curtains hid her from view.

Somehow I got out of the pit and into the street. I lingered beneath the marquee. The performance was over and enlisted men and civilslaves jostled against me as they mushroomed out of the theatre. The wind had turned colder and wild flakes of snow were sifting down through the lacy walks of the upper city.

She recognized me, I thought. She *knew* me.

The inference was staggering: *she too was experiencing the Dream.*

But why had she been ashamed? I thought I knew the answer: she didn't care what the faceless crowd in the pit thought of her, or what the perverted creatures in the loges thought of her; but she did care what I thought of her because she wanted my respect.

It was even possible that my presence in the Dream was as reassuring to her as hers was to me, that she needed me the way I desperately needed her.

Suddenly I knew I had to see her, that I had to touch her face, her hair; that I had to talk to her about the Dream.

Shortly, I knew, she and the aristo-militarist who owned her would be departing from the theatre roof. The chance of my contacting her there was remote, but it was the only chance I had.

I reentered the theatre and made my way along the corridor bordering the pit. The cold had set my bad leg to throbbing and I was limping when I came to the lifts.

The lifts dated back to the time when the city was rebuilt into an architectural symbol of the army caste system. A degree of equality still existed between civilians and officers at that time, and civilians were allowed the freedom of the upper or officer's city. However, when the military dictatorship reduced the status of civilians to the level of enlisted men, that freedom was canceled and the lifts fell into disuse. I hoped to find one that still functioned, for there was no other way for me to gain the roof.

I was in luck. The third set of controls that I tried responded with alacrity, and a moment later I stepped out into the snow-flecked wind of the upper city. I found a shadowed corner on the theatre roof, and I stood in the wind, waiting.

Above me fliers hovered, their lights dimmed by the wet clinging snow. To my right were the loge lifts, and each time an aristo-militarist and his mistress emerged, one of the fliers descended and picked them up. I kept hoping that Diane had not yet departed, even though I realized now that there would be no chance to contact her. But at least I could find out who her owner was, bitter though the knowledge was sure to be; and the identity of her owner would give me some idea of where to find her, hopeless though the information was sure to be.

Abruptly the absurdity of my reasoning overcame me and I saw my position in its true perspective. I, a nondescript civilslave, aspiring to meet an aristo-militarist's mistress! The wind laughed as it leaped the cornice behind me and made a mockery of my ragged clothes; my atrophied leg throbbed with new pain. At that very moment Diane emerged from the nearest lift on the arm of a resplendent officer.

Thee laughter of the wind climbed a wild crescendo when I recognized her owner. I should have known that the most beautiful woman on the ramp would belong to the highest ranking officer in the loges. I should have known that Diane could belong to no one but Desteil.

They passed me very close as I stood there in the shadows, and a flier, larger and more luxurious than the rest, came down to receive them. Desteil's thin, pointed face was flushed with possessive pride, and I could have murdered him happily with my bare hands. But the thought of the photon guns in the belts of the roof guards held me back, and I watched numbly while Diane, in mink and diamonds now, climbed into the bright interior of the flier, followed by her lover, and then I watched the flier purr aloft into the night until the slanting snow and the indifferent darkness hid it from view.

After a while I slipped back through the shadows to the lift that had brought me to the roof. Once in the lower city, I headed for the ghetto. The ghetto—and Acktus.

III

The world-wide radioactive fallouts of 1969 did more than prove that atomic war was impracticable: they made warfare of any kind unnecessary. The Western dictatorship that followed in their wake differed so little from the dictatorship of the East that nothing was left to fight for.

The new dictatorship was a military one, an offspring of the martial law which was declared after the fallouts. When all danger from the fallouts had passed, it established itself permanently by depositing a thermo-nuclear bomb on Washington D.C. at a time when Congress was in session and the President was in residence at the White House.

After two judicious assassinations in their own ranks, the aristo-militarists, as they now began calling themselves, stated that henceforth both the navy and the air force would be considered subsidiary branches of the army. The draft was expanded into a gargantuan entity that devoured every physically fit citizen past the age of 16. Industries were turned into military institutions replete with private-laborers, sergeant-foremen, and officer-superintendents. Physically unfit civilians were put to work on collective

farms under the supervision of the nearest city C.O. or allowed to run small businesses in the cities.

These small businesses, however, proved to be liabilities when the aristo-militarists lowered the civilians' status to that of the enslaved enlisted men. The average enlisted man's values had not improved with the new scheme of things, and the civilians discovered that the price for their remaining in the cities involved their self-respect, the rape of their daughters, and the destruction of their property. The outlying collections of haphazard huts characteristic of all military metropolises were the result.

By 2030 there were still a few schools and universities left. Acktus was a doctor of metaphysics in one of the latter. Then, with typical suddenness, the aristo-militarists decided they didn't like the idea of educated cripples—by that time the halls of ivy had no other occupants—and the military boot came down with numbing force. All schools and universities were outlawed, and their personnel persecuted.

The first time I saw Acktus, he was lying in a ghetto gutter, left there for dead by Desteil's M.P.'s. I found the flutter of a pulse in the huge wrist and I managed to drag the prodigious body to my hut. It was late at night, and I had to get the ghetto doctor out of bed. The neanderthalic head and the ape-like torso were raw from the systematic beating inflicted by the M.P.'s, but after treating the wounds, the doctor assured me that the man would live.

Acktus healed quickly. In a matter of days strength flowed back into his long arms and short thick legs. By the end of a week he was able to hobble about the three rooms of the hut without my assistance. He told me what I had already guessed; that he was one of the few descendants of the victims of the fallouts—a third generation mutant—and that he had been on the staff of one of the last of the universities to feel the brunt of the military boot.

Next he expounded his theory of ontology ...

Even though ghetto dwellers were forced to maim their children in order to keep them out of the eternal draft, they continued to beget them because children, under almost any circumstances, supply not only a reason but a justification for living. Third generations mutants however, were invariably sterile and had to find other ways to rationalize their lives. Philosophy was one such way, and it was a natural step from philosophy to metaphysics; and if you were a mutant desperately in need of a better world, your next and final step brought you to ontology.

Ontology—the study of reality itself—was Acktus' *raison d'etre.*

I found him waiting up for me. He was sitting at the table staring down at his hands. He took one look at my face and said: "Was it as bad as that, Alan?"

"She's Desteil's mistress," I said.

He returned his eyes to his hands. A shudder shook his massive frame. "So," he said. "Desteil."

Abruptly he stood up. "You have assimilated your unwanted knowledge, Alan. Now it is my turn." He took the lantern and motioning me to follow, moved ponderously into the adjoining room. It was the room which he jokingly referred to as his "laboratory." It was here that he carried on his work in ontology, and the essence of ontology, according to his definition, was its independence from mechanical equipment. Consequently the only "apparatus" in the "laboratory" were bookshelves spacious enough to hold his voluminous notebooks, a couch sturdy enough to support his weight, and a small table.

There was a newly drawn star map spread out upon the table. It was done in full color and it was flawlessly executed. There was a binary consisting of a magnificent blue-white star and a tiny white dwarf. Spread out around them in various orbital positions were nineteen planets—hardly more than tiny specks, but each painstakingly colored to signify its predominant flora or absence thereof.

Acktus set the lantern on a nearby shelf, then leaned over the table like a hairy god contemplating his latest creation; an ape-god surveying his blueprint for a new reality.

Presently he raised his eyes to mine. "I will review my theory briefly," he said.

"The mind creates subjective reality in cooperation with other minds. No two individual subjective realities are precisely similar because no two minds are precisely alike, but a general conformity exists except in cases where the circumstances of an individual's life have made it imperative for him to create an additional subjective reality—a schizo-reality, if you like. But the prefix 'schizo' betrays the inadequacy of the reality so created: it is not complete enough to supersede the reality from which the schizophrene wishes to escape and consequently he can effect only partial escape and is forced to live in two realities.

"We can compare subjective reality to a force field of ideas generated by the human race: a mass-reality or, to expand on the Berkeleyan conception, a mass-esse *est percipi—'to* exist means to be perceived as an idea' by the whole of humanity. "Although we cannot conceive of the objective universe, we must nevertheless concede its existence, and admit that the reality in which we are involved consists not only of our subjective force field of ideas but of the underlying thing-in-itself as well. We are unable to perceive the true nature of the latter because of the *a priori* factor of our intuition. As Kant said, 'In respect to the form of phenomena, much may be said *a priori,* while of the thing-in-itself, which may lie at the foundation of these phenomena, it is impossible to say anything.'

"Consider the table between us. Neither of us can conceive of it without locating it in space and connecting it with a moment in time. Yet the table, and all other aspects of the thing-in-itself, is both spaceless and timeless. Our *a priori* factor imposes both elements.

"Conversely, neither of us can conceive of space and time abstracted from objects or events. If you doubt this, close your eyes and concentrate on pure space and pure time. You will find that you cannot visualize either of them, and this alone proves that they are not a part of the thing-in-itself but mental elements which we ourselves supply.

"It follows, then, that if we could free our minds even temporarily from this *a priori* factor, the thing-in-itself would be revealed to us. And while we could not move from one point to another point by employing ordinary methods, since both space and time would be absent, we *might* be able to move from one point to another point by employing an entirely different method—by *altering our individual subjective realities.*

"In other words, if we could create an individual subjective reality strong enough to supersede the mass force field of ideas, we could move from one subjective point to another subjective point; from one subjective world to another subjective world, or from one subjective solar system to another subjective solar system. And if we could make this new reality powerful enough, we could take others—perhaps the whole of humanity—with us.

"Specifically, if I can free my find from the *a priori* factor and at the same time conceive of a subjective reality on Sirius 9 stronger than our present subjective reality on Earth, we will immediately materialize in the new reality, thereby attaining instantaneous teleportation without recourse to such naive devices as matter transmitters or any of the other transmission machines which our militaristic scientists have conceived of but have never been able to build.

"You are about to raise the objection that perhaps there is no ninth planet in the Sirius system, that for all we know there may be no planetary system at all. May I remind you that we are dealing with subjective reality, and as far as subjective reality is concerned anything that seems to be real *is* real. There is no other criterion. For example, for all we know there is no third planet of the star Sol, or Sol for that matter; yet for all practical purposes we are perfectly content to accept the reality of the ground on which we stand, the air we breathe, and the phenomena we perceive.

"Actually there is only one requirement in the creation of an alternative subjective reality of this kind: it must seem to be more real than the mass subjective reality in which we are involved and which we want to leave. It must be carefully and exhaustively fabricated; it must be replete down to the smallest detail; because if it is lacking in any respect in which the mass force field of ideas is not lacking, movement through the thing-in-itself will be impossible even with the *a priori* factor removed.

"The map here on the table roughly represents my conception of the Sirius system. It facilitates my thinking, but it is by no means indispensable."

He indicated the notebook-laden shelves covering all four walls of the room. "There lies the true essence of my alternative reality: the duplications and the variations of all the phenomena, both past and present, of the mass force field of ideas in which we are imprisoned."

Acktus returned his eyes to the map. "Of the nineteen planets, only one need concern us now—the ninth. It is a primitive planet replete with mountains and forests and lakes and seas. A river-veined wilderness, a—"

"But why a wilderness," I interrupted. "Why not at least a semblance of a civilization? A city or two; towns—"

"Why not, indeed." A smile lightened the line of the neanderthalic lips and it was as though a ray of sunlight had fallen on the massive face. "Humanity needs another chance, Alan; it needs forests, not cities, to live in—Waldens, not New Yorks. It needs blue skies to walk beneath, and winding rivers to follow down to pleasant seas."

"Humanity will never change," I said. "There have been blue skies since the time of Eoanthropus, and Cromagnon had many a winding river to follow down to many a pleasant sea."

The smile softened. "Cynicism does not become you, Alan. It does not become you because you are not a cynic. You are a frustrated idealist. You have been bitter for years because your parents mutilated your leg to keep you out of the draft, yet at the same time you admire them for their courage in performing the act, and you despise the militaristic system for indirectly bringing about their death through prolonged malnutrition. And you are bitter now because the girl in the Dream has turned out to be Desteil's mistress, yet in your heart you still idealize her. But enough—"

The smile faded away and he returned his attention to the map. One huge hand moved out over the two-dimensional planets and poised high above the tabletop ecliptic. "The blue star is, as you probably know, Sirius," he said. "The cindery speck you see some distance to the left is Sirius' dwarf companion. As I said, of the nineteen planets, only one need concern us now." The hand descended like a great but gentle bird and a forefinger touched the green dot of Sirius 9. "Here, somewhere beneath the thousands of square miles of my fingertip, is a green hill. Below the hill, in an idyllic valley, a blue river winds, fledged by the new growth of trees. There are vineyards and orchards and meadows; flowers and green grass. It is a beautiful valley, as beautiful as I could make it. Subjectively, it is approximately 8.65 light years distant from the minute area of Earth we are inhabiting at this moment.

"Now I will concentrate, and afterwards I want you to tell me what you experienced."

The eyebrow-cornices of the cliff-face seemed to lower; the sunken eyes darkened above the twin ledges of the cheekbones. Lines, like fissures, rivened the gaunt precipice.

At first I experienced nothing. The familiar room, with its notebook lined shelves, remained the same; the tabletop planets moved imperceptibly on their little journeys around their tabletop binary; Acktus stood immobile, his forefinger still touching the green dot of Sirius 9. And then, subtly, nothing became nothingness, and the gray spaceless lightless waste of the Dream closed in around me. Beside me, more vividly beautiful than ever, Diane drifted, and hovering before us, more grisly than ever, was the apparition with blood and gray matter for a face ...

I must have fallen, for suddenly I saw Acktus' pale face swimming above me and felt the pressure of his arm beneath my shoulders. "Quickly, Alan," he said, helping me to my feet. "Tell me!"

When I told him I saw the pain come into his eyes and the pain was so intense that I had to turn away. "I cannot deny the relationship any longer." I heard him say. "The Dream and my experiment are one and the same thing. But I cannot explain yet. I must think. I must try to adjust myself to the unwanted knowledge. I am an old man and I so much wanted to leave Earth . . . . "

IV

I went out into the somber November evening. The day, like all ghetto days, had been bitter and depressing, and my stand in the market place had yielded its usual pittance. At supper Acktus had explained—reluctantly, it seemed—what I had to do in order to contact Diane. Then he had lapsed into a gloomy silence.

Last night's snow was a damp memory on the lower city streets, but the wind was still running raw and fierce. In the sky dark tatterdemalion clouds brushed the embroidery of the upper city walks. I reached the Strip Theatre long before the line began to form and I waited shivering in the wind till the doors opened. Then, following Acktus' advice, I obtained a seat at the edge of the ramp in the vicinity of the seat I had occupied the night before.

I sat there impatiently while the pit and the loges filled. The aristo-militarists settled back in their chaise lounges like perverted gods preparing for a psychopathic feast. Diamond-studded scabbards

danced in the light of chandelier-suns; polished boots gleamed. Once again I glimpsed Desteil in the loge just above me, and this time I could hardly contain my hatred. Everything I deplored seemed to be epitomized in the tall wiry body and the thin hungry face; in the pitiless blue eyes. This time when I sought those eyes they returned my gaze. There seemed to be mockery in them, and cold amusement, but I could not be sure, for at that point the theatre lights dimmed. I turned my attention to the stage just as the first strains of the *Libido* sounded.

The bubble-walks paralleled those of the night before. I brooded through them, thinking over and over of a Tennysonian passage which my memory had dredged up during the day

He will hold thee, when his passion shall have spent its novel force,

Something better than his dog, a little dearer than his horse.

In my bitterness, both time and place faded, and I was startled when the elevenths climbed their weird mountain of harmonious dissonance. Softly, lewdly, the strains of the final *Libido* movement sounded in the valley below—

And then my bitterness blew away. Once again Diane was moving slowly out upon the ramp, a Diane all soft and golden; a vivid living statue of Grecian symmetry and grace. The first scarf drifted palely into the pit. The second—

I could hardly breathe when she neared the outermost curve of the ramp. Had Acktus been right in his reasoning? Would she do the one and only thing she could do in order to contact me? Closer and closer she came, a goddess of pink-gold flesh, a lovely Aurora with sun mist in her hair.

She was standing just above me now. She had removed a blue scarf and she was holding it in one hand. There was a tenseness about her, and her eyes were afraid. When they touched mine, relief filled them, and she tossed the scarf straight into my waiting hands.

I fought my way free from the other hands around me, ducked and turned and twisted, and finally gained the street. I stuffed the scarf into the inside pocket of my coat and hurried toward the nearest enlisted men's cafe. Inside, I carried my drink to a secluded booth, took out the scarf and examined it.

At first I could find nothing unusual about it. It seemed to be an ordinary bubble walker's scarf, thin to the point of translucence, but unremarkable otherwise. And then, in one of the corners, I noticed that a tiny clock had been stitched into the material. It was an ancient clock, and its hands pointed to 12:00. Above the numeral was the tiny letter—

Midnight. That was *when* I was supposed to meet her. But *where* was I supposed to meet her?

I went over every square inch of the material searching for another symbol. I found nothing. Suddenly I had the impression that someone was watching me and I glanced over at the semi-circular bar. One of the enlisted men was standing at an angle that gave him a good view of the interior of the booth where I was sitting. He was staring at the backbar now, but I knew that a moment ago he had been staring at me.

I stuffed Diane's scarf into my inside pocket again. 1 finished my drink, then I got up and walked as casually as I could to the door. But the man did not even turn his head, and I stepped unmolested into the street.

I started walking. The first chrono-streetlight said 2247 hours. I had one hour and thirteen minutes to figure out where I was supposed to meet Diane. Not even that if I deducted the time it would take me to get to wherever I had to go.

I passed the PX district, the enlisted men's and the enlisted women's barracks and the apartment barracks for married personnel. When I came to the lower city military academy, I turned and retraced my steps. The streets were filled with troops returning from the cafes and it was impossible for me to tell whether I was being followed or not.

I glanced at each chrono-streetlight I passed. 2310 hours. 2321 hours. 2340 hours. I jammed my wind-numbed hands deeper into my coat pockets, desperately trying to think.

Angrily I wondered why she had been so cryptic. But my anger was unjustified. She had had to be cryptic in the event that her message fell into the wrong hands. The replica of an ancient clock would be meaningless to the majority of enlisted men. They would take it for a senseless design which the manufacturer had stitched into the material. A civilslave, however, would recognize it for what it was, for

civilslaves had intellectual ties with the past and a number of them, myself included, still visited the Pre-Fallout museum where such archaic timepieces could still be found.

The only place where they could still be found—

V

I made my way through the jungle of the grounds, following the grass-ruptured walk. Presently the dark mass of the building became visible against the cloud-torn sky. Just before me was the once ornate entrance, now little more than a gaping hole flanked by crumbling pillars. I wondered how I would ever find Diane in the dark empty corridors and the vast silent rooms, and then the ragged clouds parted and a gibbous moon shone through; and I saw the silvery figure standing on the steps, and I heard the indrawn breath.

The moonlight had betrayed me too, and I walked numbly through the pale whiteness of it to the steps, and up the steps to where she stood, a goddess no longer gold, but silver; no longer remote, but near. I do not know how it happened, I only know that neither of us said a word; but suddenly I felt the silver coldness of her cheek on mine, and her tall pliant body pressed against me; and then the cool-warm moistness of her lips …

After an eternity. "I looked for you so long," she said. "I knew you had to be real. And then when I did see you there in the pit, I was so ashamed—"

"It's all right," I said. "It's all right, darling."

"Desteil appropriated me a month ago. I lived on one of the collective farms. My father kept me hidden for years, and then there was that horrible afternoon when Desteil pulled an unexpected inspection. I was in the fields, and I came walking into the community square not knowing, and suddenly there he was—"

"It's all right," I said again. Her cheeks were wet and I kissed the silver tears away.

"When I saw you in the Dream, I knew that you were the only one, that there could never be anyone else but you, and I wanted you to be the one who kissed me first, who—"

"I kissed you first," I said. "That's the only kiss that counts. What went before doesn't matter."

"I—I don't even know your name."

"Alan."

"You know mine of course. Only it was Dianna originally, but Special Service changed it to Diane. They said 'Diane' looked better on the marquee."

"Dianna or Diane, I love you just the same."

"I love you too, Alan. I've loved you for years. It's so strange, loving someone before you even meet them, dreaming of them before you even see them. Do you have the same Dream, Alan? The grayness and the awful silence, the feeling of movement. The man without a face."

"Yes," I said.

"Sometimes I think I can't stand it any longer, that I must be losing my mind. What's the reason for it, Alan? Why do we dream the same Dream every night?"

"I don't know yet."

I told her about Acktus and his work in ontology and I described my experience of the night before when Acktus had tried to project his new reality.

The moonlight seemed to grow brighter around us and suddenly I noticed Diane's clothes—the simple white dress, the cheap three quarter length coat. "Your dress," I said. "Your coat—"

"They're my own," she said proudly. "Desteil has nothing to do with them ... That's why I wore them."

"They're the same dress and coat you're wearing in the Dream."

She raised her arm and stared at the blue sleeve. She glanced down at the part of the dress visible beneath the hem of the coat. "Why yes," she said wonderingly. "They are the same." She looked at me, at my ragged suit, my even more ragged coat. "And your clothes—they're the same too."

She was right. Suddenly I had the feeling that the answer to our double existence was very close. "Come on," I said. "I'm going to take you to Acktus."

"But Desteil. If I'm not back soon, he'll miss me. He'll alert the whole city."

"I can't let you go back to him no matter what he does. Would you want to go back?"

I felt the shudder that shook her slender body. "No. Never," she said.

We started down the steps. The rift in the clouds had narrowed, but the moonlight still streamed brightly through it, turning the long sodden grass to silver surf, making silver lacework out of trees and bushes; glinting here and there in the darker places as though the tangled branches had shattered it into shards ...

Or swords—

I pulled Diane back up the steps and into the shadowed entrance. The dozen aristo-militarists who had been hiding in the shrubbery stepped into the clearing and ran toward us. One of them, taller than the others, seemed familiar. The moonlight briefly illumined his pointed features, and I recognized him as Desteil.

I guided Diane into the interior of the museum and up the dusty stairs that led to the mezzanine. All the while I kept thinking of the enlisted man who had watched me in the cafe, of the other enlisted men who must have watched me walk the streets and relayed my every movement to their C.O. In coming to the museum I had taken every devious route I knew, and I had doubled back several times to check on possible pursuit. But apparently I hadn't been careful enough.

Or perhaps Diane hadn't been careful enough. Perhaps Desteil had followed her. We had underestimated him badly. The amusement I had seen in his eyes should have told me that he had seen Diane look at me the previous night—look at me and blush, and then finish her walk without removing another scarf.

Now he had come to retrieve his mistress personally, and to take care of her lover. But not out of anger. He merely wished to gratify his ego further by denying me something only he could have. Diane's infidelity meant nothing to a man of his values. She was nothing but a peasant girl whom he had appropriated. He owned her, he did not love her.

Boots were resounding on the floor below and torches were crisscrossing the darkness with rapiers of light. When Diane and I reached the mezzanine, I felt around for the ancient upright piano that had graced the head of the stairs for more than a century. My fingers touched the dusty mahogany, and I put my shoulder to the wood and pushed. Castors creaked, betraying our position, but the ponderous instrument moved and I knew it could be moved further.

If the aristo-militarists had known the nature of the massive object their torches picked up beside Diane and myself, they never would have started up the stairs. I let them get halfway, then, with Diane's help, sent the quarter ton upright on its downward journey.

The stairway was narrow, flanked by the wall on one side and a wrought iron railing on the other. There was a medley of shouts and screams when the aristo-militarists saw the unanticipated weapon hurtling down upon them. The lights of their discarded torches danced wildly as they vaulted the rail and dropped to the floor below.

The piano ended its career at the bottom of the stairs with a crash of broken chords. Diane and I were just behind it. We made our way to the entrance before the routed aristo-militarists could reorganize, and hurried out into the night. Ragged clouds again obscured the moon and the grounds were shrouded in utter darkness.

Both of us had come on foot to the museum, and I assumed that Desteil and his men had also come on foot. But I had little doubt that there would be fliers on the scene before long, so the sooner we reached the labyrinthine, frequently canopied streets of the ghetto, the safer we would be.

I led the way across the grounds to the city cemetery. We picked our way through the artificial hills and dales of the enlisted men's acres, went around the high wall that enclosed the sacrosanct aristo-militarist's acres, passed through the low-lying swampy area set aside for civilslave dead, and came finally to the ghetto. There were no signs of pursuit, but still I did not dare to stop and rest. I hurried Diane through the narrow streets, through the alleys and the courtyards, past the market place—

"Alan, you're limping."

I stopped then. "Yes," I said.

"I didn't know you hurt yourself. Why didn't you tell me?"

"It happened a long time ago." The old bitterness crept into my voice despite all my efforts to hold it back.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Alan. You don't have to tell me about it."

"But I do have to tell you." I said. "I should have told you before."

When I finished telling her I felt her hand in mine. For a long while neither of us spoke. Dead leaves scuttered through the streets and the November wind howled us the clouds hung lower among the buildings. Behind than ever, some of them so low they seemed to touch the hut tops. Clouds ...

Or lightless fliers—

I drew Diane back beneath the overhang of a low rooftop, straining my eyes in the darkness. She did not notice my apprehension. "Try not to be so bitter, darling," she said. "The aristo-militarists are unhappy too. Even Desteil is unhappy. If you ever heard him scream in the night you would pity instead of hate him."

"Nothing could ever make me pity him," I said. I was quite certain now that the dark blurs over the hut tops were fliers.

"I have wondered many times about his screams," Diane went on. "They sound like the screams of a man in terrible physical pain, in unbelievable physical pain. Now I think I know the answer.

"In the Dream the man without a face wears an aristo-militarists's uniform. The blood from his wound has obscured his collar insignia, so I have been unable to make out his rank. But he is tall and thin, and very familiar. Both of us have seen him before."

I was staring at her now, the fliers momentarily forgotten. "Desteil," I said.

She nodded. *"He* is the man without a face."

VI

Acktus said: "It is time to analyze the Dream."

Diane and I had remained beneath the overhang till the fliers had passed, then hurried through the remaining streets to the hut. I thought that Acktus would advise us to leave the city, but he paid little attention to my account of Desteil's ambush, and when I told him about the fliers, he did not seem at all perturbed. He merely nodded and asked Diane to tell him her version of the Dream.

Now he stood stolidly before us, his anthropoid arms hanging low and motionless at his sides, his neanderthalic face impassive. Diane, after the shock of seeing him for the first time, had related her version—essentially the same as mine—calmly and simply, and now regarded him with dawning awe.

"Even though both of you—and the third party as well—have been experiencing the Dream for a number of years, the incident that provoked it has not yet occurred." Acktus raised his great hand as I started to interrupt him. "Please let me finish, Alan. There is very little time, and when you arrive on Sirius 9, I want you to understand why your transition was instantaneous in one sense, yet required over eight years in another."

The soft voice issuing from the coarse lips was soothing. I could see Diane relax in the lantern light, and I felt my own tension depart. In the presence of this fantastic man, no one could feel insecure.

"If we include the period of partial awareness which preceded your perception of each other, the Dream began about eight years and eight months ago. The fact that neither of you was able to 'see' the third party as anything more than a vague man-shape till much later in the Dream suggests that the events preceding the inception will be of so unpleasant a nature as to cause both your psyches to throw up blocks.

"Since both you, Alan, and you, Diane, are experiencing the Dream, we can tentatively conclude that the third party also is experiencing it—though in quite a different way. But before we can understand the nature of his experience, we must first get at the root of the Dream itself."

Acktus paused a moment, his head tipped to one side as though he were listening. But there was no sound except the whine of the wind and the sporadic rattling of the corrugated iron roof. Presently: "Last night I said that it might be possible to create an individual subjective reality than the mass force field of ideas in which we are imprisoned; I also said that if I could temporarily free my mind from the *a priori* factor, I might be able to move not only myself but others as well from one subjective point in the thing-in-itself to another subjective point—without benefit of machines of any kind. My reasoning was deficient on two counts: 1) transition of this kind does require a machine—a human machine, and 2) since the *a priori* factor would still be present in the minds of the other persons whom I teleported, it could not fail to have some effect upon the teleportation.

"Consider. The mass force field of ideas is humanity's cooperative effort to perceive the thing-in-itself. If this force field has matured during the subjective tenure of mankind, becoming more and more complicated, more and more replete with ideas, so too has the *a priori* factor which helped to mold it.

"Eoanthropus merely had to separate trees and hills, days and nights. The stars in the sky were lights to him, so subjectively close that he could touch them if he climbed a high enough mountain. And the sun was merely a celestial bonfire, no farther away than the stars. Eoanthropus' *a priori* factor was as immature and as primitive as the force field of ideas to which he contributed.

"But now the force field of ideas has matured to a point where we have to separate continents and seas, centuries and millenia; stars and island universes. Space and time have run together, becoming one, and the *a priori* factor of modern man encompasses the limiting factor of the speed of light—"

Abruptly the sound of shouting came from the street. There was the crackle of a photon gun followed by a woman's scream.

"Desteil!" I said. "He's searching the whole area. We've got to get out of here!"

"No." The massive face seemed suddenly older in the yellow lantern light. There were lines around the mouth that had never been there before and the eyes were more sunken than ever.

Diane was standing close to me, and I put my arm around her shoulders. "Don't be afraid," I heard Acktus say. "There is nothing for either of you to be afraid of. In a short while you will be in paradise.

"The Dream which you have been experiencing for eight years and eight months is an unconscious *a priori* rationalization of your instant transition from here to Sirius 9.

"While it seems to be one Dream because of your similar versions, actually it is two separate Dreams—three, if we count the third person's version. In your case it seems identical because both of you will be similarly involved in the incident which will provoke it.

"The physical appearance which you ascribe to the other persons is valid because you are rationalizing their transition as well as your own. However, while you seem to 'see' them without the aid of light, you are actually 'remembering' them as they will be at the moment of transition.

"The actions and reactions which you ascribe to the other persons are fictitious. For instance, Alan, when you said that Diane's face turned white, that her body went rigid, and that her lips parted in a soundless scream when she realized that the third person had no face, your cliches betrayed you. You *assumed* she would react that way because the heroines in the romantic fiction you have read invariably react that way, and your unconscious mind visualized the assumption.

"And when you tried to communicate with her by lip-reading, you got nowhere because you would have had to supply the answers to your own questions. Your unconscious mind did not have those answers because they weren't essential to the *a priori* rationalization.

"Your Dreams are spaceless, except for the distance between your bodies, because even the *a priori* factor cannot impose space where no objects exist. But the *idea* of space is there.

"Your Dreams are lightless because, while the *a priori* factor includes the speed of light, it does not include light itself, and therefore cannot supply it. Your sense of movement at extreme velocity from one point to another point arises from the *a priori* fact that if a body exchanges spatial co-ordinates, it *must* move. But while your subjective velocity can equal the speed of light, it can never exceed the speed of light—"

There was a pounding on the door.

For a moment none of us moved or spoke. Then Acktus said: "I meant to free the whole world, but I could only free two people. But the mass force field of ideas is never permanent, and while it shifts from one extreme to another, perhaps some day mass man will create his own utopia."

The pounding was repeated, louder than before. Acktus walked slowly across the room. "Causality is a mockery," he said, and threw open the door.

Desteil stood on the threshold. Behind him the faces of his officers showed pale and unreal in the lantern light. He had drawn his sword. His eyes, surveying the room over Acktus' tremendous shoulders, were a glacial blue. When they touched Diane, the blueness intensified but the coldness did not go away.

He raised his free arm in an attempt to shove Acktus to one side. He would have obtained more perceptible results had he tried to move a mountain. His eyes flickered. "Mutant!" he said. "Ape!" His sword flashed as he drew it back.

Acktus caught the blade in his chest. He did not move from the doorway, but he turned sideways, tearing the hilt from Desteil's grasp. I saw the sword jutting grotesquely from the anthropoid torso and the room went red. Suddenly I was running toward Desteil, oblivious to everything except his gray-collared throat.

I almost reached him; my yearning fingertips brushed the gray collar. Then Acktus' girder-like arm came up, knocking my breath away and flinging me back across the room. Diane was just behind me and when I collided with her both of us tumbled against the wall and slid to the floor.

I lay there half stunned, watching the scene before me. Desteil still stood in the doorway. He was trying to back through it now, but the pressure of his own men behind him was his own undoing. He fumbled wildly for his photon gun but fright had turned his fingers to clay.

Acktus was an immobile ape-god. Abruptly he seized the sword jutting from his chest and jerked it free. He hurled it to the floor. His right arm rose slowly, relentlessly; his massive hand opened. Desteil's scream ended in a gurgling ellipsis when his face was torn away. He staggered into the room and collapsed at Diane's feet, the gray breast of his coat scarlet with the first surge of blood.

Acktus couldn't have had more than a second before the first photon charge struck him. But that second was enough. Lines of concentration fissured his face; cornices and ledges stood out gaunt and cold. The room dimmed, darkened, and through the darkness I heard his final words:

"Sirius 9, Alan. Take it and guard it well."

VII

Diane and I were standing on a green hilltop in the warm light of a brilliant blue-white sun. The hill sloped gently down into a fertile valley of orchards and vineyards and green grass. In the distance a winding river sparkled through the pale verdure of youthful trees.

Above us arched a bluer sky than we had ever known on Earth, and into it the sun was climbing, a great and gentle god of blue-white light. Below the sun, near the horizon, was another sun, a tiny diamond point of brightness—a perfect morning star.

In that first sweet moment of the new reality we forgot that there had ever been a man without a face. It was only when we lowered our eyes from the matchless sky that we saw the dead man on the slope below us and knew that the Dream was forever over and gone.

I saw the bewilderment in Diane's eyes.

"Acktus didn't have a chance to elaborate on his explanation," I said. "You see, our instantaneous movement from Earth to Sirius 9 violated a subjective fact. We unconsciously rationalized that violation, and the rationalization appeared to us in the form of a repetitious dream.

"The distance from Earth to Sirius 9—in a subjective sense—is approximately 8.65 light years. Subjectively, the speed of light cannot be exceeded, so it is subjectively impossible for a body, or bodies, to travel 8.65 light years in less than eight years and eight months. Therefore, our instantaneous movement, in order to make *a priori* sense, had to begin eight years and eight months before it actually started—unconsciously, of course, and in the form of a dream. Our insistent sense of movement at

extreme velocity—the velocity of light—and our conviction that we were traveling from one spatial point to another spatial point, bears this out.

