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GROWING SEASON

by F. L. Wallace

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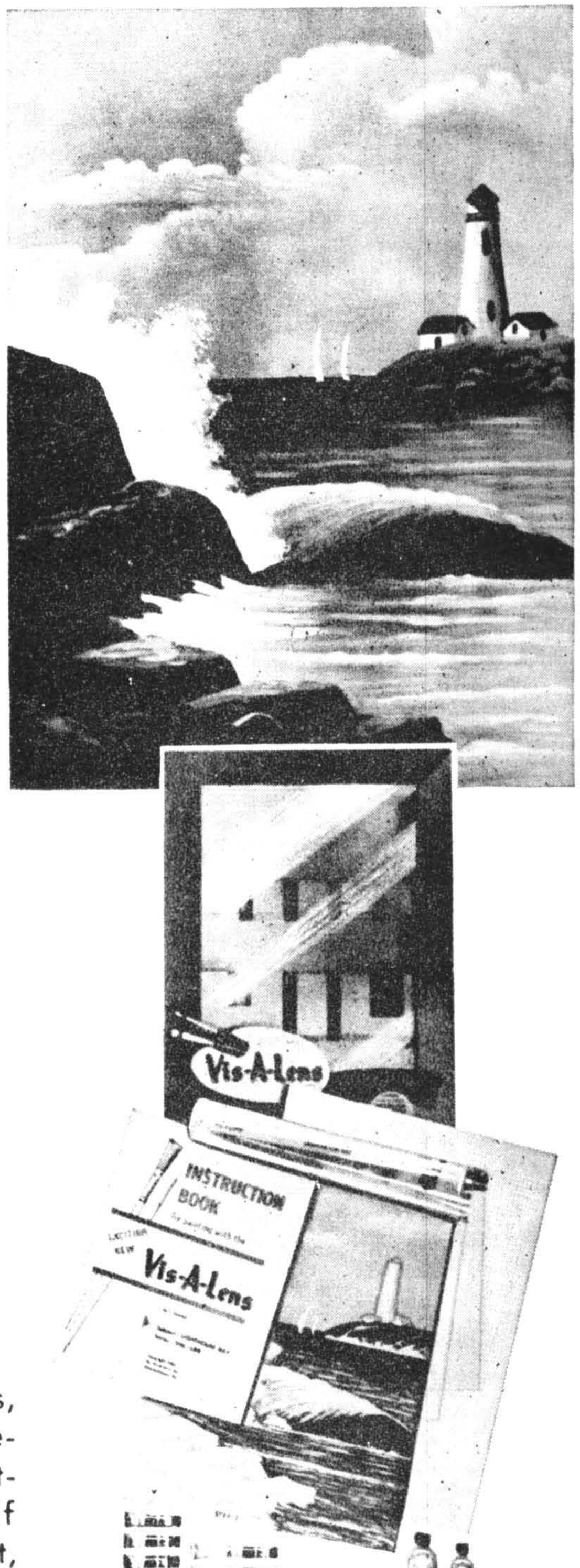

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Growing

Why would anyone want to kill a tender of mechanized vegetation—with, of all things, a watch and a little red bird?

Season

By F. L. WALLACE

THE FURRY little animal edged cautiously toward him, ready to scamper up a tree. But the kernel on the ground was tempting and the animal grabbed it and scurried back to safety. Richel Alsint sat motionless, enjoying himself greatly.

Outside the park in every direction were many tiers of traffic. He was the only person in the park; it was silent there except for birds. One in particular he noticed, all body, or entirely wing—it was impossible to say which at this distance — soared effortlessly overhead, a small bundle of bright blue feathers. The

wings, if it had wings, didn't move at all; the bird balanced with remarkable skill on air currents. Everything about it might be small, but the voice wasn't, and it made good use of every note.

Alsint twisted his hand slowly toward the sack beside him.

In that position the ship watch was visible. There was no need to look; it was connected to the propulsion processes of the ship and would signal long before he had to be back. Nevertheless he did glance at it.

In sudden alarm, he jumped up, scattering the contents of the sack. The circle of animals fled into the underbrush and the birds stopped singing and flew away.

He left everything on the bench. It was untidy, but his life would be more untidy if he missed the ship. He ran to the aircar parked in the clearing and fumbled at the door. The bright blue bird was changing to red, but he didn't notice that.

He bounced the car straight up, sinking into the cushions with the acceleration. High above the regular levels of traffic, he located the spaceport in the distance and jammed the throttle forward. The ship was there, and as long as it was, he had a chance. Not much, though. The absence of activity on the ground indicated they were getting ready.

HE DROPPED the aircar down as close as he could get and left it. There was no time to take the underground passage that came up somewhere near the ship. The guard at the surface gate stopped him.

"You're too late," said the attendant.

"I've got to get in!" Alsint said.

The guard recognized the uniform, but, sitting in the heavily reinforced cubicle, made no move to press the button which would allow the gate to swing open. It was a high gate and there was no way to get over it.

He grinned sourly. "Next time you'll pay attention to the signal."

There were worse times and places to argue about it, but Alsint couldn't remember them. "There wasn't any signal," he said. He caught the cynical expression on the guard's face and extended his hand. "See for yourself."

The watch was working, indicating time till takeoff, but the unmistakable glow and the irritating tingle, guaranteed to wake any man out of a sleep this side of the final one, were missing.

The guard blinked. "Never heard of that ever happening," he said. "Tell you what —I'll testify that it wasn't your fault. That'll clear you. You can get a job on the next ship and catch up with your

own in a month at the most."

It wasn't that easy, nor so simple. Alsint glanced frantically at the watch. Minutes left now, though he couldn't be sure. If the signal wasn't functioning, maybe the time was wrong too. "I'll never get on that one again," he said. "It's a tag ship."

The guard scrutinized him more closely, differentiating his uniform from others similar to it. "In that case you'd better go to the traffic tower," he said reluctantly. "They'll stop it for you."

They would, but he'd waste half an hour getting past the red tape at the entrance. There were a number of reasons why he couldn't let the ship leave without him. "I know our crew," he said. "They'll be waiting for me. Let me try to get on."

The guard shrugged. "It's your funeral." Slowly the gate swung open.

Alsint dashed through. He had to hurry, but it wasn't as dangerous as the guard imagined. The watch had failed, but inside the ship was a panel which indicated the presence or absence of any crew member. That panel was near the pilot. He wouldn't take off without clearing it.

Besides, there was standard takeoff procedure — always someone at the visionport, watching for latecomers, of which there were usually a few. Alsint raised his head as he ran. He couldn't see anyone at the visionport.

Breathing heavily, he brushed against the ship. Late, but not too late. He turned the corner at the vane.

He didn't like what he saw. The ramp was up and the outer lock was closed. They were waiting for clearance from the spaceport.

His composure slipped a little. If the clearance came within the next few minutes, he'd be dead. Not that the clearance would come. A ship just didn't lift off, leaving one of the crew behind — or he hoped it didn't.

He pounded on the lock and shouted, though it was useless. Inside, they couldn't hear him. The noise frightened a little red bird which had been hovering nearby. It flew around his head, squawking shrilly.

ALSINT scowled at it. It reminded him unpleasantly of the park. If he hadn't gone there, he'd be safe inside the ship. True, parks were rare, and people who went to them even more rare. After so many months in the ship, it had been a great temptation—for him, not the others. No one else had been interested.

Now he had to get in. A tremor ran through the hull and he realized how urgent it was. A little more of this and he would be caught under the rockets.

The airlock was smooth, but

he located the approximate latching point on the outside and stripped off the watch, holding it against the ship by the band. He tried to remember and thought the face should be turned inward. He held it that way and hoped he was right. He closed his eyes and swung hard with his fist.

His hand exploded with pain and he could feel the flash on his face. The energy, which was sufficient to drive the instrument for a thousand years, dissipated in much less than a second. An instant later the hand which held the strap reacted to the heat. He dropped the useless watch and opened his eyes.

He had figured it right and he was also lucky. The energy had turned inward, as he had hoped, otherwise he'd have no hand, and the latching mechanism had been destroyed. The resulting heat had buckled the plate outward. The hull was trembling with greater violence as the takeoff rockets warmed up.

The airlock was still very hot. His fingers sizzled as he grasped the curled edge and pulled out. It moved a little. He shifted his hands for a better grip and heaved. It opened.

He scrambled inside and shut it behind him, latching it with the emergency device. Close, but it didn't matter as long as he'd made it. The ship began to rise and the acceleration forced him to kneel in the passageway between the outer and inner lock. He kept thinking of the little red bird he'd seen outside. Burned, no doubt, as he would have been.

Finally the rockets stopped and the heaviness disappeared. They were out of the atmosphere and hence the ship had shifted to interstellar drive. The heat from the rockets began to abate. He was grateful for that.

He got to his feet and staggered to the inner lock and leaned against it. That didn't open, either. He shouted. It might take time, but eventually someone would come close enough to hear him.

There was air in the passageway and he knew he could survive. It had been too hot; now it was getting cold. He shivered and shook his head in bewilderment.

None of this was the way it ought to be. It had never been difficult to get on the ship. If he didn't know better, he'd say—

But this was not the time to say that.

He didn't hear the footsteps on the other side. The lock swung in and he fell forward. His burned hands were too cold to hurt as he checked his fall.

Scantily clad, Larienne stood over him. "Playing hiding games?" she asked. She got a better look and knelt by his side. "You're hurt!"

So he was, but mostly he was tired. In the interval before he accepted the luxury of unconsciousness, the thought flashed across his mind before he could disown it: Someone on the ship was trying to take the plant away, or wanted him to fail.

Either would have been accomplished if he had been left behind.

HE SAT in his room, thinking. He wished he knew more about the crew. Six months was enough to give him wide acquaintance, but not the deep kind. They were a clannish lot on the ship. His own assistant he knew well enough, and the doctor. The captain he hardly ever saw. The rest of them he knew by sight and name, but not much else: the few married couples, the legally unattached girls, and the larger number of male technicians.

None of them, as far as he could see, had any incentive to engineer the mixup which had nearly caused him to miss the ship. Of course he might be reading into it more than was there. It could have happened that way accidentally. And then maybe it didn't.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock. "Who's there?" he called.

Larienne walked in. "Nobody asks *who*," she said. "It's always *come in*. Even I know that, and I've been on this traveling isolation ward a mere three years."

She dropped into a chair and draped her legs, long legs that were worth showing off. She had a certain air of impartiality that attracted attention. She was smart, though, and knew when to discard impartiality.

She eyed him curiously. "I'm trying to discover the secret of your popularity. That damn plant is pining for you."

"It's not me," he said. "You have to know how to handle it."

"Thanks," she said dryly. "I don't know how. But Richel Alsint, boy plant psychologist, does. He knows when to increase the circulation, when to give it an extra shot of minerals, and when, on the other hand, to scare the damn thing out of its wits, which I sometimes believe it actually has."

"Don't personalize it," he warned. "It's partly plant and partly a machine. Your mistake is that you treat it as if it were wholly a machine."

"Seems to me I've heard that before. What should I do that I don't?"

"Cycles," he said. "Rhythm. A machine doesn't need that kind of treatment, but a plant does. Normally it starts as a seed, grows to maturity, produces more seeds, and eventually dies. Our plant isn't like that, of course. It never produces seeds, and, if we're careful, doesn't die. Yet it does

have something that faintly corresponds to the original cycles."

She sighed. "It might help if I knew what it was—geranium, or sunflower, or whatever."

He had told her, but apparently she didn't want to remember. "It isn't one plant. It's been made from hundreds; even I don't know what they were. One best feature from this, another strong feature from something else. We've taken plants apart and recombined them into something new. This is just—plant."

LARIENNE dropped her legs to a more comfortable if less esthetic position. "Hydroponics was simpler," she objected.

"It was," he said. "And if you want to know, old-fashioned dirt farming was even simpler. Our combination plant and machine is merely a step and a half ahead of hydroponics."

"Suppose you come out and tell me what I've done wrong," she said, getting up.

"One last thing," he said. "Remember that plants evolved on planets. No matter what we do, we can't convince the plant that it's still on a planet. Light's the easiest. As far as we know, it will grow indefinitely under our artificial light. Artificial gravity is different. I don't know the difference, and neither do the physicists, but the plant does. It can live in the ship just so long and then has to be taken out for a rest. There are other things that affect it, vibration, noise, and maybe more. You know how I have to keep after the pilot to dampen his drive. All these things change the cycle it has to have."

"Agreed," she said impatiently, meaning mostly that she didn't care. "Let's go out and look at it."

The plant was a machine and the machine was a plant. It occupied a large space in the center of the ship. And it wasn't wasted space; properly cared for, the plant could supply food for the crew indefinitely.

The plant machine evolved from earlier attempts to convert raw material and energy into food. Originally algae were used because they were hardy and simple to control. But the end product had to be processed and algae did not produce the full scale of nutrients in the proper proportion for the human diet.

Certain cells of more highly evolved plants were far more efficient in the conversion of raw materials into proteins, vitamins and the like. Originally, inedible parts were produced too, the stalk, which might or might not be used for food, and the leaves and roots. On a planet with plenty of room, this made little difference. But on an overcrowd-

ed planet, or one with a poisonous atmosphere, and especially on a ship where space was at a premium, normal methods could not be used.