"You and I had to rationalize not only our own instantaneous transition but that of the other persons involved as well. During the early phase of the Dream we weren't trying to 'see' each other, as we thought. We were trying to 'remember' each other—from the future. Such a paradox is possible because true reality—the thing-in-itself—is timeless.

"And Desteil?" Diane asked.

I took her hand and we walked down the hillside to where the dead man lay. Diane turned away, but I forced myself to kneel down beside the inert body and forced my fingers to touch the limp wrist. It was still warm but it contained no vestige of life.

I stood up. "He couldn't have died before the transition was completed," I said, "so he must have experienced the Dream. But not quite the same Dream we experienced. In effecting the teleportation Acktus had to convey the information that our destination was the ninth planet of Sirius, and since Desteil, like all aristo-militarists, was well-grounded in scientific knowledge, he must have known that Sirius is 8.65 light years distant from Sol.

"However, his *a priori* rationalization did not need to include anyone beside himself because he did not know that you and I were also a part of the teleportation. So probably his Dream consisted of a spaceless, lightless, timeless void unpeopled by anyone other than himself, but in addition to the feeling of movement which we experienced, he must have experienced something else. Pain."

Diane shuddered. "How horrible!" she said.

We stood there in silence for a While. A breeze sprang up in the valley, climbed the hill and kissed our faces. There was the sound of the singing of birds, and the scent of meadow flowers.

Suddenly Diane knelt down and plucked a blade of grass. She held it up to the blue-white sunlight and pinched it between her thumb and forefinger till her skin was stained with chlorophyll. She looked at me quizzically.

"All you've proved," I said, "is that Acktus was able to create a world physically identical to the world which mass man created in another phase of the thing-in-itself—Earth. Since he himself was unable to take advantage of his own creation, we have to conclude that movement through the thing-in-itself is possible only through the mind of a non-participator intellectually powerful enough to transcend the *a priori* factor."

"If *feels* real," Diane said, staring at the blade of grass between her green fingers.

"It *is* real. Subjectively real. And subjective reality is all that need ever concern us since it is all we can ever know. Sirius 9 is as valid as Sol 3 is."

She gave a nervous little laugh. "Perhaps more valid in one respect."

I looked at her puzzledly. "In what respect?"

"We *know* there was a God."

We buried Desteil on the hillside, then hand in hand we walked down into the valley toward the blueness of the river. I became aware of a new vitality coursing through my body, and I felt the wholeness of the new leg Acktus had given me. The air was sparkling, the sun warm. Meadow flowers rose round our knees at the foot of the hill, and lush orchards marched to meet us. The valley was a garden really, a paradise; a poem in living things.

Diane paused beneath a luxuriant tree, reached up and plucked a ripe red fruit. Suddenly I remembered Acktus saying that an alternative subjective reality had to be exhaustively fabricated, had to be complete down to the smallest detail: had to possess variations or duplications of all phenomena, both past and present, of the mass force field of ideas.

That was when I saw the serpent coiled around the tree.

I knocked the fruit from Diane's hand before it could touch her lips. Homo sapiens II would probably turn out to be a toolmaker like Homo sapiens I.

But at least he was going to begin life with a clear conscience!

The Fugitives

—and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.

—Genesis 1:28

All the while he was waiting in line to be checked out Warren felt eyes upon him, but he postponed glancing over his shoulder till after he reached the check-out counter and turned his groceries and his ration card over to the electronic cashier. But none of the people lined up behind him seemed to be aware of his existence; neither did the people waiting in the other check-out lines. He guessed the truth then, and, raising his gaze, saw that the eyes belonged to the automart manager, who was peering down at him through the little window of the gondola-like automart office.

His fears were allayed. It was part of the manager's job to keep an eye on the customers while they were checking out. Electronic cashiers weren't easily duped and it was next to impossible to hold one up; but such things had been done before and unquestionably would be attempted again. It only *seemed* to Warren that the manager was watching him. Actually, the man was watching everyone.

By the time he stepped into the parking lot he'd succeeded in laying his fears to rest. The parking lot covered two acres and even at this early hour was nearly filled with Frolics, Skylarks, Schlottisches, Jubilees, and Zests. There were no big jobs in evidence. Even in the country, where he and Dianne had recently come to live, it was impracticable to drive anything larger than a carette.

His own carette was a Schlott—low and sleek and bucket-seated. It was an extravagance, yes—but what quicker way was there to attract attention to yourself than by going carless? After walking the three hundred yards to where he'd parked it, he set the groceries in one of the bucket seats, climbed into the other, and joined the line of carettes waiting to leave the lot. Some five minutes later, he drove onto the intermegalopolitan highway and headed for the apartmotel where he and Dianne had set up housekeeping.

He was deliciously tired after working all night. He hadn't thought he'd like working nights, but when he'd been offered the position of Nocturnal Maintenance Engineer at the Bomar Bowling Academy, he'd taken it without hesitation, knowing from experience that the fewer people he came into contact with, the less likelihood there would be of his being recognized. He'd dyed his hair long ago, of course, and he'd long ago said good-bye to the little mustache he'd once been so proud of; but being on TV had made his face public property, and the tape of the little interview the newscasters had tricked him and Dianne into giving in the hospital hallway might be re-aired at any time. It had already resulted in their being spotted twice, despite their precautions, and both times only the availability of the police had made it possible for them to escape with their lives and to move on to a different locale.

But in a way, perhaps, their having been forced at last to leave Megalopolis Nine behind them had been a good thing. He liked it here in Intramegalopolia. So did Dianne. Sometimes he wondered why he hadn't made plans to live in the country while still at MIT-IV. There was so much more space here. Why, sometimes you could drive for a whole hundred feet without passing a single building! Not very often, but often enough to give you a sense of freedom you never got to know in a megalopolis. He thought of Wordsworth's lines

Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn, --
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn . . . .

Yes, that was the way it was. Exactly the way it was. It was as though the lines had been written today instead of nearly three centuries ago.

Dianne had breakfast ready for him when, an hour and fifteen miles after leaving the automart, he parked the Schlott in the car-tree and entered their apartmotel. She put away the groceries while he ate. She was a brunette now. Once, she had been a striking blonde. And once, her name had been Evelyn,

and once Gloria, and once Yvonne. Just as his name had been successively Wayne, Everett, and Theodore. "I met our next-door neighbor this morning, darling," she said, pouring the eighth-of-a-pound packet of sugar that constituted their week's ration into the sugar cannister. "She's coming over later on to show me a new way to fix spork that she heard on TV."

A cold finger of dear touched him. "Darling, do you think—"

She anticipated his objection. "But Warren, we can't go on living like a pair of hermits forever. Especially here in the country. People will wonder. People will suspect. And Mabel's so full of fun—so friendly and likable."

"So was the last frustrated housewife that sicked the crowd on us."

Dianne went rigid; her face paled. "I don't want to talk about it!"

"I know you don't, Dianne." (Even after all this time, it was hard not to call her Yvonne.) "But you should think about it. We're still too fresh on people's minds. Maybe Mabel doesn't know you from Eve now, but the more she sees of you, the more she's apt to be reminded that she's seen you before, somewhere, some place—you know how the process works. And once she remembers where and when—and why—we're going to have to run for our lives again."

"But Mabel's husband is a plainclothesman. Even if she *did* recognize us, she wouldn't give us away. She couldn't, out of loyalty to Bill."

Warren was still dubious. "You never know what a frustrated housewife will do. She *is* a frustrated one, isn't she? I don't recall seeing any children in the neighborhood."

"Y—yes. She and Bill are in the pool, but you know the odds against their names being drawn."

Tears had come into Dianne's eyes. They always did when the subject of children came up. Tears and terror, and a tinge of guilt. Warren suffered similarly, but his suffering didn't show. He wouldn't have brought up the subject of children at all if necessity hadn't demanded it. He said, "Those are the kind we have to watch out for the most."

"I know," Dianne said miserably. "But the days are so long and the nights are even longer, and she *is* friendly, Way—Warren, and her husband *is* a plainclothesman. It may even be to our benefit *to* be friends with them."

Warren relented then. She was probably right, and he was probably getting to be a misanthrope, which, however much he might be justified, wasn't a good thing for either of them. "All right," he said, "so now you've got a girl friend. So what else is new?"

He slept most of the day, awakening at five o'clock. The coolness of the August morning had long since departed, and the humid heat of afternoon was in full sway. As he slipped into his lay-around robe the lazy crescendo of a locust climbed above the ceaseless murmur of carettes passing on the highway. Through the open window he saw the heat rising in wave after shimmering wave from the apartmotel courtyard.

Mabel was in the kitchen with Dianne when he came in. She *was* full of fun, just as Dianne had said. Small, pert, with ringlets of black hair scalloping her forehead, she could have passed for a little girl—if the fullness of her breasts and hips hadn't attested that nothing could be farther from the truth. "You're just like my Bill," she said to him after Dianne performed the amenities. "Eight hours sleep, and you look like a bear."

Warren fingered the stubble on his cheeks and chin. He grinned. "Guess I'd better make myself civilized."

"No, don't do that," Mabel said. "I like men who look like bears. It's a sign of virility. *Is* he virile, Dianne?"

The feigned naivete with which she asked the question clearly indicated she meant it solely as a joke. Nevertheless, it was just about the worst thing she could have said. Dianne's face turned pink, then white; her lips quivered. How she managed to carry off the moment, Warren never knew, but carry it off she did. "And how!" she said. "If we lived in the days of yore, we'd probably have more kids than a barrel of monkeys!"

"I still think I'd better make myself civilized," Warren said, and left the kitchen before the blush that had begun infiltrating his cheeks became perceptible.

Returning some twenty minutes later after a shower and a shave and a change into a cool slacks-shirt-clax ensemble, he found Dianne setting the table and carrying on a conversation with Mabel re the relative merits of nearbeef and spork. The two of them talking back and forth lent the little room a quality that had previously been wanting—a quality compounded of homeliness, matter-of-factness, and camaraderie. Maybe having someone else to talk to *would* be good for Dianne—and, by extension, good for him too. Associating with him exclusively could only make her remember, just as associating with her exclusively made him remember. And God knew, it was time they forgot. Six months was more than long enough to torture yourself for a misdeed that, in the strict sense of the word, hadn't been a misdeed at all, but a mistake—and not even your own.

Just the same though, he reflected as he drove to work some five hours later through the heavy Tuesday-night traffic, becoming intimate with other people, no matter how nice they might be, was a risky business at best. There was the omni-present danger of a slip of the tongue, for one thing, and the possibility that you might forget yourself to the extent of making a sudden confidence for another. You had to watch yourself every second.

But Dianne knew enough to be careful. She ought to know by this time.

Was the Frolic behind him deliberately following too close, or was its driver dozing off? He'd passed the carette a few minutes ago, and it had seemed to him that the man's eyes had held a spark of recognition. But even as the thought crossed his mind, the Frolic pulled into a different lane, and a moment later turned down a side road.

That was the hell of having had your face aired over TV—of having been found innocent in the eyes of the law but guilty in the eyes of the people. Everywhere you went, you kept imagining someone was staring at you, and you could never wholly be sure they really weren't.

In a way, fleeing from the people was far worse than fleeing from the police. There were people, people everywhere, everywhere you went; you could never leave them behind. All you could do was hide in their midst—lose yourself in sameness—and hope and pray that your neighbor's memory was short.

And hope and pray, too, that someday it would all blow over and that your personal safety would no longer be in such jeopardy that the law could not award you that which was rightfully yours.

The following morning, he met Mabel's husband Bill. It was Bill's day off, and the two of them were going into outer Megalopolis Nine to take in a six-hour senshow and wanted Warren and Dianne to go along. Bill was a big strapping man with a genial Irish face and a pair of sharp blue eyes, but who nevertheless didn't look like a cop. Warren took a liking to him right away.

Just the same, he was worried. "Gosh, I can't go," he said. "It would mean I'd have to go to work tonight without any sleep." He looked at Dianne, hoping she'd say no, she couldn't go either—that her place was at her husband's side. But Dianne didn't say anything. She just stood there looking back at him, beseeching him with her eyes.

He sighed. "But there's no reason why Dianne can't go," he said.

She was radiant when she got back that night. "Darling, such sights and scenes you never dreamed of!" she cried. "For six hours I lived another life, and now it's like being born all over again. Oh, how I wish you could have come!"

Rebirth had heightened the color of her cheeks, brought back the sparkle that used to live in her eyes. All at once, he wished he didn't have to go to work, that he could sleep the whole night through beside her and know the warm smoothness of her thighs, the thrilling softness of her breasts. And he realized with a start that this was the first time he had truly desired his wife since, since— Well, no matter when. It was enough that he did desire her, that she desired him. Perhaps now they could begin living again.

A knock sounded on the door, and a second later Mabel stepped into the room. "Dianne, I forgot to tell you—tomorrow's our shopping day and I'm going to the automart. You'll come along, won't you? I *hate* shopping alone."

Dianne looked at Warren. "Do you think I should?" her eyes asked. It was her radiance that decided him. If going out did that much for her, then risk or no risk she should go out more often. In the final

analysis, the essence of life was danger; and when you tried to live without exposing yourself to it, you ended up not living at all. So he said, "Why don't you go, darling? You've never been to a country store, and you may get a kick out of it."

She laughed. "I'll window-shop while Mabel's doing the real thing."

"Be ready about nine-thirty," Mabel said. Then, "Well, I'd best be getting back to Bill." She winked. "After a senshow, he gets notions sometimes. See you in the morning, Dianne."

She left. "I'd better be going too," Warren said, glancing at his watch. "I'm glad you enjoyed yourself so much today, darling."

She pretended to pout. "I'd have enjoyed myself a lot more if you'd been with me. Senshows are ten times more fun when you share them with your husband."

"I'm off tomorrow night," he said. "Maybe Saturday we—"

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him. "We'll go to the same show! I won't mind living it again. With you with me, it'll be like living it for the first time. We'll hold hands like a pair of—of—"

"A pair of lovers."

"Yes, like a pair of lovers! And everything will be the way it used to be, and we'll climb mountains, sleep in quaint chalets; float down lovely rivers to the sea. We'll visit the craters of the moon and drink red wine in the little cafes of Mars. Good-bye, Earth, we'll say, and fly away to the stars!"

They kissed again, and said good night. Then he went outside to the car-tree, lowered his Schlott, and set out for work.

He thought about her all through the night as he rode the polishing machine up and down the bowling lanes. She was still radiant when he arrived home the next morning. For her shopping date with Mabel she'd donned a pink gadabout. It swirled like mist around her legs as she set the table, and through its diaphanous bodice he could faintly see her breasts. He pulled her down and kissed her just as Mabel came in the door. "What, so early in the morning?" Mabel asked. "Wow!"

Deliberately Dianne sat down on Warren's lap. "Why not?"

"Good thing you didn't live in the old days," Mabel said. "You really would have had more kids than a barrel of monkeys. Guess I'd better wait for you out in the carette."

"I'll be right with you," Dianne said.

After serving his breakfast, she kissed him and left. "We're invited out for supper tonight," she announced when he got up that afternoon. "Mabel got extra rations—she and the automart manager are old friends."

Warren remembered the eyes that had peered down at him from the gondola-like office when he was checking out Monday. An ice cube of fear coalesced in his stomach. "Did you meet the manager?" he asked.

"Oh yes. He's awfully nice. He said maybe he could arrange to let us have a little something extra now and then. Surpluses accumulate, he said, no matter how generous he tries to be, and he saves them for his friends."

The cube melted, drained away. He showered, shaved, and got into cool clothes, and at five-thirty he and Dianne went next door. It was the hottest it had been all week, and if anything, the sultry wind blowing up from the south aggravated matters. But Mabel had all her windows open, and her living room was relatively cool. It was a duplicate of Warren's and Dianne's. So was her apartmotel. So were all the other apartmotels.

"Bill got called out on a job and won't be here till later," Mabel said. "So sit down, you two, and I'll mix us some drinks."

Warren and Dianne complied. The television set was on, but he couldn't get interested in the program in progress. He stared out the window at the heat waves rising from the courtyard. Despite the temperature, quite a number of their neighbors, both men and women, had come out of their apartmotels and were standing in the afternoon sunlight. They had collected into a group and were talking about something, but the murmur of the highway traffic drowned out their words.

From the kitchen came the sound of ice cubes tinkling. It was a cool pleasant sound. Presently Mabel re-entered the living room carrying a tray. Her face had changed somehow. Warren spotted the

difference right away, and even though he couldn't put his finger on exactly what it was, a chill went through him.

She handed him and Dianne tall cool glasses. "Cheers," she said. Everyone drank. Ice cubes tinkled like Chinese wind chimes. Warren looked out the window again. A number of carettes had pulled into the courtyard and their occupants had added themselves to the group of neighbors. Only it could no longer properly be called a group. It had turned into a crowd.

Soon, it would become a mob ...

Warren felt sick. He glanced at Mabel's phone. How many calls had she made? he wondered. Not many, probably. It would only have taken two or three to start the ball rolling. "Bill's not coming home at all tonight, is he, Mabel?" he said.

Her eyes didn't even flicker. "Whatever makes you think that?"

"Because if he did, he'd have to stop it."

"Stop what, darling?"

Warren got to his feet, pulled Dianne to hers. There might still be time to make it to the car-tree and lower the Schlott, and once they were on the highway, it would be no trick at all to lose themselves. "Come on, Dianne—we'll have to run for it."

Abruptly Mabel dropped all pretense, pulled a gun from an end-table, and pointed it. It was an old Burchardt-Luger, but it appeared to be in good condition, and it was unquestionably loaded. "Sit down rabbitman," she said. "You too, rabbitgirl."

Warren complied. So did Dianne. The old sickness had returned to her eyes. It was a sickness born of the knowledge that you were the most despised creature in the world. Warren knew it well. But this time it wasn't so bad. This time, he was almost glad—would have been glad if it hadn't been for Dianne. He was tired of running, tired of pretending that tomorrow things would be different; tired of the human race.

He wasn't even afraid any longer. "It was the automart-manager, wasn't it, Mabel?" he said. "He thought he recognized me Monday morning, got my address from the cashier, and called you when he found out you lived next door to us. He was pretty sure he was right about me, but he wanted to get a good look at Dianne before pointing his finger. So you ingratiated yourself with her and got her to go shopping with you without arousing our suspicions. Then *you* pointed the finger."

"My, but you're clever, rabbitman."

"You don't realize what you're doing," Dianne said. "We weren't to blame. There wasn't any hereditary precedence and the pre-peds didn't make a thorough enough examination. They were the ones who were found guilty—not us. We were completely exonerated."

"By the law, maybe—but not by the people. *We* didn't exonerate you and we never will!" Mabel had momentarily forgotten Warren and was addressing Dianne. Her face was horrid to behold. Its thin coating of civilization had dissolved, and the naked flesh beneath stood out stark and clear. "I'd kill you now," she said, "but it wouldn't be fair. You robbed the others too, and some of them at least should see you suffer. You and your rabbitman-lover!"

Dianne began to cry.

Warren looked out the window again. More carettes were pulling off the highway and the ranks of the mob were swelling visibly. It had a voice now—low, vicious, murmuring.

He had heard the sound before. As he watched, one of the men uncoiled a rope and threw it over one of the empty booms of the car-tree. It hung there darkly against the glaring August sky.

Still another carette pulled into the courtyard. A familiar figure got out and began running toward the apartmotel. It was Bill. A moment later, he burst into the room. His face was white as he confronted Mabel. "I knew you were up to something when you sent me on that phony errand," he said, "and I played along to find out what. My God, Mabel, doesn't my job mean anything to you?"

He jerked the Burchardt-Luger out of her hand. "But they're The Rabbits!" she screamed.

"I guessed as much when I saw the crowd. You fool! Now I've got to get them out of here."

She made a grab for the gun, bit his hand when he shoved her away. He slapped her face. Hard. She sank limply down into a chair. He shoved Warren and Dianne toward the door. "They're not worked up

enough yet. I may be able to get you through."

He led the way, displaying his badge and carrying the Luger in plain sight. Warren and Dianne kept close behind him. People began pressing in on all sides. The murmuring of their many voices took on a more vicious note. Bill raised the Luger. "This man and woman are in my custody!" he shouted. "If you interfere, I've every right to kill you!" Sullenly the people drew back.

At length the trio reached the car-tree. Bill lowered Warren's Schlott. "Get in, both of you," he said, "and get the hell out of here!"

"Litterbitch!" someone shouted.

"Dirty Dionnes!"

"Kill them! Kill them!"

"Get going for God's sake!" Bill said.

Dianne was sobbing now. Warren helped her into the Schlott, climbed in himself. He looked up into Bill's face, wanting to commend the man for his bravery, to thank him for saving their lives. But the hatred in Bill's eyes chilled him to the bone. He gunned the Schlott and shot onto the highway. Soon, the river of carettes and trucks absorbed them.

Night found them still on the road. Dianne's eyes were dry by then, and she was staring at the lights of the service stations and the cafes and the apartmotel courts. "My babies," she kept saying, "I want my babies." They would go on to a new place and try again. They would apply for new names and new social security numbers, and the law would grant them. Secretly, so that no one would know. They would find a new apartmotel and he would find a new job. And they would settle down once more to wait for time to pass and hate to abate, praying that the day would come when their lives would no longer be in danger and they could be awarded custody of the twins. Yes, they would hide again, in the only place there was for them to hide. Among the people. The people, the people, the people.

The Pyramid Project

The Sphinx

Daniel Hall met the enemy in the blue skies of NRGC 984-D but it cannot be said that the enemy was his. Neither can it be said that he was the enemy's. In point of fact, about all that can be said about the encounter is that it never quite came off. One minute there were two trim scout ships, one Terran and the other Uvelian, arrowing toward each other, and the next minute there were two trim scout ships veering off at right angles to each other and dropping rapidly planetward. What happened to the Uvelian pilot will be touched upon later. Right now, the camera is focused on Daniel Hall.

He came down near the edge of a wide tableland and plowed a long furrow in a stretch of snow-white sand. The impact tore one of the viewscope brackets loose and sent it ricocheting from wall to wall. On the third ricochet it sideswiped Hall, ripping through both layers of his spacesuit and tearing open his left arm from elbow to shoulder. Still not satisfied, it struck the radio panel and smashed the transmitter. Then it gave up the ghost and dropped to the deck.

Hall hadn't meant to make such a hard landing. He hadn't meant to make any kind of a landing. An invisible force had seized the controls and torn the ship out of the sky, and he hadn't been able to do a thing about it.

He tried the controls now. He tried them singly and in pairs. No matter how he tried them, they did not respond. Next, he had a go at the radio. He knew even while he was beaming his S.O.S. that it would never get beyond the stratosphere and that all he would receive for his pains would be static. He was right. He turned the radio off.

Well anyway, NRGC 984-D had a reasonably amiable climate and a reasonably amiable

atmosphere–his instruments told him that much. So he could stay alive for a little while at least.

Hall grinned. "A little while" was right. The Terran fleet's imminent engagement with the Uvelian wouldn't be postponed merely because an unimportant space scout who had been sent on ahead to determine whether or not the planet in whose vicinity the engagement was to take place had intelligent inhabitants, failed to report back. The assignment had been no more than a token gesture in the first place–a gesture that would sound good on the flagship's log-tape when the war was over. Whether NRGC 984-D had intelligent inhabitants or not, the commander of the Terran fleet would carry out his original orders, and if a planet-wide tectonic upheaval resulted from the side effects of the battle–and only a miracle could avert such an eventuality–Terrankind would hold themselves no more responsible for it than they held themselves responsible for Carthage, Dresden, and Deimos.

According to Terran intelligence reports, the resemblance between Terrans and Uvelians was cultural as well as physical; hence, the odds had it that the Uvelian pilot had been on a similar token assignment and that if he, too, had been rendered helpless and incommunicado it would have a similar lack of effect on the commander of the Uvelian fleet. Anyway you looked at the situation NRGC 984-D was going to have to pay dearly for being in the wrong place at the wrong time–i.e., at a point in space equidistant from Earth and Uvel at the precise moment when the crucial battle of the Earth-Uvel war was going to take place.

Hall's arm was beginning to throb, and waves of weakness were washing over him. Breaking out a first-aid pac, he sterilized the wound and dressed it. The bleeding stopped, but he still felt weak and he knew that he should rest. However, he couldn't bring himself to do so. For one thing, he knew that regardless of what he did, he was doomed anyway, and for another, during his descent he had glimpsed a number of vaguely familiar structures in the distance, He hadn't been able to make them out clearly, but structures usually spelled intelligent beings, and he was eager to find out whether or not these structures were in keeping with the rule. It was silly of him, he supposed, to want to know what kind of beings, if any, he was going to share extinction with; but he wanted to know just the same.

So, after removing the cumbersome outer-section of his spacesuit and taking off his helmet, he opened the scout-ship's locks and stepped outside. NRGC 984 was well past meridian. Using it as a reference point, he oriented himself. To the north and to the east, the tableland dropped away into hazy foothills; far to the west, stalwart mow-crowned mountains rose sheerly into the sky. The structures which he had glimpsed lay to the south. There were four of them altogether, and three of them were pyramidal in shape. The fourth stood a little to the east of the others and was radically different from them. It looked like–it looked like—

Hall squinted his eyes against the glare of the sunlight. If he hadn't known that such a thing was impossible, he would have sworn that the fourth structure was a sphinx.

NRGC 984 was a KO star. However, if the rays which were mining down upon the tableland were a dependable criterion, it wasn't very far from attaining GO-hood. Hall felt dehydrated before he had gone half a mile. By the time a mile lay behind him, he was ready to drop.

He wet his mouth repeatedly from the vacuum-container of ship's water which he had brought along, each time swallowing as much of the icy contents as he dared. He could see the pyramidal structures quite clearly now—clearly enough to know that in mentally referring to them as "pyramidal structures" instead of as "pyramids" he was only kidding himself. He could see the fourth structure quite clearly, too—clearly enough to know that in the strict sense of the word it wasn't a structure, but a huge statue, and to know that whether such a thing were possible or not, the statue was a statue of a sphinx.

As he progressed, reeling now and then from the heat and from his increasing weakness, he began to wonder whether he had somehow been catapulted back through space to Egypt—to the plateau of Gizeh, upon which the Great Sphinx Harmachis guarded the Great Pyramids of Cheops, Chephren, and Mykerinos, and at whose base the Terran capital of Kafr el Haram stood. And as he progressed still farther he began to wonder whether he had somehow been catapulted back through space and time to the Egypt of over five thousand years ago when the Great Pyramids and the Great Sphinx were new; for these pyramids and this sphinx were new—make no mistake about it. The pyramids looked as though they had been built yesterday, and as for the sphinx, its excellent condition lent it a realism so remarkable

that Hall momentarily expected to see it rise up on its columnar legs and come thundering over the tableland to welcome him—

Or to annihilate him.

There was a third possibility, of course, and on the surface it made more sense than the other two: maybe his growing weakness and the merciless rays of the sun had combined forces and were causing him to hallucinate.

But if he was hallucinating, why hadn't he chosen a subject more in keeping with his character? Specifically, why hadn't he projected an image of a garish street lined with nepenthe nooks and fun bars, or an image of a blue mountain lake with a shack on its wooded shore and a canoe drawn up on its beach ready to take him gliding over the cool and limpid waters? Like many adventurers, Hall pursued both solitude and sin and found peace in neither; but they were at least a part of his makeup, and Egyptology was not. He had visited the plateau of Gizeh and seen the Great Pyramids and the Great Sphinx, and he had read about Cheops, Chephren, and Mykerinos in Herodotus' History: but the pharaohs and their sepulchers and their monuments were relatively unimportant items in the synthesis of real and vicarious experiences that constituted his character, and it was highly unlikely that he would be "seeing" a sphinx and three pyramids now.

He decided that the best way to find out whether or not he was imagining them would be to try to walk right through them, and with this in mind, he forced himself to go on, even though he knew that he would do better to return to his ship and forget about the whole thing.

Gradually, the pyramids took on greater detail, particularly the largest of the trio. It stood in the foreground, and several hundred yards to the east of it stood the Sphinx. The Gizeh sphinx measured in the neighborhood of 189 feet in length, 70 in height, and 30 from forehead to chin. If anything, this one exceeded those dimensions. Lord, suppose it were to stand up, Hall thought. Why, it would tower almost a hundred feet above the ground!

Had the Sphinx read his mind? It would seem so. At any rate, the huge head had turned and the great golden eyes were fixed upon his face. As he watched in disbelieving fascination, it stood erect on its four legs and regarded him contemplatively across the half a hundred yards of tableland that separated them.

Everything caught up to Hall then—his weakness, the rays of NRGC 984, the heat rising from the white sand, the doubts that had been multiplying in his mind ever since he had participated in the destruction of the Deimos Dissenters—and he sagged to the ground. The ground, he discovered presently, was trembling. Well it might. The creature walking over it probably weighed several thousand tons.

He felt the coolness of shade. Looking up, he saw the massive humanoid face looming above him, the great golden eyes gazing down into his own. Slowly, the huge head began to lower; relentlessly, the gigantic jaws began to open. Belatedly, Hall tried to draw his laser pistol, only to discover that he no longer had charge of his right arm. He retreated way back into his mind then, found a deep dark cave, crawled into it, and closed his eyes.

Cheops' Daughter

Wherever else he might be, Hall decided some time later, he was no longer in the cave. Nor was he, apparently, in the belly of the Sphinx. There was the softness of eiderdown beneath his back and a pleasant perfume upon his nostrils. He was completely relaxed and the throbbing in his arm had died away. Feeling fingers lightly touch his forehead, he opened his eyes.

There was a girl standing over him. Her face was narrow, the forehead high and rounded, the nose high-bridged and slender, the chin somewhat pointed. She had night-black hair, and her head was fitted with a ridiculous headdress that flared up into a flat crown. She was slim, but startlingly well-developed, and she was wearing a tight fitting halter and a tight-fitting knee-length skirt. The headdress, the halter, and the skirt were golden in color, and, peering over the edge of the padded platform on which he lay, Hall saw that webbed sandals of similar hue encased her small feet. Her skin was the color of olives.

Despite her unusual attire and her equally unusual development, plus a queenly hauteur that somehow

went well with both, her eyes still managed to be the most remarkable items in her feminine inventory. They were almond-shaped, slightly slanted, golden brown, and preternaturally large. In addition, there was a liquid quality about them that came close to devastating the defenses which Hall made haste to throw up around himself.

Well anyway, she made as much sense as the pyramids and the Sphinx did, he thought resignedly. As a matter of fact, she seemed to belong in such a setting. "I suppose you're going to tell me your name is 'Cleopatra'," he said, even though he knew that the all-purpose English words were bound to be Greek to her.

She had withdrawn her hand from his forehead and had stepped back from the platform the minute he opened his eyes. But she hadn't been in the least disconcerted, nor was she in the least disconcerted now. "Behold, I have dressed thy wound," she said. "Is it not enough that a Pharoah's daughter should have thus demeaned herself without her having to demean herself still further by giving thee her name?" Suddenly puzzlement crinkled her forehead, and she looked intently at his smartly-tailored inner spacesuit. Actually, in combination with his snappy black spaceboots it constituted as sharp an outfit as the Terran Space Navy had ever come up with, but she certainly didn't seem to think so. "Where didst thou learn to speak the language of Egypt, slave from a far land?" she asked.

Clearly, NRGC 984-D was a planet of surprises, and by this time Hall should have been sufficiently acclimated to have enabled him to take each new development in his stride. He was not, though—not quite—and for a while he just lay there gaping at the girl. Then he propped himself up on one elbow, noting as he did so that she had indeed dressed his wound and noting simultaneously that in the process she had somehow eliminated its soreness and brought about at least a partial return of his strength. She had also, he reminded himself quickly, called him a slave. He said snidely, "I guess you might say that I learned to speak Egyptian in the same place you learned to speak APE."

She blinked, and it was obvious from the blank look she gave him that she had missed his point completely. He had the feeling that she was just dying to put him in his place with a few well-chosen epithets but that she wasn't quite sure enough of herself to risk doing so. "Great indeed must be my disfavor in the eyes of Amen-Ra," she said presently, "for me to have been afflicted by such circumstances and by such company."

Hall sat up on the platform, which, he saw now, was a bed of some kind. The room in which it stood was on the small side, and surprisingly pleasant. The ceilings and the walls had been carved out of pink granite, and the illumination was provided by candles burning in niches that looked a lot like light-fixtures. Besides the bed, there were two marble benches, a marble table, and a slender diorite pedestal supporting a shallow diorite bowl that looked like a bird bath but which was probably a stone brazier. In the wall opposite the one against which the bed stood, a tapestry-hung doorway gave access to another room. The tapestry was heavily decorated with tiny humanoid figures with cow-like heads.

Hall had a hunch that he was inside the largest of the three pyramids—an upsetting enough possibility in itself without having a pharaoh's daughter to contend with too. "Which pharaoh are you the daughter of?" he asked.

She drew herself up as straight as could be and looked at him as though he were a chunk of mud that had just dropped from a chariot wheel. Nevertheless, the hauteur in her voice did not ring true, and he was certain that he detected a note of shame. "His Majesty King Khufu the blessed, slave! Dost thou dare profess ignorance of his reign?"

Khufu, he thought. That would be old Cheops himself. Which meant that the girl standing before him was in the neighborhood of fifty-two hundred years old. He sighed. "Well anyway, you dress a mean dressing," he said.

She just looked at him.

He regarded her shrewdly. "I take it we're in the neighborhood of Memphis," he said presently, "and that this pyramid we're in is the one your father took twenty years to build."

For the first time the underlying uncertainty which he had sensed in her from the start rose to the surface. Instead of bringing to mind a princess, she now brought to mind a little girl who had strayed out of her own back yard and become hopelessly lost in the next. "I—I know that what thou sayest must be

true," she said, "but I know also that it cannot be true. Only the first mastuba of my father's sepulcher has been built, and it is to be the first sepulcher of its kind, yet here there are three of them, and each has been completed. I—I do not understand wherefore I am in this place, nor wherefore I am alone."

"But surely you must know how you got here."

She shook her head. "Behold, two nights ago I was sitting in the—" She paused, took a deep breath, and began all over again. "Behold, two nights ago I lay me to sleep, and when Amen-Ra climbed upon his throne the morning after, here I lay in this strange place in this strange land. I do not know what to do."

She looked as though she were going to cry. Hall would have felt sorry for her if the memory of her arrogance hadn't still been fresh in his mind. He didn't think much of people who went around calling other people slaves. Another reason he didn't feel sorry for her was that he couldn't bring himself to believe that she was on the level. How could she *possibly* be Cheops' daughter?

All right, who *could* she be then? A Uvelian Mata Hari? Nonsense! A Uvelian Mata Hari might try to pass herself off as a lot of things, but unless she was hopelessly out of her mind, she would never try to pass herself off as an Egyptian princess who had been dead for more than five millennia. Besides, what would a Uvelian spy be doing on a planet which, other than on an abstract level, neither the Terran nor the Uvelian empires had ever heard about until a few days ago and which they wouldn't have heard about even then if it hadn't been for the fact that NRGC 984-D was going to be occupying almost the same point in space as that which the major Uvelian and Terran forces, which were ineluctably drawing closer and closer together, would be occupying when they met in the crucial battle of the hundred-year galactic war—in the ultimate Armageddon that would decide whether the Uvelian demosocialistic ideology or the Terran sociocratic ideology was to endure?

"Tell me," Hall said presently, "is there really a monster the size of a young mountain hanging around these parts, or did I just imagine there was?"

He expected the question to disconcert her. It didn't in the least. "Oh yes," she said, as calmly as though a sphinx were no more awe-inspiring than a common alley cat, "She-who-builds-sepulchers is still with me. I feared at first that she, too, had deserted me, but she had not. But as she will not communicate with me, I have been unable to learn wherefore she interrupted her labors in my father's behalf to build these sepulchers in this strange land, or for whom she built them."

A pyramid-building sphinx was all Hall needed. Lord knew, the girl's story had been incredible enough before, but now it was fantastic. Sliding down from the platform-bed to the floor and noting to his satisfaction that his laser pistol was still in its holster at his hip, he said, "I can see that if I'm going to find out anything around here, I'm going to have to find it out for myself. So if you'll climb down off that high horse of yours long enough to tell me how to get out of this rock pile, Miss Whoever-you-are, I won't bother you any more!"

The girl gasped. She stamped her right foot. She stamped her left. She clenched her hands. "Hast thou the effrontery to imply that the noble daughter of His Majesty King Khufu the blessed is guilty of a falsehood, slave!"

Hall put his hands on his hips. "A falsehood! Why you've been lying your head off."

He would have said more if tears hadn't come into her golden brown eyes. Turning, she pointed toward the doorway. "Beyond that portal thou wilt find another, slave," she said, "and beyond the second portal, yet another. Then thou wilt find thyself in the passage that leads to the portico. Go!"

Hall went.

The Pyramid Project

As he left the room, it occurred to him that he had forgotten to ask her how he happened to be inside the pyramid in the first place. It was just as well. She would only have told him another fib.

How did he happen to be inside it then?

Probably, after his sphinx hallucination, he had crawled the rest of the distance to his objective and the girl had found him and taken him in tow. For all he knew, she could very well have saved his life. He

wished now that he hadn't been quite so rude to her.

As nearly as he could ascertain, the room that adjoined the one he had just left was a living room. It contained elaborately upholstered settees and chairs, and there were cushions scattered over the thickly carpeted floor. The next room was unquestionably a cooking room. Floor-to-ceiling shelves were lined with earthenware pots, and there was a brick oven large enough to roast an elephant in. In addition to the oven, there was a brazier-like affair on which less pachydermatous dishes could be prepared.

Passing through the third doorway, he found himself, not in the passage which the girl had mentioned, but in a spacious court. Stone columns gave the illusion of supporting the ceiling, and at the top of each, just beneath the capital, was the bas relief of a cow-like face. Elaborate horns rising from the stone foreheads blended with the capitals and supplied their motifs. It finally dawned on Hall who this cow-like being was. It was Hathor, the Egyptian goddess of love.

He crossed the court without further delay and stepped through a wide doorway into a long corridor. At the end of the corridor, a dark, star-spangled rectangle showed. He made track for it, rejoicing in the cool night air that presently reached his nostrils. Obviously he had been unconscious longer than he had thought.

He could hardly wait to see the stars. He knew perfectly well that he couldn't possibly be in ancient Egypt, that there was another, far more practical, explanation for the presence of the Sphinx and the pyramids and the olive-skinned girl, but just the same it would be good to know for sure. The stars would tell him. Stars did not lie.

Stepping out of the passage, he looked up at them. The structure behind him and the roof of the portico had half of the heavens, but the half that was visible contained not a single familiar constellation. He gave a sigh of relief. A moment later, he wondered why. Wouldn't he be better off if he *were* in ancient Egypt? There, at least, he would have a chance to live out the rest of his natural life. Here, he would be dead before morning.

The portico was wide and lofty. Four columns, larger but similar in all other respects to the columns he had seen in the court, stood in a row along the marble apron, supporting the roof. Between the two center ones a short flight of wide marble steps descended to the ground. He crossed the apron and went down them.

All was silence. Above his head, a constellation suggestive of a huge crocodile sprawled across the heavens. The white sands of the tableland caught the starlight and shattered it into infinitesimal particles, and the particles glistened softly for miles around, seeming to emit a radiance of their own. Behind him, the Great Pyramid—he still thought of it as the "Great Pyramid" even though he knew that it wasn't—rose geometrically up into an apex that was nearly 500 feet above the ground. To his left, the lesser pyramids stood, and to his right crouched the Sphinx.

Despite himself, he was struck by her beauty—awed, almost. She had a silvery cast in the starlgith. Her flanks rose up like smooth escarpments to the magnificent ridge of her back. Her noble head hid half a hundred stars. The cliff of her classic profile was a splendid silhouette against the sky.

Hall walked toward her in the starlight. He had been impressed by the Great Sphinx of the Gizeh Necropolis. Even in its state of disrepair there was a mysterious quality about it that he had found appealing, a massive grace that had intrigued him. But compared to his sphinx the one of the Gizeh Necropolis was nothing more than a crudely sculptured rocky promontory reinforced with masonry. Stone was all it had ever been and stone was all it could ever be. This sphinx was art apotheosized. No wonder in his dazed and weakened state of a few hours ago he had invested her with life. Even now, thinking clearly again, he felt that at any moment she would rise and walk beneath the stars.

What had happened to the race of people who had sculptured her? Hall wondered. To the race of people who had built the three pyramids over which she was standing guard? Did that same race of people have something to do with the building of the Egyptian pyramids? Did—

Nothing happened to the race of people who built the pyramids, Daniel Hall. And nothing is going to happen to them if they can help it.

As the words formed themselves in his mind, he saw that the Brobdingnagian head was turning toward him. Simultaneously he realized that, far from being inanimate, the massive leonine body was

rampant with life. At length, the mysterious eyes met his and regarded him like a pair of intelligent golden suns. He stood stark still in the starlight, a statue now himself.

In the final analysis there was no reason why a sphinx couldn't be alive. Statues were sculptured of men, too, but this did not mean that men were made of stone.

Even the poor Egyptian child who dressed your wound in the Temple of Hathor is less anthropocentric than you are, Daniel Hall. She realized I was alive the moment she saw me. And yet you allowed yourself to know resentment simply because her thought world ruled out the possibility of your being her equal, thereby forcing her to think of you as a slave. For shame, Daniel Hall!

"And now what happens?" Hall asked, half in cynicism, half in fear. "Are you going to devour me?"

There, your anthropocentric nature is influencing you again! You think that merely because a being is larger than you are, it must be evil. And the larger it is, the more evil it becomes in your mind, and the more partial to human flesh. No, I'm not going to devour you, Daniel Hall—it is you and your kind who are going to devour me and my sisters. That is, you would be going to devour us if we hadn't taken the necessary steps to prevent you from doing so, although the possibility exists that you may still succeed. You are on the verge of devouring us, not because you want to at the moment, but because you haven't bothered to find out whether or not we exist.

“That’s not true!" Hall objected. "I was sent here myself to find out!"

And so was one of the members of the Uvelian forces. But even if either or both of you were able to report your respective findings to your respective headquarters the battle would still take place, and you know it. Incidentally, it's unnecessary for you to speak, to say nothing of shout. I can receive thoughts as well as send them.

It was you who seized our controls then—who—who caused us to crash.

It was I who seized your controls and caused you to crash, Daniel Hall. My sister in the neighboring demesne took care of your opponent. If our project is successful, we will need both of you. However, although I caused you to crash, Daniel Hall, I had no intention of causing you bodily injury. Small details are beyond the scope of our telekinesis. But I see that thanks to the skillful ministrations of Ahura, you've fully recovered.

Ahura?

The little Egyptian princess whom you were so rude to a few minutes ago in the Temple of Hathor.

She's no more of an Egyptian princess than you are! Hall "said." *Egypt was consolidated with the Union of Terran States over a hundred years ago when the capital was built at Kafr el Haram, and couldn't recognize a princess even if she wanted to.* Egyptian princesses were out of style long before that time anyway.

But millennia ago, they were not. Ahura wasn't lying to you–she really is Cheops' daughter.

But don't you see?–that's more incredible yet! Cheops' daughter has been dead for over five thousand years!

No, said the Sphinx, *Cheops' daughter is very much alive. However, until yesterday she had been unaware of the fact for quite some time. Not long after I arrived on your planet some fifty-two hundred of your years ago and instituted the project my sisters and I had agreed upon, it came to my attention that in his zeal to see his sepulcher erected Cheops had placed her in the stews. Since I had told him that if he would put all of the resources of his kingdom at my disposal the first pyramid would be his, I felt responsible for his action; and, as I had intended to take back someone like Ahura anyway, I stole her from the stews, placed her in suspended animation, built a special capsule for her, and had one of my sisters come and get her. She was then entombed in a special vault on Pornos–NRGC 984-D to you, Daniel Hall–until such time as I should have need of her. Two days ago I brought her here, dressed her in clothing similar to what she was accustomed to, placed her in the Temple of Hathor, and revived her. Ahura is not her real name, incidentally. She thinks of her ordeal in the stews as having happened only a few days ago and has unconsciously taken the first step toward creating a new identity. I interceded in time, but the*

experience left its mark just the same.

Drowning, Hall grabbed for the first straw he saw. *But according to Herodotus, she stayed in the stews for a long time, and also according to Herodotus, she made each of the patrons pay off with a building block for a small pyramid which she later built in front of her father's.*

Come now, Daniel Hall, you aren't even convinced of that yourself. You simultaneously think of Herodotus as the "Father of History" and as the "Father of Lies." However, as his Egyptian history can't possibly be anything more than recorded hearsay, he can't have been deliberately lying in this case. Probably he merely repeated the myths which the generations that followed the fourth dynasty dreamed up to supplement their knowledge of Cheops, Chephren, and Mykerinos. In any event, what he wrote about Ahura is untrue.

Hall had already forgotten Ahura. *You said you arrived on Earth fifty-two hundred years ago. That means you're over five thousand years old!*

Right, said the Sphinx. *Even older if you count my incubation period, which you really should in view of the fact that members of my race mature before they even see the light of day. Altogether, we have a longevity of some fifteen thousand years–your years, that is. So you see, I've still got quite a few to go–or will have if the preventive measures my sisters and I have taken succeed in averting the Armageddon which the Terran and Uvelian space navies are so determined to bring off in our skies. Her golden eyes traversed the heavens, returned to Hall. No Pleiades yet, I see. Well, there will be soon. Incidentally, I stole the expression from your mind, Daniel Hall.*

"Pleiades" was the term used by ground observers to describe a space fleet in planetary orbit. But at the moment Hall was concerned with more important matters than Terran war terminology. *You and your sisters– you're parthenogenetic, aren't you?* he said.

Right again, Daniel Hall

And does each of your sisters have a set of pyramids like these?

Not all of them, no–only those who have need for them at the moment.

Who built them for you?

We built them ourselves–not as a team, but as individuals. I myself built the set at Gizeh.

Come off it! Hall said. *How could you build a pyramid.*

I have spread my left forefoot. Look at it, Daniel Hall, and tell me what you see.

Hall looked. *I—I see, he said a long time later, a set of five powerful appendages. Two of them–the ones which correspond to my thumb and forefinger–appear to be some manner of gripping tools. The next one appears to be a stone-cutting tool, and the last two appear to be tools that can be adapted for almost any kind of work.*

Good. Basically, my sisters and I are equipped for quarrying and building, but through the ages our race extended its abilities to encompass innumerable other fields. The stone used in the set of pyramids behind you, I quarried in the mountains that form the western boundary of my dhen–or demesne; hence, transportation was no problem. Owing to the distribution of our dhens, it rarely is on our planet. However, the stone used in the Gizeh pyramids in many instances had to be quarried in neighboring countries; hence, transportation was a problem, and I had to enlist the aid of the reigning pharaohs. It's doubtful whether I could have succeeded without their co-operation in any case. The job took almost one hundred and fifty of their years–practically the whole of the fourth dynasty. It needn't have taken that long, but the timing had to be perfect, and besides, I wanted it to look as though mankind alone were responsible for it. The first pyramid became Cheops', the next, Chephren's, and the last, Mykerinos'.

But why did you build them on Earth?

My sisters and I have the ability to look into the future. It's a limited ability and functions only when we're enjoying complete freedom from fear and worry, but when we do foresee, we foresee quite well. Some fifty-two hundred of your years ago, Daniel Hall, one of my sisters foresaw the converging of the Terran and Uvelian fleets of Pornos and realized that our planet couldn't possibly survive the side effects of the battle that was bound to take place. She also foresaw the appearance of your scout ship and the almost simultaneous appearance of the Uvelian's. In

keeping with our custom she convened an emergency council, and the situation was examined in detail. Finally the only possible solution was arrived at, and two of us were chosen, one to go to Earth and one to go to Uvel, there to take the necessary steps to save our civilization. I was the one who was chosen to go to Earth, and my sister in the neighboring dhen was the one who was chosen to go to Uvel. The strategic location of our dhens with respect to the predicted appearance of you and the Uvelian scout was partially responsible for the decision.

Well you certainly put a stop to our hostilities in a hurry. How about the battle between the two fleets? Won't that come off either?

We hope it won't. In any case, all that could have been done to avert it has been done–short of stooping to genocide and short of prematurely interfering with the natural evolution of two civilizations.

But surely if this sister of yours could look fifty-two hundred years ahead one of the rest of you ought to have been able to look a little beyond that point and have found out whether or not you're going to succeed!

I told you, Daniel Hall, that we're capable of prescience only when we're enjoying complete freedom from fear and worry. We haven't been free from either for those same fifty-two hundred years.

Hall was "silent" for some time. Then, *I'll overlook for the moment how a being of your size without any apparent means of space-travel could have journeyed from here to Earth, he said, and I'll also overlook for the moment how your presence on our planet escaped being recorded in our history other than in legend form. But will you please explain to me how you expected to avert a battle in the vicinity of your own planet by building pyramids on another planet thousands of years before the battle was to begin?*

Two other planets, Daniel Hall. While I was building the set on Earth, my sister in the neighboring dhen was building a corresponding set on Uvel.

All fright, two other planets then. But that still doesn't answer my question. Does the shape and the size and the location of the Gizeh pyramids have any thing to do with it? I mean, could they possibly be a focal point for some kind of fourth-dimensional weapon?

The Sphinx laughed thunderously. *The shape and the size and the location of the pyramids have a great deal to do with it, Daniel Hall–but not in the way you suggest. The riddle will become clear to you before the night is over, I'm sure. The other two items that puzzle you may not, however, so I will clear them up for you now.*

My sisters and I navigate space by teleporting ourselves through it. We do this by utilizing a paraspatial energy-source which can be employed only when interstellar distances are involved. However, we can't teleport ourselves from point A to point B unless the cosmic variables pertinent to the two points are in appropriate relationship, and this severely limits our activities. And when the need arises, as it did in the case in question, for one of us to teleport herself from point A to point B and another of us to teleport herself from point A to point C within a single teleportative period, the cosmic variables are doubly limiting. Fifty-two hundred of your years ago, the cosmic variables with respect to Pornos-Earth and Pornos-Uvel limited us to a period of three hundred years. Following this three-hundred year teleportative period was a twelve-hundred year non-teleportative period, which in turn was followed by another three-hundred year teleportative period, and so on. Ideally, one of the three-hundred year teleportative periods should have partially coincided with the three centuries immediately preceding the battle we wished to avert; practically, however, none of them did, and as a result we had to pursue an indirect course in averting our planet's accidental annihilation. Fortunately, the first three-hundred year teleportative period proved feasible for the plan which we presently devised.

With respect to the second point that puzzles you, Daniel Hall, the reason my presence on your planet failed to find an authentic place for itself in your history books was that I took the necessary action to make sure that it didn't. My sisters and I simply couldn't allow you to know enough about us to take us seriously because if you had, you might have guessed our secret, and

that would have meant the end of our plan–not to mention the end of us. So before I left your planet, I wiped all memory of my activities from the minds of men. This automatically gave Cheops, Chephren, and Mykerinos exclusive credit for the building of the three pyramids at Gizeh. However, memory eradication is only ninety-five percent effective, and while the pharaohs and the priests and the slaves and everybody else forgot about my activities, they didn't quite forget about me. I suspected as much but I wasn't sure until this afternoon when I read your mind while I was carrying you to Ahura. Fortunately, their memory of me was ambiguous at best, and although they associated me with the Gizeh pyramids, it simply didn't occur to them that I might have built them. So they adapted me to their religious needs of the moment and sculptured a statue of me in the Gizeh Necropolis, identifying me with the Harmachis version of their sun-god, Amen-Ra. Their other "sphinxes," as you call them, can undoubtedly be traced to me also, and the non-Gizeh pyramids with which Egypt abounds were undoubtedly modeled after mine, although before the reign of Cheops an architect named Imhotep had devised a "step pyramid" that may very well have resulted in similar structures. As for the non-Egyptian pyramids and "sphinxes" which are scattered over your planet, some of them can be traced to me also, but I daresay that in most cases they have religio-socio backgrounds of their own. In any event, the only pyramids I built on Earth are the ones on the Gizeh plateau. My sister, you see, foresaw not only the Terran-Uvelian Armageddon but also the future sites of the Terran and Uvelian capitals.

And your other sister, Hall said. *The one who went to Uvel when you went to Earth. You say she built a set of pyramids too?*

Exactly like my Gizeh set. In addition to looking and acting alike, Terrans and Uvelians have almost parallel pasts. In a general sense of course.

The Sphinx had turned her head and was looking at a region of the heavens just above the eastern horizon. Following her gaze, Hall saw the first group of Pleiades rising into the sky. The distance was such that only the dreadnoughts attained the status of "stars." The thousands of smaller craft were invisible.

He counted six bright points of light, but the number told him nothing. Both the Terran and Uvelian fleets had six major vessels. Facing west, he was not surprised to see the second six climbing slowly above the mountains. *Looks like we're going to get a good view of the proceedings anyway, he said. Just the same, I wish they were meeting above the dayside. That way, we might stand a chance.*

Not enough of a one to worry about . . . You don't even know which fleet is yours, do you, Daniel Hall?

I'm better off not knowing.

Yes, I suppose you are. The Sphinx was "silent" for a moment. Then, *Don't you think it would be a good idea if you went to Ahura and lent her one of your broad shoulders to lean on?* she asked. *She's going to need it. There's no terror that can compare to the fear of the unknown.*

Hall was annoyed. *Surely you could have briefed her on what's coming off!*

Again, the Sphinx laughed. *Tell me, Daniel Hall, how do you explain a battle between two huge space navies to a child who visualizes the creation of the universe as a trio of anthropomorphic deities in the midst of a fantastic hand-balancing act? As Shu the air supporting his sister, Nut the sky, with their brother, Keb the Earth, lying beneath them. I did well in the little time I had since reviving her to supplant her native tongue with yours.*

I see your point, Hall said. *Nevertheless, it can be done.*

And it will be done. But not in hours, Daniel Hall, nor in days nor weeks nor months, and not by me, but by you. Ahura has an excellent mind, and given time she can learn all you can teach her, and then some. And with the aid of the special textbooks and other teaching aids contained in the first step of the smallest pyramid there's no limit to what you can teach her—nor to what you can teach yourself

Wait a minute, Hall objected. *Even assuming I decide to cooperate in this project of yours, how am I going to make use of textbooks I can't read and that are probably too big for me to open?*

The textbooks are printed in APE and are no larger than those you are accustomed to. My

sisters and I have had thousands of years to prepare for this crucial point in our history, Daniel Hall, and we've prepared for it well. However, at this juncture it's futile to discuss what you are or aren't going to do. The battle hasn't been averted yet, and there's a good chance that it may not be. If it is averted, come to me afterward. In the meantime, go to Ahura. You can take shelter in the Temple of Hathor if you wish, but I guess you know as well as I do that without a system of deflectors to protect you, the death rays of either fleet can reach you regardless of where you are.

Hall looked up into the mysterious golden eyes. Was there sadness there? Concern? He could not tell. *And if the battle isn't averted?*

Then this is good-bye. I have enjoyed knowing you, Daniel Hall. Basically, your race and mine are very much alike. Certainly, we share the same major character trait, and moreover we share it in common with the Uvelians. It's only in the matter of terminology that we differ. My sisters and I call the trait "selfishness," and your race and the Uvelian call it "patriotism." It's right for a man to love his country, but he should never forget that his country is only an extension of himself and that the intensity of his love for it is an infallible index of the intensity of his love for himself We can't change the way we are, but it helps the cause of reason if we face the truth. Go now, Daniel Hall—Ahura awaits you.

Ahura's Tale

Ahura was sitting on the bottom portico step. Hall sat down beside her. "Behold, I am here," he said.

She said, "Behold, I am aware of it."

Her almond eyes were fixed on the eastern Pleiades, which by now were quite high above the horizon. In the starlight, her classic face had a statuesque quality about it. At length, she lowered her gaze to his face. "I will prepare thee food if thou wish."

"Later on—I'm not hungry right now."

"I did not make thee the offer out of my heart. I made it because She-who-builds-sepulchers desired me to do this for you."

"That's all right," Hall said easily. "You probably can't even boil water anyway."

She looked at him. "Thou speakest in riddles, slave."

"The name is 'Daniel'," Hall said, "and you'll do well to call me by it. A cog in one of the wheels of the Terran war machine I may be, but a slave I am not."

"Dan'el?"

"That's pretty close."

"I am `Ahura'—as no doubt She-who-builds-sepulchers hath told thee."

"Among other things. Incidentally, I've got a hunch she's tuned in on us now."

"She-who-builds-sepulchers is all-knowing," Ahura said. And then, "With thy strange garments and thy uncouth ways, from what far land dolt thou come, Dan'el?"

"From a land you've never heard of, so the less said about it, the better." Noting that she had returned her gaze to the eastern Pleiades, he pointed to the sky above the mountains. "There's another swarm of them over there," he said.

She nodded. "I know. But the sky hath donned a strange dress. It is even stranger than the dress she wore last night."

Ahura raised her eyes to the crocodile constellation within whose confines, if the present trajectories of the two fleets remained unchanged, the encounter would take place. "Behold, Sebek hath left the river bottom and now rules the world. All is not well, Dan'el."

Hall remembered then that the ancient Egyptians had numbered a crocodile god among their many deities. Lowering his eyes, he saw that the girl's hands were tightly clasped together on her lap, and he realized that despite her deceptively calm demeanor she was terrified. Apparently in her primitive way she knew as well as he did that the hand of death was in the sky.

He tried to reassure her. "Sebek will be gone before morning, and Amen-Ra will rise in his glory.

Relax, Ahura."

She shook her head. "All is not well, Dan'el," she repeated. "It is not the presence of Sebek alone from which I know this. All day, a tale about a prince which was told to me as a child hath been on my mind, and I cannot drive it away, and from this, too, I know that all is not well."

"The best way to get something off your mind is to tell it to someone, so why not tell the tale to me?"

She looked at him solemnly, as though trying to make up her mind. It dawned on him all of a sudden that in a way he had never quite figured on, she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. "Very well," she said presently, "I will tell thee. There was once a king to whom no son was born; and his heart was grieved, and he prayed for himself unto the gods around him for a child. They decreed that one should be born to him. And his wife, after her time was fulfilled, brought forth a son. Then came the Hathors to decree for him a destiny; they said, 'His death is to be by the crocodile, or by the serpent, or by the dog.' Then his Majesty's heart sickened very greatly. And his Majesty caused a house to be built upon the desert; it was furnished with people and with all good things of the royal house, that the child should not go abroad. And when the child was grown, he went up upon the roof, and he saw a dog; it was following a man who was walking on the road. He spoke to his page, who was with him, 'What is this that walks behind the man?' The page answered him, 'This is a dog.' The child said to him, 'Let there be brought to me one like it.' The page went to repeat it to his Majesty. And his Majesty said, 'Let there be brought to him a little pet dog, lest his heart be sad.' And behold they brought him a dog."

"You see the significance there don't you?" Hall interrupted. "By being indulgent in the seemingly most harmless aspect of his son's destiny, the father made him all the more vulnerable to the other two."

There was wonderment in Ahura's golden brown eyes as they touched his. "Thou art wise, Dan'el," she said. "I am sorry I called thee a slave. When the child became grown in all his limbs," she went on, "he sent a message to his father saying, 'Come, wherefore am I kept here? Inasmuch as I am fated to three evil fates, let me follow my desire.' They agreed to all he said, and gave him all sorts of arms, and also his dog to follow him, and they took him to the east country, and said to him, 'Behold, go thou whither thou wilt.' His dog was with him, and he went northward, following his heart in the desert, while he lived on all the best of the game of the desert. He went to the chief of Naharaina.

"And behold there had not been any born to the chief of Naharaina, except one daughter. Behold, there had been built for her a house; its seventy windows were seventy cubits from the ground. And the chief had caused to be brought all the sons of the chiefs of the land, and had said to them, 'He who reaches the window of my daughter, she shall be to him for a wife.'

"Seeing the youths climbing for the window, the young prince asked, 'What is it that ye do here?' They told him, and another day the sons of the chief came to climb, and the youth came to climb with them. He climbed, and he reached the window of the daughter of the chief of Naharaina. She kissed him, she embraced him in all his limbs . . . . "

Ahura's eyes had strayed to the sky again—to the western Pleiades this time. Their "rise" was slightly slower than that of the eastern Pleiades, owing perhaps to the fact that the former's course coincided with NRGC 984-D's rotational direction, or perhaps to their commander's disinclination to rush matters. Nevertheless, it was evident that the forthcoming battle would take place in the center of NRGC 984-D's heavens—"in" the constellation of the crocodile.

Which were the good guys and which were the bad? Hall wondered. Certainly, their ideological differences weren't apparent at this distance. Would the differences be apparent to an objective observer such as the Sphinx from *any* distance?

Hall grinned wryly. Ahura was twining and untwining her fingers on her lap, and a barely perceptible quivering was going on in her lower lip. He moved a little closer to her, wanting to put his arm around her but not quite daring to. "Get on with your story," he said. "You left me hanging on a cliff seventy cubits high."

Her bewilderment would have been comical under less trying conditions. "Thou speakest in riddles, Dan'el. In many ways thou art like She-who-builds-sepulchers. But I will tell thee the rest of the tale.

"When the chief of Naharaina saw that the young prince had indeed reached the window of his daughter, he gave to him his daughter to wife; he gave also to him a house, and serfs, and fields, also

cattle and all manner of good things. And after the days of these things were passed, the youth said to his wife, 'I am doomed to three fates—a crocodile, a serpent, and a dog.' She said to him, 'Let one kill the dog which belongs to thee.' He replied to her, 'I am not going to kill my dog, which I have brought up from when it was small.' And she feared greatly for her husband, and would not let him go alone abroad.

"And one went with the youth toward the land of Egypt, to travel in that country, and with him also went his dog. Behold the crocodile of the river, he came out by the town in which the youth was. And in that town was a mighty man. And the mighty man would not suffer the crocodile to escape. And when the crocodile was bound, the mighty man went out and walked abroad. And when the sun rose the mighty man went back to the house; and he did so every day, during two months of days.

"Now when the days passed after this, the youth sat making a good day in his house. And when the evening came, he lay down on his bed, sleep seized upon his limbs; and his wife filled a bowl of milk, and placed it by his side. Behold the dog, it entereth into the house, and behind it came a serpent to bite the youth; behold his wife sitting by him, she lay not down. Thereupon the servants gave milk to the serpent, and he drank, and was drunk, and lay upside down. Then his wife made it to perish with the blows of her dagger. And they woke her husband, who was astonished; and she said unto him: 'Behold thy God has given one of thy dooms into thy hand; he will also give thee the others.' And he sacrificed to God, adoring him, and praising his spirits from day to day.

"And when the days were passed after these things, the youth went to walk in the fields of his domain. He went not alone, behold his dog was following him. And his dog ran aside after the wild game, and he followed the dog. He came to the river, and entered the river behind his dog. Then—"

Abruptly Ahura paused as a beam of blinding light leaped from the eastern to the western Pleiades, glanced from a deflector screen and lanced through NRGC 984-D's atmosphere, narrowly missing the mountains that formed the western boundary of the Sphinx's demesne. The Sphinx, silhouetted darkly against the eastern heavens, did not move.

Trembling, the girl raised her hands and pressed them tightly against her mouth. "It's all right," Hall said, "scream if you want to. No one ever had a better right to."

Another blinding beam—this one from the western Pleiades—speared the heavens, ricocheted from an enemy deflector, and arrowed off into deep space. The law of averages made it an even bet that the next one would strike NRGC 984-D dead center, gouge a crater two thousand miles deep, and precipitate a tectonic revolution. It was also an even bet that the tectonic revolution would give birth to a series of others and that the accompanying seismic and volcanic activity would alter every fact of NRGC 984-D's surface features and in the process destroy every living being on the planet.

"The object of the game," Hall went on, momentarily forgetting that his audience hailed from the twenty-ninth century B.C., "is for one fleet to penetrate the deflector screens of the other. This isn't as impossible as it sounds. Deflector screens utilize a rhythmic frequency, and the trick is to hit them on the offbeat. Vulnerable as they are, though, they provide considerable protection, and I'd give my eyeteeth to have one over us right now. Well no, I'll qualify that: I'd give my eyeteeth to have one over us right now if it weren't for the fact that they won't function except in a vacuum."

Ahura's hands were still pressed tightly against her mouth, and she was rocking gently back and forth. "I do not understand thee, Dan'el," she moaned. "I understand only that Sebek is greatly displeased and that Keb the Earth is in danger."

"You understand far more than that, Ahura. As a matter of fact, in your own way you know as much about what is happening as I do. You know that mankind is about to destroy himself because of his dog—his selfishness. That's why you can't get the story of the doomed prince out of your mind. The doomed prince is mankind, Ahura, only he isn't quite doomed. There's still hope for him. There's still hope for you and me—and She-who-builds-sepulchers. Tell me the rest of it, Ahura."

She had stopped rocking back and forth, and now she returned her hands to her lap. "There is but little left to tell thee, Dan'el. After the prince entered the river behind his dog there came out the crocodile, and took him to the place where the mighty man was. And the crocodile said to the prince, 'I am thy doom, following after thee.'* (*Ahura's tale is an adaption of the Egyptian story, "The Doomed Prince".) And there endeth the tale."

"So actually," Hall said, "we don't know for certain whether the crocodile got him or not. He may very well have escaped it in the end."

"Yes, but there is still the dog, Dan'el."

"There will always be the dog. But maybe by recognizing it for what it really is we can curtail its activities." He looked at the sky, gasped. "Ahura, look! they're going away!"

She, too, was staring at the Pleiades. They were rapidly fading from sight, one set of them into the eastern reaches of the heavens, the other set into the western reaches. Abruptly, one set winked out as its hyperdrives went into effect. A moment later, the other followed suit. "Did—did we escape the crocodile, Dan'el?"

Hall hugged her. "We sure did and all of a sudden I'm as hungry as a horse. Does that offer you made a little while ago still stand?"

She slipped free from his arms, not haughtily, but hesitantly, as though she weren't quite sure whether she wanted to be free or not. "I will prepare thee a feast fit for a king," she said. "Come."

The Ambassadors

Well, said the Sphinx, *it looks as though you two are going to live happily together ever after, after all, as they say in your planet's folklore. Where's Ahura now? I broke contact with you after you went into the Temple of Love.*

She's tidying up the kitchen, Hall answered gazing up into the starlit Brobdingnagian face. *Incidentally, I was right when I told her that she probably could not even boil water. Would you believe it?— I had to show her how!*

But she learned readily enough, did she not? You'll find her equally as receptive when you begin teaching her full time.

Who said I was going to teach her at all? And while we're on the subject, just what am I supposed to teach her, and why?

Everything you can. As to why, it would be rather impractical for you not to, don't you think, in view of the fact that you and she are going to be representing my sisters and myself on Earth in the negotiating of a million-year peace treaty between Pornos, Earth, and Uvel? Meanwhile, the Uvellian scout whom my sister in the neighboring dhen captured will be similarly engaged on Uvel.

Hall was thunderstruck. *So that's what you've got up your sleeve! But whatever gave you the idea that I'd make a good ambassador?*

It was a gamble, Daniel Hall, but it paid off You haven't a great deal of diplomacy, but I can teach you diplomacy. The really important attributes, you already have. You have intelligence, and you are brave. Underneath your flippant exterior you are kind and gentle, but you can be firm wizen the occasion demands. Most important of all, you have motivation. Ever since you played a part in the destruction of the Deimos Dissenters you've hated war and everything it stands for. With someone like Ahura working at your side, there's no limit to what you can accomplish in the cause of peace, Daniel Hall. As man and wife, the two of you will—

"Wait a minute!" Hall interrupted. "You're carrying this thing too far!"

Come now, Daniel Hall, you're half in love with her already, and you know it. And you might as well know, too, that she's already half in love with you. I not only "heard" everything both of you said, I also experienced everything both of you felt. My sister in the next demesne "tells" me that her scout and her princess hit it off well, too.

Her princess?