In the plant machine were certain cells which had been selected because of their ability to produce a variety of nutrients. The inedible parts of the plant were replaced by machinery. Instead of roots to draw water and minerals from the soil, there were pumps and filters. Instead of stems to elevate that material to the leaves, there were hoses. Instead of entire leaves to perform photosynthesis, there were only those cells most efficient at the process. There were no seeds, tubers, roots, nor fleshy stalks to store the food. Collecting trays replaced them. There was no waste space; nothing was produced that couldn't be eaten.

There was an additional problem of reconciling the various cell fluids and different rates of growth. In part, that was accomplished by the plant machinery; the rest depended on the plant mechanic. His job was akin to that of a factory manager. In a sense, the plant machine was nothing more than a highly organized and complex factory, of which the productive units were the actual cells.

ALSINT went along the aisles. Dials and gauges everywhere—a continuous record was kept of every stage. Each record was important, but nothing that could be reduced to a formula. The plant was not in bad shape, considering. At his instructions, Larienne made certain adjustments.

"Why reduce the light?" she asked. "I thought this unit grew better with stronger light."

"It does, within limits."

"I was within those limits."

"You were, but consider this. The plant from which these cells came grow fastest in early summer, but it isn't edible at that time. In late summer, it is. The light change merely corresponds to original conditions."

Partly convinced, she nodded. "What kind of plant was it?"

He smiled. "I don't know. It's the nth cellular descendant of some plant that once grew on Earth."

She touched a dial she had adjusted. "And on this one you reduced the fluid flow into it, and switched the output to another unit I've never seen it connected to."

"Same thing. The input corresponds to the difference between the dry and rainy seasons."

"But things grow faster with more water."

"They do, unless it happens to be a cactus."

She shook her head. "I give up. Cactus yet."

"I didn't say it was cactus. It might be, and, if so, could be very efficient in preparing water and soil minerals for use by the leaves. There aren't any leaves, of course, but that doesn't change the principle."

"Don't think I'll ever understand it," she said. "Enough to get by, but not the way you do."

She stood at his side. It was pleasant to have her there. Other things were pleasant to imagine too, but he refrained. There were married couples on the ship, just as there were unattached men and women. But when the men outnumbered the women three to one, certain conclusions were inevitable, and he had made them the first few days aboard. Unlike many of the others, he didn't expect to stay on the ship forever. In a year and a half he would either prove his point or fail.

Then he would leave. Would Larienne come with him? Maybe, but it wasn't a good bet. A liaison, no matter how easy it was to enter into, was not always easy to break. There would be time to decide about that later.

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

He glanced over the dials and mentally added them up. "Reasonably so. Yes."

"Good," she said. "Unless you need me sooner, I'll be back in about ten hours."

He nodded and she left. It was unnecessary to ask where she was going. He could tell that from her manner. They had raised a hitherto unmarked solar system and she was helping tag it.

His injured hands were aching with the effort, though Larienne had done most of the actual work. He started toward his room, and then, on another thought, turned into the dispensary. Franklan he knew better than anyone except Larienne, and he might get a fresh viewpoint from him.

FRANKLAN was waiting. He had a doctor's degree from some planet, but on the ship titles were largely ignored. "The wounded hero comes back, holding our food supply precariously in his skilled hands," he said as Alsint entered.

The sarcasm was not altogether friendly, Alsint decided. Without comment, he laid his hands on the table. He did not pretend to be a hero and he was not even particularly stubborn. He had put together a plant in a better way, one that ought to withstand the rigors of tag ship service, and he intended to see that it got a fair trial.

"What do you know about ship watches?" he asked cautiously.

"Fifteen years on a tag ship, and I've never personally seen a failure. I suppose it can hap-

pen." Franklan glanced up. "It's too bad you had to destroy yours to get in. I'd like to see what an examination by our technicians would show."

The same thought that he had, though Franklan seemed to have attached the opposite meaning to it. "Interesting, isn't it?" Alsint said evenly. "But I was thinking of the connection it has to the crew panel."

Franklan bit his lip. "I hadn't considered that."

"I have. The pilot had to check the crew panel before he could take off. If he did, and saw that I was missing, why didn't he wait? If he didn't see that I wasn't inside the ship, then the panel was defective too. It's hard to believe."

Franklan filled a small tank with fluid and motioned toward it. Alsint dipped his hands in. It stung, but he could see that it had a pronounced healing effect.

Franklan was watching him narrowly. "Service on a tag ship is voluntary. It has to be, considering all the solitude we have to take. Any man can withdraw any time he wants. A lot of them do, especially in the first three years. However, bear this in mind. You've practically accused someone on the ship of trying to leave you behind. I know you do think that. And if you can produce evidence, I'll believe you. But there is one person on whom suspicion will fall first."

That was what Alsint wanted to hear. He'd gone over it in his mind and couldn't find anyone to suspect. Any clue was welcome.

"Who?" he asked.

"You," said Franklan. "If *I* wanted to leave the tag ship service, I'd see to it that I made as graceful an exit as possible. Forced out by an accident, of course. I'd want to tell people that."

HE MIGHT have expected that kind of attitude. Franklan was proud of the work he was associated with. Nothing wrong with that; everyone had that right. In fact, if he didn't, he had no business doing it.

However, it made things difficult for Alsint. He was on a tag ship for other reasons. He had evolved several strains of plant cells that should be especially suited for use on tag ships.

For some reason the plants on tag ships were always dying. Ships returned to inhabited planets for refueling with the machines intact but with the plants dead. The plant cells had to be replaced. It was not that the actual material was expensive. It wasn't. But the process of getting the strange cells to work together as a new unit was time-consuming and enormously costly. That was

where the trouble came. The plant couldn't be fitted together like an engine.

Alsint had evolved cells that were far more viable, but the only way to test that was in actual use. He had received permission from the Bureau of Exploration to install his plant in a ship and try it for two years. If at the end of that time the plant was still alive, he had something really worthwhile. The only stipulation was that no one on the ship should know that it was a test, since they might, out of consideration for him, modify the service the ship normally went through. It had to be a true rough, tough test.

And he was getting it, in more ways than he had expected. Unless he could stay with his plant for the next year and a half, all his work would go for nothing.

He drew his hands out of the fluid. "Do you think I'm trying to run out?" he asked quietly. He had proof that he wasn't, but he couldn't use it.

Franklan shrugged. "Honestly, I don't. But I'm not blinding myself to what the others will think." He squinted professionally at the burns and dried the hands with a gentle blast of air. He picked up a large tube and squeezed a substance on them which was absorbed almost instantly. "There. You'll be all right in a few days."

"Thanks," Alsint said laconically and stood up.

As he went out the door, Franklan called after him. "If I see the captain, I'll tell him I don't think you tried to jump ship. I doubt that he'll ask. As I said, service on this ship is voluntary."

Personally, Alsint didn't care what Franklan told the captain. However, he was at a definite disadvantage. Next time they came to a planet, if he were to disappear, nobody would be overly inquisitive.

THE tagging operation was far from complete—seven planets in the system and each had to be thoroughly investigated. Long-range investigation, of course. A tag ship rarely landed, and then only when the planet under consideration seemed extremely desirable for colonization, enough to warrant closer observation.

It didn't matter whether it had a breathable atmosphere or not, whether it was icebound or blazing hot. These were minor difficulties and engineering ingenuity could overcome them. There were other criteria, and it was for these that they were checked.

Alsint went out into the ship. There was a lot of activity, but much of it was invisible, electronic in nature, affecting only instruments. The ship had slipped into an orbit, the plane of which in-

tersected the axis of planetary revolution at the most effective angle. The ship went around twice while the planet revolved three times. In that period the mineral resources were plotted and the approximate quantities of each were determined.

Larienne looked up as he came near. "This is a real find," she said cheerfully.

"I suppose you've located the heavy stuff," he said, knowing that it was a superfluous statement.

"What else would we look for?" She bent over the small torpedo shape she was working on. "Not just one, either. This is the second planet in the system with enough heavy elements to be worth settling."

"What's the gravity?" He didn't always share the enthusiasm others had for their discoveries.

"The first was 1.6. This is about 2.3. A little high for personal comfort, but with the mineral resources there, the settlers can manage."

"What about atmosphere?"

"The first hasn't much, frozen mostly. This one has chlorine in it." She grinned at him. "Your old theme, huh?"

It was an old theme, though he didn't argue it. He was entitled to personal reactions. "Maybe. Would you like to live on either of them?"

"Don't have to," she said, making an adjustment on the torpedo. "Never get out on a planet more than twice a year. In fact, I've almost forgotten what a year means."

That was the point, possibly, though there was no use to discuss it. "Anything else of interest?"

"We're coming to a smaller planet. Land, oceans, warm enough, and with an atmosphere we can probably breathe as is. Don't know the composition of the solid matter yet, but from our mass reading, it's a good bet that there won't be enough heavy stuff to justify settlement." She made a final delicate adjustment on the torpedo and began wheeling it to a launching tube. "This one's in a rich system, though, and will probably be used as an administration planet—vacation spot too. It won't go to waste, if that is what's worrying you."

In a way, it was. It was too bad that so many planets that were otherwise ideal for human habitation had to be passed over because they lacked the one essential. There was no help for it, of course. To settle planets, spaceships were necessary—and heavy elements to drive those ships. Nothing else mattered in the least.

LARIENNE snapped the torpedo in place and pressed a stud. The dark shape disappeared. Out in space, it fell into an orbit

which eventually would land it safely on the planet.

"There," she said with quiet satisfaction. "It's tagged, and it will stay tagged until somebody digs it up."

It might be a month, or a hundred years, before Colonization got around to it. Meanwhile the torpedo was there, broadcasting at intervals the information that the tag ship had discovered. Somewhere in a remote planning center, a new red dot appeared in a three-dimensional model of space, to be accounted for in a revised program of expansion.

Larienne brushed the hair out of her eyes. There was a smudge on her face. "I'm busy," she said. "But I can get out of this if you need me."

As long as she was more interested in what she was doing, he'd rather not have her. He shook his head. "I'll manage," he said, and headed toward the plant.

The instant he entered, something seemed wrong. He couldn't say what it was without investigation. It was a big complex machine as well as a plant, and even reading all the dials was not enough; visual inspection was necessary too. He started at one end and worked toward the other. The gauges indicated nothing out of the ordinary, but the plant was in bad condition.

It was something like a tree, the trunk and leaves of which were sound enough, no discernible injuries, but nevertheless dying. At the roots, of course. This plant had no roots, merely a series of tanks and trays, each connected to others in a bewilderingly complex fashion. In that series, though, was something which corresponded to roots.

He was near the end of the first row before he spotted part of the trouble. A flow-control valve was far out of adjustment. His hands were bandaged and clumsy, but he tried to reset it. It was jammed tight and he couldn't move it.

He could call Larienne, but she was busy. So was the rest of the crew. With sufficient leverage he could turn the valve. He looked around for something he could use. A small metal bar leaning against the wall nearby seemed adequate.

He picked it up—and the bar burned into the bandages. He knew what it was; he didn't have to think. He could hear the sparks as well as feel it. Fortunately his shoes were not good conductors and not much of the charge got through.

With an effort he relaxed his convulsive grip, and still the bar stayed in his hand. It had fused to the bandage and he couldn't shake it off. The bar was glowing red; only the relatively nonconductive prop-

erties of the bandage—heat as well as electricity—had prevented his instant electrocution. And the bar was sinking deeper into the bandage. If it ever touched his flesh, the charge would be dissipated—through his body.

He had to ground it. The metal tanks which held the plant would do that, but also crisp the plant beyond salvage. He had to make a fast choice.

HOLDING the bar at arm's length, he ran through the aisle, and, at the far end, thrust it against the side of the ship.

The resulting flash staggered him, but he stayed on his feet. Though the metal began cooling rapidly, it remained fused to the bandage. He laid one end on the floor and stepped on it, tearing it loose.

It was a plain metal bar, made into a superconductor, with an unholy charge stored in it. This couldn't be an accident. It took work to turn ordinary metal into a superconductor at room temperature. Also it couldn't be placed just anywhere. If the charge were to remain in it, a special surface had to be prepared.

The trap had been set up for him, and he had walked into it. The bandage had saved him, nothing else. That was the one thing the unknown person hadn't taken into account.

Who? Larienne? She had access to the plant. But so did anyone else, just by walking in.

Not Larienne. She had her ugly moments and might try to kill him in a fit of anger, but she wouldn't plan it coldly, nor go through with the scheme if she planned it. It didn't take special knowledge to sabotage the plant. Any control could be moved drastically and the plant would suffer. The only technical knowledge required was that of making the bar into a superconductor, and that knowledge she didn't have. True, she could ask someone to do it for her. But she wouldn't.

Alsint sat down. The actual physical damage from the electrical shock wasn't great. The certainty that someone had tried to kill him was.

Why? Violent personal hatred for himself he could rule out. He'd been careful in his contacts with the crew. Only a psychotic could manufacture a reason to hate him, and psychotics didn't last long on a tag ship.

It had to be connected to the plant. Someone on the ship was trying to take it away from him, or one of his competitors had hired one of the crew to see that he didn't survive. The last was unlikely.