She brought a princess back from Uvel just as I brought one back from Earth. We're going to arrange a double wedding ceremony that will comply with the customs of the four different religions which will be represented. I myself have been chosen to do the officiating. This will in no way conflict with the religions of the two princesses, and I'm sure that both you and the Uvelian scout are sufficiently sophisticated in such matters not to raise any objections. I've already built

you and Ahura a love nest in my largest pyramid—not altogether authentic as regards her background, but authentic enough to satisfy her—and modern enough to satisfy you, as you will see presently when Ahura's educations permits her to take such "miracles" as electricity and hot and cold-running water in her stride.

Hall threw up his hands. *All right, we'll let all that pass for the moment. Right now, suppose you drop that deep and mysterious mien of yours and break down and tell me how you managed to put a stop to the greatest space battle ever contemplated and to put two of the mightiest space armadas ever assembled to rout?*

The Sphinx laughed, softly this time. *You already know part of the answer, Daniel Hall. You know that we're parthenogenetic. You know that we build pyramids—or what you think of as pyramids. And you know that some of your legends depict us with wings. How do you account for that, Daniel Hall? Why should we be depicted with wings when we don't have any and never did?*

The truth dawned on Hall then. "You lay eggs!" he gasped.

We do indeed. And we incubate them in inviolable capsules that lend the illusion of invisibility. These capsules are placed just beneath the apexes of the structures that you call "pyramids" but which we call "nests." Originally, we did this out of instinct alone; now, we do it out of knowledge as well. Owing to the length of the incubation period–some fifty-two hundred of your years–nests of this kind are ideal for the survival of our species. They provide protection, they provide warmth, they—

But no egg could possibly contain enough nutrients to nourish an embryo for fifty-two hundred years! Hall objected.

Of course it couldn't. My race obtains ninety-five percent of its nutrition from the sun, Daniel Hall, and your sun is an even better provider than ours is. I may seem to consist of flesh and blood, but I don't–at least not in the sense that you do.

And do you always build three nests of three different sizes?

Always. Our eggs are three in number and our offspring vary in size. Not very much, but enough to necessitate larger or smaller incubation areas. Now that the eggs which I incubated on the Gizeh plateau have hatched, I'm due to procreate again; consequently, I've built three new nests. When the time arrives, I'll remove the as-yet-unsealed apexes, place the eggs in the capsules, which are already in position, and seal the apexes over them.

I can anticipate your next question, Daniel Hall, so there's no need for you to ask it. Incubation time never varies, and can be computed to the second, and the main reason I and my sister in the neighboring dhen were chosen for the job was that our procreation times were compatible with the Terran and Uvelian time periods that had to be used. At the end of the incubation period an adult rather than a child emerges from the nest. Physically, she's only partially grown, but mentally, she's completely mature, having inherited the parent's knowledge and abilities, plus a sizeable quantity of the parent's judgment. As a result, she's perfectly capable of carrying out whatever commands the parent may have implanted in her embryo-mind at the beginning of incubation. In the case of my Gizeh offspring, the commands which I implanted were three in number: Take over the Terran capital of Kafr el Haran, establish immediate contact with the Terran Space Navy and order all of its units to return to base at once; then retain control of the Terran government until otherwise advised. *The commands which my sister implanted in her offspring were basically the same, and her three offspring carried out the Uvel end of the operation at roughly the same time mine were carrying out the Terran end of it. Consequently, both governments are now under the dominion of Pornos, and moreover they will remain under the dominion of Pornos until such time as the million-year peace treaty is signed. Since my sister just notified me that her scout has already agreed to co-operate, the fate of the long-range aspect of our plan is now in your hands, Daniel Hall.*

Hall sighed. *Oh, I'll go along with you, I suppose–I'd be pretty much of a heel if I didn't. But before we get down to brass tacks how about relieving my mind on a certain little matter? Granted, I'm half in love with Ahura, and maybe she's half in love with me as you say, but there*

has to be more to it than that for marriage to work. Now that the crisis is past, how about taking a peek a little ways into the future and finding out whether Ahura and I are going to hit it off the way a married couple should?

I'll try, Daniel Hall, said the Sphinx. She looked straight ahead, and Hall could tell from the serious expression on her face that she was concentrating with all her might. A few minutes passed. Then the Sphinx turned to him and winked.

Thirty Days Had September

The sign in the window said: SCHOOLTEACHER FOR SALE, DIRT CHEAP; and, in small letters: CAN COOK, SEW, AND IS HANDY AROUND THE HOUSE.

She made Danby think of desks and erasers and autumn leaves; of books and dreams and laughter. The proprietor of the little second-hand store had adorned her with a gay-colored dress and had slipped little red sandals on her feet, and she stood in her upright case in the window like a life-size doll waiting for someone to bring her to life.

Danby tried to move on down the spring street to the parking lot where he kept his Baby Buick. Laura probably had his supper all dialed and waiting on the table for him and she would be furious if he was late. But he went right on standing where he was, tall and thin, his youth not quite behind him, still lingering in his brown, wistful eyes, showing faintly in the softness of his cheeks.

His inertia annoyed him. He'd passed the store a thousand times on his way from the parking lot to his office and on his way from his office to the parking lot, but this was the first time he'd ever stopped and looked in the window.

But wasn't this the first time the window had ever contained something that he wanted?

Danby tried to face the question. Did he *want* a schoolteacher? Well, hardly. But Laura certainly needed someone to help her with the housework, and they couldn't afford an automatic maid, and Billy certainly could stand some extra-TV tutoring, with the boxtop tests coming up, and—

And—and her hair made him think of September sunlight, her face, of a September day. A September mist settled around him, and all of a sudden his inertia left him and he began to walk—but not in the direction he had intended to go …

"How much is the schoolteacher in the window?" he asked.

Antiques of every description were scattered about the interior of the store. The proprietor was a little old man with bushy white hair and gingerbread eyes. He looked like an antique himself.

He beamed at Danby's question. "You like her, sir? She's very lovely."

Danby's face felt warm. "How much?" he repeated.

"Forty-nine ninety-five, plus five dollars for the case."

Danby could hardly believe it. With schoolteachers so rare, you'd think the price would go up, not down. And yet, less than a year ago, when he'd been thinking of buying a rebuilt third-grade teacher to help Billy with his TV-schoolwork, the lowest-priced one he could find had run well over a hundred dollars. He would have bought her even at that, though, if Laura hadn't talked him out of it. Laura had never gone to realschool and didn't understand.

But forty-nine ninety-five! And she could cook and sew, too! Surely Laura wouldn't try to talk him out of buying this one—

She definitely wouldn't if he didn't give her the chance.

"Is—is she in good condition?"

The proprietor's face grew pained. "She's been completely overhauled, sir. Brand new batteries, brand new motors. Her tapes are good for another ten years yet, and her memory banks will probably last forever. Here, I'll bring her in and show you."

The case was mounted on castors, but it was awkward to handle. Danby helped the old man push it out of the window and into the store. They stood it by the door where the light was brightest.

The old man stepped back admiringly. "Maybe I'm old-fashioned," he said, "but I still say that teleteachers will never compare to the real thing. You went to realschool, didn't you, sir?"

Danby nodded.

"I thought so. Funny the way you can always tell."

"Turn her on, please," Danby said.

The activator was a tiny button, hidden behind the left ear lobe. The proprietor fumbled for a moment before he found it; then there was a little *click!,* followed by a soft, almost inaudible, purring sound. Presently, color crept into the cheeks, the breast began to rise and fall; blue eyes opened—

Danby's fingernails were digging into the palms of his hands. "Make her say something."

"She responds to almost everything, sir," the old man said. "Words, scenes, situations … If you decide to take her and aren't satisfied, bring her back and I'll be glad to refund your money." He faced the case "What is your name?" he asked.

"Miss Jones." Her voice was a September wind.

"Your occupation?"

"Specifically, I'm a fourth-grade teacher, sir, but I can substitute for first, second, third, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, and I'm well-grounded in the humanities. Also, I'm proficient in household chores, am a qualified cook, and can perform simple tasks, such as sewing on buttons, darning socks, and repairing rips and tears in clothing."

"They put a lot of extras in the later models," the old man said in an aside to Danby. "When they finally realized that teleducation was here to stay, they started doing everything they could to beat the cereal companies. But it didn't do any good." Then: "Step outside your case, Miss Jones. Show us how nice you walk."

She walked once around the drab room, her little red sandals twinkling over the dusty floor, her dress a gay little rainfall of color. Then she returned and stood waiting by the door.

Danby found it difficult to talk. "All right," he said finally. "Put her back in her case. I'll take her."

***

"Something for me, Dad?" Billy shouted. "Something for me?"

"Sure thing," Danby said, trundling the case up the walk and lifting it onto the diminutive front porch. "For your mother, too."

"Whatever it is, it better be good," Laura said, arms folded in the doorway. "Supper's stone cold."

"You can warm it up," Danby said. "Watch out, Billy!"

He lifted the case over the threshold, breathing a little hard, and shoved it down the short hall and into the living room. The living room was preempted by a pink-coated pitchman who had invited himself in via the 120" screen and who was loudly proclaiming the superiority of the new 2061 Lincolnette convertible.

"Be careful of the rug!" Laura said.

"Don't get excited, I'm not going to hurt your rug," Danby said. "And will somebody please turn off TV so we can hear ourselves think!"

"I'll turn it off, Dad." Billy made nine-year-old strides across the room and killed the pitchman, pink coat and all.

Danby fumbled with the cover of the case, aware of Laura's breath on the back of his neck. "A schoolteacher!" she gasped, when it finally came open. "Of all the things for a grown man to bring home to his wife! A schoolteacher."

"She's not an ordinary schoolteacher," Danby said. "She can cook, she can sew, she—she can do just about anything. You're always saying you need a maid. Well, now you've got one. And Billy's got someone to help him with his TV-lessons."

"How much?" For the first time Danby realized what a narrow face his wife had.

"Forty-nine ninety-five."

"Forty-nine ninety-five! George, are you crazy? Here I've been saving our money so we could turn in our Baby B. for a new Cadillette, and you go throwing it away on an old broken-down schoolteacher. What does *she* know about teleducation? Why, she's fifty years behind the times!"

"She's not going to help *me* with *my* TV-lessons!" Billy said, glowering at the case. "My TV-teacher said those old android teachers weren't good for anything. They—they used to *hit* kids!"

"They did not!" Danby said. "And I should know, because I went to realschool all the way to the eighth grade." He turned to Laura. "And she's not broken down, either, and she's not fifty years behind the times, and she knows more about *real* education than your teleteachers ever will! And like I said, she can sew, she can cook—"

"Well, tell her to warm up our supper then!"

"I will!"

He reached into the case, depressed the little activator button, and, when the blue eyes opened, said: "Come with me, Miss Jones," and led her into the kitchen.

He was delighted at the way she responded to his instructions as to which buttons to push, which levers to raise and lower, which indicators to point at which numerals— Supper was off the table in a jiffy and back on again in the wink of an eye, all warm and steaming and delectable.

Even Laura was mollified. "Well …," she said.

"Well, I guess!" Danby said. "I said she could cook, didn't I? Now you won't have to complain any more about jammed buttons and broken fingernails and—"

"All right, George. Don't rub it in."

Her face was back to normal again, still a little on the thin side, of course, but that was part of its attractiveness under ordinary circumstances; that, and her dark, kindling eyes and exquisitely made-up mouth. She'd just had her breasts built up again and she really looked terrific in her new gold and scarlet loungerie. Danby decided he could have done far worse. He put his finger under her chin and kissed her. "Come on, let's eat," he said.

For some reason, he'd forgotten about Billy. Glancing up from the table, he saw his son standing in the doorway, staring balefully at Miss Jones, who was busy with the coffee.

"She's not going to hit me!" Billy said, answering Danby's glance.

Danby laughed. He felt better, now that half the battle was won. The other half could be taken care of later. "Of course she's not going to hit you," he said. "Now come over and eat your supper like a good boy."

"Yes," Laura said, "and hurry up. *Romeo and Juliet* is on the Western Hour, and I don't want to miss a minute of it."

Billy relented. "Oh, all right!" he said. But he gave Miss Jones a wide berth as he walked into the kitchen and took his place at the table.

***

Romeo Montague twisted a cigarette with deft fingers, put it between sombrero-shadowed lips and lit it with a kitchen match. Then he guided his sleek palomino down the moonlit hillside to the Capulet ranch house.

"Guess I better be a mite keerful," he soliloquized. "These hyar Capulets, being sheepherders an' hereditary enemies o' my fambly, who are noble cattlemen, would gun me down afore I knowed what happened if'n they got the chance. But this gal I met at the wrassle tonight is worth a mite o' danger."

Danby frowned. He had nothing against rewriting the classics, but it seemed to him that the rewrite men were overdoing the cattlemen-sheepmen deal. Laura and Billy didn't seem to mind, however. They were hunched forward in their viewchairs, gazing raptly at the 120" screen. So maybe the rewrite men

knew what they were doing at that.

Even Miss Jones seemed interested … but that was impossible, Danby quickly reminded himself. She *couldn't* be interested. No matter how intelligently her blue eyes might be focused on the screen, all she was doing, really, was sitting there wasting her batteries. He should have taken Laura's advice and turned her off—

But somehow he just hadn't had the heart. There was an element of cruelty in depriving her of life, even temporarily.

Now *there* was a ridiculous notion, if ever a man had one. Danby shifted irritably in his viewchair, and his irritation intensified when he realized that he'd lost the thread of the play. By the time he regained it, Romeo had scaled the wall of the Capulet rancho, had crept through the orchard, and was standing in a gaudy garden beneath a low balcony.

Juliet Capulet stepped onto the balcony via a pair of anachronistic french doors. She was wearing a white cowgirl—or sheepgirl—suit with a thigh-length skirt, and a wide-brimmed sombrero crowned her bleached blond tresses. She leaned over the balcony railing, peered down into the garden. "Where y'all at, Rome?" she drawled.

"Why, this is ridiculous!" Miss Jones said abruptly. "The words, the costumes, the action, the place—Everything's wrong!"

Danby stared at her. He remembered suddenly what the proprietor of the secondhand store had said about her responding to scenes and situations as well as words. He'd assumed, of course, that the old man had meant scenes and situations directly connected with her duties as a teacher, not *all* scenes and situations.

An annoying little premonition skipped through Danby's mind. Both Laura and Billy, he noticed, had turned from their visual repast and were regarding Miss Jones with disbelieving eyes. The moment was a critical one.

He cleared his throat. "The play isn't really 'wrong,' Miss Jones," he said. "It's just been rewritten. You see, nobody would watch it in the original, and if no one watched it, what would be the sense of anyone sponsoring it?"

"But did they have to make it a *Western?*"

Danby glanced apprehensively at his wife. The disbelief in her eyes had been replaced by furious resentment. Hastily he returned his attention to Miss Jones.

"Westerns are the rage now, Miss Jones," he explained. "It's sort of a revival of the early TV period. People like them, so naturally sponsors sponsor them and writers go way out of their way to find new material for them."

"But Juliet in a cowgirl suit! It's beneath the standards of even the lowest medium of entertainment."

"All right, George, that's enough." Laura's voice was cold. "I told you she was fifty years behind the times. Either turn her off or I'm going to bed!"

Danby sighed, stood up. He felt ashamed somehow as he walked over to where Miss Jones was sitting and felt for the little button behind her left ear. She regarded him calmly, her hands resting motionless on her lap, her breathing coming and going rhythmically through her synthetic nostrils.

It was like committing murder. Danby shuddered as he returned to his viewchair. "You and your schoolteachers!" Laura said.

"Shut up," Danby said.

He looked at the screen, tried to become interested in the play. It left him cold. The next program featured another play—a whodunit entitled *Macbeth.* That one left him cold, too. He kept glancing surreptitiously at Miss Jones. Her breast was still now, her eyes closed. The room seemed horribly empty.

Finally he couldn't stand it any longer. He stood up. "I'm going for a little ride," he told Laura, and walked out.

***

He backed the Baby B. out of the drivette and drove down the suburban street to the boulevard, asking himself over and over why an antique schoolteacher should affect him so. He knew it wasn't merely nostalgia, though nostalgia was part of it—nostalgia for September and realschool and walking into the classroom September mornings and seeing the teacher step out of her little closet by the blackboard the minute the bell rang and hearing her say, "Good morning, class. Isn't it a beautiful day for studying our lessons?"

But he'd never liked school any more than the other kids had, and he knew that September stood for something else besides books and autumn dreams. It stood for something he had lost somewhere along the line, something indefinable, something intangible; something he desperately needed now—

Danby wheeled the Baby B. down the boulevard, twisting in and around the scurrying automobilettes. When he turned down the side street that led to Friendly Fred's, he saw that there was a new stand going up on the corner. A big sign said: **KING-SIZE CHARCOAL HOTS—**HAVE A REAL HOT DOG GRILLED OVER A REAL FIRE! OPEN SOON!

He drove past, pulled into the parking lot beside Friendly Fred's, stepped out into the spring-starred night, and let himself in by the side door. The place was crowded, but he managed to find an empty stall. Inside, he slipped a quarter into the dispenser and dialed a beer.

He sipped it moodily when it emerged in its sweated paper cup. The stall was stuffy and smelt of its last occupant—a wino, Danby decided. He wondered briefly how it must have been in the old days when bar-room privacy was unheard of and you had to stand elbow to elbow with the other patrons and everybody knew how much everybody else drank and how drunk everybody else got. Then his mind reverted to Miss Jones.

There was a small telescreen above the drink-dispenser, and beneath it were the words: GOT TROUBLE? TUNE IN FRIENDLY FRED, THE BARTENDER-HE'LL LISTEN TO YOUR WOES *(only 25¢ for 3 minutes).* Danby slipped a quarter in the coin slot. There was a little click and the quarter rattled in the coin return cup and Friendly Fred's recorded voice said, "Busy right now, pal. Be with you in a minute."

After a minute and another beer, Danby tried again. This time the two-way screen lit up and Friendly Fred's pink-jowled, cheerful face shimmered into focus. "Hi, George. How's it goin'?"

"Not too bad, Fred. Not *too* bad."

"But it could be better, eh?"

Danby nodded. "You guessed it, Fred. You guessed it." He looked down at the little bar where his beer sat all alone. "I … I bought a schoolteacher, Fred," he said.

"A *schoolteacher!*"

"Well, I admit it's a kind of odd thing to buy, but I thought maybe the kid might need a little help with his TV-lessons—boxtop tests are coming up pretty soon, and you know how kids feel when they don't send in the right answers and can't win a prize. And then I thought she—this is a special schoolteacher, you understand, Fred-I thought she could help Laura around the house. Things like that …"

His voice trailed away as he raised his eyes to the screen. Friendly Fred was shaking his friendly face solemnly. His pink jowls waggled. Presently: "George, you listen to me. You get rid of that teacher. Y'hear me, George? Get rid of her. Those android teachers are just as bad as the real old-fashioned kind—the kind that really breathed, I mean. You know what, George? You won't believe this, but I know. They usta hit kids. That's right. Hit them—" There was a buzzing noise, and the screen started to flicker. "Time's up, George. Want another quarter's worth?"

"No thanks," Danby said. He finished his beer and left.

***

Did *everybody* hate schoolteachers? And, if so, why didn't everybody hate teleteachers, too?

Danby pondered the paradox all next day at work. Fifty years ago it had looked as though android teachers were going to solve the educational problem as effectively as reducing the size and price of the prestige-cars at the turn of the century had solved the economic problem. But while android teachers had certainly obviated the teacher shortage, they'd only pointed up the other aspect of the problem—the school shortage. What good did it do to have enough teachers when there weren't enough classrooms for them to teach in? And how could you appropriate enough money to build new schools when the country was in constant need of newer and better superhighways?

It was silly to say that the building of public schools should have priority over the building of public roads, because if you neglected the country's highways you automatically weakened the average citizen's penchant to buy new cars, thereby weakening the economy, precipitating a depression, and making the building of new schools more impracticable than it had been in the first place.

When you came right down to it, you had to take your hat off to the cereal companies. In introducing teleteachers and teleducation, they had saved the day. One teacher standing in one room, with a blackboard on one side of her and a movie screen on the other, could hold classes for fifty million pupils, and if any of those pupils didn't like the way she taught, all he had to do was switch channels to one of the other teleducational programs sponsored by one of the other cereal companies. (It was up to each pupil's parents, of course, to see that he didn't skip classes, or tune in on the next grade before he passed the previous grade's boxtop tests.)

But the best part of the whole ingenious system was the happy fact that the cereal companies paid for everything, thereby absolving the taxpayer of one of his most onerous obligations and leaving his pocketbook more amenable to sales tax, gas tax, tolls, and car payments. And all the cereal companies asked in return for their fine public service was that the pupils—and preferably the parents, too—eat their cereal.

So the paradox wasn't a paradox after all. A schoolteacher was an anathema because she symbolized expense; a teleteacher was a respected public servant because she symbolized the large economy-size package. But the difference, Danby knew, went much deeper.

While schoolteacher-hatred was partly atavistic, it was largely the result of the propaganda campaign the cereal companies had launched when first putting their idea into action. They were responsible for the widespread myth that android schoolteachers hit their pupils, and they still revived that myth occasionally just in case there was anybody left who still doubted it.

The trouble was, most people were teleducated and therefore didn't know the truth. Danby was an exception. He'd been born in a small town, the mountainous location of which had made TV reception impossible, and before his family migrated to the city he'd attended realschool. So he *knew* that schoolteachers didn't hit their pupils.

Unless Androids, Inc. had distributed one or two deficient models by mistake. And that wasn't likely. Androids, Inc. was a pretty efficient corporation. Look at what excellent service station attendants they made. Look at what fine stenographers, waitresses, and maids they put on the market.

Of course, neither the average man starting out in business nor the average householder could afford them. But—Danby's thoughts did an intricate hop, skip, and a jump—wasn't that all the more reason why Laura should be satisfied with a makeshift maid?

But she wasn't satisfied. All he had to do was take one look at her face when he came home that night, and he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that she wasn't satisfied.

He had never seen her cheeks so pinched, her lips so thin. "Where's Miss Jones?" he asked.

"She's in her case," Laura said. "And tomorrow morning you're going to take her back to whoever you bought her from and get our forty-nine ninety-five refunded!"

"She's not going to hit *me* again!" Billy said from his Indian squat in front of the TV screen.

Danby whitened. "*Did* she hit him?"

"Well, not exactly," Laura said.

"Either she did or she didn't," Danby said.

"Tell him what she said about my TV-teacher!" Billy shouted.

"She said Billy's teacher wasn't qualified to teach horses."

"And tell him what she said about Hector and Achilles!"

Laura sniffed. "She said it was a shame to make a cowboy-and-Indian melodrama out of a classic like the *Iliad* and call it education."

The story came out gradually. Miss Jones apparently had gone on an intellectual rampage from the moment Laura had turned her on in the morning to the moment Laura had turned her off. According to Miss Jones, everything in the Danby household was wrong, from the teleducation programs Billy watched on the little red TV set in his room and the morning and afternoon programs Laura watched on the big TV set in the living room, to the pattern of the wallpaper in the hallway (little red Cadillettes rollicking along interlaced ribbons of highways), the windshield picture window in the kitchen, and the dearth of books.

"Can you imagine?" Laura said. "She actually thinks books are still being published!"

"All I want to know," Danby said, "is did she hit him?"

"I'm coming to that—"

About three o' clock, Miss Jones had been dusting in Billy's room. Billy was watching his lessons dutifully, sitting at his little desk as nice and quiet as you please, absorbed in the efforts of the cowboys to take the Indian village of Troy, when all of a sudden Miss Jones swept across the room like a mad woman, uttered her sacrilegious remark about the alteration of the *Iliad,* and turned off the set right in the middle of the lesson. That was when Billy had begun to scream and when Laura had burst into the room and found Miss Jones gripping his arm with one hand and raising her other hand to deliver the blow.

"I got there in the nick of time," Laura said. "There's no telling what she might have done. Why, she might have killed him!"

"I doubt it," Danby said. "What happened after that?"

"I grabbed Billy away from her and told her to go back to her case. Then I shut her off and closed the cover. And believe me, George Danby, it's going to stay closed! And like I said, tomorrow morning you're going to take her back—if you want Billy and me to go on living in this house!"

***

Danby felt sick all evening. He picked at his supper, languished through part of the Western Hour, glancing every now and then, when he was sure Laura wasn't looking, at the case standing mutely by the door. The heroine of the Western Hour was a dance hall girl—a 32-24-38 blonde named Antigone. Seemed that her two brothers had killed each other in a gunfight, and the local sheriff—a character named Creon—had permitted only one of them a decent burial on Boot Hill, illogically insisting that the other be left out on the desert for the buzzards to pick at. Antigone couldn't see it that way at all, and she told her sister Ismene that if one brother rated a respectable grave, so did the other, and that she, Antigone, was going to see that he got one, and would Ismene please lend her a hand? But Ismene was chicken, so Antigone said, All right, she'd take care of the matter herself; then an old prospector named Teiresias rode into town and—

Danby got up quietly, slipped into the kitchen, and let himself out the back door. He got behind the wheel and drove down to the boulevard, then up the boulevard, with all the windows open and the warm wind washing around him.

The hot-dog stand on the corner was nearing completion. He glanced at it idly as he turned into the side street. There were a number of empty stalls at Friendly Fred's, and he chose one at random. He had quite a few beers, standing there at the lonely little bar, and he did a lot of thinking. When he was sure his wife and son were in bed, he drove home, opened Miss Jones' case, and turned her on.

"Were you going to hit Billy this afternoon?" he asked.

The blue eyes regarded him unwaveringly, the lashes fluttering at rhythmic intervals, the pupils gradually adjusting themselves to the living-room lamp Laura had left burning. Presently: "I am incapable

of striking a human, sir. I believe the clause is in my guarantee."

"I'm afraid your guarantee ran out some time ago, Miss Jones," Danby said. His voice felt thick and his words kept running together. "Not that it matters. You did grab his arm though, didn't you?"

"I had to, sir."

Danby frowned. He swayed a little, weaved back into the living room on rubbery legs. "Come over and sit down and tell me about it, Mish—Miss Jones," he said.

He watched her step out of her case and walk across the room. There was something odd about the way she walked. Her step was no longer light, but heavy; her body no longer delicately balanced, but awry. With a start, he realized that she was limping.

She sat down on the couch and he sat down beside her. "He kicked you, didn't he?" he said.

"Yes, sir. I had to hold him back or he'd have kicked me again."

There was a dull redness filling the room, coalescing before his eyes. Then, subtly, the redness dissipated before the dawning realization that here in his hand lay the very weapon he had needed: the psychological bludgeon with which he could quell all further objection to Miss Jones.

But a little of the redness still remained and it was permeated with regret. "I'm terribly sorry, Miss Jones. Billy's too aggressive, I'm afraid."

"He could hardly help being so, sir. I was quite astonished today when I learned that those horrid programs that he watches constitute his entire educational fare. His teleteacher is little more than a semicivilized M.C. whose primary concern is selling his company's particular brand of cornflakes. I can understand now why your writers have to revert to the classics for ideas. Their creativity is snuffed out by clichés while still in its embryo stage."

Danby was enchanted. He had never heard anyone talk that way before. It wasn't her words so much. It was the way she said them, the conviction that her voice carried despite the fact that her "voice" was no more than a deftly-built speaker geared to tapes that were in turn geared to unimaginably intricate memory banks.

But sitting there beside her, watching her lips move, seeing her lashes descend every so often over her blue, blue eyes, it was as though September had come and sat in the room. Suddenly a feeling of utter peace engulfed him. The rich, mellow days of September filed one by one past his eyes and he saw why they were different from other days. They were different because they had depth and beauty and quietness; because their blue skies held promises of richer, mellower days to come—

They were different because they had meaning …

The moment was so poignantly sweet that Danby never wanted it to end. The very thought of its passing racked him with unbearable agony and instinctively he did the only physical thing he could do to sustain it.

He put his arm around Miss Jones' shoulder.

She did not move. She sat there quietly, her breast rising and falling at even intervals, her long lashes drifting down now and again like dark, gentle birds winging over blue limpid waters—

"The play we watched last night," Danby said. "*Romeo and Juliet*—why didn't you like it?"

"It was rather horrible, sir. It was a burlesque, really—tawdry, cheap, the beauty of the lines corrupted and obscured."

"Do you know the lines?"

"Some of them."

"Say them. Please."

"Yes, sir. At the close of the balcony scene, when the two lovers are parting, Juliet says, *'Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow, that I shall say good night till it be morrow.'* And Romeo answers: *'Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast! Would I were sleep and peace, so sweet to rest!'* Why did they leave that out, sir? Why?"

"Because we're living in a cheap world," Danby said, surprised at his sudden insight, "and in a cheap world, precious things are worthless. Shay—say the lines again, please, Miss Jones."

"*'Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow, that I shall say good night till it be morrow—'*"

"Let me finish." Danby concentrated. "'*Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace—*'"

"'*—in thy breast—*'"

"'*Would I were sleep and peace, so—*'"

"'*—sweet—*'"

"'*—so sweet to rest!*'"

Abruptly, Miss Jones stood up. "Good evening, madam," she said.

Danby didn't bother to get up. It wouldn't have done any good. He could see Laura well enough, anyway, from where he was sitting. Laura standing in the living-room doorway in her new Cadillette pajamas and her bare feet that had made no sound in their surreptitious descent of the stairs. The two-dimensional cars that comprised the pajama pattern stood out in vermilion vividness and it was as though she was lying down and letting them run rampant over her body, letting them defile her breasts and her belly and her legs …

He saw her narrow face and her cold pitiless eyes, and he knew it would be useless to try to explain, that she wouldn't—couldn't—understand. And he realized with sudden shocking clarity that in the world in which he lived September had been dead for decades, and he saw himself in the morning, loading the case into the Baby B. and driving down the glittering city streets to the little secondhand store and asking the proprietor for his money back, and he saw himself afterwards, but he had to look away, and when he looked away he saw Miss Jones standing incongruously in the gaudy living room and heard her saying, over and over like a broken, bewildered record, "Is something wrong, madam? Is something wrong?"

***

It was several weeks before Danby felt whole enough to go down to Friendly Fred's for a beer. Laura had begun speaking to him by then, and the world, while not quite the same as it had once been, had at least taken on some of the aspects of its former self. He backed the Baby B. out of the drivette and drove down the street and into the multicolored boulevard traffic. It was a clear June night and the stars were crystal pinpoints high above the fluorescent fire of the city. The hot dog stand on the corner was finished now, and open for business. Several customers were standing at the gleaming chrome counter and a waitress was turning sizzling wieners over a chrome charcoal brazier. There was something familiar about her gay rainfall of a dress, about the way she moved; about the way the gentle sunrise of her hair framed her gentle face— Her new owner was leaning on the counter some distance away, chatting with a customer.

There was a tightness in Danby's chest as he parked the Baby B. and got out and walked across the concrete apron to the counter-a tightness in his chest and a steady throbbing in his temples. There were some things you couldn't permit to happen without at least trying to stop them, no matter what the price for trying to stop them involved.

He had reached the section of the counter where the owner was standing, and he was about to lean across the polished chrome and slap the smug fat face, when he saw the little cardboard sign propped against the chrome mustard jar, the sign that said, MAN WANTED ...

A hot-dog stand was a long way from being a September classroom, and a schoolteacher dispensing hot-dogs could never quite compare to a schoolteacher dispensing dreams; but if you wanted something badly enough, you took whatever you could get of it, and were thankful for even that …

"I could only work nights," Danby said to the owner. "Say from six to twelve—"

"Why, that would be fine," the owner said. "I'm afraid I won't be able to pay you much at first, though. You see, I'm just starting out and—"

"Never mind that," Danby said. "When do I start?"

"Why, the sooner the better."

Danby walked around to where a section of the counter raised up on hidden hinges and he stepped into the stand proper and took off his coat. If Laura didn't like the idea, she could go to hell, but he knew it would be all right because the additional money he'd be making would make *her* dream—the Cadillette one—come true.

He donned the apron the owner handed him and joined Miss Jones in front of the charcoal brazier. "Good evening, Miss Jones," he said. She turned her head and the blue eyes seemed to light up and her hair was like the sun coming up on a hazy September morning. "Good evening, sir," she said, and a September wind sprang up in the June night and blew through the stand and it was like going back to school again after an endless empty summer.

Little Dog Gone

The ground beneath his back was frost-cold. During the night the coldness had climbed into his arms and shoulders and condensed in his chest, and now he was a part of the ground itself, an almost indistinguishable part that must soon break free or forever be lost.

Through will alone he drove the last of the garish nightmares away, turned on his side and opened his eyes. It had been a binge to beat all binges. It had begun in a little bar off Teletheatre Square in Old New York City, and it had blasted off into space and taken root among the stars. Now, after strutting and fretting its hour upon the stage, it had come to an end.

Dawn had emerged from her gray dwelling in the east and was lighting pink candles to illumine the big back yard of the world. It was a world that Nicholas Hayes could not remember. He knew, though, that he had seen it before, seen it from the distorted deeps of drunkenness ... through the mists of no-pain and non-remembrance ... from the false heights of Never Come Tomorrow ... seen it, and forgotten it.

He was lying in a field. Rows of dead stalks alternated with parallel swaths of frost-wilted weeds. On either side were similar fields, and in the distance, woods. Beyond the woods, hills showed.

He could see his breath. He could see something else, too–a small animal of some kind. It was crouching in the weeds a dozen yards away, and it was watching him.

He wondered whether it was inside or outside his head. Painfully, he propped himself up on one elbow, picked up a loose clod of earth and heaved it in the animal's direction. The animal promptly disappeared.

He patted his pockets in the vain hope of finding a bottle. Raising his eyes, he saw the animal again. It had reappeared in the same spot, and had resumed watching him. "Go 'way!" he shouted hoarsely, and closed his eyes. When he re-opened them, the animal was still there.

It looked as though it might be a dog of some sort, but he could not be sure. Perhaps it was real after all. Working himself into a sitting position, Hayes went through his pockets. They contained his billfold, which was empty, his Teletheatre Guild membership card, which was void, his passport, a large handful of change and a concentrated chocolate bar. Unwrapping the bar, he broke it in two and tossed one half to the animal. Again the animal vanished; but this time, thanks to the growing light, he saw it reappear some fifty yards beyond its original position. As he sat there, staring, it vanished once more, rematerialized in the very same spot it had occupied before, and gobbled down the chocolate.

Hayes rubbed his eyes. Still the animal would not go away. Moreover, it was looking at him as though it momentarily expected him to toss it another piece of chocolate. He held out the remaining half of the bar. "If you want it, you'll have to come and get it," he said.

The dog–for a dog of some kind it seemed to be–flattened out on its belly and inched its way forward. Dawn had lighted the last of her pink candles, and now her son, the day, was coming out to play. In the brighter light Hayes saw that the dog was about the size of a miniature poodle. Its hair was quite thick, though not in the least curly, and was the color of the rising morning mist. Its slightly oversize paws suggested that it had not completely grown out of puppyhood, and the sad, eager-to-be-loved look in its slightly slanted golden eyes more or less substantiated the suggestion. The rather long but blunt muzzle lent a comical pug-nose effect, and the tatterdemalion ears hung down on either side of the head like a pair of frayed bar-rags. By far the most remarkable feature about the animal was its tail–on the bushy side, terminating in a white tuft. But instead of wagging, it rotated, first clockwise and then counterclockwise, somewhat in the manner of a spring winding itself up and letting itself mn down. A star-shaped white mark blazed in the middle of the animal's forehead.

Obviously the dog had not been eating very well of late, or perhaps, like any puppy, it was eternally hungry. It made short work of the second piece of chocolate, and gazed eagerly up into Hayes' eyes as though expecting a third. Tentatively, Hayes tweaked one of the rag-like ears. "Well, anyway, at least you're real," he said.

But if the dog *was* real, why had it disappeared?

Hayes let the question ride for the moment. Too many other questions had priority over it. For one example, where was he? For another, what was he doing here?

He could remember choosing a planet at random and booking passage for it at the Great Eastern Spaceport, and he could vaguely remember boarding a subspace liner and long hours spent in the starbar, talking with other passengers now and then, but mostly to himself. But that was all he could remember. Sometime during the voyage he had reached the point of no-pain and non-remembrance. Somewhere along the line he had scaled the heights of Never Come Tomorrow and thumbed his nose at the cosmos.

And now, tomorrow had come. And the heights were hopelessly behind him.

He forced himself to his feet. His head was one vast gnawing ache, his body, a lump of clay supported by unfeeling stilts that once had been a pair of legs. Hatless. coatless, begrimed of slacks and shirt, he tamed and faced the way he must have come. There was a road of sorts not too far distant, and presently he was walking along it toward a misted huddle of buildings that spelled a town.

A soft whimpering sound came from behind him. He stopped and turned. The little dog stopped, too. It fixed him with a forlorn eye. "Well, what do you know?" Hayes said. And then, "Come on, Bar-rag. If you'll promise not to disappear on me again, I'll stake you to a meal."

"Rowp!" the little dog answered, and rotated its tail. Hayes waited till it caught up to him, then tamed and continued on his way.

II

He was sweating when he came to the first house, and yet he was shivering, too. By the time he reached the business section, his chest was paining him so acutely that he could barely breathe.

The business section was still asleep, but it informed him by means of its unpretentious facades and crude wooden walkways that the town was an out-planet settlement. How-ever, there were thousands of out-planet settlements. This could be any one of them. The place-name, when he finally spotted it on the facade of the only hotel, told him nothing:

THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS

He headed for the hotel, Bar-rag trotting at his heels. The doors were open, but there was no one on the immediate premises. He looked around. If he had ever been there before, the memory eluded him. He stepped into the bar. That at least ought to be familiar, and familiar it turned out to be. However, the bell that the big raftered room with its old-fashioned tables and chairs rang in his mind was faint indeed. While he knew that he had been there recently, he could not remember any detail of his visit.

He chose a table at random and sat down. Bar-rag, obviously disconcerted by its new surroundings, slipped beneath the table and curled up at his feet. The room was as devoid of decor as it was of people. Two high windows looked out into the street, a liana-like rope looped incongruously down from a centrally-located rafter to a small gallery on the wall opposite the bar, and there was a doorway in the rear that presumably led to the kitchen.

Hayes pounded on the tabletop. Someone ought to be up at least.

Someone was: a tall girl with shoulder-length blonde hair, rattler wide hips, and nice legs. She advanced purposefully into the room through the doorway at the rear, her blue eyes bright with indignation. "Breakfast isn't served till eight-thirty!" she snapped. "Just who in hell do you think you are, mister?" Abruptly she stopped in her tracks. Then, slowly, she covered the remaining distance to the table, eyes no longer indignant. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hayes," she said. "I didn't recognize you."

She had a full, oval face, but her rather high cheekbones and the way she wore her hair made her cheeks seem thin. Hayes judged her to be somewhere in her late twenties or early thirties, which put her

pretty much in his own age-category. However, he did not know her from Eve. "When did we meet?" he asked.

"We didn't, but I know you from your teletheatre roles. Last night when you came into the bar I recognized you right away." Briefly, she lowered her eyes. She was wearing a knee-length floral dress that covered most of her shoulders, and her hair lay upon the false flowers like morning sunshine. "You—you might say I'm one of your many admirers."

"Did anyone else recognize me?"

"I don't think so. I'm afraid even taped teletheatre hasn't got to Black Dirt yet."

Black Dirt, he thought. That would be Procyon 16. Now why in hell had he come here? Aloud, he said, "I'm a little foggy on a few points. By any chance did I happen to mention how I got here?"

"I heard you tell the bartender that you'd come in from Port-o'-Stars by airbus, and that you were recently arrived from Earth. Don't you remember, Mr. Hayes?"

"How long did I hang around?"

"Till nearly closing time. I—I wanted to talk to you, but I didn't have enough nerve. Then suddenly I looked around and you were gone. I checked your bag and your coat in the lobby. I thought perhaps you'd gone somewhere else to sleep."

Hayes grimaced. "I did. Though I imagine my original intention was confined to a walk beneath the stars."

At this point, Bar-rag poked its head from beneath the table. The girl jumped. "Where in the world did you get hold of a doggone, Mr. Hayes?" she said. "I thought all of them had been frightened back into the hills."

"A doggone?"

"That's the settlers' name for them. First you see them, then you don't. They're capable of teleportation."

"Well, no wonder!" Hayes said. "For a while there when I first woke up I thought I was seeing things. He followed me back to town for some reason or other—probably a free meal. Do you think you could fix him up with something?"

"Of course. He must like you, Mr. Hayes. Usually when a doggone sees a human being, he teleports himself as far away as he can get. Or perhaps I should say 'it.' They're bisexual, you know, and reproduce by parthenogenesis." She looked at Hayes closely. "You're shivering, Mr. Hayes. Shall I turn the heat up?"

"No. Just bring me a triple shot."

He downed half of it a second after she set it before him. A shudder began deep within him and spread upward. The room very nearly turned upside down, but he steadied it just in time by gripping the edge of the table with both hands. Presently he became aware that the girl was leaning over him. "Are you all right, Mr. Hayes?" she asked.

He drank the rest of the whiskey. "I will be. By the way, what's your name?"

"Moira. Moira Blair."

"Bring me another triple shot, Moira."

There was concern in her blue eyes. "Do you think—"

"I do. Bring it."

After she brought it, she went into the kitchen and returned a few minutes later bearing a plate of meat scraps. She set the plate on the floor, and the little doggone came out of hiding and dug in. "Does he have a name yet, Mr. Hayes'!"

"Bar-rag." Hayes tossed off the second triple shot and removed the handful of change from his pocket. He piled it carefully on the table. "This cairn of coins you see before you, Moira, represents the last of the tangible assets of one Nicholas Hayes," he said. "You will keep bringing him drinks till it is gone, after which it is to be hoped that you will have the good sense to throw him out into the gutter where he belongs."

"Please let me help you, Mr. Hayes."

"Why?"

"Because it isn't fair for you to—to be like this. When I was still living in New North Dakota, Mars and had access to live TTV, I saw you in all your teletheatre roles, both Debuts and Encores. I saw you as Tambourlaine. I saw you as Cyrano. I saw you as Hamlet. I saw you as Edward II. I saw you as Willy Loman. And you were wonderful. You still are! You always will be."

"Aha! but you didn't see me as Milton Pomfret, did you? You didn't see me in the Debut of *The Two-Sided Triangle.* Even if you were still living in New North Dakota you wouldn't have seen me." Hayes crashed his fist on the table. "And do you know why you wouldn't have seen me, Moira? You wouldn't have seen me because on Debut night, I showed up as drunk as a spaceman on three-weeks' leave and got myself thrown out of teletheatre. And it was just what I had coining, too. Because you see, Moira my dear, that was far from the first time I had shown up as drunk as a spaceman on three-weeks' leave—

far from the first time Humpty Dumpty Hayes had had a great fall. Only this time, Christopher King's horses and Christopher King's men didn't bother to put Humpty Dumpty back together again with alco-antidotes and souped-up sugar pills. By this time they were as sick of him as he was of himself. So they told him that if he wanted to be put back together again, he would have to do the job himself. So he burned his bridges behind him, invested in a super-binge, climbed aboard and blasted off for the stars on a mission he has since forgotten and no longer wants to remember. For God's sake, bring him a bottle and let him bow out in peace!"

It was the flattest, most uncompromising "no" that Hayes had ever heard in all his life. It brought him to his feet—and to his undoing. This time, when the room started to turn upside down, he could not stop it. Giddiness washed over him like gray surf, and beyond the surf, blackness roiled ... And now, the blackness began swirling around his legs. Up, up, it swirled, and he called out "Leslie!" in a semi-strangled voice. However, it was not sophisticated dark-haired Leslie who leaped through the gathering night to his side, but a tall blonde girl with anxious eyes. He felt strong arms supporting him as he sank into nothingness, and just before the nothingness became complete, he felt her fingers touch his face.

There were jumbled phrases of warmth and cold, of darkness and light. Sometimes the bedroom in which he lay played host to a blonde girl wearing a print dress—and once in a while to the same girl wearing a jaguar-skin sarong—and frequently to a coarse, bearded man with chest-prodding fingers—and always, it seemed, to a small, mist-gray animal with bar-rag ears, rotating tail, and worshipful golden eyes. Finally there were late mornings and long, sunny afternoons, and sometimes snow falling lazily beyond diamond-patterned window-panes.

The bedroom was not a large one. Strictly speaking, it was not a bedroom at all, but a commandeered living room. There was a sofa and there were chairs and there was a small table on which stood a lamp, a clock and a copy of R. E. Hames' *Stellar Geography.* The only incongruous item was the bed. It was high and narrow and it had obviously been borrowed from the local frontier hospital. It stood out among the endemic furniture like a bedsheeted barge floating down a nonexistent river.

One night, the girl in the jaguar skin came out of the shadows and gazed down upon his face. "Dr. Grimes says you're much better," she said. "I'm glad."

"You're Moira, aren't you?" Hayes said.

"Not when I wear my costume. When I wear my costume I'm Zonda of the Amazon, the Amazon in this case being the big river of the same name in the wilds of Alpha Centauri 9. Haven't you ever heard of Zonda of the Amazon, Mr. Hayes?"

"I can't say as I have."

"She was the main character of an earthside 3V show of the same title. They chose me for the role because they needed a big blonde and didn't in the least mind if she fell considerably short of being a second Sarah Bernhardt. I used to swing through trees on fake grapevines and win friends and influence animals and utter sparkling lines such as `Zonda hungry' and `Zonda save you—you no fear.' For a poor girl from New North Dakota, Mars, who couldn't act her way out of a plastic bag, I did all right for myself for a while. And then the series was canceled, and I found myself out in the cold, because big blondes who can't act are no more in demand in Videoville than they used to be in Hollywood. But I'd

saved enough money to last me until the reruns began and checks started coming through again. And after the reruns came the repeat-reruns. And after that the series was sold successively to just about every earthside station on the network, and I began making personal appearances in local studios for the benefit of the kids who still remembered me. Then the series was sold successively to the Martian stations, and I made more personal appearances, and eventually the tapes were shipped off to out-planets like Black Dirt that didn't have 3V yet but that did have local theatres where the tapes could be run along with old, old movies, and, well, I tagged along as usual for more personal appearances and finally I ended up here in The Last Of The Mohicans where the proprietor of the local hotel offered me a job for life if I'd play Zonda of the Amazon once a week for the benefit of his bar trade. By that time I was sick of being Zonda. But I was even sicker of traveling from one sad stand to another, so I took him up on his offer."

"What do you have to do?" Hayes asked.

"Three times each Saturday night I swing across the barroom on a make-believe grapevine, land on the bar, give the victory cry of a Centaurian jungle girl, and fight off the dirt farmers."

"Is this your living room?"

She nodded. "But don't feel that you're inconveniencing me, Mr. Hayes. I never use it."

"Why didn't you pack me off to the nearest charity ward and have done with me?"

"I thought you'd be better off here. Out-planet hospitals are understaffed and half of the time they don't even have the medical supplies they need." She glanced at the clock on the table. "I'll have to be going now, Mr. Hayes. It's almost time for Zonda's first aerial maneuver. Bar-rag will keep you company till you fall asleep. Won't you, Bar-rag?"

At the sound of its name, the little doggone materialized on the bed, joyously winding and unwinding its tail. "Rowp!" it said to Hayes, and licked his cheek. Hayes grinned. "I need a shave, don't I?" he said.

"I'll have a barber come in tomorrow. While he's at it, he can give you a haircut, too." Moira dimmed the light. "Good night, Mr. Hayes."

"Good night," Hayes said.

After site had gone, he let his head sink deep into the pillow. He was weary and he was weak, and he felt as though he could go on lying there forever. There was no sound save for the remote thumping of a stereo in the bar below, and the soft susurrus of Bar-rag's breathing. Beyond the diamond-patterned windowpanes, a streetlight caught glistening particles of gently falling snow ... In Old York, it would be summer. It was always summer in Old York, with balmy winds blowing in from the rerouted Gulf Stream and breathing up the revamped avenues. The open-air little theatres around Teletheatre Square would be in full swing. NOW PLAYING: *The Two-Sided Triangle,* with Leslie Lake and Humpty Dumpty Hayes. No, not Humpty Dumpty Hayes. Humpty Dumpty Hayes had had a great fall—remember? And all the King's horses and all the King's men hadn't bothered to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

Hayes closed his eyes against the sudden bleakness of the ceiling. Desperately, he reached out and touched Bar-rag's glossy back. The little animal curled up in the crook of his arm. It was all right then, and he knew that tonight at least he could sleep. NOW PLAYING, he thought drowsily: *The Last of the Mohicans Hotel,* with Bar-rag, Zonda of the Amazon, and Humpty Dumpty Hayes ...

III

There were times after that when he wanted a drink, when he begged for a drink, when he cried out for a drink and raved when Moira would not bring him one and locked the door behind her. Once when she came upstairs after her Zonda routine he was waiting for her in the shadows, and when she came into the room, he seized her throat and went tumbling with her to the floor, threatening to kill her unless she promised to go back down to the bar and get him a bottle.

He was still pitifully weak. It would have been no trick at all for her to have broken his grip and flung him aside but she didn't. Instead, she lay there immobile, and after a while, she said, "Go ahead, Nick—choke me. What are you waiting for?" His hands fell away then, and he sat there sick and ashamed on the floor till she got up and helped him back into bed.

When she brought him his breakfast the next morning, she sat down beside the bed and talked to him as though nothing had happened. He couldn't stand it. "For God's sake, why don't you throw me out and have done with me!" he said.

Her eyes were soft upon his face. "Nights are the worst, aren't they?" she said.

"Nights I'm someone else. Or maybe it's the other way around. It doesn't matter—neither one of us is any good."

"I think you're someone in between. Like me. I'm someone in between Zonda of the Amazon and Moira Blair."

"It's not the same, and you know it," Hayes said. Then, "How long have I been cooped up in here?" he asked.

"Three weeks. But the doctor says you'll be on your feet in a few more days. I guess you know by now that you very nearly died."

Suddenly Bar-rag materialized between them on the edge of the bed. There were particles of ice clinging to its paws, and a little ridge of snow lay along the top of its nose. Hayes gave the little animal a piece of toast. "I wonder where he's been," he said.

"Home in the hills, I imagine," Moira said. "They have an infallible sense of direction, and I've heard that they can teleport themselves millions of miles. I think they could even teleport themselves from one planet to another if they took it into their heads."

"If they did, they'd be dead. Teleportation may be instantaneous in one sense, but it's still subject to the velocity of light—unless it employs subspace."

"It doesn't—which is probably why doggones never leave Black Dirt. They probably sense what would happen to them if they were to spend several minutes in an absolute-zero vacuum. The way an ordinary dog knows enough not to jump over a cliff."

"Rowp!" Bar-rag said.

Hayes laughed. "I almost believe he knows what we're talking about."

"It wouldn't surprise me. They're remarkably intelligent." She stood up. "I must go now, Nick."

"Between Moira of the Kitchen and Zonda of the Amazon, you put in a pretty long week."

"I don't mind. It's good to keep busy." She picked up the breakfast tray. Just as she did so, Bar-rag disappeared from the bed, and a split second later, scratching sounds came from the hall. She went over to the hall door and opened it, and there was Bar-rag standing proudly on the threshold. "Why I do believe you're showing off," she said. "Bar-rag, you're a born ham!"

"Rowp!" Bar-rag said, and teleported itself back to the bed.

Hayes stared at the roguish face. "Moira," he said excitedly, "I just remembered why I came to the stars! I was going to tour the out-planet towns and support myself by giving Shakespearean soliloquies. It was a corny idea, and I thought of it when I was drunk, and it never would have paid off in a million years. But now I've got a better idea. Would you bring me a pad and pencil before you go back down stairs?"

"Sure, Nick."

He did not begin to write right away, but sat there thinking, his pillow propped behind his back, the pad resting on his knees. To accomplish what he had in mind, he would need first of all the right sort of skit.

Perhaps he could adapt it from a passage of a well-known play that was in the public domain. The idea appealed to him, and he began going over the plays he knew by heart. The process could very well have taken the rest of the morning if *The Two-Sided Triangle* hadn't come immediately to mind. When that happened, he knew he needed to go no further: the play was a good sixty years old, it was perennially popular and part of it at least should prove ideally suited to his needs.

He knew it by heart. Now he began thinking it through, word for word, line by line, scene by scene. It concerned a young executive named Milton Pomfret whose wife Glenda was determined to find out whether he was a philanderer or a perfect husband. Enlisting the services of a phoneticist and a face-and-figure specialist, she made arrangements with each to have herself temporarily changed into another woman, after which she told her husband she was going to visit her mother for a few weeks,

packed her things and rented a downtown apartment under the name of Mary Lou Johnson. She had her face and figure altered over the weekend, and with the phoneticist's help, practiced and perfected a subtly different mode of speech. Then on Monday morning, she got a secretarial job in her husband's office and went on the make for him. On several occasions she almost became his "mistress," but each time, something happened to interrupt the proceedings, leaving her no wiser than she had been before.

Eventually the husband fell madly in love with her and asked her to marry him—a development she had failed to foresee—and in order to keep him, she had to divorce him as her original and remarry him as her second self.

The scene which Hayes finally settled on was one of the most popular ones in the play. It opened with Milton Pomfret stopping off at Mary Lou's apartment after a date and sitting down beside her on the big sofa in her living room. By this time, Milton's defenses had crumbled and he was ready to make love and as for Mary Lou, she was more than ready. However, each time they were about to go into a clinch an interruption occurred. In the play, the interruptions were ironic in nature; in the version which Hayes presently set down, they were farcical and amounted in each case to the materializing of Bar-rag between the two lovers each time they were about to embrace. The first time the little animal appeared, Mary Lou put it outside and locked the door; the second time, she put it outside and locked the windows as well as the door; the third time she put it outside, locked the windows and the door and activated the anti-housebreak field; and the fourth time, with Milton's help, she got a suitcase and a trunk out of the closet, put the little animal into the suitcase, locked the suitcase and secured the straps, put the suitcase into the trunk, closed and locked the lid, dragged the trunk outside, came back in, locked and barricaded the door and reactivated the anti-housebreak field. Then, certain that they would not be interrupted again, the two frustrated lovers returned to the sofa, only to have Bar-rag pop into being between them for the fifth and final time. In addition to these changes, Hayes made the revisions that were necessary to make the skit an independent unit, but otherwise he kept the dialogue and the action intact.

He was just completing the polished version when Moira brought him his lunch. He was so enthusiastic that he could hardly eat.

"Read it," he said, handing her the script. "Picture yourself as Mary Lou, me as Milton Pomfret and Bar-rag as himself. See what you think."

Her blue eyes brought a summer sunrise to mind when she raised them from the final page. "You—you want *me* to act this with *you?"*

"You and Bar-rag. He'll be the star of course. The people on Black Dirt know about doggones but the people on the other out-planets have probably never even heard of such an animal, and with them, the act will be twice as effective. We'll be combining old-fashioned thaumaturgy with broad out-planet humor and, even if we fail to get laughs, our audiences will at least be mystified. Sure I know that such a cornball setup would fall flat on its face in Old York, but we should worry about Old York with all the out-planet places we've got at our disposal. I'll turn out a few more skits to round out the show to about an hour and a half, then we'll go on tour, the three of us, and—"

"You—you want *me* to act with *you?"*

"Come off it, Moira, I'm not bestowing any honors, I'm merely suggesting a way for us to make some money. *I've* got to make some someway, and acting, or at least some aspect of it, is the only means I have. If you're satisfied with your job here, I'll get someone else. But I'd much rather have you."

"Don't you *dare* get anybody else!"

He grinned. "All right, I won't," he said. "We can begin rehearsing right here in this room," he went on. "If you can scare up a trunk somewhere, we'll have all the props we'll need, and the room itself will serve as a stage. Our main problem is going to be Bar-rag. He's got to appear between us at exactly the right times, or the whole thing won't work. You'll notice that in the skit the last word Milton speaks before each interruption is 'darling.' That'll be Bar-rag's cue. Do you think we can get him to respond to it?"

Her eyes were shining, and there was a hint of tears in their corners. Hayes didn't believe be had ever seen anyone so happy in all his life. "I'm sure we can," she said. "Bar-rag, come here."

The doggone materialized in her arms, tail whirring like a small propellor. A tear tumbled down her

cheek and dropped on the little animal's nose. NOW PLAYING, Hayes thought: Zonda of the Amazon, Bar-rag the Wonder Dog, and Nicholas Hayes in *Courtin' Mary Lou.*

IV

They began rehearsing the next evening, with Hayes playing Milton Pomfret and directing at the same time. Moira and Bar-rag proved to be the two most co-operative players he had ever worked with. Within three days the skit was running smoothly, with the doggone appearing promptly on cue and Moira embracing the role of the beautiful but far from brilliant out-planet girl as though she had been preparing for it all her life. As for Hayes himself, he merely had to make a few minor changes in his portrayal of the old Milton Pomfret in order to become the new, after which he performed the part with his usual adroit mastery.

Between rehearsals, he dashed off three more skits, each embodying the sort of broad humor out-planet people went for, and he and Moira mastered these skits, too, with Bar-rag providing an enthusiastic if puzzled audience of one. Finally one evening they ran through the entire act, saving *Courtin' Mary Lou* till the last. The performance came off without a hitch. "Now," said Hayes, "we've got to have a sort of trial run right here in The Last of the Mohicans, just to make sure. For that, we'll have to rent the local theatre, and to rent the local theatre we're going to need money." He went into the bedroom, opened the dresser drawer where Moira had put away his things, and returned a moment later with a platinum figurine of Maurice Evans. Inscribed on the base were the words: *The Evans Telerheatre Award, given to Nicholas Hayes in this year of Our Lord 2186 for his outstanding contribution to the telestage in his role as Edward II.* He handed the figurine to Moira. "Take it into Port-o'-Stars tomorrow. You ought to be able to get a couple of hundred credits for it, which should be enough to get us started."

She stood there looking down at the figurine as though it were a crucifix. "I have money, Nick. There's no need for you to make such a sacrifice."

He flushed. "That's a chunk of platinum you're holding in your hands. Nothing more. You'll do as I say."

"But it's not fair, Nick."

"All right, I'll go myself!"

He reached for the figurine, but she drew it back. "I'll go," she said, not looking at him. "You're not well enough yet."

"Good. While you're gone, I'll get some advertising copy into circulation and rig up an anti-housebreak field generator. When you get back, we'll run through the act on a real stage. And in a couple of days we'll open!"

On the first night, they played before a full house. On the second. And the third.

Hayes was amazed till he remembered that out-planet towns like The Last of The Mohicans were virtually devoid of live entertainment, and that the same state of affairs endured in the surrounding areas. Even with Bar-rag as a known quantity, the *Courtin' Mary Lou* skit went over big, and the three skits that preceded it got their share of laughs, too. No, not laughs: guffaws—guffaws that made the skylights rattle. It was a new experience for Hayes, who was accustomed to sophisticated audiences, but he took it in his stride without undue difficulty. Moira took it in hers, too, and as for Bar-rag, it turned out to be the truest trouper of them all, and fell sound asleep in Hayes' arms while they were returning to the hotel after their first performance.

They could have played in The Last Of The Mohicans for a month running, but Hayes was anxious to get started on the itinerary which he had mapped out with the aid of Hames' *Stellar Geography,* and anxious also to sample an audience that had never seen a doggone. Hence he instructed Moira to give her employer a week's notice.

When the week was up, they packed their things, set out by airbus to Port-o'-Stars, cleared Bar-rag through customs and booked passage for Goshen, the twelfth planet of the blue star Sirius. Moira had sold the figurine for three hundred credits. Their take after expenses from The Last Of The Mohicans

stand amounted to more than seven hundred more, giving them a combined working capital of some one thousand credits.

Things were looking up.

Their first stop on Goshen was a backwoods town called Down In The Valley.

The town itself harbored a mere handful of colonists, most of them merchants, but the first district that it serviced was as large as the Holland Land Grant and boasted a population of some ten thousand immigrants and some two thousand natives. During the three weeks Hayes & Co. played at the Down In The Valley Grange Hall, all of them, immigrant and native alike, managed to get into town at least once to see the "disappearin' dawg."

Hayes should have been delighted. He wondered why he wasn't.

From Down In The Valley, the trio journeyed overland to Sheepdip, and from Sheepdip to Rise-n'-Shine, and from Rise-n'-Shine to St. Johnswort. In his room at the St. Johnswort Hotel, Hayes came across a discarded copy of *Spectrum,* and in it he found a review of *The Two-Sided Triangle,* The play had enjoyed a successful TTV Debut and was enjoying equal success during its Old York stand. According to the reviewer, it was a cinch for a TTV Encore. Leslie Lake's bravura in the portrayal of Glenda—Mary Lou had firmly established her in the upper echelons of stardom, and the part of Milton Pomfret was being played with a finesse seldom encountered in an understudy. Hayes threw the mgazine in the wastebasket.

He walked over to the room's only window and looked down into the street. The hour was late, and no one was abroad. In the adjoining room Moira, weary from their long journey, was preparing for bed. He could hear drawers opening and closing as she put her things away, and the muted patter of her bare feet upon the floor. Behind him, Bar-rag lay fast asleep at the foot of the bed.

He felt suddenly, horribly, alone.

Leaving the room, he descended to the lobby. The lobby was empty. He stepped out into the street. There was a lingering tang of winter in the night air, but there was the scent of green things, too. In St. Johnswort, it was spring. Soon the lovely flowers that had given the little town its name would be nodding their yellow heads along roadsides and country lanes. Soon birds would sing.

He began to walk. St. Johnswort stood on a gentle mountainside, and below it lay a deep valley where the scattered lights of farmhouses shone. Above the valley lay the inverted valley of the sky, and here there were other lights, the lights of stars.

One of the stars was Sol.

In Old York, it would be summer. It was always summer in Old York. In Old York, there were many lights and much laughter, and never any need to be alone. In Old York, if you were good enough, you could step upon a magic stage and cameras would focus on you and multiply you by one hundred million ... and on Earth and on Mars you would step into millions of living rooms, and people would know you were alive. Out, out, brief candle! Out, out, the brief career of Nicholas Hayes.

The street along which he was walking came to an end. It did not debouch into another street the way most streets do when they die. It simply stopped existing because there was no further reason for it to be. Trees grew boldly up to its very edge, and in the darkness a phosphorescent sign said, *Dead End.*

Wearily, Hayes turned and began retracing his steps. He became aware then that he was not alone. Something was walking beside him—a little animal with a pug nose and golden eyes.

"Bar-rag," he said, "what're you doing out so late at night? You should be in bed."

"Rowp!" the little animal said, and looked up at him the way people used to look up at him at curtain call when he and his supporting cast stepped out upon the proscenium, and took their bows. Then it disappeared. Lord! he thought, if I could teleport, I'd be back on Earth as fast as the wings of light could carry me. And then he thought, Yes, and arrive there dead eight years from now. I'm as well off being dead, dumbly waltzing around up here among the stars.

Yes, but did he have to remain dead? Was he so stupid that he could devise no way to bring himself back to life? No, he was not stupid. Not he, Nicholas Hayes. It wasn't a matter of devising a means to gain his end. It was merely a matter of selection!

When he got back to his room, Bar-rag was fast asleep again at the foot of the bed. The adjoining room was silent. Should he wait till morning? he wondered. He decided not to. Tapping on the door, he said, "Moira, may I talk with you for a while."

There was a silence, and then the clicking of a lamp. "Yes, Nick, come in."

In the radiance of the bed lamp her hair was the color of evening primroses and lay like spring upon the pillow. Her eyes were bellflower-blue. "Are you all right, Nick?" she asked.

"Yes." He pulled a chair over to the side of the bed, and sat down. "I was walking tonight, and I got an idea. An idea for a theatre-ship."

"Yes, Nick?"

"Centuries ago on Earth, charlatans used to travel from frontier town to frontier town on enclosed wagons, giving what were called medicine shows. The shows themselves were free, designed to attract a crowd so that the charlatan could peddle his quack remedies. Thanks to too-rapid colonization brought on by the subspace drive, we have today a situation similar to that which existed in the old west. The settlers have spread out so rapidly and so widely that it's no longer possible to keep them supplied with everything they need, and this is particularly true with regard to medicine. So suppose, Moira, that you and I were to invest in a used space-freighter, remodel the interior so that we could live in it comfortably, stock it with all-purpose medicine kits, and install a stage. Then suppose that we were to limit our act to the *Courtin' Mary Lou* skit and were to peddle medicine kits instead of charging admission. We could sell them at a modest profit, and we'd never have to feel guilty about taking advantage of gullible people. Because far from taking advantage of them, we'd be helping them. Granted, we'd never get rich. But we'd make a reasonably good living, and, while we'd be traveling all the time, we'd never really be away from home because we'd have our home with us. What do you think, Moira?"

For a long while she was silent. Then, "Why do you want to do this, Nick?"

The time had come for the lie. He told it beautifully: "Because I've got to stop thinking of myself as an actor. Because somehow I've got to shed the past. I need a new identity, a totally different identity. Maybe being a 'medicine man' will bring me peace."

She looked away from his face; at the coverlet, at her hands. They were rather large hands, and hard work had broadened them; but they were full of grace. Presently she said, "I think it's a wonderful idea, Nick."

"Good. We'll do a one-week stand here, then we'll go to Mars. There's a big used-ship yard at Port-o'-Sands that ought to be able to supply us with the sort of ship we'll need." He stood up. "I'm sorry I had to wake you up, Moira, but I had to find out how you'd feel."

"It's all right, Nick. And Nick?"

"Yes?"

"Port-o'-Sands isn't very far from New North Dakota. Maybe we can visit the farm. And—and my folks."

"We'll make it a point to. Good night, Moira."

"Good night."

V

The freighter they finally settled for was an old washtub of a job, but the ion drive was still in good working order and the space-subspace correlator, for all its passe design, functioned as efficiently as the newer, more compact units. In common with the more modern merchantmen, the *Dr. Albert Schweitzer*, as they named the vessel, could be operated by one man. Just as important, the deck of the lower level was but several feet above ground level, and in conjunction with the retractable dock would provide an excellent stage.

To obtain more width, Hayes had the original cargo-locks removed, the aperture enlarged and wider ones installed. The power room occupied most of the rear section of the lower hold, but there was still a dressing room for Moira, one for Hayes and space for three compartments and a small storage room. Moira insisted that Bar-rag's name be painted on the storage-room door, saying that in view of the fact

that the little doggone was the most essential member of the cast, it rated equal prestige at least. Grudgingly, Hayes gave in to her. Half of the upper hold, Hayes set aside for the Medicine kits, which had already been ordered from Earth, and for supplies. The other half he had converted into a large living room, a commodious kitchen and a small office. The pilots' quarters on the deck above made an excellent pair of upstairs bedrooms. As a finishing touch, he replaced the pilots' quarters and control room with a spiral steel stairway, after which he had the ship painted inside and out. Then he and Moira went shopping for furniture.

By this time, the capital of Hayes & Co. had dwindled to an alarming low. They had purchased the ship on time, putting the loan through the Port-o'-Sands Manufacturers' and Traders' Trust Company; for everything else, however, they had laid down hard cash.

Consequently, they had to settle for something less in the way of furniture than they originally had had in mind. In the end, though, this worked to their advantage, for Moira proved to have a knack for refurbishing chairs, tables, beds and even appliances, and eventually the cheapest and most decrepit items they bought yielded both dignity and grace. Nor did Moira stop with the furniture. The rooms themselves got a going over, too, and when she was done, the living quarters could have passed for a late-twentieth century duplex–which in effect was what they really were.

All this while she and Hayes had been attending night school and learning how to pilot a spacecraft. The near-complete automation of ships like the *Dr. Albert Schweitzer* had long since relegated spaceship navigation to pretty much the same category as driving a late-twentieth century automobile. In many ways it was simpler; certainly it was less perilous. Nevertheless, there were certain basic steps that all would-be pilots had to familiar with, and in addition there were scores of rules to be memorized. Then Moira and Hayes had to take the training ship on a solo orbit apiece, after which each of them had to go on a trial correlation run to Alpha Centauri 4 and back. Neither ran into any trouble, and they received their licenses on the same day.

Meanwhile, the medicine kits they had ordered from Earth had arrived and had been loaded onto the *Dr. Albert Schweitzer,* bringing their business in Port-o'-Sands to a close. "If we're going to visit your folks, it's high time we were getting started," Hayes said after supper one night. "What did you say the name of your home town was?"