He had no proof that his

plant was better, merely a belief that it was. It seemed illogical that anyone would want to eliminate him on the strength of an untested belief.

But except for Larienne, no one had enough knowledge to nurse the plant along for the required two years. Unless he remained alive, no one would benefit.

He shook his head. It was difficult to add up and arrive at a sensible answer. One thing he knew, though—hereafter, he'd have to be on his guard at all times.

He could go to the captain with his story. He considered and rejected that in the same instant. He'd have to tell the captain everything, which would invalidate the test. He'd have to handle this by himself.

He got up and continued his inspection of the plant, making minor adjustments to compensate for the damage. Except for that one valve, nothing seemed far out of line.

That done, he limped to the dispensary. His hand was aching where he had torn the bar loose and ripped the flesh.

"Back again?" said Franklan. "Any new information on the enemy?"

By itself, that was a suspicious statement. How could he know about the latest incident? The easiest answer was that he didn't. He was referring to the time Alsint had nearly missed the ship.

"Not a thing," Alsint muttered. Unless he wanted to reinforce Franklan's original opinion, he'd better keep this to himself.

Franklan looked at his hand. "Whatever you've done, I don't recommend it. It's not the way to get well fast—or at all."

"Grabbed something hot," Alsint said. Might as well say that. The bar was now just a bar and no examination would reveal that it had been a superconductor. Same with the insulation it had rested on. He couldn't prove anything.

FRANKLAN rattled the instruments. "Nothing serious. This'll heal on schedule, but it's going to hurt while I fix it." He administered a local anesthetic below the elbow.

It made Alsint dizzy. He sat down and closed his eyes while Franklan worked. He relaxed more than he intended and then deliberately opened his eyes because he was drowsy and didn't want to fall asleep.

Over Franklan's shoulder, behind the window that swung out from the dispensary to the corridor, was a little red bird. It was much like the one that had fluttered around as he had tried to get on the ship. Perhaps it had come in with him and hidden in some quiet

place until now. It was possible.

Franklan looked up. "What are you staring at?"

Alsint's tongue was fuzzy. "Outside the window behind you is a little red bird," he said, speaking distinctly to overcome the side-effects of the anesthesia.

Franklan went on swabbing, not bothering to glance behind him. "You're tired," he said. "And look again at that bird outside the window. For my sake, tell it to put on a spacesuit. If it doesn't, it will die in a matter of seconds."

Startled, Alsint looked around. He was mixed up in his directions. He was facing the visionport, plain empty space, not the corridor.

He blinked his eyes frantically, but the bird wouldn't go away and it didn't die. There was no air out there, millions of miles from the nearest planet. The bird flapped its wings in the airless space and went through the motions of singing.

IT WAS ridiculous. There was nothing to carry the sound. But he could imagine hearing it anyway, through the thick armorglass of the visionport—a bird singing in space.

Resolutely he closed his eyes and kept them closed. He had enough trouble without taking on hallucinations.

Franklan finished the new bandage and tapped his shoulder. "You can come out of it now."

Alsint tried not to, but he couldn't resist. He stared past Franklan toward the visionport.

"Is it gone?" asked Franklan. His voice was quiet.

"It's gone," Alsint said in relief.

"Good. These things happen occasionally. As long as you can adjust back to reality, you have nothing to worry about." Franklan rummaged through the medical supplies. "Take these. They may help you."

Wordlessly, Alsint took the packet and went back to his room. He was sweating and shaken.

Franklan hadn't seen it because he hadn't looked, but there had been a bird out there, or there hadn't. If not, Alsint's contact with reality was precarious and he'd have to watch himself. Franklan had hinted at that. Maybe he wanted Alsint to believe it.

But it didn't mean there hadn't been an actual bird. It could be put there in a plastic bubble that wasn't visible against the blackness of space. If so, it was an ingenious way of harassing him.

He relaxed at that formulation. It hadn't been worth the effort, but it did prove one thing—his unknown antagonist had an excellent imagination.

TIME passed—days, perhaps, though that unit had little meaning on the ship. It was the work period which counted and nobody had bothered to tell him how long that was. The last planet of the system was analyzed and the permanent markers sent down. The star was tagged and the ship proceeded on its way.

What the destination was, Alsint didn't know and didn't inquire. They were going somewhere, to uncatalogued stars, and that was enough to know.

His hands healed and the bandages were removed. Larienne was reassigned to help him. The rest of the crew, whatever they guessed, or sensed, said nothing and the normal pattern of life on the tag ship seemed re-established.

His anxiety faded. It was not, he was sure, the end of the attempts to remove him, but he had time to think, to plan countermeasures.

He was not wholly prepared. He and Larienne were approaching the plant. The door was open and he could see inside. He glanced casually at the row on row of mechanism, and stopped.

"What's the matter?" asked Larienne.

He moistened his lips. "Go around to the other side and close the door. Be quiet about it, but close the door quickly."

She stared at him curiously and started to go inside.

He grabbed her arm. "Around, I said. Not through."

She shrugged and went around. In time he could see the other door close. Then she came back.

"What's inside?" she whispered, adopting his own attitude.

"Something I want you to see."

She peered in. "I can't see anything."

"It's out of the line of vision now, but it's still in there." He swung the door nearly shut. "Inside, fast. I'll show you."

Obediently she went in and he followed, closing the door behind him. She waited.

"The bird," he said. "I want you to verify that it is in here."

"Bird?" She was puzzled and dismayed. "How did a bird get in here?"

"I don't know. I'll figure that out later." There was no need to whisper, since it couldn't escape; nevertheless he did. "It's a psychological stunt. The best way to stop it is to catch the bird."

She drew away uncertainly. "You saw it in here?"

"I did, and I want you to be with me when I find it."

"Then we should make a lot of noise. It will fly up if it's frightened."

"Good. You take that aisle

and I'll take this. Yell when you see it."

They separated. He hunted carefully, moving everything that could be moved, looking for the flash of red wings. The bird was shy and had hidden.

They met in the center aisle.

In answer to his unspoken query, she shook her head. "I didn't see it."

"It's here," he said stubbornly. "I can't be mistaken."

She started to say something and changed her mind. "Let's look again," she suggested. It was not what she intended to say. What she thought was plain from the expression on her face.

AGAIN they went through the plant machine, searching. Every crevice, every hidden corner was examined. He peered into the machinery, the tanks and the trays, above and below. They looked, but there was no bird.

Larienne stood beside him and glanced up at the ceiling. "Maybe it got out through the ventilators."

"It couldn't," he said harshly. The ventilators were also filters; a microbe would have difficulty getting through. She was trying to give him a way out, but he couldn't take it.

The room in which the plant machine was housed was not a simple open space; there was structure throughout. But it was inconceivable that something as large as a bird, even a small bird, could escape detection.

"I'll take care of the plant," he said quietly. "I want to think."

She left. He knew how she felt. It was worse because she did feel that way.

He had scored against himself. Larienne would say nothing to the rest of the crew, but it would come out. Emotional reactions couldn't be hidden. And if there was ever an inquiry, she'd have to tell her story.

Franklan would see that there was an inquiry. That was his job. There was nothing particularly arduous about life on a tag ship, yet not everyone was suited to it. Monotony—and each person had to adjust to the others as well as the ship. There was no room for a person who saw things.

It was a most effective attack, without danger for the man or men behind it. Twice he had seen something that wasn't there, and there were witnesses to testify against him. It would be enough to remove him from the ship. The subsequent treatment wouldn't harm him, but the ship would be gone and he'd never get back on. Tag ships were just too unpredictable; they came and they went as they pleased, and no one could say where they would next arrive.

Baffled, he tried to catalogue the crew. Not Larienne. She'd live with him if he wanted, more readily now than before. Ordinary rules didn't apply to her; sympathy counted for most.

Nor was it Franklan. Bluntly he'd given his opinion, but that didn't mean he was responsible for this. The person who was behind it was keeping well hidden.

Alsint went wearily down the line, adjusting and readjusting.

On one of the handles was —a tiny red feather.

HE STARED at it, relief forming nebulously in his mind. A bird *had* been there. How it had gotten in and then out again through closed doors, he didn't know. That part was unimportant. It *had* been there.

It wasn't a hallucination, though for a time he'd almost believed it himself. Now he knew.

Gingerly he picked up the feather. It was no proof, except to himself. That was enough. He could do something about it.

The trap for him was set, but wouldn't be closed immediately. The ship would not go out of the way except in extreme emergency. In another four months it would run low on fuel and material for the tagging operation, assuming normal conditions. The ship would then return to the nearest inhabited planet.

That was the way tag ships operated. Unlike other ships, freight or passenger, their objective was not to get from one inhabited planet to another as fast as possible, but to stay away as long as they could. For that reason, of all ships, they alone had to have the plant. No other food supply was so economical of space and weight.

Once they reached a planet, he'd be referred to the authorities for psychiatric examination. Eventually he'd be cleared, but by then it would be too late. *Unless he could forestall it.*

There was a way to do that, though it was dangerous for him, and he stood a chance of ruining the plant.

He made up his mind and went back down the line of controls. Larienne might question some of the new settings, but she'd defer to his judgment.

It took two weeks for the plant to decline so even the captain could see that it was impossible to go on. As master of the ship, he disliked abandoning tagging operations even temporarily, but the crew had to eat.

IT WAS a planet. Nothing out of the ordinary, there were many planets like Earth. Not many that were settled, though; almost uniformly,

that kind of planet lacked the heavy elements that made colonization economically feasible.

It was pleasant and sunny, great grassy glades and an equal amount of forests. No intelligent life on it, so there was nothing to worry about on that score. Animals, big and little, but ordinary weapons would discourage them.

Half a mile away was the ship, ready for instant flight. Not that there was anything to flee from. That was the way it had to come down if it was ever to rise again.

The plant had been stripped to components and spread over the ground. An extensive layout, but it was necessary if the plant was going to get full benefit of planetary conditions. It had been put together to facilitate disassembly, and it hadn't taken long to remove it from the ship.

A transparent canopy covered it, protection from the elements. A sudden rainstorm could drastically alter the concentration of the vital fluids. There was also an electrified fence to keep out stray animals.

Everything except root cells was exposed to the sun and wind. Under these conditions the plant began to recover from the deliberate injury he had done it. Why plants should recover so easily was still a mystery, but generations of plant mechanics had discovered that they always did.

Alsint took the sundown shift. The plant could be left alone at night, locked up with the knowledge that nothing big enough to damage it could get in. It was better if there was someone to make minute adjustments from time to time, but that was not the reason he was there.

SUNDOWN or sunrise, and sundown was better. Either time, men were outside the ship who didn't have to account for their whereabouts. More were out at sundown. And one of them, sooner or later, would be the person he wanted.

The plan was simple. Give the man every opportunity to kill him, make it irresistible—but shoot first. If the man lived, he would talk. If he didn't, there would be some clue in his personal effects. Dangerous, but if Alsint wanted to profit from his plant, he had no choice.

Days passed and no one came near. He could and did retard the regrowth of the plant, but in that respect he was limited. He couldn't be too obvious about it. The time came when he couldn't stall any longer. In reply to the captain's blunt question, he had to admit that in the morning the plant would be in as good condition as he could get it.

HE SAT that night in the enclosure, knowing this was his last chance. It grew dark and night sounds intruded. The lights in the ship went out. Only the light near him remained. He was careful to sit at the edge of illumination, visible, but a poor target.

Animals snuffled in the brush near the electrified fence. They had learned quickly and knew better than to touch it. And there was another sound—no animal.

He quietly shifted his arm and held the light in readiness. He listened. Someone was crawling through the brush. He had to wait. It was hard on his nerves, being bait.

He flashed the light on suddenly.

The man was half hidden behind a bush and Alsint couldn't see his face, but the gun in his hand glittered through the leaves.

"Surprise," said Alsint. "Don't try anything."

The man stood there, but he didn't drop his gun.

Alsint didn't like it. He couldn't identify the man. If he ran back into the forest, Alsint wouldn't know any more than he had in the beginning. He fingered the gun. "Come out where I can see you," he said.

The man didn't move—waiting until his eyes adjusted to the light shining on him, decided Alsint. As a choice, his own life came first. He raised the gun.

Before he could fire, a red bird attacked his eyes, squawking wildly.

He didn't drop the light. He tried to bat the bird away from his face, but it clung to his hair. Before he could crush it, he heard the whoosh of a gas gun. And the sound came from *behind* him. That was his mistake. There was more than one of them.

He breathed once and then felt himself fall forward.

IT WAS morning when he awakened, bright sunlight streaming into his eyes. That was not the reason his head hurt, though he could be thankful the man or men had used a gas pellet instead of a projectile. Whoever *he* or *they* were.

He got up and staggered toward the ship. A few steps were all he took. The ship wasn't there. He leaned against a tree and looked wildly around. The plant was gone too.

Shakily he fumbled for a cigarette. Smoke didn't help much. They had taken the plant aboard while he was unconscious. They had left him alone on an uninhabited planet.

A pretty planet and a useless one. No ship ever stopped here except to revive a plant, and that wouldn't happen often. It would be several life-

times before another ship came, if one ever did.

He stared miserably into the bright blue distance and thrust his hands into his jacket, and made a discovery. They'd left him a gun, at least, and ammunition. He'd be able to keep himself alive at a minimum level.