She placed the last of the supper dishes in the rinser and turned the unit on. "Red Spud. It's not a town, though. It's a hamlet, and not much of a one at that. But it's on one of the main airbus routes."

"Good. We can pack tonight and leave in the morning." She did not look at him. "All right."

"You don't seem very enthusiastic."

"Nick," she said to the stove, "do you think we could pretend to be–to be–"

"To be what?"

"Man and wife. For the duration of the visit, I mean. I–I know you've never thought of me that way, and I know I've no right to expect you to. But my mother and father are going to wonder. And probably they'll worry. So for their benefit could we make believe?"

Hayes looked out of the kitchen viewport into the cluttered darkness of the shipyard. Here and there, specks of wan light shone, and in the distance a night crew was dismantling an ancient SB-2. Marriage was an item that had not entered into his calculations. But would it do him any harm to marry Moira? True, he did not love her. But then he had never loved anyone, for that matter–save Leslie perhaps. And anyway, marriage wasn't the final step it used to be. There was a clause in every contract that made it possible for either party to walk out on the other during the first year without showing just cause–provided no children had been conceived during that period of time. *The Two-Sided Triangle* would come up for Encore long before a year.

So he said to Moira, "I remembered everything, didn't I? Except the most important thing of all. Will you marry me, Moira?"

Her eyes, when she raised them to his, brought Bar-rag's worshipful orbs to mind. "I didn't mean for you to ask me that."

"Nevertheless, I did ask it. So don't you think I rate an answer?"

"I'm the girl who used to swing on a grapevine in the Last Of The Mohicans Hotel–remember?"

"And I'm the drunk you rescued from the snakes."

He saw her then, as the years fell from her shoulders, the way she must have been when she set out from New North Dakota long ago, tall and slender, girlish and soft; Zonda of the Amazon standing in a treetop and looking out over the wide, wide world, blue eyes filled with wonder. But it was Moira, not Zonda, who answered. "I'm not Leslie," she said. "1 could never be Leslie Lake."

He stood his ground. "I wouldn't want you to be." Stepping closer, he placed his hands upon her shoulders. "Well tied a justice of the peace tonight. We'll spend our honeymoon in New North Dakota." He paused. Terms of endearment had always been difficult for him to utter. He could never in real life give them the sincerity that was needed to put them across, the sincerity that came so natural to him on the stage. But it was imperative that he utter on now. "I'm sure we'll be happy, darling," he said.

Instantly, Bar-rag, who had been dozing on the couch in the living room, materialized between them. Moira laughed, and suddenly everything was the way it should be, and she was warm and wanted in his arms. Bar-rag, proud as a peacock for having remembered its cue, leaped ecstatically about their feet, tail rotating like a toy windmill.

New North Dakota was warmth on cold nights and red plains rolling away under pale Martian skies; it was raftered rooms and open fireplaces and strong coffee percolating on primitive stoves, it was *maklus* roasts browning in ovens, and brown gravy and baked beans; it was 3-V beamed all the way from Earth and viewed on long evenings in big living rooms; it was hikes in ocher hills and dances in bright community halls, and allemaine left and allemaine right; it was star-crisp nights walking home from warmth and laughter, cameraderie and good cheer; it was waking under eaves in gray dawnlight beneath feather ticks ten inches thick; it was a quaint little church standing like a steepled matchbox beneath a vastness of lavender sky, and the peace of pleasant people on pleasant Sunday afternoons.

When the time came to leave, Hayes was almost as sad as Moira's parents were. Moira cried. Bar-mg did not cry, of course; but the sadness in the little animal's slanted golden eyes said that it would have if it could.

However, the sadness was short-lived on both man and doggone's part. It lasted no longer than the airbus journey back to Port-if-Sands. After that, Hayes had piloting to occupy him, and Bar-rag, the exploration of the world of the ship.

The exploration had been begun before the trip to New North Dakota, and now it was resumed in earnest. Seemingly obsessed with a desire to be everywhere at once, the little animal kept teleporting itself from deck to deck, from hold to hold, from room to room, and for a while Hayes re-experienced the fear he had experienced during the Black Dirt-to-Goshen and Goshen-to-Mars run—that the doggone would miscalculate its distance and teleport itself beyond the life-and-death boundary of the hull. But it never did. Hayes came to the conclusion that, in common with its sense of direction, a doggone's sense of distance was infallible.

The first planet on the medicine-show itinerary was Golden Grain, the ninth satellite of the green star Castor. After clearing the ship at Port-o'-Plains, he began the series of hops that he and Moira had decided upon, the first of which brought them to One Leg To Stand On. Coming down in an uncultivated field a few miles outside of town, he started beaming a carefully prepared sales pitch over the local short-wave band: "NOW PLAYING: Nicholas Hayes, Zonda of the Amazon, and Bar-rag the Wonder Dog in *Courtin' Mary Lou.* Come one, come all—ADMISSION FREE. The place: the Theatre-Ship, two miles south of town. The time: starrise. See Bar-rag the Wonder Dog thwart the ardent lovers. See him appear out of Thin Air and spin his magic tail. See him, see him, see him! FREE! FREE! FREE!" If the "FREE" didn't get them, nothing would.

It got them all right—that, and the emptiness of their days. By the time the first star appeared, the section of the meadow in front of the ship was filled to capacity, and beyond. The starlit faces were gaunt and unimaginative for the most part, but there was curiosity in every pair of eyes, and in the children's, eagerness as well. Hayes turned on the footlights he had installed along the edge of the dock, and stepped from behind the maroon plastivelvet curtain Moira had made.

"Citizens of Golden Grain," he said, "we have not come here to defraud you of your hard-earned credits but to help and to entertain you. Whether or not you buy one of the medicine kits which I'm about

to show you, you will be equally welcome to attend the show which will go on immediately afterward." He faced the curtain. "Zonda?"

Clad in her jaguar skin, her long legs flashing in the footlights, Moira stepped out on the dock carrying a small table on which several dozen medicine kits were piled. Setting the table down, she picked up the topmost kit and handed it to Hayes; then she turned and smiled warmly at the audience.

Hayes held up the kit and described its contents.

"None of the items I've mentioned is a panacea," he concluded, "but each of them will live up to the claims I made for it, and all of them should be in every single household in One Leg To Stand On. The kits sell for two credits apiece. Surely your physical welfare and the welfare of your children are worth that much to you!"

The kits sold surprisingly well, and Moira had to go upstairs twice for more of them. She and Hayes were elated when they retired behind the curtain to round up Bar-rag and get ready for their act. "I think we'd better tone it down a little, don't you?" she said, slipping into her Mary Lou dress. "There's a lot of kids out there."

"Good idea," Hayes said. "I'll keep my hands above the waist and leave out the leers, and you can eliminate the wiggles when you walk. Okay?"

"Okay."

Even toned down *Courtin' Mary Lou* went over big. In fact, the audience begged for an encore. Hayes and Moira gave it to them in the form of one of their abandoned skits. "Why don't you do something for them out of your repertoire?" Moira asked Hayes, when the people continued to linger hopefully about the platform.

"That's one way of getting rid of them, I suppose."

"I didn't mean it that way. Don't you see, Nick? You're as much obligated to elevate them culturally as you are to elevate them physically. You've sold them penicillin. Now sell them another kind of pill. Force it down their throats if they don't want to take it. You owe it to them, Nick. You owe it to yourself!"

He regarded her thoughtfully. It was an angle that hadn't occurred to him, and it just might provide the added something that he needed to round out the image he was trying to create. "All right," he said, "I'll give it a try."

Stepping out on the dock, he explained what had gone before the soliloquy he was about to render and what would take place afterward. Then he raised his arms

"What is a man, If his chief good and market of his time Be but to sleep and feed?
A beast, no more.
Sure, He that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fast in us unus'd .. ."

As he spoke, the stars stood out ever more vividly above his head, while their light rained down with ever greater intensity upon the upturned faces of his audience. The air was cool, bracing. One of Golden Grain's three moons had climbed into the sky and hung in the heavens like the eye of a camera.

He felt shackles slip from his wrists, fetters fall from his ankles. The "camera" captured his facsimile and started relaying it toward a hundred million living rooms, and he knew the fulfillment of distribution once again. His words climbed into the sky and spread out among the stars in rich and rounded syllables, hung there for all to hear even after he had finished speaking and there was no sound save the susurrus of the meadow grass beneath the feet of his awed and departing audience And he stood there all alone, Nicholas Hayes did, the wind from the forest fresh against the words he had uttered as they sped outward into the immensities.

No, not quite alone. Moira had come out on the deck and was standing beside him, and Bar-rag had crept forth from behind the curtain and had curled up at his feet. Hayes was barely aware of either of them. "You were wonderful, Nick," Moira said, "and they knew it, too. They'll never forget, and neither will I."

The spell was broken. "It's getting cold," Hayes said. "Let's go inside."

VI

From One Leg To Stand On they hopped to Dutchman's Breeches, and from Dutchman's Breeches they hopped to Devil Take The Hindmost, and from Devil Take The Hindmost they hopped to A Pocket Full Of Rye. The turnout in each instance was excellent, and the same enthusiasm that had been accorded them in One Leg To Stand On was accorded them thrice more. At the close of each performance Hayes rendered his soliloquy, and each time received the same rapt attention and the same symbolic fulfillment.

But symbolic fulfillment was not enough. And he knew it. From Golden Grain they proceeded to Acre In The Sky, the fifth planet of the blue star Achemar, where they made one-night stands in Potpourri, Sunrise, Venus Looking-Glass, Hereafter, Winding River and Jack Jump Over The Candlestick. Their stand in Jack Jump Over The Candlestick resulted in the accidental publicity which Hayes had gambled on gaining sooner or later. Mahatma McFadden, a leading correspondent for the IBS Special News Service, had come upon the scene to tape a peasant wedding, Acre In The Sky style, but when he heard about the medicine show and learned that none other than Nicholas Hayes was the medicine man, he taped the *Courtin' Mary Lou* performance, too. He also taped the spiel that preceded it and the soliloquy that followed it.

Hayes played his hand shrewdly. "I'm not sure I'd want that much publicity," he said when Mahatma came hurrying back stage, waving a waiver.

"Give me anything, but don't give me that, Mr. Hayes," Mahatma said. "Who ever heard of an actor who didn't want publicity!"

"I'm not an actor any more. I'm a medicine man." Mahatma guffawed. He was a thin, wiry little man with a hungry face and bright brown eyes. "Medicine smedicine. Once an actor, always an actor, I say. The trouble with you, Mr. Hayes, is you're sore because you got kicked out of the Guild. Sign here, and when they see the tape, they may even let you back in. You never can tell."

"Let me back in because I ran away and became a medicine man?" Hayes laughed a laugh with the precise amount of derision in it necessary to lend it a ring of truth. "Even if they would, I wouldn't consider it."

"All right, then. Look at the situation this way, Mr. Hayes. Eventually this tape will wind up in the out-planets and be played in two-bit theatres and barns—provided you sign the waiver, that is. Now, you want these people to know about you, don't you? You want them to look forward to your coming, don't you? Well, believe me, once they see you on tape, they *will* look forward, and if they happen to have seen you live already, they'll be all the more eager to see you live again. Publicity never hurt anybody, you know."

"I think he's right, Nick," Moira said.

"I know I'm right," Mahatma said.

"H'm'm," Hayes said.

The battle won, Mahatma handed him the waiver and an uncapped jet pen. "Right there, where it says 'signature of originator,' Mr. Hayes."

Two months later when Hayes and Moira and Bar-rag were touring Green Thumb, the tenth planet of the white star Beta Aurigae, Nancy Oakes, girl reporter for the interstellar magazine *Newstar* caught up to them in the little town of Lily of The Valley.

Miss Oakes was asparkle with excitement when she sought Hayes out in the *Dr. Albert Schweitzer* after the performance, and her portable tape-recorder was loaded and ready to go. "Mr. Hayes, you simply *must* let me write you up," she said. "Our readers will simply *devour* your story. Here, let me show you some of the stereophotos I took during your act. They're simply *terrific."*

Hayes looked them over with carefully disciplined curiosity. One of them showed him peddling medicine kits, with Moira standing beside him in her jaguar skin. Another showed him and Moira on the sofa, with Bar-rag between them. A third showed him standing on the starlit dock in the midst of his soliloquy. It. was one of the best pictures he had ever had taken.

He handed the sterophotos back. Abruptly Bar-rag materialized on the living-room floor and jumped up on his lap. Miss Oakes gasped. "How in the world did you ever manage to train him like that, Mr. Hayes?"

"It wasn't difficult. He's not an ordinary dog, you see. He's a doggone."

"Really?" Miss Hayes activated the recorder with an unobtrusive flick of her finger. "Tell me what a doggone is, Mr. Hayes. It ought to make simply fascinating copy." Hayes complied. "And now," Miss Oakes rushed on, "you must fill me in on your past. And Zonda's too, of course. Naturally, I know that you're a guest actor, but I'd like some personal items—things that will tie in with your deciding to become medicine man."

Hayes looked at Moira with feigned helplessness. "Shall we let her do the article?" he asked.

"Of course, Nick."

He faced Miss Oakes again. "Well, I guess we can't fight destiny, can we, Miss Oakes? Start throwing your questions." The issue with the article in it came out two months later, but two more months passed before the copy which the publisher sent Hayes caught up to him. The article began on page 14. He looked at the title: *Nicholas Hayes: the Dr. Schweitzer of the Spaceways.* He read the blurb: *How an exiled thespian has triumphed over alcoholism to bring the blessings of civilization to our neighbors in the sky.*

He threw the magazette into the wastebasket.

The next town they played in was Winter's Breath. At the close of the performance Hayes received a message that a certain party wished to see him in her room at the Winter's Breath Hotel. He walked through woods and over fields, beneath stars he no longer saw, then down a winding street and up dilapidated steps into a tired lobby. The room was number 204. He climbed stairs, turned right down a dingy hall. Leslie met him at the door. "Nick, darling, you're looking wonderful."

He went in and sat down on the nearest chair. She took the chair facing it. "I guess you know I've come to take you back," she said.

He raised his eyes. Her eyes were the same. Pale brown, with flecks of summer sunlight in them. Her hair was night-dark as always, sequined with latent stars that even unimaginative lamplight could elicit. Translucent of V-bodice she sat there, gold of abbreviated skirt. Strutting as always her little hour upon the stage. "Why didn't King come after me himself?"

"Because I asked him to send me. An appropriate gesture, don't you think? Imagine, Nick—we'll have cocktails in Laughter in the Afternoon just the way we used to. We'll go to those cute crummy places we used to eat in after shows. We'll—"

"I'm married," Hayes said.

She laughed. "So what? No one stays married any more. It's passe. In Old York, we've adopted the Muslim custom in such matters. You say 'I divorce you' three times and it's all over."

"Is it?"

She leaned forward. "Don't play noble with me, Nick. I can read between the lines when the lines concern you. I'm not Zonda of the Amazon. I'm Leslie of Laughter in the Afternoon. You didn't become a medicine man to help out-planet peoples. You became a medicine man to help yourself—to attract the favorable attention you needed to get yourself back into the good graces of the Teletheatre Guild and back into the good graces of Christopher King. Most of all, you became a medicine man so you could step before the teletheatre camera and be multiplied by one hundred million once again."

Hayes was looking at the floor. "I assume I'm already reinstated in the Guild. Does King have a part for me?"

"I knew you'd see the light, darling. Of course he has a part. He has *the* part — the part of Milton Pomfret. *The Two-Sided Triangle* is coming up for Encore next month and your understudy's contract runs out before that time. So you're all set, Nicholas dear. I can't say the same for Zonda, of course, since I'm still Mary Lou, besides which I doubt very much if she'd measure up to Chris' standards." Suddenly she giggled. "Tell me, darling, did she really swing on a grapevine in The Last of the Mohicans bar the way is says in the article?"

"Shut up!" Hayes said.

"And that ridiculous little dog with the windmill tail. Where in the world did you find *him?* Honestly, Nick, you're too precious for words!"

Hayes stood up. "You've reserved passage, I suppose."

"On the Great Eastern Express. We rendezvous out of Port-o'-Winds at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. So get a move on, darling. We've very little time."

"I'll be back in an hour," Hayes said, and walked out of the room

And down the hall and down the stairs and out into the street and down the winding street and through woods and across meadows, more field to where the dark pile of the ship showed against the stars ...

Moira was waiting up for him. Bar-rag fast asleep on her lap. Her face told him that she already knew. "You've known all along, haven't you?" he said.

"Don't feel bad, Nick. I wanted you to be reinstated, too." It was late in the day to ask it, but he asked it anyway. "Do *you* feel bad?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm going back to New North Dakota, Mars, where I belong."

"I'll hire a pilot to go with you. It's no good piloting a ship alone. The *Schweitzer* ought to bring more than we paid for it if you can find the right buyer."

"I'm glad. Bar-rag and I will watch you."

He looked down at the small gray head and the absurd, tatterdemalion ears. He raised his eyes to Moira's slender throat. A faint pulse beat there. He raised his eyes still further and caught the telltale twinkle of the runaway tear. He stood there, desperately trying to feel. He felt nothing at all except a desire to be gone. "Goodby, Moira," he said, and turned and ran down the spiral stairway and out into the night.

VII

In Old New York it was summer. It was always summer in Old York. He went with Leslie and King to Laughter in the Afternoon and sipped drab coffee while they gaily chatted over cocktails and said Nick this and Nick that, and Oh Nick, how good it is to have you back! He went to *Triangle* to rehearsals and picked up effortlessly where he had left off, and sometimes when he spoke his lines, he thought of starry nights on Green Thumb and Acre In The Sky, and cool winds wafting out of virgin woods and breathing upon the little stage.

He was not surprised when he began to drink again. It had been inevitable all along. He drank for the same reason he had drunk before. Only this time he knew what the reason was. But knowing did not help. What good did it do to know that you were incapable of loving anyone besides yourself if the incapability was incurable?

On Encore night the Teletheatre Bowl overflowed into the square. Encores were traditional, and Old Yorkers treasured traditions above the common sense that would have reminded them, had they listened, that they had already seen the play at least once, either on its teletheatre debut or in one of the various little theatres it had been playing in during the past year. But they did not listen, and came instead like lemmings to drown in a quasi-cultural sea.

"How does it feel to be in action again, medicine man?" Leslie said, as she and Hayes took their places for the first scene. "How does it feel to know that in a few seconds you'll be multiplied by one hundred million and will no longer be alone?"

He did not answer. Would Moira be watching? he wondered. Would Bar-rag? Abruptly he forgot both girl and doggone as the curtain rose and the cameras swung into place. Seated behind his desk, he said to his wife who had stopped off at the office on this sunny Friday afternoon to check up on him, "As you can see, Glenda, my dear, there are no secretaries sitting on my lap, none hidden in the filing cabinets, and none peering fearfully forth at you from behind the coffee-break bar," and the play was off to a smooth start with Leslie, as the suspicious Glenda, telling him that she had not come to count his amanuenses but to remind him that that night they were dining at the Croftons and to suggest that he skip his usual on-the-road cocktail and get home a little early so that for once they could avoid the usual

last-minute confusion occasioned by his trying to shave, shower, and dress all at the same time.

At this point, a striking redhead minced into the office and told Hayes-Pomfret that he was wanted in the layout room, whereupon he followed her offstage. Glenda glared after them for a moment, then picked up the phone and put in a call to the face-and-figure specialist and told him what she wanted done, and why. Next, she put in a call to the phoneticist and told *him* what she wanted done, and why.

The following scene showed her as ravishing Mary Lou Johnson, applying for and obtaining a secretarial job in her husband's office. The plot progressed. Hayes-Pomfret took his new secretary out to lunch. He took her out to dinner. At length he made a date with her and stopped off afterward at her apartment. They sat down side by side on the sofa in her living room. Mary Lou edged closer to him. I'll bet your home was never like this." she said, pouting her lips for the "first" kiss.

"Darling," Hayes-Pomfret said, "if home was like this, I'd never budge from the doorstep."

She moved even closer. "Prove it then."

"I will," Hayes-Pomfret said, and put his arms around her. The doorbell rang. "Darn!" Mary Lou said, and got up and left the room.

Her voice could be heard offstage as she argued loudly with a salesman who was trying to sell her a book called *Why You Should Never Trust Your Husband.* To get rid of the man she had to take the stand that all husbands *were* trustworthy and that therefore the book was a big lie. The interruption lasted a little over five minutes, during which time Hayes-Pomfret paced back and forth on the stage doing a humorous pantomime of a conscience-stricken husband trying vainly to free himself from the grip of an impatient lover. Upon Mary Lou's return, he resumed his seat on the sofa and she sat back down beside him.

"Darn old salesmen!" she said. "It's getting so people can't have *any* privacy any more!"

Hayes-Pomfret started to put his arm around her. Abruptly she screamed and leaped to her feet.

Hayes stared at the small object that had materialized beside him. He could not move.

The object had hair the hue of morning mists. Its tatterdemalion ears brought bar-rags to mind, and its glazed, protruding eyes lingered a hint of the gold that had once shone forth in love and adoration. Frozen blood flaked the once-roguish mouth, and the white-tufted tail was silent. The small star in the middle of the forehead shone no more.

He picked the little body up and cradled it in his arms. For a moment, he could not see.

"Shove it under the sofa quick!" Leslie, who had sat back down beside him, whispered. "Get on with your lines!"

Hayes hardly heard her. "Why, Bar-rag?" he said. "Why did you do it? You knew it was a cliff—why did you jump over it? It was forty million miles high, Bar-rag. Forty million miles!"

"Nick, for God's sake!" Leslie said. "Get rid of that horrible thing and get on with your lines!"

Still cradling Bar-rag in his arms, Hayes stood up. The bowl was filled with a vast whispering; ten thousand faces shimmered in the mist before his eyes. He walked away from Leslie. He walked away from himself. He died one hundred million deaths.

In the dressing-room corridor, King caught up to him. "Nick, come back! We can still save the show. Some stagehand pulled a dirty trick–that's all."

Hayes did not pause.

"Nick, you walk out that door, you'll never walk back in it again! I swear."

Hayes kept on walking.

Outside, it wasn't so bad. Outside, he could see Mars. Almost at perigee, it hung like an orange streetlight in the sky. He saw the red plains through his tears. He saw the steepled matchbox of the little church. He saw the rambling ocher hills. His gaze came back and rested on the little body cradled in his arms. Forty million miles, he thought. *Forty million miles!*

The house was a gentle pile of wood and windows in the starlight. Moira met him at the door. "Nick, I hoped, I prayed you'd come!"

"Were you with him when–when he–"

She nodded. "He was sitting at my feet. A second after you said 'darling,' he disappeared. At first I didn't understand what had happened. I never dreamed he'd recognize you on teletheatre. Then, several

minutes later, he appeared on the screen, and–and I knew."

"I buried him in space," Hayes said. "Out among the stars. He belongs there, Bar-rag does. He was a star himself."

"Come into the living room, Nick. There's something I want to show you."

They walked down the hall. "The ship," Hayes said. "Did you sell it yet?"

"No–it's still at Port-o'-Sands. Mom and Dad just went to bed–shall I wake them so you can say hello?"

"No. I'm going to be here for some time–if you'll put up with me."

In the living room, she knelt beside a small basket that stood by the fireplace. He knelt beside her. He saw the tiny tatterdemalion ears first, then the small mist-gray body and the little white-tufted tail. A pair of slanted golden eyes returned his astonished gaze, and above them on the forehead shone a little star. "Bar-rag!" he gasped.

"I told you they were parthenogenetic. He–she gave birth to him a week before she died."

Hayes tweaked one of the tatterdemalion ears, "Well, what do you know!" he said.

He straightened, and pulled Moira to her feet. Over her shoulder he saw the platinum figurine of Maurice Evans standing on the mantel. Yes, she had sold it all right. Sold it to herself. He looked into her eyes. He would have fallen in love with her long ago if love had not been beyond him. It was beyond him no longer. "We'll begin all over, Moira–if you'll do me the honor of being my leading lady again. We'll restock the ship and we'll go to all the places we didn't get to before. We'll go to Morning Glory and Far Reach and Lode–"

"And Meadow Flower and Forty-Niner and Frontier–"

"And when we complete our circuit, we'll go back to Black Dirt–"

"And go on from there to Golden Grain–"

"And Goshen–"

"And Acre In The Sky ..."

She was in his arms now, and he was kissing her. In Old York, it was summer. It was always summer in Old York. But in New North Dakota, Mars, it was spring.

The Grown-up People's Feet

There are things we remember because we can't forget them and there are things we remember because we don't want to forget them, and there are a few very special things that possess both qualities.

It was late in September of that last year, and Mary Ellen had driven in to town to pick me up from work. She pulled over to the corner of Main and Central where I was waiting, and I got into the car. Laurie was standing on the front seat, her blue eyes enormous with the marvel of a new discovery.

"Dad, I can read!" she shouted the moment she saw me. "I can *read* now, Dad!"

I pinched her button nose but she hardly noticed. She had a small red primary reader in her hands, opened to a brightly colored picture of a little girl in a swing with a little boy pushing her. Beneath the picture was a series of short paragraphs in large clear print.

"Listen to me, Dad! Listen: 'Jane is a girl. John is a boy. I see Jane. I see John!' "

"What do you think of our little Edna St. Vincent Millay?" Mary Ellen said, watching the red light.

"I think she's just wonderful!"

The light turned green, and we went up the big hill that led out of the little town on 30. It was late in September, as I said, but the hills and the fields along the highway were still brushed with the faded green of summer and the sky was hazily blue. Houses were a washed white and the violet shadows of elms and maples made unpremeditated patterns on close-cropped lawns. An empty tandem rumbled past us, touching the shoulder and whirring up a cloud of dust.

" 'Oh, look at Jane. Oh, look at John.' "

"You can read 'Bed in Summer' to *me* now, Laurie," I said.

She looked up from the book. I still can't forget the way her eyes were. They made you think of deep blue lakes with the sun sparkling in them for the first time.

"Sure, Dad," she said. "I'll read it to you."

Mary Ellen turned off 30 and started up our road. "Don't you think Stevenson might be a little difficult for her, dear?"

"Oh, no," Laurie said. "You don't understand, Mother. I can *read* now!"

"You can help her over the rough spots, Mary L.," I said . . . "What's for supper, by the way?"

"Roast beef. It's still in the oven." She turned into the drive and braked by the forsythia bush.

Our house was on a rise and you could look down and see the highway with the cars hurrying back and forth like busy metallic beetles. Beyond the highway there was a fine view of the lake. On clear days you could see Canada. It was hazy that day though, and all you could see was the milky blueness of the lake interblending with the misted blueness of the sky. An intermittent wind kept rustling the big maples in the yard.

I got the evening paper out of the roadside tube, went over to the verandah and sat on the swing. Laurie was already there, the primary reader opened on her knees. We drifted gently back and forth.

" 'I see Jane,' " Laurie read. " 'I see John.' "

The wind kept ruffling the paper, making the headlines crawl. They were concerned with the bomb, as usual. Beneath, them was the same old dismal story of potential megatons and potential megadeaths. After awhile I let the paper slip from my hands and listened to Laurie and the wind, and the sounds Mary Ellen was making as she set the dining room table.

I can still hear the pleasant clatter of dishes, and I can still hear the soft rushing sound of the wind; but most of all I can hear Laurie's sweet child's voice saying over and over: " 'Jane is a girl. John is a boy. I see Jane. I see John . . ."

A boy and a girl and a bomb, and presently Mary Ellen calling, "Come to supper!"

What I remember most, though, was the last right of day, and the three of us sitting on the porch swing. Laurie sat in the middle, a *Child's Garden of Verses* on her lap, opened to "Bed in Summer."

" 'In—' " she read.

" 'In winter,' " Mary Ellen prompted.

" 'In winter I get up at night—' "

" 'And—' "

" 'And dr—' "

" 'And dress by yellow candlelight.' "

" 'In summer, quite the other way—' "

" 'I have to go to bed by day!' "

"Why that's wonderful, darling. 'I have—' "

" 'I have to go to bed and see the—' "

" 'birds still hopping—' "

" 'The birds still hopping on the tree—' "

" 'Or hear the—' "

" 'Or hear the grown-up people's feet—' "

" 'Still going—' "

" 'Still going past me in the street—' "

* * *

As I say, there are things we remember because we can't forget them and there are things we remember because we don't want to forget them, and there are a few very special things that possess both qualities.

Laurie is a big girl now, but she does not know how to read. There would be little point in her knowing how since there is nothing to read. But once upon a time she could read a little bit, though of course she has forgotten how by now and perhaps it is just as well. There is no need for the printed word

in the simple village we have built here in the hills, far from the radioactive shore of the lake; there is need for nothing here except strong backs that will not tire after long hours in the fields.

The long winter nights are empty, of course, and at first thought it might seem that books would help to fill them; but the books would be old books and they would only fill the nights with the past, and the past is better the way it is, half-forgotten, a way of life we are not quite sure we experienced at all—except for those little things we keep remembering, sitting before the hearth, the wind howling in the bitter darkness outside, shrieking in the distances as it scatters the ashes of cremated cities over the barren land.

Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory

They called him "The Jet-propelled Dutchman," but he was neither Dutch nor jet-propelled. He was neo-Terran. In common with all interplanetary spaceships of his day, his ship employed the Lamarre displacement-drive. His name was Nathaniel Drake.

Legend has it that whenever he put into port, he searched for a certain woman in the hope of redeeming himself through love, but the makers of legends are prone to draw parallels where no true parallels exist. Nathaniel Drake searched for a certain woman—yes; but the woman for whom he searched was even more of a ghost than he was, and it was not love through which he hoped to redeem himself, but hate.

His story begins in a region of space off the orbital shores of Iago Iago, not long after the "Suez Canal" sprang its first "leak." In those days, the Sirian Satrapy was at the height of her industrial career. Her globular merchant ships busily plied her interplanetary seas, and her Suez Canal freighters left Wayout almost daily for the ravenous marts of Earth. Her planets prospered and her peoples dwelled in peace and plenty and her politicians lived high on the hog. Only one of her ten ecosphere worlds knew not the blessings of civilization. This one—Iago Iago—had been set aside for displaced indigenes in accordance with section 5, paragraph B-81, of the Interstellar Code, and was out of bounds to poet and pillager alike.

Nathaniel Drake was transporting a cargo of pastelsilk from Forget Me Not to Dior. Forget Me Not and Dior, as any schoolboy will tell you, are Sirius VIII and X respectively. Between their orbits lies the orbit of Sirius IX, or Iago Iago. Now at the time of Drake's run, these three planets were in conjunction, and consequently, in order to avoid the gravitic pull of Iago Iago, he had programmed the automatic pilot to swing the one-man ship into a wide detour. Although he did not know it at the time, this detour had already brought the *Fly by Night* into an area of space seldom "trodden by the foot of man."

When the "Suez Canal warp-process' proved impracticable for interplanetary runs, interplanetary spacemen accepted their lot once and for all and adopted three standard measures to combat solitude. In the order of their importance, these measures were (1) girlie realitapes, (2) girlie stereo-comics, and (3) hangoverless gin. Nathaniel Drake had nothing against watered-down voyeurism, but he believed in slaking a thirst, not in tantalizing it; hence during most of his runs, he concentrated on measure number three—i.e., hangoverless gin. The present run was no exception, and he was in the middle of his fifth fifth when the knock sounded on his cabin door.

He was not a man who took fright easily, and he never panicked. He finished filling the glass he had just emptied, and set the bottle back down on the chart table. He could hear the faint creaking of the hull re-enforcing beams and the subdued murmuring of the gray generator in the power room below him. For a while, there were no other sounds. Then the knock came again.

Deliberately Drake got up, removed his ion gun from the rack above his bunk, and laid it on the table. He sat back down again. "Come in," he said.

The door opened, and a girl entered.

She was quite tall. Her hair was light-brown, and her brown eyes were set wide-apart in a thin,

rather high-cheekboned face. They were strange eyes. They seemed to be looking both outward and inward at the same time. Atop her head sat a small kepi, its hue strictly in keeping with the blue-grayness of her coatblouse and skirt. Army of the Church of the Emancipation uniforms were noted for their severity, and hers was no exception. In her case, however, the severity seemed to have been lost in the shuffle, and catching the sweep of her thighs as she moved into the room, Drake guessed why. She was stacked, this girl was—stacked so stunningly that the fact would have been self-evident even if she had been wearing a blanket.

The thoroughness of his scrutiny neither escaped nor disconcerted her. She did seem somewhat taken aback by his appearance, however. Small wonder: he needed a haircut, and the sideburns and chin whiskers that symbolized his captaincy had spread out into an unkempt beard that made him look fifty years of age instead of the thirty-two he actually was. "I—I imagine you're surprised to see me," she said.

Her voice was husky, but rich and full, and lent her words a resonance that words seldom get to know. Drake dug up another glass, poured it half full of gin, and offered it to her. She declined it, as he had known she would. "No thank you," she said.

He drank the gin himself, then sat back in his chair and waited. While waiting, he pondered the why and the whereby of her presence. The whereby gave him no trouble: the starboard storeroom provided sufficient space for a penurious passenger to stow away, and venality was certainly a common enough ailment among port officials. The why, however, was a horse of a different dimension.

She tethered it herself. "I want you to put me down on Iago Iago," she said. "I'll pay you—pay you well. It would have been impractical for me to take a passenger ship—with so many witnesses, the pilot wouldn't have dared to land me. I—I gambled that a loner like yourself might. Iago Iago's in conjunction now, and you won't lose more than a few hours, and no one will ever know."

He was staring at her. "Iago Iago! Why should you want me to put you down in Iago Iago?"

"The Polysirians are expecting the resurrection of their supreme saint. I—I want to be on hand to witness it."

"Nonsense!" Drake said. "When you're dead, you're dead, and that goes for saints and sinners alike."

Golden flecks danced briefly in her brown eyes. "Does it, Mr. Drake? Then how do you explain the Potomac Peregrination?"

"I don't have to explain it because I don't believe in it. But to get back to specifics: even assuming that there *is* a resurrection about to take place on Iago Iago, there would be no way for the news to have reached you."

"We have ways. Call it an interplanetary grapevine, if you like ... The supreme saint prophesied that he would rise from the dead before the passing of a single year and appear in the heavens for all to see, and then descend among the people."

To gain time for reflection, Drake dropped the subject and asked her name. "Annabelle," she said. "Saint Annabelle Leigh."

"And how old are you?"

"Twenty-three. Please put me down on Iago Iago, Mr. Drake."

"You said you were prepared to pay. How much?"

She turned her back on him, did something to her coatblouse, and swung around a moment later with a money belt in her hands. She held it out to him. "It contains two thousand credits. Count them, if you like."

He shook his head. "Put it back on. I wouldn't risk losing my pilot's license for ten times that amount."

"But there *isn't* any risk. I'm certainly not going to tell anyone that you violated the code."

He regarded her speculatively. "Credits aren't the only form of negotiable cash," he said.

She did not even blush. "I am prepared to pay in that kind of cash too."

He was dumbfounded. Sex was not forbidden to Church of the Emancipation girls, but usually at the merest hint of it, they ran away and hid somewhere. For a moment, remembering the sweep of her thighs

when she had entered the room, he was tempted; but only for a moment. Recovering himself, he said, "I'm afraid that kind of cash won't suffice either. My pilot's license is my bread and butter, and I value my bread and butter highly." He stood up. "In my capacity as captain of this vessel I hereby place you under arrest and order you to return to your self-chosen quarters and to remain there for the duration of this voyage."

Disbelief darkened her wide-apart brown eyes. Then golden motes of anger came and chased the darkness away. She made a wild grab for the ion gun on the table. He thwarted her easily, seized her arm and, towering above her, escorted her out of the cabin and down the companionway to the starboard storeroom. The starboard storeroom adjoined the hull, and in common with all hull compartments, it was equipped with a lock instead of a door. After shoving Saint Annabelle Leigh inside, he adjusted the sealing mechanism so that the lock could be opened only from the outside, then he turned to go.

She ran forward and caught his arm. There was desperation in her brown eyes. *"Please* put me down on Iago Iago."

He freed his arm, stepped out into the corridor, and closed the lock behind him.

An hour later, his ship passed through a Lambda-Xi field. At least Drake thought it was a Lambda-Xi field. Certainly its effect upon himself and the *Fly by Night* fitted the hypothetical description given in section 3, chapter 9 of *The Pilot's Handbook—a* prose-work which all spacemen were required to know by heart. The bulkheads "shimmered"; the artificial atmosphere took on a "haze-like aspect"; the deck "desolidified." As for Drake himself, he experienced a "painful prickling of nerve-ends and a slight vertigo." Then translucence—"the prelude to total disintegration" came to ship and master alike.

The handbook went on to state that in view of the fact that no one had ever passed through a Lambda-Xi field and survived, all knowledge pertaining to the preliminary effects of such a passage had had to be extrapolated. It then added reassuringly that since such fields were exceedingly rare, the danger they represented was virtually negligible. The handbook said nothing, however, about any handwriting on the wall. Handwriting there was, though, just the same. Standing in his ship, through the translucent bulkheads and hull of which he could make out the stars, Drake read the single word:

DEATH.

And yet death did not come. Neither did total disintegration—if a distinction can be drawn. The *Fly by Night* went right on being translucent, and so did Nathaniel Drake.

He took a tentative step. He took another. The deck supported him, even though he could look down through it and through the decks beneath it and through the hull and dimly see the stars—yes, and in the nearer distance, the green globe of Iago Iago. He raised his hand, and found that he could see through his flesh too. He got a mirror and hung it on the wall and stared into his translucent face. He could see right through his reflected eyes to the reflected wall behind him. He could see right through his reflected cheeks and chin. Looking down at himself, he found that he could see through his body. Through his clothes. The translucence was such that the combination of clothes and flesh cancelled out nakedness; nevertheless, his spaceshoes and his spaceslacks and his thigh-length spacecoat were as unquestionably spectral as he was.

And yet he felt whole. His body had solidity. He lived and breathed. His ghostly ship still sped on its way to the distant shores of Dior. Maybe he was dead, but he did not feel dead. I think, therefore I am ...

He got out the log and set down the co-ordinates of the field. Abruptly he remembered his passenger, and ran down the companionway to the starboard storeroom. However, he did not throw open the lock. If he had he really would have been dead. Beyond the translucent bulkhead lay the utter airlessness of space. The storeroom was gone. So were all the other starboard compartments. So was the starboard hull.

So was Saint Annabelle Leigh.

Nathaniel Drake sought out Madame Gin, only to find that she too was a ghost of her former self. Nevertheless, she had not lost her sixty-proof personality, and he consulted her at considerable length—throughout the rest of the voyage, in fact—beseeching her to close up the rather raw wound that

had appeared in the side of his hitherto impregnable conscience. This, Madame Gin obstinately refused to do.

Between consultation he put his mind to work on a pair of pressing problems. The first problem had to do with his cargo. It had come through, every yard of it, but it had come through the way the ship itself had come through—with the exception, of course, of the starboard side, which had apparently passed through the center of the field and been disintegrated altogether. It was ironic that a vessel so effective when it came to nullifying thermo-nuclear devices could be so utterly helpless against Lambda-Xi bombardment. Translucent to begin with, the pastelsilk was now virtually transparent and undoubtedly would be rejected by *Dernier Cri* Garments, the New Paris firm that had ordered it. Worse, he was bonded for it, and if the bonding company had to stand the entire loss, his ship would have to be forfeited, and his career as an independent merchant spaceman would be over.

The second problem had to do with his ghosthood. He did not have to ask himself how people would react to his appearance because he knew how he himself reacted to it whenever he looked into the mirror. And it was no good arguing that the mirror was a ghost of its former self too. He had merely to glance down at his hands to prove that the degree of emphasis was negligible.

Invariably his thoughts reverted to the wound in his conscience, whereupon he would rejoin Madame Gin at the chart table. Oh, he had a hundred arguments in his favor. He had not asked Saint Annabelle Leigh to stow away on his ship, had he? He had not known that the ship was going to undergo Lambda-Xi bombardment, had he? He had not known that the starboard section was doomed, had he? But, while each question could be answered with a resounding "no," the cold cruel truth marched inexorably on: If he had acceded to Annabelle Leigh's request and put in for Iago Iago, she would still be alive, and by not acceding to her request and by locking her in the starboard storeroom, he had afforded Fate a very large assist.

"I wash my hands of it," he told Madame Gin. "I'm no more to blame for her death than Pilate was to blame for the death of Christ the First."

Madame Gin was silent.

"It's not my fault she was a saint," he said. "That's what makes it seem worse than it really is—her being a saint, I mean."

Madame Gin said nothing.

"If she hadn't been a saint, it wouldn't be half so bad," Drake went on. "If she'd been some bum peddling her posterior, it probably wouldn't bother me at all. Why the hell should I care just because she was a saint? It's crazy, I tell you. Hell, she wasn't even a good saint. Good saints don't go around making the kind of proposition she made me, no matter what the cause. Saint Annabelle Leigh isn't quite as noble as you might think."

"Wasn't," said Madame Gin.

"All right then, I killed her. I'll even admit it. All I'm trying to say is that her being a saint makes it worse."

"Murderer," said Madame Gin.

Nathaniel Drake seized her around the neck, whereupon she turned into an empty bottle. He smashed the bottle on the edge of the table, and spectral splinters flew in all directions. "I'm not a murderer!" he screamed. "I'm not, I'm not, I'm not."

The first person to set eyes on "The Jet-propelled Dutchman" was the pilot of the New Paris sewage barge. He saw the ghost ship rather than its ghostly occupant, but this is of small consequence in view of the fact that the same looseness of terminology that marks the original legend also marks the second. He took one long look, then dumped his cargo into orbit post-haste and put back into port. The word spread rapidly, and when Nathaniel Drake put down some fifteen minutes later the New Paris streets and rooftops were jammed with jaded curiosity-seekers hopefully waiting to be scared out of their wits. They were not disappointed.

It is one thing to scare people who have no chestnuts in the fire that frightens them; it is quite another to scare people who have. The *Fly by Night* had barely settled itself on its anti-gray jacks when a ground car came skimming across the spacestrip and drew up before the cargo dock. Out of the car

stepped Thaddeus P. Terringer, president of *Dernier Cri* Garments, Dorrell Numan, vice president of *Dernier Cri* Garments, and the mayor of New Paris, who had his finger in the pie a la mode somewhere but exactly where not even the IRS troopers had been able to find out. Nathaniel Drake did not keep his visitors waiting, but donned his anti-gray belt, opened the ventral lock, and came drifting down to the dock. He had not shaved in two weeks, his unkempt hair hung over his forehead, and he was as translucent as tissue paper. They gaped.

The dock, rising as it did some five feet above the spacestrip, gave him an eminence of sorts, and the eminence, in turn, gave him confidence. "First time I ever rated a welcoming party," he said. "Where's the red carpet?"

Thaddeus P. Terringer was the first of the tongue-tied trio to recover his voice. He was a tall portly man, and he was attired as were his companions in the latest of *Dernier Cri* Garments' creations for the modern male: a pink tophat, a green, form-fitting suit of hand-twilled *thrip* fuzz, and high-heeled plastigator shoes. "Drake," he said, "you're drunk."

"No, I'm not—I'm disintegrated."

Terringer took a backward step. So did Dorrel Numan and the mayor. "You went through a Lambda-Xi field!" Numan exclaimed.

"That's about the size of it."

"Nonsense," Terringer said. "No one could survive Lambda-Xi bombardment."

"You call this survival?" Drake asked.

"The cargo," groaned the mayor. "What about the cargo?"

Drake answered him. "With a little luck, it might make good wrapping material for invisible bread. Put on your belt and go up and take a look."

By this time, the port master had arrived upon the scene. "I don't want anyone to board that ship till I've run a radiation check on it," he said. "Meanwhile Drake, take it up and park it on the five-hundred foot level. I don't know what happened to it and I don't know what happened to you, but I'm not taking any chances."

"Bring back a sample bolt," Terringer said. "We won't be contaminated if we look at it from a distance."

Drake nodded, adjusted his belt and guided himself up through the ventral lock. He extended the anti-grav jacks to five hundred feet, then, after getting a bolt of pastelsilk out of the hold, he drifted down to the dock again. He unrolled the bolt a little ways and held it up so that Terringer, Numan and the mayor, all of whom had retreated to a safer distance, could get a good look at it. It was as tenuous as mist, and owed what little visibility it still possessed to the exquisite blueness which the worms of Forget Me Not had imparted to it. Terringer groaned. So did Numan. So did the mayor. "And it's all like that?" Terringer asked.

Drake nodded. "Every last yard."

"Take it back to Forget Me Not," Terringer said.

Drake stared at him. "Why? They won't make it good."

"Of course they won't. But they may be able to induce their worms to reprocess it, or be able to salvage it in some other way. Meanwhile, we'll just have to order another shipment." He regarded Drake shrewdly. "You'd better hope they *can* salvage it. If they can't, your bonding company will be liable, and you know what that means." He glanced skyward to where the maimed and ghostly *Fly by Night* hovered like an awry balloon. "Although how a ship in that condition can be auctioned off is beyond me."

He turned, and together with Numan and the mayor re-entered the ground car and skimmed away. Drake felt suddenly, desperately sober. "Before you run a radiation check on my ship, run one on me," he told the port master. "I'm going into town and tie a good one on."

The port master grinned sympathetically. "Will do, Mr. Drake. I'll have the doc take a look at you too."

He was as good as his word, and both the *Fly by Night* and Drake checked out satisfactorily. Drake then went to see the port doctor, who gave him a complete physical and finally confessed in a

rather awed voice that he could find nothing wrong with him. Afterward, Drake visited the Port Exchange Bank, turned in his translucent credit notes for a less spectral species, and withdrew his savings—a matter of some five hundred Rockefellows. However, he did not tie a good one on. He did not tie any kind of a one on. He had barely set foot outside the port when it all began. People looked at him and ran away, or, even worse, stared at him and followed him wherever he went. The first lush lair he went into emptied almost as soon as he stepped in the door. In the next, the bartender refused to serve him. He said hello to a pretty girl walking down the street, and she fainted right before his eyes. He had gotten a haircut and a beard-trim by that time in one of the automatic barberbooths scattered strategically throughout the city, but apparently neither concession to propriety had made his appearance any the less ghastly. Finally, in desperation, he visited one of New Paris' leading physicists. The physicist ran a lengthy series of tests on him, stared at him for a long time, then asked, "Are you of Dutch descent by any chance?"

"No," Drake said, and left.

He bought ten fifths of gin and returned to his ship. It had already been recharged and reprovisioned. Repairing it, of course, had been out of the question. He thumbed his nose at the city as he soared spaceward. Soon he was beyond the sewage belt and free among the stars.

Forget Me Not

In Nathaniel Drake's day, the worms of Forget Me Not were legion. All over Silk City you could hear the sad susurrus of their tiny bodies as they spun their colorful cocoons in the long low sheds thoughtfully provided for them by the good folk of Pastelsilks, Inc. Toward twilight, the whispering would fade away, then, with the timid twinkling of the first star, it would come to life again and build up and up and up until the night would be one great vast whispering of worms at work—pink worms, green worms, blue worms, yellow worms, spinning silk such as had never been known before and will never be known again, for now the worms of Forget Me Not are dead.

Raise one more monument to the onward march of mankind. Place it beside the statue of the buffalo. You know where the statue of the buffalo stands. It stands right next to the statue of the blue whale.

Nathaniel Drake was well acquainted with the whispering. Forget Me Not was his birthplace, and his father had brought him to the fabled city-farm when Drake was a small boy. In his capacity as merchant spaceman, Drake had been there many times since, but it was the first time that stood out the most vividly in his memory. His father had been a grower of multi-pastels, a Forget Me Not plant genus whose mulberry-like leaves formed the worms' main diet, and had occasionally come to Silk City on business. On one of these occasions, he had brought the boy Nathaniel with him and taken him through several of the long low sheds, hoping that the experience might help the boy to forget about his mother, who had died the spring before and about whom he had been brooding ever since. There had been the sad susurrus of the worms working, and the glowing of colorful cocoons in the gloom, and in the processing sheds there had been the relentless turning of the automatic reels and the tiny corpses falling to the floor, one by one, and the boy Nathaniel, obsessed with thoughts of death, had wondered why more of the larvae were not spared the ignominy of the heat-treatment ovens and allowed to attain the apotheosis that was their birthright, not knowing then the senseless selfishness of mankind.

The man Nathaniel had not wondered. The man Nathaniel had not cared. The ghost of the man Nathaniel cared even less.

"Hello," said the ghost to a pretty girl as it passed her on the street.

The girl screamed, and ran away.

An old woman looked at him with horror in her eyes, then looked the other way. An IRS trooper stopped and stared. Nathaniel Drake went on.

Behind him in the Silk City spaceport, a trio of reluctant techs from Pastelsilks, Inc. were conducting various tests upon his cargo in order to determine whether or not it could be salvaged. As their findings would have to be processed through the executive echelons of the company and would not be made known to him till later in the day, he had a few hours to kill.

He did not intend to kill them in lush lairs, however. He had a wound to take care of.

It was the wound that had appeared in the side of his conscience. It had festered on the trip in from Dior, and now it was so painful that he could barely endure it. Madame Gin had only made it worse.

Conscience-wounds are different from physical wounds. In treating physical wounds, you attack the effect. In treating conscience-wounds, you attack the cause. Once the cause is eliminated, the wound automatically closes. This is rarely possible, but quite often the cause can be weakened, in which case the wound, while it will never completely close, will at least be less painful. In Nathaniel Drake's case, the cause was Saint Annabelle Leigh. If he could prove to himself that his suspicions were correct and that she had been something less than her sainthood would seem to indicate, a quantity of his pain might go away, and if he could discredit her sainthood altogether, his wound might close completely.

He proceeded directly to the local headquarters of the Army of the Church of the Emancipation. There, he inquired whether a Saint Annabelle Leigh were assigned to any of the local chapels. A white-faced clerk replied in the affirmative, and referred him to the Saint Julia Ward Howe chapel on Redemption Street.

In common with all Church of the Emancipation chapels, the Saint Julia Ward Howe chapel was an unpretentious wooden building, long and narrow, with crossed Confederate and Union flags hanging above its entrance. Entering, Drake walked down a narrow aisle between two rows of backless benches and paused in front of a small pulpit upon which a crude lectern stood. Beyond the lectern there was a curtained doorway, and above this doorway two more crossed-flags hung. Presently the curtains parted, and a tall, pale man with a seamed and narrow face and gray and quiet eyes stepped onto the pulpit. "I am Saint Andrew," he began, then stopped in staring consternation.

"I'm Nathaniel Drake, the captain of the. *Fly by Night,"* Drake said. "I've come about Saint Annabelle Leigh."

Comprehension supplanted the consternation on Saint Andrew's lined face—comprehension and relief. "I am so glad you came, Mr. Drake. I am but just returned from the port, where I was informed that you had just left. I—I refrained from asking them about Saint Annabelle. Tell me, is she all right? Did you put her down on Iago Iago? I have been half out of my mind ever since I heard what happened to you and your ship."

"I had bad news for you," Drake said. "Saint Annabelle Leigh is dead."

The whispering of the worms crept into the room. Saint Andrew's immaculate blue-gray uniform seemed suddenly several sizes too large for him. "Dead? Please tell me that's not true, Mr. Drake."

"I can't," Drake said. "But I can tell you how it happened." He did so briefly. "So you can see it wasn't my fault," he concluded. "I *couldn't* put her down on Iago Iago. It would have meant jeopardizing my pilot's license, and piloting a ship is all I know how to do. It isn't fair to ask a man to put his livelihood on the block—it isn't fair at all. She should have contacted me before she stowed away. You simply *can't* hold me responsible for what happened."

"Nor do I, Mr. Drake." Saint Andrew wiped away a tear that had run halfway down his cheek. "She did what she did against my advice," he went on presently. "The information she had received concerning a resurrection on Iago Iago was of dubious origin to say the least, and I was dead set against her stowing away on board your ship in any event, but she was very set in her ways. None of which in the least alleviates the cruel fact of her death."

"She left much to be desired as a saint then?" Drake asked.

"On the contrary, she was one of the finest persons I have ever indoctrinated. One of the kindest and the gentlest. And in all my years of service in the Army of the Church of the Emancipation, I have never seen a more dedicated and selfless soldier than she was. Her—her passing grieves me immeasurably, Mr. Drake."

Drake looked at the floor. He felt suddenly tired. "May I sit down, Saint Andrew?" he said.

"Please do."

He sank down on the nearest bench. "Was she a native of Forget Me Not?"

"No: She came from the vineyards of Azure—from a little province called *Campagne Piasible."* Saint Andrew sighed. "I remember vividly the first time I saw her. She was so pale and so thin. And her

eyes—I have never seen torture in anyone's eyes that could compare to the torture I saw in hers. She walked in here one morning, much in the same way you yourself walked in, and she knelt down before the lectern and when I appeared, she said, 'I want to die.' I stepped down from the pulpit and raised her to her feet. "No, child,' I said, 'you do not want to die, you want to serve—else you would not have come here,' and it was then that she lifted up her eyes and I saw the torture in them. In the two years that followed, much of the torture went away, but I knew somehow that all of it never would." Saint Andrew paused. Then, "There was a quality about her which I cannot quite describe, Mr. Drake. It was in the way she walked. In the way she talked. Most of all, it manifested itself when she stood up here behind the lectern and spread the Word. Would you like to hear one of her sermons? I taped them—every one."

"Why—why yes," Drake said.

Saint Andrew turned, parted the curtains behind the lectern, and disappeared into the room beyond. He reappeared a few moments later, bearing an archaic tape-recorder which he placed upon the lectern. "I selected a tape at random," he said, flicking the switch. "Listen."

For a while there was no sound save the whispering of the worms, and then above the whispering came her rich, full voice. Sitting there in the dim chapel, Drake pictured her standing straight and tall behind the lectern, her stern, blue-gray uniform trying vainly to tone down the burgeoning of her breasts and the thrilling sweep of her calves and thighs; her voice rising now in rich and stirring resonance and filling the room with unpremeditated beauty ..." "I have chosen to speak to you this day of the Potomac Peregrination, of the walking of His ghost upon the land; of the rising of His stone figure from the ruins of the temple where it had sat in silent meditation for three score and seventeen years, and of its coming to life to walk down to the blood-red sea, there to fall asunder on the beach. They will tell you, No, this did not happen, that the broken statue was borne there by men who wished to immortalize Him, and they will supply you with pseudo-scientific data that will seem to prove that the Planet of Peace that hovered above His head and then came down and absorbed His ghost and bore it from the face of the earth was no more than a mass-figment in the minds of the beholders. Yes, they will tell you this, these cynical-minded people will, these fact-stuffed creatures who are incapable of believing that a man can become immortal, that stone can transcend stone; that this kindest of men was the strongest of men and the greatest of men and the most enduring of men, and walks like a giant in our midst even unto this day. Well, let it be known by all present, and let it be bruited about, that *I* believe: *I* believe that stone can take on life and that this great man *did* rise from the ruins of His desecrated temple to walk upon the land; like a towering giant He walked, a giant with the fires of righteousness burning in His eyes, and He did raise His voice against the bombs falling and He did wipe the incandescence from the hellish heavens with His terrible gaze, and the thunder of His tread did set the very earth to trembling as He walked down the Potomac to the sea, ‘Lo, I have arisen,' He proclaimed. ‘Lo, I walk again! Look at Me, ye peoples of the earth—I have come to emancipate you from your shackling fears, and I have summoned the Planet of Peace from out of the immensities of space and time to transport My ghost to the stars. Lo, I *force* peace upon you, ye peoples of the earth, and I command you to remember always this terrible day when you drove Kindness from your doorsteps and threw wide your portals to Perdition . ...' Yes, He said these things, I swear unto you He said them as He walked down the Potomac to the sea beneath the brief bright bonfires of the bombs; the Planet of Peace shining high above His head, and if you cannot believe in the walking of His ghost upon the land and in His ascension to the stars, then you are as one dead, without hope, without love, without pity, without kindness, without humanity, without humility, without sorrow, without pain, without happiness, and without life. Amen."

The sad susurrus of the worms crept softly back into the room. With a start, Drake realized that he had bowed his head.

He raised it abruptly. Saint Andrew was regarding him with puzzled eyes. "Have you notified her family, Mr. Drake?"

"No," Drake said. "I mentioned the matter to no one."

"I'll radio them at once then, and tell them everything."

Saint Andrew rewound the tape, removed it from the recorder, and started to slip it into his pocket.

"Wait," Drake said, getting to his feet.

Again, the puzzled regard."Yes?"

"I'd like to buy it," Drake said. "I'll pay you whatever you think it's worth."

Saint Andrew stepped down from the pulpit and handed him the tape. "Please accept it as a gift. I'm sure she would have wanted you to have it." There was a pause. Then, "Are you a believer, Mr. Drake?"

Drake pocketed the tape. "No. Oh, I believe that the War of Nineteen Ninety-nine came to a halt on the very day it began all right. What I don't believe is that the nuclei of the enemy warheads were negated by the 'terrible gaze' of a second Christ. I've always gone along with the theory that they were negated by the bombardment of a Lambda-Xi field that 'slipped its moorings' and wandered into the area—the same kind of a bombardment that nearly negated me."

"And a commendable theory it is too—but basically isn't it as dependent upon divine intervention as the Potomac Peregrination?"

"Not necessarily. Such concurrences seem providential merely because we try to interpret the macrocosm on a microcosmic scale. Well, I have to be on my way, Saint Andrew. The powers-that-be at Pastelsilks should have come to some decision concerning my transparent cargo by this time. Thank you for the tape, and for your trouble."

"Thank *you* for bringing me news of Saint Annabelle, Mr. Drake. Even though it was bad. Goodbye."

"Goodbye," Drake said, and left.

* * *

The offices of Pastelsilks, Inc. were as many as they were magnificent, and the building that houses them pre-empted almost an entire acre. The whispering of the worms was absent here, shut out by sound-proof construction or devoured by the sterile humming of air-conditioning units. "Right this way, Mr. Drake," a frightened office girl said. "Mr. Pompton is waiting for you."

The vice president of Pastelsilks, Inc. gave a start when Drake entered, but Drake was accustomed by this time to the reactions his appearance gave rise to and no longer paid them any heed. "Good news or bad news, Mr. Pompton?" he said.

"Bad news, I'm afraid. Please sit down, Mr. Drake."

Drake did so. "But surely my cargo must be worth some thing."

"Not to us, it isn't. Nor to *Dernier Cri* Garments. And there's no way it can be salvaged. But you just might be able to dispose of it on one of the more backward planets, and to this end Pastelsilks, Incorporated is willing to defer demanding restitution from your bonding company for six months."

"Six months doesn't give me very much time to peddle a thousand bolts of invisible silk," Drake said.

"I consider it a very handsome gesture on our part. Of course if you're not interested, we can—"

"I'll give it a try," Drake said. "Which of the backward planets would you recommend?"

"Marie Elena, Dandelion, Little Sun, Dread—"

"Is Azure a possibility?"

"Why yes, Azure ought to provide a potential market. Its peoples are largely members of the peasantry, and it's conceivable that they might be attracted by bolts of colored mists and pastel nothingness."

"Good," Drake said, getting to his feet. "I'll be on my way then."

"One minute, Mr. Drake. Before you leave, I would like to make a suggestion with regard to your appearance."

Drake frowned. "I don't see what I can do about it."

"There are quite a number of things you can do about it. First of all, you can buy yourself some clothing that is *not* translucent. Secondly, you can buy yourself a pair of skin-tight gloves. Thirdly, you can buy yourself a flesh-colored rubber mask that will align itself to your features. You can, in other words, cease being an apparition in the eyes of everyone you meet, and become a perfectly presentable

silk salesman."

Drake shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I'm afraid I can't do any of those things," he said.

"You can't? In the name of all that's wholesale, why not?"

The word "penance" came into Drake's mind, but he ignored it. "I don't know," he said. He turned to go.

"One more minute please, Mr. Drake. Will you enlighten me on a little matter before you leave?"

"All right."

Mr. Pompton cleared his throat. "Are you of Dutch descent by any chance?"

"No," Drake said, and left.

Azure

The best way to build a mental picture of Azure is to begin with a bunch of grapes. The bunch of grapes is cobalt-blue in hue and it is part of a cobalt-blue cluster of similar bunches. The cluster hangs upon a vine which is bursting with heart-shaped leaves, and the vine is one of many similar vines that form a verdant row, in turn, is one of many similar rows that form a verdant vineyard. You see them now, do you not?—these lovely vineyards rolling away, and the white, red-roofed houses in between?—the intervals of green and growing fields in the blue swaths of rivers and the sparkling zigzags of little streams?—the blue eyes of little lakes looking up into the warm blue sky where big Sirius blazes and little Sirius beams? Now, picture people working in the fields and in the vineyards; picture trees, and children playing underneath them; picture housewives coming out back doors and shaking homemade rugs that look like little rainbows; picture toy-like trains humming over anti-gray beds from town to town, from city to city, tying in the entire enchanting scheme of things with the spaceport at *Vin Bleu.* Finally, picture a narrow road winding among the vineyards, and a man walking along it. A man? No, not a man—a ghost. A tall gaunt ghost in spectral space-clothes. A ghost named Nathaniel Drake.

He had come many miles by train and he had visited many towns along the way and talked with many merchants, and each time he had unfolded the sample of pastelsilk he carried and held it up for inspection, and each time the word had been no. In the town he had just left, the word had been no too, and he knew by now that wherever he went on Azure the word would be no also, but right now he did not care. Right now he was about to carry out the ulterior purpose of his visit, and the ulterior purpose of his visit had nothing to do with the selling of silk.

He could see the house already. It sat well back from the road. In it, she had grown up. Along this very road, she had walked, to school. Between these verdant vineyards. Beneath this benign blue sky. Sometime during those green years she must have sinned.

Like all its neighbors, the house was white, its roof red-tiled. In the middle of its front yard grew a Tree of Love, and the tree was in blossom. Soon now, the blossoms would be falling, for autumn was on hand. Already the time for the harvesting of the grapes had come. Had she picked in these very vineyards? he wondered. Clad in colorful clothing, had she walked along these growing banks of green and heaped baskets with brilliant blue? And had she come home evenings to this little white house and drenched her face with cool water from that archaic well over there, and then gone inside and broken bread? And afterward had she come outside and waited in the deepening darkness for her lover to appear? Nathaniel Drake's pulse-beat quickened as he turned into the path that led across the lawn to the small front porch. No matter what Saint Andrew had said, Saint Annabelle Leigh could not possibly have been all saint.

A girl in a yellow maternity dress answered the door. She had hyacinth hair, blue eyes and delicate features. She gasped when she saw Drake, and stepped back. "I've come about Annabelle Leigh," he said quickly. "Did Saint Andrew radio you about what happened? He said he would. I'm Nathaniel Drake."

The girl's fright departed as quickly as it had come. "Yes, he did. Please come in, Mr. Drake. I'm Penelope Leigh—Annabelle's sister-in-law."

The room into which he stepped was both pleasant and provincial. A long wooden table stood before a big stone fireplace. There were cushioned chairs and benches, and upon the floor lay a homemade hook-rug that embodied all the colors of the spectrum. A big painting of the Potomac Peregrination hung above the mantel. The marble figure of the Emancipator had been huge to begin with, but over the centuries the minds of men had magnified it into a colossus. Artists were prone to reflect the popular conception, and the artist who had painted the present picture was no exception. In juxtaposition to the towering figure that strode along its banks, the Potomac was little more than a pale trickle; houses were matchboxes, and trees, blades of grass. Stars swirled around the gaunt gray face, and some of the stars were glowing Komets and Golems and T-4A's re-entering the atmosphere, and some of them were interceptors blazing spaceward. The sea showed blood-red in the distance, and in the background, the broken columns of the fallen Memorial were illuminated by the hellish radiance of the funeral pyre of Washington, D.C. High above the ghastly terrain hovered the pale glove of the Planet of Peace.

"Please sit down, Mr. Drake," Penelope said. "Annabelle's mother and father are in the vineyard, but they will be home soon."

Drake chose one of the cushioned chairs. "Do they hate me?" he asked.

"Of course they don't hate you, Mr. Drake. And neither do I."

"I could have averted her death, you know," Drake said. "If I'd put her down on Iago Iago as she asked me to, she would still be alive today. But I valued my pilot's license too highly. I thought too much of my daily bread."

Penelope had sat down in a cushioned chair that faced his own. Now she leaned forward, her blue eyes full upon him. "There's no need for you to justify your action to me, Mr. Drake. My husband is a Suez Canal tech, and he can't pursue his profession without a license either. He worked very hard to get it, and he wouldn't dream of jeopardizing it. Neither would I."

"That would be Annabelle's brother, wouldn't it. Is he here now?"

"No. He's on Wayout, working on the 'leak.' I say `working on it,' but actually they haven't found it yet. All they know is that it's on the Wayout end of the warp. It's really quite a serious situation, Mr. Drake—much more serious than the officials let on. Warp seepages are something new, and very little is known about them, and Ralph says that this one could very well throw the continuum into a state of imbalance if it isn't checked in time."

Drake hadn't come all the way to *Campagne Paisible* to talk about warp seepages. "How well did you know your sister-in-law, Miss Leigh?" he asked.

"I thought I knew her very well. We grew up together, went to school together, and were the very best of friends. I *should* have known her very well."

"Tell me about her," Drake said.

She wasn't at all an outward person, and yet everyone liked her. She was an excellent student—excelled in everything except Ancient Lit. She never said much, but when she did say something, you listened. There was something about her voice ..."

"I know," Drake said.

"As I said, I *should* have known her very well, but apparently I didn't. Apparently no one else did either. We were utterly astonished when she ran away—especially Estevan Foursons."

"Estevan Foursons?"

"He's a Polysirian—he lives on the next farm. He and Annabelle were to be married. And then, as I said, she ran away. None of us heard from her for a whole year, and Estevan never heard from her at all. Leaving him without a word wasn't at all in keeping with the way she was. She was a kind and gentle person. I don't believe he's gotten over it to this day, although he did get married several months ago. I think, though, that what astonished us even more than her running away was the news that she was studying for the sainthood. She was never in the least religious, or, if she was, she kept it a deep dark secret."

"How old was she when she left?" Drake asked.

"Almost twenty. We had a picnic the day before. Ralph and I, she and Estevan. If anything was troubling her, she certainly gave no sign of it. We had a stereo-camera, and we took pictures. She asked

me to take one of her standing on a hill, and I did. It's a lovely picture—would you like to see it?"

Without waiting for his answer, she got up and left the room. A moment later she returned carrying a small stereo-snapshot. She handed it to him. The hill was a high one, and Annabelle was outlined sharply against a vivid azure backdrop. She was wearing a red dress that barely reached her knees and which let the superb turn of her calves and thighs come through without restraint. Her waist was narrow, and the width of her hips was in perfect harmony with the width of her shoulders—details which her Church of the Emancipation uniform had suppressed. Spring sunlight had bleached her hair to a tawny yellow and had turned her skin golden. At her feet, vineyards showed, and the vineyards were in blossom, and it was as though she too were a part of the forthcoming harvest, ripening under the warm sun and waiting to be savored.

There was a knot of pain in Drake's throat. He raised his eyes to Penelope's. Why did you have to show me this? he asked in silent desperation. Aloud, he said, "May I have it?"

The surprise that showed upon her face tinged her voice. "Why—why yes, I suppose so. I have the negative and can get another made . . . Did you know her very well, Mr. Drake?"

He slipped the stereosnapshot into the inside breast-pocket of his longcoat, where it made a dark rectangle over his heart. "No," he said. "I did not know her at all."

Toward twilight, Annabelle's parents came in from the vineyard. The mother, buxom of build and rosy of cheek, was attractive in her own right, but she was a far cry from her daughter. In order to see Annabelle, you had to look into the father's sensitive face. You could glimpse her in the line of cheek and chin, and in the high, wide forehead. You could see her vividly in the deep brown eyes, Drake looked away.

He was invited to share the evening meal, and he accepted. However, he knew that he would not find what he was searching for here, that if there had been another side of Annabelle, she had kept it hidden from her family. Estevan Foursons was the logical person to whom to take his inquiries, and after the meal, Drake thanked the Leighs for their hospitality, said good by, and set off down the road.