There was a whistle in the distance. His head came up. He wasn't alone. Larienne?

It couldn't be. From the direction of the sound, if it was Larienne, she was hiding in a nearby tree. But Larienne didn't like trees.

"Richel Alsint," said a loud voice. Behind him this time.

He turned around. There was no one there. Nothing but a red bird sitting on a branch. He started. The same red bird that had flown mysteriously in and out of his life. If it weren't for that creature, he'd be safely on the ship. He raised the gun.

From one foot to another, the bird hopped on the branch. "Birds can't talk," it screeched. "Birds can't talk."

The implication was clear. "Since you *can* talk, you're not a bird." The gun was still leveled. "Then what are you?"

"I could tell," said the bird. It had stopped hopping and was watching him calmly. It was red, but sometimes blue. The colors wouldn't remain fixed.

He lowered the gun in defeat. He couldn't kill a harmless creature just for the sake of killing. It hadn't been responsible for this.

"Don't be so sure, Richel Alsint. Don't be so sure." The bird burst into a wild trilling song.

He glared at it speechlessly. Bird it wasn't. Either it could read his thoughts or it had been taught a patter that fitted his present situation with remarkable precision.

"What do you think?" said the bird, cocking its head.

He forgot about the bird. It was only a momentary diversion. "I've been marooned," he said dully.

"It's happened before. It will happen again," chirruped the bird. "Don't worry, I'm here."

It was, but he wished it would go away.

"There is a note. Why don't you read, read, read?" sang the bird.

He looked, catching a glimpse of sunlight on metal. They had left something. He ran over to it, a few hundred yards away.

And there was a note. He seized it feverishly.

I made them leave this. You may not need it, but you deserve to know the answers.

Don't you understand? You were infuriating everyone, even me, and I liked you better than anyone on

the ship. You were always changing things for the sake of that damn plant! It was too dry, so we had to have more humidity than we liked. Or the pilot had to keep the drive from vibrating. Or this, or that, on and on and on! Who cares, really?

A good plant mechanic ought to keep the plant alive for five months and then let it die. We can live the last month off the remains. We have to go back every six months for supplies anyway. It's expensive, I know, but until you can get a plant that reacts as we do, it will just have to die and be replaced.

I thought of staying with you, but I couldn't stand all those changes—rain and sun—all the things an uncontrolled planet has. And then there was that story of the bird. That was too much!

Don't think too badly of me. At least I kept them from killing you.

THERE was no signature, but there was no doubt who had written it.

"All of them," he muttered. Not just one man. Everyone, from the captain down. Larienne too. And they were safe. Who would bother to look for him when the captain recorded in the log that Richel Alsint had deserted because his plant was a failure? And, of course, it was going to fail.

"The crew of the craft was daft, and you were the only one who was sane?" said the bird. "Don't you believe it. There are people on countless planets just like them."

It was true. The crew was part of the civilization. On those planets where it was possible to have parks, no one went to them. They stayed in the cities as the crew stayed in the ship. And on other planets—roofed over against poisonous gases, and inhabitants who never saw the sun—those planets were not much better than spaceships. He was the one who was different, not they. They had a mechanical culture and they liked it.

He could see how he had irritated the crew in ways he didn't suspect. They had wanted to get rid of him and they had.

He looked down at the machine they had left him, robbed, at Larienne's insistence, from the major plant. Small, just large enough to supply one man, but containing all the necessary parts. A plant machine in miniature.

She really hadn't understood. He *could* live on the food this provided. But *would* he, on a world teeming with animals and covered with plants, *real* plants? He laughed bitterly.

"Now you know," said the

bird. "In the past there were others marooned. Just like you. I came from them."

He looked up wonderingly. "Here? On this planet?" he asked eagerly.

A brilliant butterfly wandered past. The bird eyed it longingly and shivered into a rainbow of colors and darted away after it.

"Come back!" Alsint shouted. He couldn't find them unaided. He had to have directions.

The bird didn't return immediately. It played with the butterfly, flashing around it. Presently it tired of the sport and came back to the branch it had perched on. "Pretty bit of fluff," it said breathlessly.

"Never mind that," said Alsint impatiently. "What about those people? Are they on this world?"

"Oh, not here," said the bird. "A thousand planets away."

Alsint groaned. The bird had been trained by a madman and was alternately raising his hopes and crushing them.

"Not so," said the bird. "Here's history: a hundred and forty years ago, a couple, plant mechanics, were marooned—for the same reason." It flew from the perch and alighted on the plant machine, dipping its bill in a collecting tray. "Good stuff," it said, clattering its beak.

ALSINT said nothing. It would tell him when it got ready, not before.

"The plant machine's fine," said the bird. "It's a plant that's been taken apart. Can you put it back together?"

"No more than it is," said Alsint. "No one can."

"No one *you* know," said the bird. "Here's more history: A hundred and forty years ago, this couple learned how to put it together—and it grew. A hundred and thirty years ago, they knew how to take an animal apart and keep it alive. A hundred and twenty years ago, they put the animal together and made it work in a new way."

The bird sidled along the branch. "What's the difference between plant and animal?" it asked.

There were countless differences, on any level Alsint wanted to think about. Cellular, organizational, whatever he named. But the bird had something simple in mind.

"There are some plants which can move a little," Alsint said slowly. "And there are some animals that hardly move at all. But the real difference, if there is any, is motion."

"Right. You'll get along fine," said the bird. "A hundred and twenty years ago, this couple—who by then had several children—put an animal together in a new way and got—pure motion."

That was what had been puzzling him, and now he knew. "Teleports," he said. "They can teleport."

"They can't," said the bird. "The mind's best for thinking —they say. And they've kept theirs uncluttered." The bird cocked a glittering eye. "I don't know about minds. I never had one."

If they couldn't teleport, how had the bird got here?

Alsint glanced at the bird. It wasn't perched on the plant machine and the wings were folded. Six feet off the ground it hovered, and not a breath of air stirring.

"Behind you," said the bird.

It didn't twitch a feather, but it was behind him now and he hadn't seen it move.

"Teleports, yes," said the bird. "But they can't do it. We do it for them."

The bird *had* been outside the visionport of the spaceship. If it could teleport itself, why not air too?

That was only part of it. The bird had followed him, but how had it foreseen this end?

"Did you know this would happen?" he asked.

"Plant mechanics are always getting marooned," said the bird. "We've gathered up quite a few. They work with the plant and a plant belongs on a planet. The rhythm is different from that of a machine."

HE KNEW that. He could feel it, though he had never put it into words. "Go tell them where I am," he said. "I can live until they send a ship."

"A ship?" said the bird. "So slow? They don't believe in waiting. They've got all the beautiful planets that men don't want—just for the asking, though they don't have to ask. They need the right kind of people to live on them."

They didn't believe in waiting. A shadow fell across his face. Alsint looked up. Something was dropping down from the sky. Not a ship—not the conventional kind, anyway. It was the kind *they* would use. On planets on which all the food was grown naturally and no heavy elements were needed, what would be transported? People.

Not moving a wing, it came down, first fast and then slow. It stood in front of him, towering, a giant abstract figure of a woman with wings. There was frost on it.

He went to it and it covered him with wings.

There was no sensation at all except cold, which lasted only a few seconds. When he opened his eyes, the strange, beautiful ship was dropping down on another planet, more pleasant than the last. Men and women were coming out of the houses to meet him. One of them looked something like Larienne.

END

What did *Professor Sanzmann have in that cardboard box?*

THE OGRE

By AVRAM DAVIDSON

WHEN THE menace of Dr. Ludwig Sanzmann first appeared, like a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, Dr. Fred B. Turbyfil, at twenty-seven, had been the youngest museum director in the country; and now at thirty-five he was still one of the youngest. Moreover, he had a confident, if precarious, hold on greater glories to come: the Godbody Museum of Natural History; Dr. Fred B. Turbyfil, Director.

The salary would be splendid, the expense account lavish and tax-free, and the director would have ample time to finish his great work, at present entitled *Man Before the Dawn* —recondite, yet eminently readable. There were already seventeen chapters devoted to the Mousterian, or Neanderthal, Era alone. (It would be certain to sell forever to schools and libraries; a big book, firm in the grasp, profusely illustrated and done in so captivating a style that even a high school senior, picking it up unwarily in search of nudes, would be unable to extricate himself for hours.)

Mr. Godbody, the future source of all these goodies, was a skeptic of the old-fashioned sort. "Where did Cain get his wife?" was a favorite cackle, accompanied by a nudge of his bony elbow. "Found any feathers from angels' wings yet?" was another.

There was, at the moment, a minor hitch. Old Mr. God-

body affected to be shaken by the recent revelation of scandal in anthropology. From that respectable group of ancestors, whose likenesses were known to every schoolchild, from that jolly little club—judgment falling like a bolt of thunder—Piltdown Man had been expelled for cheating at cards.

If Piltdown Man was a fake, why not all the rest? Java Man, Peiping Man, Australopithecus Africanus — all bone-scraps, plaster of paris, and wishful thinking!

In vain, Turbyfil assured him that competent scholars had been leery of H. Piltdown for years; ugly old Mr. Godbody testily replied: "Then why didn't you say so?"

Having lost one faith in his youth, the merchant prince was reluctant to lose another in his old age. But Dr. Turbyfil trusted his patron's doubt was only a passing phase.

In sum, Dr. Turbyfil was about to reap the rewards of virtue and honest toil, and when he reflected on this (as he often did) it amused him to sing — a trifle off-key — a song from his childhood, called "Bringing in the Sheaves."

That was before the advent of Dr. Sanzmann.

The two men had come to Holden within a few months of one another, Dr. Turbyfil from his two-year stay at the Museum of Natural Philosophy in Boston, and Dr. Sanzmann from a meager living translating in New York, whither he had come as a exile from his native country. Sanzmann was politically quite pure, with no taint of either far right or near left; was, in fact, a Goethe scholar—and what can be purer than a Goethe scholar? He had a post at the local denominational university: Professor of Germanic *and* Oriental Languages, neatly skipping the questionable Slavs. Dr. Turbyfil was not an ungenerous man, and he was quite content to see Prof. Sanzmann enjoy the full measure of linguistic success.

But Dr. Philosoph. Ludwig Sanzmann was also an amateur anthropologist, paleontologist, and general antiquarian; and this was enough to chill the blood of any museum director or even curator. Such amateurs are occupational hazards. They bring one smelly cowbones, and do it with a proud air of expectancy, fully anticipating the pronouncement of a new species of megatherium or brontosaurus.

"My dear Dr. Turbyfil! I have looked forward to this our meeting for so long! I cannot tell you —" Sanzmann shook the proffered hand, sat down, holding a cardboard carton as if it contained wedding cake, took out a handkerchief, wiped his rosy face, and panted.

"Dr. Turbyfil!" the name assumed the qualities of an indictment. "What is that which

they used always to tell us? *Uhrmensch*—Primal Man, that is—he was a stunted little crea-ture, like a chimpanzee, with a molybdenum deficiency, and he—which is to say, *we*—grew larger and bigger and more so, until, with the help of the actuarial tables of the insurance companies, we have our present great size attained, and also life expectancy. And we, pres-u-mably, will greater grow *yet*.

"*But!*" (Dr. Turbyfil quivered.) "What then comes to pass? An anthropologist goes into an *apotheke*—a druck-store, yes?—in Peiping—oh, a bea-u-tiful city, I have been there, I love it with all my heart!—he goes into a native Chinese pharmacy, and there what is it that he finds? He finds—amongst the dried dragon bones, powdered bats, tigers' gall, rhinoceros horn, and pickled serpents—two humanlike gigantic molar teeths! And then, behold, for this is wonderful! The whole picture changes!"

Oh, my, oh, my! thought Dr. Turbyfil, suffering.

"Now Primal Man becomes huge, tremendous, like the Sons of Anak in the First Moses Book. We must now posit for him ancestors like the great apes of your Edgar Burroughs Rice. And how it is that we, his children, have shrunken! Pit-i-ful! Instead of the pigs becoming elephants, the elephants are become pigs!" Dr. Sanzmann clicked his tongue.

"But that is nothing! Nothing at all! Wherefore have I come to you now? To make known to you a something that is so much *more* startling, I must begin earlier than our own times. Charles the Fifth!"

Dr. Turbyfil quavered, "I beg your pardon?"

"Charles the Fifth of Hapsburg. In fifteen hundred and fifty-five, Charles the Emperor resigns, no retires? *Ab*dicates. His brother Ferdinand succeeds him as sovereign of the Hapsburg dominions, and Charles retreats himself to a monastery.

" 'With age, with cares, with maladies oppres't,

"He seeks the refuge of monastic rest—' "

"Ahh, Professor *Sanz*mann," Dr. Turbyfil began.

"Yes-yes: I *di*-gress. Well. Charles and Ferdinand. A medallion is struck, Charles, one side — Ferdinand the other. And the date, fifteen hundred and fifty-five. Here is the medallion." Dr. Sanzmann reached into an inner pocket and pulled out a flat little box, such as jewelers use. He opened it.

Inside lay a blackened disk about the size of a silver dollar, and a piece of paper with two rubbings—the profiles of two men, Latin mottoes, and the date: fifteen hundred and fifty-five. Completely at sea, and feeling more and more sorry for himself, Dr. Turbyfil look-

ed at his rosy-faced and gray-haired caller. He made a small, bewildered gesture.

"Soon, soon, you will understand everything. Nineteen-thirty. My wacations — I am still in Chairmany—I spend at Maldenhausen, a little rural hamlet in a walley. Then things are quiet. Ah, these Chairman walleys! So green, remote, enchanting, full of mysteries! I drink beer and wine, I smoke my pipe, and go on long walks in the countryside. And—since I am a scholar, and ever the dog returns to his vomit—I spend also some time in the willage archives. . . . Many interesting things. . . . A child named Simon. . . .

"In fifteen hundred and fifty-five, a child named Simon is stolen by an ogre."

Dr. Turbyfil pressed a fist to his forehead and moaned faintly. "Is—*what?*" he said fretfully.

"Please! You see the hole in the medallion? The child Simon wore it about his neck on a thong. They were very reverend, these peasant people. An Imperial medallion, one wears it on one's bosom. A photostatic copy of the testimony." Prof. Sanzmann opened the box, removed papers. Photostatic copies, indeed, were among them, but the language was a monkish Latin, and in Gothic lettering. Dr. Turbyfil felt his eyes begin to hurt; he closed them.

Prof. Sanzmann, dreadful man, spoke on. "There were two witnesses, an old man of the name Sigismund, a boy called Lothar. It was winter. It was snow. The child Simon runs with his dog down the field. He shouts. He is afraid. Out of the snow behind him the ogre comes. He is just as they always knew ogres to be: Huge, hairy, crooked, clad in skins, carrying a cudgel. Terrible.

"Lothar runs for help. The old man cannot run, so he stays. And prays. The ogre seizes up the child Simon and runs away with him, back into the fields, toward the hills, until the snow hides them.

"The people are aroused, they are fearful, but not surprised. This happens. There are wolves, there are bears, there are ogres. Such are the hazards of living on the remote farms."

Dr. Turbyfil shivered. A chill crept into his flesh. He rubbed his fingers to warm them. "Folklore," he said. "Old wives' tales."

Dr. Sanzmann waved his hands, then placed them on the photostats. "This is not the Brothers Grimm," he said. "These are contemporary accounts with eyed witnesses. I continue. The people go out in the storm, with dogs and pikes and even a few matchlocks; and since they huddle fearingly together and the snow has hid all foot-marks, it is not a surprise that they do not find

the child or the ogre's spoor. The dog, yes—but he is quite dead. Crushed. One tremendous blow. The next day they search, and then the next, and then no more. Perhaps in the Spring they will find some bones for Christian burial. . . .

"The child had been warned that if he went too far from home he would be stolen by an ogre. He *did* go too far from home, and he *was* stolen by an ogre. So, fifteen-sixty."

Dr. Turbyfil ventured a small smile. "The child has been dead for five years." He felt better, now that he knew what was in the carton. He visualized the card which would never, certainly *never*, be typed: *"Bones of child devoured by ogre in 1555. Gift of Prof. Ludwig Sanzmann, Dr. Phil."*

THE GOETHE scholar swept on. "In fifteen hundred and sixty, the child Simon," he said, "is discovered trying to pilfer fowls from a farmyard in the nexten walley. He is naked, filthy, long-haired, lousy. He growls and cannot speak coherent speech. He fights. It is wery sad."

The Museum Director agreed that it was very sad. (Then what *was* in the cardboard carton?)

"Child Simon is tied, he is delivered up to his parents, who must lock him in a room to keep him from escaping. Gradually he learns to speak again. And then comes to see him the burgemeister, and the notary, and the priest, and the baron, and I should imagine half the people of the district, and they ask him to tell his story, speaking ever the truth.

"The ogre (he says) carried him away wery distantly and high up, to his cave, and there in his cave is his wife the ogress, and a small ogre, who is their child. At first Simon fears they will consume him, but no. He is brought to be a companion to the ogre-child, who is ill. And children are adaptive, wery adaptive. Simon plays with the ogre child, and the ogre brings back sheep and wenison and other foods. At first it is hard for Simon to eat the raw meat, so the ogress chews it soft for him—"

"Please!" Dr. Turbyfil held up a protesting hand, but Professor Sanzmann neither saw nor heard him. With gleaming eyes gazing afar, he went on.

"It comes the spring. The ogre family sports in the forest, and Simon with them. Then comes again the autumn and winter and at last the ogre-child dies. It is sad. The parents cannot believe it. They moan to him. They rock him in their arms. No use. They bury him finally beneath the cave floor. *Now* you will ask," he informed the glassy-eyed Turbyfil, "do they smear the dead body with red ochre as a symbol of life, of blood and flesh, as our scientists say? No. And why not? Because he is

already smeared. All of them. All the time. They like it so. It is not early religion; it is early cosmetic only."

He sighed. Dr. Turbyfil echoed him.

"And so, swiftly pass the years." Prof. Sanzmann patted his hand on the empty air to indicate the passing years. "The old ogre is killed by a she-bear and then the ogress will not eat. She whimpers and clasps Simon to her, and presently she grows cold and is dead. He is alone. The rest we know. Simon grows up, marries, has children, dies. But there are no more ogres.

"Not ever.

"Naturally, I am fascinated. I ask the peasants, where is there a cave called the Cave of the Ogres? They look at me with slanting glances, but will not answer. I am patient. I come back each summer. Nineteen hundred thirty-one, nineteen hundrd thirty two, nineteen hundred thirty-three. Everyone knows me. I give small presents to the children. By myself I wander in the hills and search for caves. Nineteen hundred thirty-four. There is a cow-tending child in the high pastures. We are friends. I speak of a cave near there. This, I say, is called the Cave of the Ogres. The child laughs. No, no, he says, that is another cave; it is located thus and so.

"And I find it where he says. But I am circumspect. I wait another year. Then I come and I make my private excawations. And—I—find—*this*."

He threw open the carton and unwrapped from many layers of cotton-wool something brown and bony, and he set it in front of Dr. Turbyfil.

"There was a fairly complete skeleton, but I took just the skull and jaw-bone. You recognize it at once, of course. And with it I found, as I expected, the medallion of Charles and Ferdinand. Simon had allowed them to bury it with the ogre-child because he had been fond of it. It is all written in the photostatic paper copies.... In nineteen hundred thirty-*six*, the Nazis—"

Dr. Turbyfil stared at the skull. "No, no, no, no," he whispered. It was not a very large skull. "No, no, no," he whispered, staring at the receding forehead and massive chinless jaw, the bulging eye-ridges.

"So, tell me now, sir Museum Director: Is this not a find more remarkable than big teeths in a Peiping herbshop?" His eyes seemed very young and very bright.

Dr. Turbyfil thought rapidly. It needed just something like this to set the Sunday supplements and Mr. Godbody ablaze, and ruin forever both his reputation and that of the Holden Museum. Years and years of work—the seventeen chapters on the Mousterian Era alone in *Man Before the Dawn*—the bequest from old Mr. Godbody—

He arose, placed a hand on Professor Sanzmann's shoulder.

"My friend," he said, in warm, golden tones. "My friend, it will take some time before the Sanzmann Expedition of the Holden Museum will be ready to start. While you make the necessary personal preparations to lead us to the site of your truly astounding discovery, please oblige me by saying nothing about this to our—alas—unscholarly and often sensational press. Eh?"

Dr. Sanzmann's rosy face broke into a thousand wrinkles; tears of joy and gratitude rolled down his cheeks. Dr. Turbyfil generously pretended not to see.

"Imagine what a revolution this will produce," he said, as if he were thinking aloud. "Instead of being tidily extinct for fifty thousand years, our poor cousins survived into modern times. Fantastic! Our whole timetable will have to be rewritten. . . ." His voice died away. His eyes focused on Prof. Sanzmann, nodding his head, sniffling happily, as he tied up his package.

"Incidentally, my dear Professor," he said, "before you leave, I must show you some interesting potsherds that were dug up not a mile from here. You will be fascinated. Aztec influences! This way . . . mind the stairs. I am afraid our cellar is not very well arranged at present; we have been recataloguing. . . . This fascinating collection formerly belonged to a pioneer figure, the late Mr. Tatum Tompkins."

Behind a small mountain of packing cases, Dr. Turbyfil dealt Prof. Sanzmann a swift blow on the temple with one of Uncle Tatum's tomahawks. The scholar fell without a sound, his rosy lips opened upon an unuttered aspirate. Dr. Turbyfil made shift to bury him in the farthest corner of the cellar, and to pile upon his grave such a pyramid of uncatalogued horrors as need not, God and Godbody willing, be disturbed for several centuries.

Dusting his hands, and whistling — a trifle off-key — the hymn called "Bringing in the Sheaves," Dr. Turbyfil returned to the office above stairs. There he opened an atlas, looking at large-scale maps of Germany. A village named Maldenhausen, in a valley. . . . (Where there had been *one* skeleton, there must be others, unspoiled by absurd sixteenth-century paraphernalia—which had no business being there anyway.) His fingers skipped joyfully along the map, and in his mind's eye he saw himself already in those valleys, with their lovely names: Friedenthal, Johannesthal, Hochsthal, Neanderthal, Waldenthal . . . beautiful valleys! Green, remote, enchanting . . . full of mysteries.

END

By WYNNE N. WHITEFORD

never

IN A THOUSAND YEARS

Coincidence, was this — a trail

leading through many centuries—

and pointing to but one man?

"RIDICULOUS!" Graden swept his fingers through his mane of iron-gray hair, his faded eyes bright with anger. "You're wasting my time with a pack of coincidences."

The younger man's voice remained controlled and even. "I can show you plenty more evidence down at Central Archives."

"What kind of evidence?"

Hart zipped open his brief case, taking out a file of thin plastic photocopy sheets. "I don't blame you for doubting me. I didn't believe it myself at first. Down at Archives we correlate records from almost every inhabited world. I'd been working on the land titles of Anrac—"

"Where's that?"

"A planet way out toward the Rim. I noticed that a man called Eltro Xilden owned half the main city. He claimed his father bought the property when the place was being evacuated a hundred years ago."

"Evacuated, you said? Why was it evacuated?"

"Anrac orbits one of the suns of a widely separated binary. It was settled three centuries ago, just after the system had been surveyed. Plenty of mineral deposits there—they built up a big population. Then they found out the orbit of the second sun brought it in on a long ellipse, with a close approach about every two thousand years. During the last century, it came close enough to Anrac to boil the seas, and for ninety years the place was deserted. Someone called Eltro Xilden bought all the property he could lay his hands on while the planet was being evacuated—bought it for next to nothing. Now the present Eltro Xilden must be worth billions from his holdings there—mines, any buildings that survived the heat, land around the starport—in fact, the best part of the city."

Graden snorted. "So the father was far-sighted and the son was equally shrewd. What of it?"

"Let me go on. One of the team who made the original survey of the Anrac system three hundred and fifty years ago was also a man called Eltro Xilden."

Graden said nothing for a few seconds, his face expressionless. "Are you suggesting that an ancestor of these men gave wrong information—deliberately?"

"I'll let you judge that in a moment. I've spent every spare minute during the last three months down at the Archives buildings checking every reference I could find on anyone called Eltro Xilden. I found records from forty-seven planets scattered all over the Galaxy—some of them going back before the collapse of the First Empire!"

"What?"

HART studied a sheet of paper. "Three hundred and eighty-six years ago, a man of this name bought out a tri-planet freight transport fleet in the Ursan Group. And his signature was almost identical with the signature on a land sale document drawn up on Anrac last year. Here, look at these photostats. See for yourself."

Graden looked closely from one to another of the two copies. "They're alike, certainly. Very alike."

"Far too alike for coincidence. Notice the same swirling initial 'E'—and the crossbar of the 'T' bending down to form one of the strokes of the 'X.' Here it is again, on a

copy of a mining contract made on Tau Ceti 3, about three hundred years before the earlier of those two."

Graden unclamped his jaws with an effort. "I see what you mean. A remarkable similarity." He looked piercingly, almost angrily at Hart. "Are you trying to suggest this is the work of the same man?"

"I am."

Graden looked from one of the photostats to another, his lips moving slightly. "And these are not all?"

Hart shook his head. "As you go back beyond that, the trail becomes a bit indefinite. The earliest reference I found to the name was in an article on psycho-electronics printed over a thousand years ago. The writer referred to experimental work done by a man called Eltro Xilden on a planet called Zeno. But I couldn't make a direct check. All I know is that Zeno was a small, independent culture that was wrecked in the collapse of the First Empire."

"Are you sure the place was called Zeno?"

"Yes."

Graden rose to his feet and walked slowly across his study to a wall-recess. He poured two drinks and handed one to Hart.

"I wonder," he said, half to himself. He looked sharply down at the younger man. "I recall that Zeno used to figure in one of the more extravagant legends that grew up in the Dark Era between the collapse of the First Empire and the beginning of the Second Expansion. It was said that the Zenians had discovered the secret of the indefinite lengthening of the human life. Did you know that?"

Hart shook his head. "Never heard of it. How was it supposed to work?"

"As far as I know, it's never been treated as anything but a fable for centuries. Varying stories, of course, ranging from simply a slowing up of the process of aging to a continuous renewal of youth." He took a careful sip from his glass. "Psycho-electronics, eh? Throws the legend into a different light, doesn't it?"