Estevan Foursons lived in a house very much like the Leighs'. Vineyards grew behind it, vineyards grew on either side of it, and across the road, more vineyards grew. The sweet smell of grapes ripening on the vine was almost cloying. Drake climbed the steps of the front porch, stood in the artificial light streaming through the window in the door, and knocked. A tall young man wearing pastel slacks and a red-plaid peasant blouse came down the hall. He had dark-brown hair, gray eyes, and rather full lips. Only the mahogany cast of his skin betrayed his racial origin—that, and his unruffled calm when he opened the door and saw Drake. "What do you want?" he asked.

"Estevan Foursons?"

The young man nodded.

"I'd like to talk to you about Annabelle Leigh," Drake went on "It was on my ship that she—"

"I know," Estevan interrupted. "Penelope told me. Nathaniel Drake, is it not?"

"Yes. I—"

"Why are you interested in a dead woman?"

For a moment, Drake was disconcerted. Then, "I—I feel responsible for her death in a way."

"And you think that knowing more about her will make you feel less responsible?"

"It might. Will you tell me about her?"

Estevan sighed, "I sometimes wonder if I really knew her myself. But come, I will tell you what I thought I knew. We will walk down the road—this is not for my wife's ears."

Beneath the stars, Drake said, "I talked with the saint who indoctrinated her. He thought very highly of her."

"He could hardly have thought otherwise."

Estevan turned off the road and started walking between two starlit rows of grapevines. Disappointed, Drake followed. Had Annabelle Leigh never done anything wrong? It would seem that she had not.

For some time the two men walked in silence, then Estevan said, "I wanted you to see this place. She used to come here often."

They had emerged from the vineyard and were climbing a small slope. At the top of it, Estevan paused, and Drake paused beside him. At their feet, the ground fell gradually away to the wooded shore of a small lake. "She used to swim there naked in the starlight," Estevan said. "Often I came here to watch her, but I never let on that I knew. Come."

Heartened, Drake followed the Polysirian down the slope and through the trees to the water's edge. Drake knelt, and felt the water. It was ice-cold. A granite outcropping caught his eye. Nature had so shaped it that it brought to mind a stone bench, and approaching it more closely, he saw that someone had sculptured it into an even greater semblance. "I did that," Estevan said from behind him. "Shall we sit down?"

Seated, Drake said, "I find it difficult to picture her here. I suppose that's because I associate saints with cold corridors and cramped little rooms. There's something pagan about this place."

Estevan did not seem to hear him. "We would bring our lunch here from the vineyards sometimes," he said. "We would sit here on this bench and eat and talk. We were very much in love—at least everybody said we were. Certainly, I was. Her, I don't know."

"But she must have loved you. You were going to be married, weren't you?"

"Yes, we were going to be married." Estevan was silent for a while; then, "But I don't think she loved me. I think she was afraid to love me. Afraid to love anyone. Once, it hurt me even to think like this. Now, it is all past. I am married now, and I love my wife. Annabelle Leigh is a part of yesterday, and yesterday is gone. I can think now of the moments we spent together, and the moments no longer bring pain. I can think of us working together in the vineyards, tending the vines, and I can think of her standing in the sun at harvest time, her arms filled with blue clusters of grapes and the sunlight spilling goldenly down upon her. I can think of the afternoon we were rained out, and of how we ran through the rows of vines, the rain drenching us, and of the fire we built in the basket shed so that she could dry her hair. I can think of her leaning over the flames, her rain-dark hair slowly lightening to bronze, and I can think of the raindrops disappearing one by one from her glowing face. I can think of how I seized her suddenly in my arms and kissed her, and of how she broke wildly free and ran out into the rain, and the rain pouring down around her as she ran . . . I did not even try to catch her, because I knew it would do no good, and I stood there by the fire, miserable and alone, till the rain stopped, and then went home. I thought she would be angry with me the next day, but she was not. She acted as though the rain had never been, as though my passion had never broken free. That night, I asked her to marry me. I could not believe it when she said yes. No, these moments give me no more pain, and I can recount them to you with complete calm. Annabelle, I think, was born without passion, and hence could not understand it in others. She tried to imitate the actions of normal people, but there is a limit to imitation, and when she discovered this limitation she ran away."

Drake frowned in the darkness. He thought of the tape Saint Andrew had given him, of the picture that he carried in his left breast-pocket. Try as he would, he could correlate neither of the two Annabelles with the new Annabelle who had stepped upon the stage. "Tell me," he said to Estevan, "when she ran away, did you make any attempt to follow her?"

"I did not—no; but her people did. When a woman runs away because she is afraid of love, it is futile to run after her because when you catch up to her, she will still be running." Estevan got to his feet. "I must be getting back—my wife will be wondering where I am. I have told you all I know."

He set off through the trees. Bitterly disappointed, Drake followed. In trying to discredit the woman he wanted to hate, he had merely succeeded in vindicating her. The new Annabelle might be inconsistent with the other two, but she certainly was not inconsistent with saintliness, and as for the other two, for all their seeming disparity neither of them was inconsistent with saintliness either. It was a long step from the girl on the hill to the girl he had locked in the storeroom to die, but it was not an illogical step, and therefore it could be made. Two years was more than enough time to transform the surcharged fires of spring into the smoldering ones of fall—

Two years?

That was the length of time she had served under Saint Andrew. In the cabin of the *Fly by Night*, however, she had given her age as twenty-three.

The two men had reached the road. Suddenly excited, Drake turned to Estevan. "How old was she when she left?" he asked. "Exactly how old?"

"In two more months she would have been twenty."

"And when she left, did anybody check at the spaceport? Does anybody know positively that she went directly to Forget Me Not?"

"No. At the time it never occurred to anyone—not even the police—that she might have left Azure."

Then she could have gone anywhere., Drake thought. Aloud, he said, "Thank you for your trouble, Estevan. I'll be on my way."

He proceeded by anti-grav train to the spaceport at *Vin Bleu,* only to find that the records he desired access to were unavailable to unauthorized personnel. However, by distributing a quantity of his fast-dwindling capital (he had drawn out the second half of his bi-planetary nest egg on Forget Me Not), he managed to bring about a temporary suspension of the rule. Once handed the big departure log, he had no trouble finding the entry he wanted. It was over three years old, and read, *9 May, 3663: Annabelle Leigh via Transspacelines to Worldwellost, class C. Departure time: 1901 hours, GST.*

Hope throbbed through him. There were no Army of the Church of the Emancipation missions on Worldwellost. Worldwellost was a mecca of sinners, not saints.

In a matter of hours, Azure was a blue blur in the *Fly by Night's* rear viewplate.

On the chart table in his cabin, Madame Gin sat. Drake regarded her for some time. For all her refusal to help him in his time of need, he still found her presence indispensable. Why, then, did he not go to her at once and enrich his intellect with her fuzzy philosophies?

Presently he shrugged, and turned away. He propped the picture Penelope had given him against the base of the chart lamp; then he incorporated the tape Saint Andrew had given him into the automatic pilot and programmed a continual series of playbacks over the intercom system. He returned to the table and sat down. Ignoring Madame Gin, he concentrated on the girl on the hill—

"I have chosen to speak to you this day of the Potomac Peregrination, of the walking of His ghost upon the land; of the rising of His stone figure from the ruins of the temple where it had sat in silent meditation for three score and seventeen years, and of its coining to life to walk down to the blood-red sea ..."

Worldwellost

In common with Azure, Worldwellost is one of the inner planets of the vast Sirian system. However, it has little else in common with Azure, and in Nathaniel Drake's day it had even less.

Before the commercial apotheosis of its lustrous neighbor, Starbright, it had flourished as a vacation resort. Now, its once-luxurious hotels and pleasure domes had fallen into desuetude, and the broad beaches for which it had once been renowned were catchalls for debris, dead fish, and decaying algae. But Worldwellost was not dead—far from it. The rottenest of logs, once turned over, reveal life at its most intense, and the rotten log of Worldwellost was no exception.

Nathaniel Drake put down in the spaceport-city of Heavenly and set forth upon his iconoclastic quest. Annabelle Leigh's trail, however, ended almost as soon as it began. She had checked into the Halcyon Hotel one day, and checked out the next, leaving no forwarding address.

Undaunted, Drake returned to the port, distributed some more of his fast-dwindling capital, and obtained access to the departure log. He found the entry presently: *26 June, 3664:*

Annabelle Leigh via Transspacelines to Forget Me Not, class A. Departure time: 0619 hours, GST.

Spacetime was synonymous with earth time and, while it was used in calculating all important time periods, such as a person's age, it seldom coincided with local calendars. Therefore, while the month and the year on Worldwellost might seem to indicate otherwise, Drake knew definitely that Annabelle Leigh had left the planet over two years ago, or approximately one year after she had arrived.

Judging from her change in travel-status, she had bettered herself financially during that period.

Had she spent the entire year in Heavenly? he wondered. When all other attempts to obtain

information about her failed, he had a photostat made of the stereosnapshot Penelope had given him, presented it to the missing persons department of Heavenly's largest 3V station, and engaged them to flash a daily circular to the effect that he, Nathaniel Drake, would pay the sum of fifty credits to anyone providing him with bona fide information concerning the girl in the picture. He then retired to his room at the Halcyon Hotel and waited for his visiphone to chime.

His visiphone didn't, but several days later, his door did. Opening it, he saw an old man clad in filthy rags standing in the hall. The old man took one look at him, lost what little color he had, and turned and began to run. Drake seized his arm. "Forget about the way I look," he said. "One hundred of my credits makes a Rockefellow the same as anyone else's, and I'll pay cash if you've got the information I want."

Some of the old man's color came back. "I've got it, Mister—don't you worry about that." Reaching into the inside pocket of his filthy coat, he withdrew what at first appeared to be a large map folded many times over. He unfolded it with clumsy fingers, shook it out, and held it up for Drake to see. It was a stereo-poster of a girl, life-size and in color—the same girl who had had her picture taken on a hill on Azure

Only this time she wasn't wearing a red dress. She was wearing a *cache-sexe,* and except for a pair of slippers, that was all she was wearing.

Drake could not move.

There was a legend at the bottom of the poster. It read:

Mary Legs, now stripping at King Tutankhamen's

Abruptly Drake came out of his state of shock. He tore the poster out of the old man's hands. "Where did you get it?" he demanded.

"I stole it. Ripped it off the King's billboard when nobody was looking. Carried it with me ever since."

"Did you ever see her . . . perform?"

"You bet I did! You never saw anything like it. She'd—"

"How long ago?"

"Two-three years. Big years. She's the one you want, ain't she? I knew it the minute I saw the picture on 3V. Sure, the name's different, I says to myself, but it's the same girl. You should have seen her dance, Mister. As I say, she'd—"

"Where's King Tutankhamen's place?" Drake asked.

"In Storeyville. As I say, she'd—"

"Shut up," Drake said.

He counted out fifty credits and placed them in the old man's hand. The old man was regarding him intently. "You're the Jet-propelled Dutchman, ain't you."

"What if I am?"

"You don't look like a Dutchman. Are you?"

"No," Drake said, and re-entered the room and slammed the door.

* * *

The anti-grav trains of Worldwellost were as rundown as the towns and cities they connected. Drake rode all night and all the next morning. He didn't sleep a wink throughout the whole trip, and when he got off the train at the Storeyville station, he looked even more like a ghost than he had when he had got on.

His appearance provoked the usual quota of starts and stares. Ignoring them, he made his way to the main thoroughfare. Tall and gaunt and grim, he looked up and down the two rows of grimy facades, finally spotted the neoned name he wanted, and started out. A knot of teen thieves formed behind him as he progressed down the street. "The Jet-propelled Dutchman," they cried jeeringly. "Look, the Jet-propelled Dutchman!"

He turned and glowered at them, and they ran away.

The exterior of King Tutankhamen's had a rundown mien, but it retained traces of an erst-while elegance. Within, dimness prevailed, and Drake practically had to feel his way to the bar. Gradually,

though, as the brightness of the afternoon street faded from his retina, he began to make out details. Rows of glasses; rows of bottles. Obscene paintings on the wall. A pale-faced customer or two. A bartender.

Outside in the street, the teen thieves had regrouped and had taken up their jeering chant again. "The Jet-propelled Dutchman, the Jet-propelled Dutchman!" The bartender came over to where Drake was standing. He was fat, his skin was the color of nutmeg, and his hair was white. "Your—your pleasure, sir?" he said.

Eyes more perceptive now, Drake looked at the obscene paintings, wondering if she were the subject of any of them. She was not. He returned his gaze to the bartender. "Are you the owner?"

"King Tutankhamen at your service, sir. I am called 'the King'."

"Tell me about Annabelle Leigh."

"Annabelle Leigh? I know of no such person."

"Then tell me about Mary Legs."

The light that came into the King's eyes had a sublimating effect upon his face. "Mary Legs? Indeed, I can tell you about her. But tell *me,* have you seen her lately? Tell me, is she all right?"

"She's dead," Drake said. "I killed her."

The King's fat face flattened slightly; fires flickered in his pale eyes. Then his face filled out again, and the fires faded away. "No," he said, "she may be dead, but you did not kill her. No one would kill Mary Legs. Killing Mary Legs would be like killing the sun and the stars and the sky, and even if a man could kill these things, he would not do so, and neither would he kill Mary Legs."

"I did not kill her on purpose," he introduced himself and told the King about the *Fly by Night's* encounter with the Lambda—Xi field, of how he had locked Saint Annabelle Leigh in the starboard storeroom to die. "If I had not been so selfish," he concluded, "she would still be alive today."

The King looked at him pityingly. "And now your hands are bloodied, and you must seek her ghost."

"Yes," said Drake. "Now I must seek her ghost—and destroy it."

The King shook his head. "You may seek it all you want, and you may even find it. But you will never destroy it, Nathaniel Drake. It will destroy you. Knowing this, I will help you find it. Come with me."

He spoke a few words into an intercom at his elbow, then came around the bar and led the way down a spiral staircase into a subterranean room. Their entry brought vein-like ceiling lights into luminescence, and the room turned out to be a large hall. Cushioned chairs were arranged in rows on either side of a narrow ramp that protruded from a velvet-curtained stage, and to the right of the stage, a chromium piano stood.

"It is fitting that I tell you about her here," King Tutankhamen said, "for this is where she danced. Come, we will take the best seats in the house."

Drake followed him down the aisle to the juncture of stage and ramp. The King seated him in the chair nearest the juncture and took the adjacent chair for himself. Leaning back, he said, "Now I will begin.

"It was over three galactic years ago when she first walked into my establishment. The tourists had not entirely forsaken Worldwellost in those days, and I was still enjoying prosperity. The bar was bright and bustling, but I saw her nevertheless the minute she stepped upon the premises. Thin, she was, and pale, and I thought at first that she was sick. When she sat down at the table by the door, I went immediately over to her side.

" 'Wine, would you like?' I asked, knowing as I do the revivifying qualities of the grape. But she shook her head. 'No,' she said, 'I want work.' `But what can you do?' I asked. `I can take off my clothes,' she replied. 'Is there something else I need to know?' Looking at her more closely, I saw that indeed there was nothing else she needed to know; nevertheless, there is an art of sorts to bumps and grinds, and this I told her. 'You have other girls who can show me the rudiments,' she said. 'After that, it will be up to me.' `What is your name?' I asked then. 'Mary Legs,' she answered. 'It is not my real name, however, and you will have to pay me in cash.' I took one more look at her, and hired her on the spot.

"It developed that she had no aptitude for bumps and grinds. It also developed that she did not need to have. The first time she danced, only a dozen men sat here in this room and watched her. The second

time she danced, two dozen sat here. The next time she danced, the room was packed, the bar was overflowing, and there was a line of men waiting in the street. Some girls dance simply by walking. She was one of them. She had what is called 'poetry of motion,' but I think it was her legs, really, that most men came to see. I will let you judge for yourself. Incidentally, the piano which you will hear accompanying her was played by me."

King Tutankhamen leaned forward, slid aside a small panel just beneath the edge of the proscenium, and depressed several luminescent buttons. Instantly the lights went out, and the velvet curtains parted. A stereo-screen leaped into bright life, and a moment later, Mary Legs, nee Annabelle Leigh, appeared upon it. So flawless was the illusion that it was as though she had stepped upon the stage.

Perfume reminiscent of the vineyards of Azure infiltrated the room. Drake found breathing difficult.

She was wearing a standard stripper's outfit that could be removed piece by piece. Hardly had she "appeared" upon the stage when the first piece fluttered forth and disappeared. Three more followed in swift succession. A fifth went just as she stepped, seemingly, out upon the ramp.

"She was always that way," the King whispered. "I told her that she should be coy, that she should tease, but she paid no attention. It was as though she couldn't get her clothes off fast enough."

Drake barely heard him.

Mary Legs was moving down the ramp now, and now another garment drifted forth and winked out of sight. He saw her breasts. Chords sounded in the background. A progression of ninths and elevenths. Her face was glowing; her eyes were slightly turned up. Glazed.

Drake watched the final garment disappear into the mists of time. She was down to sandals and *cache-sexe* now. Her slow walk down the ramp continued.

There was poetry in the play of light upon her flesh, there was poetry in her every motion. The flabby pectorals of beauty queens, she knew not. Here was firmness; depth. Her hair burned with the yellow fires of fall. An arpeggio like the tinkling of glass chimes leaped up and formed a brief invisible halo over her head. At the base of the ramp she went through a series of contemptuous bumps and grinds, then returned casually the way she had come. Now there was a subtle difference in her walk. Sweat broke out on Drake's face. His breath burned in his throat. Eyes turned up, she saw no one, then or now; knew no one, knew nothing but the moment. Her body writhed obscenely. Notes fell around her like cool rain. Suddenly Drake realized that she had not been flaunting her sex to the audience, but to the worlds.

She began a second series of bumps and grinds. While it lacked finesse, it was obscene beyond belief, and yet, in another sense, it was somehow not obscene at all. There was something tantalizingly familiar about it, so tantalizingly familiar that he could have sworn that he had seen her dance before. And yet he knew perfectly well that he had not.

His mind ceased functioning, and he sat there helplessly, a prisoner of the moment. Presently she began a series of movements, a dance of sorts that had in it the essence of every orgy known to mankind, and yet simultaneously possessed a quality that had nothing whatsoever to do with orgies, a quality that was somehow transcendant and austere. She paused transiently just above him, and her legs were graceful pillars supporting the splendid temple of her body and her head was the rising sun, then she stepped back into the screen, the lights went on, and the curtain closed.

I am a wall, and my breasts like the towers thereof:

Then was I in his eyes as one that found peace.

It was some time before either man spoke. Then Drake said, "I'd like to buy it."

"The realitape? Why—so you can destroy it?"

"No. How much do you want?"

"You must understand," said the King, "that it is very precious to me, that—"

"I know," Drake said. "How much?"

"Six hundred Rockefellows."

The amount came perilously close to the figure to which Drake's capital had dwindled. Nevertheless, he did not haggle, but counted the hundred-credit notes out. The King removed the realitape from the proscenium projector, and the exchange was made. "You are getting a bargain, Mr. Drake," the King said. "For a collector's item like that, I could get twice six hundred Rockefellows."

"When did she leave here?" Drake asked.

"About a year after she arrived. A big year. I went to her room after one of her dances and found her gone. Her clothes, everything ... For all her willingness to exhibit herself, she was never really one of us. She would never permit any of us to get close to her in any sense of the word. There was something tragic about her. She said once that she could not bear children, but I do not think that this had very much to do with her unhappiness. She *was* unhappy, you know, although she was very careful never to let on." The King raised his eyes, and Drake was dumfounded to see tears in them. "You have told me that after she left Worldwellost she became a saint. Somehow this does not surprise me. There is an exceedingly thin line between good and evil. Most of us manage to walk this line with a greater or lesser degree of equilibrium, but I think Mary Legs could not walk it at all: with her, I think it had to be one side or the other. Evil she found intolerable after a while, and she ran away, crossing the line to good. But good she eventually found intolerable too, and she ran away again. She told you that she wished to be put down on Iago Iago to witness a resurrection. This, I do not believe. Real or not, the resurrection was an excuse for her. I believe that she was searching for a way of life that would combine the two extremes of good and evil and that she hoped to find it among the primitive Polysirians. And I think that she also hoped to find a man who would understand her and accept her for what she was. Do you think I may be right, Nathaniel Drake?"

"I don't know," Drake said. Abruptly he stood up. "I'll be on my way now."

King Tutankhamen touched his arm. "The question which I am about to ask is an exceedingly delicate one, Nathaniel Drake. I hope you will not take offense?"

Drake sighed wearily. "Ask it then, and get it over with." "By any chance, are you of Dutch descent?"

"No," Drake said, and left.

Three of the six months which Pastelsilks, Inc. had given Drake to sell his cargo had now passed, and his cargo was undiminished by so much as a single bolt of blue. His capital, on the other hand, was virtually exhausted. Even *Der Fliegende Hollander* had never had it so bad.

Drake had not expected to be able to sell any of the pastelsilk on Worldwellost, nor, he realized in retrospect, had he expected to be able to sell any of it on Azure. It was imperative, however, that he sell it somewhere and sell it soon, for, unredeemed or not, he still intended to go on living, and in order to go on living, he needed a means by which to make his daily bread, and while a ghost-ship left much to be desired, it was better than no ship at all. He had known all along that there was one place in the Sirian Satrapy where the people were naive enough to barter worthwhile goods for "bolts of blue and pastel nothingness," and that place was Iago Iago. However, he had deferred going there for two reasons. The first reason had been his eagerness to discredit Saint Annabelle Leigh, and the second had been his fear that fencing the goods he procured on Iago Iago might get him into trouble with the authorities and lead to the loss of his pilot's license. But for all his seeming success in blackening the face of the woman he wanted to hate, he had failed so completely to evoke the desired emotion that he knew by now that the cause was hopeless; and in view of the fact that his pilot's license would be worthless if he lost his ship, the second objection was no longer valid. It had been in the books all along for him to go to Iago Iago.

He lifted up from Heavenly and found the stars again, and the stars were good. Madame Gin, he left behind. After turning over the ship to the automatic pilot, he got out the realitape he had purchased from King Tutankhamen and fitted it into the girlie realitape projector. Presently Mary Legs stepped out of the past. He propped the stereosnapshot Penelope had given him against the base of the chart lamp, then he turned on the intercom. "I have chosen to speak to you this day of the Potomac Peregrination, of the walking of His ghost upon the land," said Saint Annabelle Leigh. Mary Legs cast her final garment into the mists of time and walked lewdly down the ramp. Perfume reminiscent of the vineyards of Azure permeated the room. Cancelling out the background music, Drake discovered that her dance blended with the words Saint Annabelle Leigh was uttering. No, not Saint Annabelle's words exactly, but the rhythm and the resonance of her voice. What the one was trying to express, the other was trying to express also. *Look at me,* they "said" in unison. *I am lonely and afraid, and full of love. Yes, yes!* cried the girl on the hill. *Full of love, full of love, full of love! . . .* And in the cabin, vineyards

blossomed, flowers bloomed; there rose a blue-bright sun, and in its radiance the boy and the girl walked, the boy Nathaniel and the girl Annabelle Leigh, and the wind blew and the grass sang and the trees put their heads together in rustling consultations ... and all the while, the hull-beams creaked and the gray generator murmured, and the spectral *Fly by Night* sped on its way to Iago Iago.

It was fitting that a ghost should fall in love with a ghost.

Iago Iago

Iago Iago is like a massive ball of yarn left lying in the hall of the universe by some capricious cosmic cat. It is emerald in hue, and when it is viewed from a great distance its atmosphere lends it a soft and fuzzy effect: This effect diminishes as the distance decreases, finally ceases to be a factor, and the planet emerges as a bright green Christmas-tree ornament hanging upon the star-bedight spruce of space.

The Polysirians were expecting Nathaniel Drake. They had been expecting him for many months. "I will arise and come back to you," he had said. "I will appear in your sky, and come down to you, and you will know then that His ghost did truly walk, and that it did not walk in vain." Nathaniel Drake did not know that they were expecting him, however, nor did he know that he had said these words.

He brought the *Fly by Night* down in a grassy meadow, parked it on extended anti-grav jacks, and drifted down to the ground. He heard the shouts then, and saw the Polysirians running toward him out of a nearby forest. He would have re-boarded his ship and closed the lock behind him, but the tenor of their shouts told him that he had nothing to fear, and he remained standing in the meadow, tall and gaunt and ghostly, waiting for them to come up.

They halted a dozen yards away and formed a colorful semi-circle. They wore flowers in their hair, and their sarongs and lap-laps were made of pastelsilk. The pastelsilk was decades-old. Had another trader come down out of the heavens in times past and defiled this virgin ground?

Presently the semicircle parted, and an old woman stepped into the foreground. Drake saw instantly that she was not a Polysirian. Her Church of the Emancipation uniform stood out in jarring contrast to the colorful attire of the natives, but it was not one of the mass-produced uniforms worn by her compeers in the civilized sections of the satrapy. It had been spun and cut and sewn by hand, and in its very simplicity had attained a dignity that its civilized cousins could never know. Somehow he got the impression that she was wearing it for the first time.

She began walking toward him through the meadow grass. There was something tantalizingly familiar about the way she moved; something nostalgic. The brim of her kepi kept her eyes in shadow, and he could not see into them. Her cheeks were sere and thin, yet strangely lovely. She stopped before him and looked up into his face with eyes into which he still could not see. "The people of Iago Iago welcome you back, Nathaniel Drake," she said.

The heavens seemed to shimmer; the terrain took on an unreal cast. The semicircle knelt and bowed its be-flowered heads. "I don't understand," he said.

"Come with me."

He walked beside her over the meadow, the ranks of the people parting, and the people falling in behind; over the meadow and through the park-like forest and down the street of an idyllic village and up a gentle hill that swelled like a virgin's breast into the sky. The people began to sing, and the tune was a thrilling one, and the words were fine and noble.

On top of the hill lay a lonely grave. The old woman halted before it, and Drake halted beside her. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a tear flash down her withered cheek. At the head of the grave there was a large stone marker. The marker was intended for two graves, and had been placed in such a way that when the second grave was dug, the stone face would be centered behind both.

"Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coining of the Lord;" the Polysirians sang. *"He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored; He hath loosed the fearful lightning of his terrible swift sword, His truth is marching on."*

Nathaniel Drake looked at the marker's stone face. One half of it was blank. On the other half—the half that overlooked the grave—the following letters had been inscribed:

Drake knew the answer then, and knew what he must do—What, in a sense, he had done already ...

He turned to the old woman standing beside him. "When did I first come here?" he asked.

"Fifty-two years ago."

"And how old was I when I died?"

"You were eighty-three."

"Why did I become a saint?"

"You never told me, Nathaniel Drake."

Gently, he touched her cheek. She raised her eyes then, and this time he saw into them—saw the years and the love and the laughter, the sorrow and the pain. "Were we happy together?" he asked.

"Yes, my darling—thanks to you."

He bent and kissed her upon the forehead. "Good-bye, Mary Legs," he said, and turned and walked down the hill.

"Glory, glory hallelujah," the Polysirians sang, as his ship rose up into the sky. *"Glory, glory, hallelujah. Glory, glory, hallelujah, his truth is marching on."*

To what may a warp seepage be likened?

It may be likened to a leak in the roof of a twentieth-century dwelling. The roofs of twentieth-century dwellings were supported by rafters, and whenever a leak occurred, the water ran along these rafters and seeped through the ceiling in unexpected places. While the "rafters" of man-made spacewarps are of a far more complex nature than the rafters of such simple dwellings, the basic analogy still holds true: the spatio-temporal elements that escape from spacewarps such as the Suez Canal never emerge in the immediate vicinity of the rift.

Even in Nathaniel Drake's day, the Suez Canal techs knew this, but what they did not know was that such seepages do not pose a threat to the continuum, but only to whoever or whatever comes into contact with their foci. Neither did the Suez Canal techs—or anyone else, for that matter—know that the effect of these foci varies in ratio to the directness of the contact, and that in the case of partial contact, the effect upon a human being or an object is seemingly similar to the hypothetical preliminary effect of a Lambda-Xi bombardment. Hence it is not surprising that no one, including Drake himself, had tumbled to the true cause of his "ghosthood": i.e., *that he and the major part of his ship, in coming into partial contact with a focus, had been partially transmitted into the past.* Simultaneously, the rest of the ship—and Annabelle Leigh—had come into direct contact with the focus and had been totally transmitted into the past.

Here then was the situation when Drake left Iago Iago:

Part of himself and part of his ship and all of Saint Annabelle Leigh were suspended in a past moment whose temporal location he knew to be somewhere in the year 3614 but whose location, although he knew it to be within displacement-drive range of Iago Iago, he could only guess at, while the preponderance of himself and the preponderance of his ship hurtled toward the region of space that was responsible for his "ghosthood" and whose co-ordinates he had jotted down in the *Fly by Night's* log over three months ago. In the light of the knowledge with which his visit to Iago Iago had endowed him, he quite naturally assumed that once he and the ship made direct contact with the force that had partially transmitted them, the rest of the transmission would automatically take place—as in a sense it already had. But what Drake did not know, and had no way of knowing, was that spatio-temporal inconsistencies must be balanced before they can be eliminated, and that before total transmission could be effected, his three months-plus sojourn in the future had to be compensated for by a corresponding sojourn in the past, the length of said sojourn to be in inverse ratio to the spatio-temporal distance he would be catapulted. Consequently he was shocked when, following the *Fly by Night's* coincidence with the focus, he emerged, not in the spatiotemporal moment he was prepared for, but in the war-torn skies of a planet of another era and another system.

At the instant of emergence, every warning light on the ship began blinking an angry red, and the scintillometric siren began wailing like an *enfant terrible.* Drake's conditioned reflexes superseded his

shock to the extent that he had the anti-fission field activated before the automatic pilot had finished processing the incoming sensoria. Although he did not know it at the time, the shield that the ship threw out cleansed nearly an entire hemisphere of radio-activity and engulfed half an ocean and a whole continent. All of which brings up another aspect of time that was undreamed of in Drake's day: Expansion.

Neanderthal man stood knee-high to a twentieth-century grasshopper, and the woolly mammoth that he hunted was no longer than a twentieth-century cicada. The universe expands on a temporal as well as a spatial basis, and this expansion is cumulative. Over a period of half a century, the results are negligible, but when millenia are involved, the results are staggering. Look not to fossils to dispute this seeming paradox, for fossils are an integral part of the planets they are interred upon; and do not point with polemic fingers to such seemingly insuperable obstacles as mass, gravity, and bone tissue, for the cosmos is run on a co-operative basis, and all things both great and small co-operate. Nor are there any discrepancies in the normal order of events. A six-foot man of a past generation is the equivalent of a six-foot man of a future generation: it is only when you lift them from their respective eras and place them side by side that the difference in relative size becomes manifest. Thus, in the eyes of the inhabitants of the planet he was about to descend upon, Nathaniel Drake would be a figure of heroic proportions, while his ship would loom in the heavens like a small moon—

Or a small planet ...

Beneath him lay the ruins of a once-magnificent structure. Not far away from the ruins, a pale river ran, and across the river, a city burned brightly in the night. Nathaniel Drake knew where he was then—and when. Looking down upon the ruins, he had an inkling of his destiny.

What I do now, he thought, has already been done, and I cannot change it one iota. Therefore, what I do I am destined to do, and I am here to fulfill my destiny.

He still wore his anti-grav belt. He parked the *Fly by Night* on extended jacks, and drifted down to the ground.

Here, cherry trees grew, and the cherry trees were in blossom. Towering above the pink explosions, Nathaniel Drake knew his heroic proportions.

He approached the ruins he had seen from above. The noble columns lay broken; the stately roof had fallen in. The walls, blasphemed not long ago by the hate-steeped scrawls of segregationists, were rivened. Was that a marble hand protruding over there?

A hand. A marble arm. A shattered white-marble leg. Drake knew his destiny then, and began to dig.

No one saw him, for men had become moles, and cowered in dark places. Above him in the sky, missiles struck the anti-fission shield and winked out like gutted glowworms. Interceptors blazed up, then blazed back down again, and died. The flames of the burning capital painted the Potomac blood-red.

He continued to dig.

A fallen column lay across the broken marble body. He rolled the column aside. The noble head lay broken on the floor. He picked it up with gentle hands and carried it out and laid it on the spring-damp ground. Piece by piece, he carried the broken statue out, and when he was sure that not a single fragment remained among the ruins, he brought his ship down and loaded the pieces into the hold. Lifting, he set forth for the sea.

Some distance inland from the shores of Chesapeake Bay, he left the ship and drifted down to the bank of the river and began walking along the river to the sea. Above him, the automatic pilot held the ship on the course.

He felt like a giant, Nathaniel Drake did, walking down the Potomac to the sea, and in this long-ago age a giant he was. But all the while he walked, he knew that compared to the giant he was impersonating, he was a pygmy two feet tall.

. . . and if you cannot believe in the walking of His ghost upon the land and in His ascension to the stars, then you are as one dead, without hope, without love, without pity, without kindness, without humanity, without humility, without sorrow, without pain, without happiness, and without life . . .

"Amen," said Nathaniel Drake.

He came to a village untouched by the destruction around it, and saw people crawling out of underground shelters. Looking down upon them, he proclaimed "Lo, I have arisen. Lo, I walk again! Look at Me, ye peoples of the earth—I have come to emancipate you from your shackling fears, and I have summoned the Planet of Peace from out of the immensities of space and time to transport My ghost to the stars. Lo, I *force* peace upon you, ye peoples of the earth, and I command you to remember always this terrible day when you drove Kindness from your doorsteps and threw wide your portals to Perdition."

On the shore of Chesapeake Bay he halted, and when the automatic pilot brought the ship down, he removed the fragments of the statue from the hold and laid them gently on the beach . . . *And the Planet of Peace absorbed His ghost and bore it from the face of the earth.*

A moment later, complete transmission occurred.

* * *

The cabin was a lonely place. He left it quickly and hurried down the companionway to the starboard storeroom. The bulkheads no longer shimmered, and the deck was solid beneath his feet. His translucence was no more. He opened the storeroom lock and stepped across the threshold. Mary Legs, nee Annabelle Leigh, was huddled on the floor. She looked up when she heard his step, and in her eyes was the dumb and hopeless misery of an animal that is cornered and does not know what to do.

He raised her gently to her feet. "Next stop, Iago Iago," he said.