"I think it all fits."

"Perhaps. I think we have something worth investigating here. But tell me one thing: Why did you come to me?"

Hart's eyes were cool and steady. "Two reasons. First, you have plenty of money, enough not to miss paying my fare to Anrac. Second, you're —well, old enough not to want to go all that way and tangle with a man like Xilden yourself, yet close enough to the end of your life to value the chance of prolonging it."

Graden flushed momentarily. Then the fire went out of him as quickly as it had ignited. He looked away. "You're right. I have nothing to lose

—and a lot to gain. But have you thought of this? Other men must have stumbled on Xilden's secret during the past thousand years. What happened to them?"

Hart's smile was hard and taut. "I can look after myself. Well, is it yes or no?"

"Yes, of course," said Graden.

BY THE time he landed on Anrac, some of Hart's confidence in his ability to handle the situation had evaporated. It had been a long, long journey out here to the Galaxy's Rim. It had needed three changes of starships to complete the voyage, and with each vast leap outward into the void he had found himself in a culture more individualistic, more divergent from the pattern of civilization that he had thought to be universal.

From Anrac, most of the Galaxy was visible as a spindle-shaped haze of light to one side. In the other direction lay only a thin sprinkling of stars against the empty dark, and the scattered flecks of light of other galaxies at unimaginable distances beyond. Hart, who liked to think of himself as a man who knew his way about, was acutely aware of the immense separation between him and everyone he knew.

"You're way out on your own," he told himself mirthlessly as the ship dropped toward Anrac's surface. The starport was a rocky plain that stretched level as a table to distant crimson mountains that filled the western horizon. East and north, the far-off buildings of Anrac City gleamed with many-tinted metal and crystalline towers, some of them spearing a low bank of misty cloud. Low in the east, the primary sun was rising, a huge red disc behind bars of thin stratus. The second sun was high in the southwest, with the fierce blue brilliance of an electric arc.

Riding down the escalator from the ship, Hart felt better as he breathed deeply in the thin, oxygen-rich air. Air that was rich enough to be intoxicating if he wasn't careful. He had to fight down a boyish impulse to run.

The official who checked his papers in the terminal building looked at him with unpleasantly observant eyes. "What's your purpose in visiting Anrac?"

"I'm collecting historical data on the evacuation," said Hart.

"Couldn't you get all the data from Central Records?"

"I want to interview someone here."

The official's eyes were unwavering. "Who?"

"Eltro Xilden."

The official pressed something on his desk, muttered

something into an intercom, then gestured at a line of seats. "Wait over there," he said curtly.

Hart sat on the nearest seat, looking about him. The terminal building was transparent-walled, and the intersecting beams of red and blue sunlight gave it a theatrical gaudiness that did nothing to make him feel at home. The men and women about him, mostly bare-limbed and in short, vivid tunics and capes, made his own gray suit seem grotesquely out of place.

He was kept waiting until the building was almost empty. The red sun climbed the sky with maddening slowness. His watch was useless for local time, and he could make no sense of the clock on the wall, which had nine divisions and three differently colored hands, one of which made its full circuit in about half an hour. It had been around twice when his name boomed from a loudspeaker.

"Lon Hart, Flight 447, report to Room 9."

He walked down to the room indicated and the translucent door slid open as he approached it. A thin, hawk-faced man sat behind a black plastic desk.

"Sit down," he said. As Hart sat, he remained motionless for fully a minute, reading a paper in his hands. Then he looked up sharply. "You said you wanted to see Eltro Xilden. Is that right?"

"Right. I'm collecting data on—"

"Thank you." The words cut his sentence like a knife. "I may as well tell you at once: Nobody sees Eltro Xilden."

HART met the hawk-faced man's eyes. He reminded himself silently that the man in front of him was a third-rate official on a tenth-rate planet. He took a notebook from his brief case and spent some seconds opening it at a fresh page.

"Let's get this all straight," he said. "What's your name?"

The official's somber eyes wavered to the notebook, skittered to the name-board on his desk, then returned to Hart's face with a somewhat changed expression. "That's of no importance," he said quickly. "I'm not putting any restrictions on you. I'm just telling you the simple fact that Xilden refuses to see anyone."

Hart looked at the name-board, copied the name unhurriedly into his notebook, lifting the book so that the other man couldn't see what he was writing. He made meaningless squiggles on the page until he heard the official swallow noisily, then looked up at him again.

"Who gave you the information that Xilden doesn't see anyone?" He kept his pen

poised over the notebook, and it gave him some satisfaction to see that the official was watching it as though hypnotized.

"Everyone here knows that. Xilden is probably the most important man on Anrac—he's president of Anrac Consolidated, and that controls every major company on the planet. Also, he's quite old. Leaves everything to his managers and directors, and to his granddaughter—she's the only person he sees now, I believe."

"Where can I contact her?"

The official hesitated, his eyes on the notebook. "I don't know. Try the offices of Anrac Consolidated."

Hart walked out of the terminal building on to a wide platform, from which the line of a magnetic shuttle ran straight across the plain to the distant city. He smiled as he recalled the official's description of Xilden: "He's quite old." The understatement of ten centuries.

The bulletlike shell of the shuttle whistled across the plain; its internal stasis-field killed any sensation of movement. Hart stepped out on another platform at the side of a large square within the central part of the city, looking up at the towering buildings.

Some of them were burned-out shells, with empty window-holes showing as black rectangles in discolored metal walls—silent evidence of the ferocious heat that had seared Anrac during the close approach of the blue sun. Most of the larger structures had been reconditioned and were obviously in use again, but the city was still relatively empty of people and vehicles.

A SHORT flight in an aircab took him to the offices of Anrac Consolidated, out of the center of the city, facing a park in which young, recently planted vegetation was beginning to spring up. He looked at the building from outside for a minute or two—it was less imposing than he had expected—then walked into the reception room.

As soon as he gave his name at the desk, the receptionist checked her appointment pad.

"Lon Hart? You're expected." She buzzed someone on the intercom, while Hart glanced about him uneasily. The hawk-faced official back at the terminal had acted quickly.

A door slid open and a thickset man faced him. "Will you come this way, Mr. Hart?"

He led the way into a bright, bare office with a desk and two chairs, gesturing to Hart to sit down. He sat opposite and pressed his fingertips together.

"I understand you wish to

see the Chief. What's the nature of your business?"

FORCING himself to be deliberate, Hart said, "I want some information on Tau Ceti—on the mines there. I believe your Chief is the only man who can give it to me."

"Never heard of the place."

"This was a very long time ago," said Hart.

The thickset man looked at him fixedly. "I see," he said. He glanced at a huge visi-screen filling the end wall of the office. "I think I'd better put you in touch with Sula. That's the Chief's granddaughter. She's the only one who has direct contact with him these days—handles all his personal business."

He dialed an instrument on his desk and looked toward the visi-screen again. The whole end wall seemed to vanish, as though it had opened into a large, beautifully furnished room beyond. It was obviously not a room in Anrac City. A broad window in the far wall overlooked a wild sweep of coastline with crimson cliffs, white surf and turquoise water.

Into the field of the screen came a tall, slender girl in a close-fitting azure dress, and Hart felt suddenly frozen. She had ash-blonde hair and dark eyes with a faint upward slant, and every movement of her body gave the effect of a catlike blend of suppleness and intense vitality. She looked questioningly at the thickset man.

"Sula," he said, "this is Lon Hart. He's come all the way from New Altair to see the Chief."

The girl looked at Hart, the screen making her image incredibly lifelike. "Can I help you?" she asked. Her voice was smoothly modulated and unexpectedly deep.

He found himself trying to guess her age. She might have been anything between eighteen and twenty-five—eighteen at first glance, but with the poise and quiet sureness of a mature woman.

"I'd like to see Eltro Xilden personally. I want some information from him about Tau Ceti—and about Zeno."

"Surely only a historian could tell you about Zeno," said the girl.

"A historian, yes. Or a man who had lived there."

Sula looked at him very steadily. Suddenly she turned to the thickset man. "Could you leave us, Carl?"

Carl nodded briefly to Hart, then went out of the room, closing the sliding door behind him. The girl returned her gaze to Hart, looking him over as though he were a new species of animal. He had a moment of inspiration.

"How do you know I'm not from Zeno myself?" he asked.

"It's unlikely, isn't it? Zeno

was abandoned a very long time ago." Her smile was naive, girlish, except for the calm watchfulness of her eyes.

"Unlikely, yes, but it's not impossible."

"I think you had better come out here to the house," she said. "I'll get an aircar to pick you up there in a few minutes." She touched something on a console and the picture faded from the screen, leaving Hart staring at a blank silver wall.

ALONE, Hart grinned savagely, driving his fist into his palm. It had been easier than he had ever dreamed.

But as he waited on the roof of the building, watching an aircar drop toward him from Anrac's violet sky, a nagging thought began to creep into his mind. It was easy so far, yes—*too* easy. He took out the tiny solenoid pistol he had bought on one of the planets where he had changed starships on the way out here to the Rim. It had been made to look like a cigarette lighter. Small, but the only weapon he dared to carry.

Once he had identified himself, the pilot of the aircar said nothing to him. He relaxed in the back seat, watching the rectilinear net of Anrac City's streets and avenues swinging below as they headed northward along the coast.

Here and there across the scorched red countryside were groves of quick-growing tamarisks and other alien vegetation obviously introduced since the evacuation and return.

The aircar must have covered a hundred and fifty miles before the pilot swept down over a curving bay walled with crimson cliffs. He landed in a courtyard of a large white house of synthetic stone, with an iridescent blue roof. There was nobody in sight.

Hart felt a twinge of uneasiness—as he climbed out of the aircar, he had the uncanny feeling of being watched. The pilot took off almost immediately, and Hart stood in the courtyard for a minute watching the aircraft dwindle to a speck in the sky to the southward. He turned toward the house.

"Come to the door by the yellow bushes." It was Sula's voice, coming through the hot, still air from some amplifier he couldn't see. He walked across the blue-tiled courtyard toward a group of bushes like giant lemon-yellow cacti, and a door slid silently open to reveal the cool interior of the house.

He hesitated, looking around the wide sweep of horizon. There was not another building in sight. Apart from the far-off hollow roar of surf on the beaches at the foot of the cliffs, the only sound was the pounding,

pounding, pounding of the pulse in his ears.

"Come on in."

He whirled to find Sula standing within the doorway. She was even more beautiful than he had thought—the visi-screen had only hinted at the freshness and youth of her. Without speaking, he went into the house, following her along the quietly furnished hall and into a huge lounge with transparent walls overlooking the sweep of red and turquoise coastline he had seen on the screen.

A tall, gaunt old man with white hair and bleak, wintry blue eyes stood in the center of the room. Sula turned back to Hart with a dizzyingly brilliant smile.

"Here's the man you crossed half the Galaxy to meet," she said. "My grandfather—Eltro Xilden."

Hart felt Xilden scanning every part of his body, returning again and again to his face. For the first time for many years, he found himself at a loss for anything to say. Had he not known Xilden's fantastic history, he would have put the man's age at a well-preserved hundred. He wore a plain green robe that hung slackly from a large, bony frame. When he spoke, his voice had an incisive harshness.

"You've come all the way from New Altair to meet me," he said. "Why?"

HART swallowed. He was acutely aware of the isolation of the house, of the fact that if he were to die in this place, nobody could ever trace him. Normally he found no difficulty in telling a lie. But now his life might depend on it. He was conscious of the seconds slipping mercilessly by while those chill eyes bored into his—eyes that must have seen every possible gambit used over and over again.

"I'm making an investigation for Central Archives," Hart said. "We've noticed your name has been prominent on a number of worlds—at different times."

Xilden held up a thin, blue-veined hand. "Young man, you must forgive me if I appear rather blunt. What do you want?"

"I'm afraid I don't follow."

The old man snorted. "I watched your conversation with Sula over the screen. You mentioned Zeno—a planet that was wiped out a thousand years ago. No doubt you've heard of the legend that the Zenians had the secret of prolonging life. I don't know what data you've found out about me, and I'm not going to bother to ask. This situation has come up before."

"I was merely carrying out an investigation—"

"Unoriginal. Almost every man who has tried to make inquiries about me has used that story. Do you know why *you*

are the only one in half a century who has got this far?"

Hart was about to say he didn't understand, but he realized the uselessness of fighting a thousand years of experience with apparent innocence. "No," he said.

"Sit down," invited Xilden. Hart and Sula sat on two of the magnetic-suspension chairs in the room, and Xilden lowered himself stiffly into another. "It's because of her," he said.

Hart looked at Sula, who was sitting demurely with her hands clasped in her lap.

"You know I'm quite old." Xilden's voice shook with a senile chuckle. "Perhaps even older than you think. And no matter what the legends say about the Zenians, no man can make the human body last forever. I want to see my granddaughter's future assured."

Hart felt himself thrown completely off balance. Sula lifted her eyes to his and smiled.

"You must forgive Eltro—he has absolutely no tact," she said.

Xilden rose shakily to his feet and went slowly out of the room.

Hart looked in bewilderment at the girl. "Have I got this straight?" he asked. "Did he mean—?"

She went to a large and ornate bar and poured out two glasses of emerald-green liquid. She handed one to Hart, and as he took it he noticed the tapering perfection of her slim hands. The pale hair hung forward across her shoulders.

"Is Eltro really your grandfather?" he asked.

She sipped her drink before replying. "Not really. He's my guardian. He knew my parents."

"A man called Eltro Xilden was a member of the research team that gave wrong data on Anrac's orbit three hundred years ago. A man called Eltro Xilden wrote an article on psycho-electronics on Zeno a thousand years ago. It *was* the same man, wasn't it?"

SULA'S eyes were very steady on his. Slowly she smiled, a calm, secretive smile. But she said nothing.

"You're very beautiful," he said, and was surprised that he had said it. It was as though the words had come from him of their own volition.

"I'm glad you think that. From the moment I saw you on the visi-screen, I wanted to meet you. Eltro doesn't want to see anybody these days, but when I told him, he—he didn't mind my asking you here."

She was sitting very close to him. Her hair brushed his face as she put her lips close to his ear.

"It's quite true that Eltro

can prolong life. He's performed the treatment on himself very many times."

"Has he performed it on you?"

"Well, of course!"

He pulled back in alarm. "Then—"

A small, delighted laugh rippled through her. "Silly! I'm *twenty!* I have a long time ahead of me, that's all." She put her hands on his shoulders and held herself away from him at arm's length, her head slightly to one side. "I'm so *glad* you came here! I'll ask him to give his treatment to you. He likes you already—and he'll do it if I ask him." All at once she became serious. "You have no illnesses, have you? That might complicate the treatment."

"None!" he said, his heart thumping almost deafeningly. "Not a one!"

She sprang to her feet with the lightness of a gazelle. "I'm going to ask him right now!"

She ran out of the room. Hart stood up and walked across to the windows, looking down over the sea. He smacked his fist against his palm. Of all the incredible luck—it didn't seem possible that things could have run so smoothly for him. To come halfway across the Galaxy to make an almost hopeless attempt to find the greatest secret a man could have—and then have it handed to him freely, with the love of an attractive girl thrown in!

Once again he felt the disguised pistol in his pocket, and grinned happily that he didn't have to rely on anything so puny.

He was still looking down at the distant surf when Sula and Xilden came slowly back into the room. The old man's arm rested across the girl's shoulders, and his wintry eyes scanned Hart calculatingly, as though summing up every detail of his personality.

"You really like him, my dear?" he asked Sula.

"I really do." She tilted her head on one side, looking critically, mischievously at Hart. "I always liked blue eyes, and I just *love* that mop of black hair! Of course, he could look a little more confident."

Xilden's gaunt frame shook with a senile cackle. "Maybe we could change that. Eh, dear?"

"I'm sure we could." The girl looked up at him, and they both laughed. Hart felt a stab of jealousy at the intimacy between them.

IN THE laboratory in another wing of the house, Xilden made him sit in a metal chair, while the girl stood looking on. Along one wall was a fantastically complex mass of electronic equipment with a strangely makeshift, jury-rigged appearance. Xilden fitted a metal helmet with

innumerable hair-thin wires on Hart's head, and strapped metallic contacts to various parts of his body.

Hart knew sudden fear. Xilden had only to put a high-voltage current through the contacts, and his secret was safe!

As if she knew what Hart was thinking, Sula stepped forward and put her hand on his. He remained tense, torn between fear and anticipation, the two opposing thoughts keeping his mind thrashing in a circle.

"I think it's about time I took another myself," muttered Xilden to the girl. "You remember how to operate the dials, Sula?"

"I remember. You get in the other chair."

Xilden climbed stiffly into a similar chair on the far side of the room. He sighed, looking down at his hands. The girl slipped a second helmet over his head, strapped contacts to his gaunt body similar to those he had fitted to Hart.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Ready, dear," said Xilden.

Hart felt something like a violent electric shock contorting his muscles . . .

Blackness . . . the blackness of an abyss. A weird sensation of looking at his own body, squirming in the chair as the currents went through it. Then nothingness . . .

He felt a leaden sense of fatigue, and the light hurt his eyes when he opened them. His mouth was dry, and when he tried to speak, his voice was a shaky croak, as though the muscles of his lips and throat were partly out of control. Through the inertia of utter exhaustion, he heard a deep, ringing laughter, almost like his own laughter, yet somehow freer and more exultant.

"A good choice, Sula! The best I've had in centuries!"

HART forced his eyes open. Colors looked slightly different, outlines of objects slightly blurred. The helmet and contacts had been taken away, but when he tried to rise to his feet, his body didn't respond properly.

He looked down at the loose green robe, the skinny, aged legs, the knotted blue veins on the clawlike hand gripping the arm of the chair.

Across the room, Sula and the tall, black-haired young man turned—and Hart realized he was looking at a man who could have been a double of himself, but with a poise, an assurance that had never been his. The man walked across and stood looking down at him. As he blinked up, Hart's watering eyes took in the vertical crease between the brows, the tiny scar on the angle of the jaw, the small mole on the side of the neck. And then the realization he had been fighting against

came in on him like an avalanche.

He was looking at his own body.

And these gnarled hands he held up in front of him were the hands of Eltro Xilden.

He fainted.

WHEN consciousness returned, he was lying on rocky ground near the sea. A little way off stood an aircar. Standing over him was the man who was his double.

"Yes," he said, and though the voice was Hart's, the inflections were Eltro Xilden's. "It's true that a man can be immortal, in the sense of being a continuously existing mind with an accumulating reservoir of experience. Unfortunately, it needs a succession of bodies."

Hart shook uncontrollably. "You can't do this!"

"I can. I have—many, many times."

"You planned all this from the beginning! You deliberately left a trail for me to find!"

"Naturally. It takes a good mind to puzzle it out and a good body to make the trip—and I want both. I won't ask you to keep quiet about this. I've seen to it that people think Eltro Xilden is a senile idiot, anyway, and anything you say will confirm it."

Sula came along from the aircar and stood beside him. "Ready, dear—or do I call you Lon Hart?"

"Don't like that name much. Think I'll change it."

The girl smiled up at him. "Why don't you change it to Eltro Xilden?"

"Not tired of him yet?"

She pressed her cheek against his shoulder. "Never in a thousand years!"

They went toward the aircar together. Hart stumbled to his feet, but when he tried to run after them, he fell headlong. As the car took off, he beat his fists in fury against the ground, his eyes scalded with tears.

The aircar dwindled into the empty sky.

END

IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF IF...

James H. Schmitz, after much too long a sabbatical from science fiction, returns with SUMMER GUESTS, a short novel that begins with deceptive seasonal warmth, and builds to as cold a chill as ever this planet has known. Gordon R. Dickson's HOMECOMING, a novelet, has one of the cutest pets—and the worst dilemma—you are likely to meet. Charles L. Fontenay and Miriam Allen DeFord lead the lengthy parade of short stories. And IN THE BALANCE continues with sparkle and verve and wit. A fine issue. Don't pass it by.

Sitting Duck

By DANIEL F. GALOUYE

The difference between hunter and hunted isn't intelligence—it's who does the shooting!

THE shimmering mote dropped toward the plain to the east. Like a silver mirror, it captured the luster of the sinking sun and hurled it back sparkling toward the city.

A band of smudge-faced boys, their feet rooted in the

dust of the play lot, stared at the point of scintillating brilliance.

Four women, poised before the entrance of a supermarket, strained to watch.

In the downtown district, a stock broker paused in midsentence as the reflection danced through the window. His client tensed, leaned forward for a better view.

For a long while the radiant mote hovered, soaking up the shadows of dusk that drifted from the surface like a mist. Then it dropped quietly, hiding itself in a subtle contour of the plain.

"Come on!" shouted a blond tyke as he retrieved the football. "We ain't got all night."

The women in front of the supermarket exchanged glances, then dispersed, three going on into the store while the fourth trundled off her cart of groceries.

Turning from the window, the broker thumbed through a stack of papers. "Here's an attractive investment . . ."

Hundreds closer to the site said the mote was a great sphere of gleaming metal. But when the first detachment of Guardsmen pushed across the plain hours later that Friday night, they found nothing—or practically nothing.

IT WAS almost noon Saturday when Ray Kirkland ringed the hat rack with an underhanded toss and shrugged off his topcoat, together with the chill of the plain that clung to it like a clammy film. He was a large, thick-shouldered man with a blunt face and stout jaw.

Balston, the managing editor, laced him with a caustic eye. "You sure took your time getting back."

"Thought I'd try to squeeze a few more quotes out of Stoddard for the last edition," said Ray.

"Did the general find out where they dropped down?"

"As I said on the phone, they pinpointed it with Geiger counters. But, like in the first twelve landings, there weren't any other kinds of marks."

Balston, a tall, gaunt man with wiry graying hair, leaned back. "Did the general have any theories?"

Ray shrugged. "The usual. No cause for concern—would have acted by now—probably setting down to replenish water or oxygen."

The editor made a sound that was somewhat like a sarcastic grunt. "I suppose he didn't venture an opinion on why they have to land *close to cities* to get their water and oxygen?"

"No. But he did suggest they might be so superior that they'd have nothing to gain by coming in contact with us."

Balston squinted quizzically.

"Stoddard," Ray explained, "put it this way: If one of our naval ships had to land on a primitive island to fill its water tanks, the crew wouldn't want to get involved socially with the savages."

The other chewed thoughtfully on a pencil. "At least that's a different line of speculation. Put your new lead on it for the final."

Ray started for his desk.

"Kirkland!" one of the reporters called. "Telephone—your father-in-law."

"That you, Ray boy?" the receiver rasped eagerly in his ear when he picked it up. "Drop by Clark's store and bring home a box of number five shells, will you?"

"Duck season doesn't open for another week," Ray reminded him, annoyed.

The old man laughed. "Nothing like being prepared. And don't forget, son—you're going out in the marsh with me tomorrow."

Ray slumped in the chair. He'd forgotten about the blind. A hell of a way to spend Sunday. And Alice would sulk if he didn't pamper the old boy.

AT SUPPER, his father-in-law sat across the table, half hidden behind a mound of decoys that congregated around his plate as though it were a lush feeding pond.

"As I figure it," Ray was saying, "since all these landings were close to cities, there must be a purpose behind them *in connection with the cities*. There ought to be some tangible results. I'm sure if I looked close enough, I might find something that's different from what it was yesterday."

"But giving up your Sunday!" Alice exclaimed. "I won't have that! You do enough for that paper."

He hunched forward. "But think of the recognition I could get . . ." His voice trailed into silence as she merely shook her head.

The old man pushed a pair of dusky brown pintails out of the way and straightened with no small amount of resentment.

"Tomorrow's the only day we have to fix that blind, son," he said soberly, "if we're going to be ready for Saturday."

Ray cast him a glance of sullen hostility. "But don't you understand, Dad? There's been a landing near here and—"

"And try to get back from that swamp early, Raymond," Alice broke in. "There's a new house in the subdivision that may be just what we're looking for. It's on that corner lot—where you said you'd like to build."

Enheartened at the unexpected prospect of not having to spend his entire day in the swamp, he smiled gratefully.

But his smile changed to a

puzzled frown. "There's no house on that corner."

"Of course there is, dear. A small Cape Cod. I walked past it at noon."

"It wasn't there when I drove by this morning," he insisted.

The existence or nonexistence of the Cape Cod remained unsettled as Alice, disinterested, busied herself with gathering up the dishes.

Dad proudly picked up two green-winged teals with stupid blunt heads and stubby necks. He held one in each hand. "It'd take a darn smart duck to be suspicious of these, wouldn't it, son?"

SUNDAY in the marsh was particularly tedious and frustrating as Ray subordinated his professional interest in the reported landing to the whims of his father-in-law and paddled down a narrow waterway. The raucous squawks of the mallard hen, as produced by the old man's duck call, made the monotony no more endurable as they reached a pond adjoining the central lake.

A flock of sleek-headed canvasbacks hugged the northern edge of the pothole. The lead male, tense and alert, stretched his neck to keep a wary eye on the skiff.

Two females, preening themselves in the reeds along the shore, looked up in alarm.

Several of the younger ducks clustered uneasily, training their beady eyes alternately on the lead bird and the skiff as it glided through the slough into the lake.

When Ray glanced back over the top of the saw grass, the ducks had recovered from the intrusion.

The lead male was swimming among the others, as though reassuring them. The two hens on shore had returned nonchalantly to their preening. And the yearlings were dispersing from their cluster and spreading out boldly once more over the surface of the pothole.

Two of the larger males left the main group and swam over to the clouded water where the skiff had passed. They glided in circles, inspecting the area curiously.

Ray paddled into the blind and helped his father-in-law onto the platform. But the structure was only half concealed by the reeds they had used to camouflage it the year before.

The old man reached back into the boat and untied his bundle of tools, arranging a saw, hammer, pliers and roll of wire on the platform.

The lead canvasback from the pothole was in the air now. Flying over the lake, he dipped down occasionally to touch the water and peer into clumps of saw grass.

"Damned drake's trying to see where we went," Dad said

irately. "Wouldn't want him to get wise to our setup and louse things up for next Saturday."

The big duck rose higher, banked and came in directly over the blind, squawking stridently as it spotted the men.

Dad reared up from the sack of tools, clutching his twelve-gauge automatic. His florid face froze in an expression of delight as he swept the butt to his shoulder and sent the barrel arching past Ray's shoulder.

Instinctively, Ray hurled himself on the platform. The gun went off, its spread of number-five shot roaring by within searing range of his face.

"Got him!" the old man shouted exuberantly.

THE shotgun blast was still a far-away buzzing in his ear as Ray drove up in front of the Cape Cod that afternoon. Surrounded by new shrubbery, it was a neat little bungalow that surveyed the freshly turned ground around it.

"See?" Alice said smugly. "I told you they built on this corner."

The sign next to the walk identified it as a product of Castle Estates, Inc., and announced that the four-kitchen, one-and-a-half-bedroom home was open for inspection.

Ray did a double-take. The sign *did* say "four kitchens."

"Wait here," he told Alice, still skeptical that a complete house could have been built in less than three days. "I'll see if the agent's inside."

At the entrance, he pushed the bell. But the button wouldn't budge. Defects, so soon?

He tried the buzzer again, gave it up, and knocked on the door. But with the first rap, his fist went *through* the oak paneling as though it were crisp cardboard.

Swearing, he tried to pull his hand from the shattered panel. The door came off at the hinges and folded over limply as it fluttered to the ground.

"For goodness *sake*, Raymond!" Alice called impatiently from the car. "What are you *doing?*"

Confounded, he entered.

But there was no inside to the house.

From the landing, he stepped down onto a mud floor with a sickly matting of brown, sun-starved grass. Overhead was the inverted "V" of the roof—no ceiling joists, no rafters. And the walls—it was as though they had been poured from a mold, with imperfections here and there in the form of raised ridges, like seepage seams from matrices that had failed to match evenly.

Tipping his hat up off his forehead, he walked around surveying the eviscerated

house. Probably something new in prefabricated construction, he decided. Might bear looking into for a Sunday supplement yarn.

Backing toward the door, he started as something sharp nudged him in the side. He turned and almost knocked over a contraption he hadn't noticed before. Mounted on spindly legs, it resembled a surveyor's transit, with the telescope pointed through a window in the general direction of a row of ligustrum plants.

Interested, he inspected the thing, running his hand over its slick metal surface. His fingers touched a protuberance on the side of the cylinder and an almost inaudible, high-pitch humming erupted in his ear, crescendoed until it ended with an abrupt *click*.

He thrust his hands guiltily into his pockets, hoping he hadn't disturbed some delicate adjustment that might make a construction worker catch hell the next day.

Turning to leave, he almost tripped over something else he hadn't noticed previously —a wax-leafed ligustrum plant that lay on the mud floor, its roots shining and moist as though it had just been plucked from the soil.

Outside, as he strode toward Alice's impatient grimace, his eyes swept the row of ligustrums. There was a breach in the hedge where a vandal had no doubt uprooted the plant.

"OF COURSE it isn't ours!" exclaimed August Sandifer, developer. "Castle Estates doesn't deal in cracker boxes! We have a motto: 'Every Castle-Built Home Is a Home-Built Castle' and . . ."

Ray eased the receiver farther from his ear. On his desk before him was spread the Monday morning mail edition with its story of the two new landings—one east of Denver and the other near San Diego.

"You mean you didn't build the Cape Cod?"

"It wasn't there Friday," Sandifer snapped. "It's there now. That's all I know about it."

"How do you suppose it got there?"

"One of those prefab outfits must have gotten their delivery addresses mixed. We've got the city permit division out there now. If they can't tell us who is responsible, we're going to put a match to the damned thing!"

Ray checked with the permit office before he sent out a photographer. Then he started in on the story, featurizing it heavily:

FOUND: House with 4 Kitchens

City officials and a local housing developer were

stumped today over the enigma of a misplaced prefabricated house . . .

It rated a byline and a spot on the bottom of page one for the first street edition. Sample copies of the run were shuttled up from the press room just as Balston came in.

The managing editor settled down in his chair, spread the paper on his desk and promptly recoiled ceilingward, bellowing, "Kirkland! Come here!"

Ray went over uncertainly.

"You walked into this damned thing wide open!" Balston's eyes darted incriminatingly from the front page to Ray. "Don't you know a promotion trick when you see one?"

"It's no publicity stunt," Ray objected. "Sandifer didn't come to us. I went—"

Exasperated, Balston brushed him aside. "Hawkins!" he shouted at the city editor. "Get that thing out of the paper and find something legitimate for Kirkland to do!"

"Ray," one of the reporters called from a rear desk. "Sandifer's on the phone again. Says that house is gone—and two of his agents with it."

The managing editor shot up and spun around. "Tell him to peddle his promotion stuff somewhere else!"

Ray went over to the city editor's desk.

"I didn't think he'd take it that way," Hawkins sympathized. "Check this out for a possible human interest angle."

He reached into the assignment book and selected a classified ad clipping:

FOR SALE, CHEAP: One giant mutated sea horse, complete with harness and aqua-sled. Apply Dr. Whitmore Vandell, Rt. 4, Sand Beach.

THE advertisement, whatever its purpose, had drawing power, Ray conceded as he turned off the highway toward the dumpy white frame structure that squatted half in the water like a centipede on its creosoted pilings. There were three cars parked randomly on a level area a short distance from the beach house. A fourth was throwing up a dust barrage on the road ahead of him.

By the time he drew up next to the newly arrived vehicle, its driver was threading his way among boulders and scrubby growth toward the house. Ray sat in the car and traced the man's progress along the path—behind a rock, across a sandy stretch, behind a bush . . .

There was the annoying, high-pitch buzzing of a mosquito in his ear and he fanned the air to chase it away. His eyes, however, remained on

the last bush behind which the man had disappeared. A minute passed and still he hadn't emerged.

Curious, Ray started down the path, keeping the bush and house in sight. But when he reached the spot where the man should have been, he wasn't there.

Tense and suspicious, he stood staring hesitantly at the house. His shadow was an almost black patch on the intensely white sand. The muffled sound of surf on rock was a subdued whisper. In the distance, a gull circled above the water, wailing plaintively.

An abrupt movement beyond a window on his right attracted his attention. Through the pane he saw a small, tubular object resembling a compact telescope on a tripod. It was a duplicate of the transitlike instrument in the window of the Cape Cod!

The tube swiveled in his direction and he squinted to make out the shadowy form that lurked behind it—something huge, not human. Thin, jointless arms extended from a rotund and scaly gray torso to coil like tendrils around the transit. An even more bulbous head swung around with the instrument, following him as he backed away from the house in fright. If there were eyes in that head, they were hidden in a mass of scales and lesser tendrils.

Bristling with fear, he remembered the transit in the Cape Cod and the high-pitched humming it had produced when he touched the tube. It was a sound suspiciously similar to the buzzing of the mosquito he had heard only minutes earlier—*at the same time the man had vanished from behind the bush!*

The telescope steadied on him and he whirled and raced toward the nearest boulder, skirting a clump of bushes and flushing a startled seagull from concealment behind the foliage.

The humming sounded again and the bush disappeared, as though it had been uprooted and flung out of sight at a speed too fast for the eye to follow. Gone too was the gull in midflight.

HE DIVED behind the rock, remembering the ligustrum he had almost stumbled over in the Cape Cod. Now he was *certain* the plant hadn't been there before he touched the transit!

The high-pitched note wailed again and he felt the rock vibrate before him. Apprehensively, he pressed closer against the boulder. Some of it made sense now. He had suggested looking for a purpose behind the landing, scouting for effects that hadn't existed before. Was this—and the Cape Cod too—part of those effects?

"Help me! Please help me!"

He started. The cry had come from the house. One of the windows on the side was open and a young woman in a torn dress, her face streaked with terror, leaned half out, screaming.

"Jump!" he called. "Run along the beach! They've got the thing pointed *this* way!"

Her slim white hands gripped the sill, but she only stared frantically at him, paralyzed with terror.

"Help me! Please help me!"

He seized a rock and hurled it at the transit in the front window. It went wild, crashing against the house. The second hurtled through the window but missed also. The third hit the tube squarely and it toppled out of sight.

Bolting around to where the girl was, he seized her arm and hauled her over the sill.

"Help me! Please help me!"

He grabbed her hand to race away, but she almost collapsed. He slung her over his shoulder, running along the bluff and leaping into a gully that shielded them from the house.

Climbing out of the shallow ravine at a point close to his car, he set her on the ground. She swayed, then steadied. But there was only panic on her face.

"Help me! Please help me!" Her eyes were focused beyond him and her cries were unchanged from the first time he had heard them.

Suddenly confounded, he backed away. The girl only stood there, repeating her desperate plea. Then he saw the rough ridge that ran from her temple, along her cheek, neck and shoulder and down the outside of her arm—like imperfections in an object cast from a matrix.

Sickened and horrified, he reeled back to the car.

Her unvarying cries followed him as her lips moved, but too methodically and not in synchronization with the words.

He sent the car plunging up the dirt road toward the highway. When he looked back, the girl wasn't there any longer—nor were the other four cars and the beach house.

But there *was* something else, speeding above the road behind him—a vague symmetrical shadow, like the merest suggestion of an oval-shaped cloud.

He reached the highway and swerved recklessly into the stream of traffic. Through his rear-view mirror, he watched the patch of dense haze pause at the intersection, as though confused. Then it turned and streaked off southward, gaining altitude. In its path, perhaps ten miles away, a fragment of silver glistened radiantly in the sky.

RAY pounded his fist on the managing editor's desk. "Sure I came straight back

here. You think this is the kind of thing you go chat with Chief Johnson about?"

"So you came here instead, expecting to find me less skeptical?" Balston demanded.

Ray bent over tensely. "Don't you see? The Cape Cod, the beach house, the landing, the ad in the paper —they're all connected! And there are other ads that look phony. Check the paper. You'll see them."

The managing editor sat up. "Look, Kirkland. How'd you like to take a day or two off?"

"You don't believe me!"

A half-dozen staff members, crowded around them, dispersed respectfully. Across the room, Hawkins hunched busily over the city desk, not doing a very good job of pretending to be preoccupied. He sighed gratefully as the phone rang and he had to answer it.

"The Cape Cod, the beach house," Ray went on, "don't you see they're traps—devices to lure people within range of those things? This may be happening all over!"

"Why *lure* people?" Balston asked. "If they're as advanced as you're implying, they shouldn't have to use deception."

"I don't pretend to have all the answers. I'm just telling you what I know. It's your job to see that the facts get to the public."

The city editor replaced his phone on the hook. "State Police Headquarters," he called over, "says there's no beach house out there."

Ray spread his hands. "I told you that when I came in. Didn't the Cape Cod disappear too—after Sandifer and I found out it was just a blind?"

Balston rose and gripped his shoulder. "Take the rest of the week off. A good rest—"

Ray shrugged out from under the other's hand. "Oh, for God's sake!"

"You admit you've been scouting around *looking* for unusual things resulting from the so-called landing?"

"So I've found them!"

"What? Scaly creatures with gooseneck arms?" There was no laughter in Balston's voice. But it was heavily implied.

"What'll you do when people start turning up missing?"

"We have never been a sensational newspaper," the managing editor said, "and we don't intend to create panic now. So don't be difficult, Kirkland. Take a week off, then see how you feel."

HANDS thrust dejectedly in his pockets, Ray trudged toward the parking lot. Ahead, a crowd jammed the sidewalk in front of a gaudily decorated department store that flew a festooned banner:

IS KOSTLEMAN KRAZY? BIGGEST SAIL OF ALL!

Lesser pennants advertised: "21-Ounce Telavideo—$13.95!" "Combination Washer-Shaver—$13.66!" "Bicycle — $2.19; Tricycle — $3.77; Quadricycle—$5.98!"

Drifting slowly up from the roof of the building were two of the almost indiscernible patches of dark haze. A third was descending. Squinting, he located the speck of silver that hung steady overhead, almost lost in the blue.

He pushed into the wedge that was pouring in through the main entrance.

"Wait!" he shouted, arms upraised. "Don't go in! They'll kill you!"

The man pressing against him laughed. "You crazy? This is a publicity stunt."

"What won't they think of next!" the woman next to him exclaimed, smiling.

Abysmally, Ray thought of a vast formation of ducks flying high over a blind occupied by a persistent caller . . . several of the hens wavering in flight, impatient to set down among the decoys . . . the irate lead drake seeing through the phony setup and quacking his alarm . . . the other birds ignoring his warning and peeling off to plunge to the destruction that waited below.

Caught up in the tide of eager bargain-seekers, he was swept into the store and deposited in a long aisle where a young couple stood examining a console television set. The man propped his elbow on top of the cabinet and his arm promptly plunged right through the paneling. Confounded, he backed away.

The buzzing sound of the transit was barely audible as man and wife vanished.

BACKING away fearfully, Ray saw the metal tube and its tripod—high on a shelf against the wall. To the left, flanking the next row, was another; to the right, a third.

The faint humming sounded again—and again—and again.

He turned and bolted for the entrance. But the press of the crowd was too great, so he lunged for the back of the store. At the end of the aisle, he swerved to race along the wall looking for another exit. But he tripped over a carton and his impetus carried him headlong into the rear wall—*through* the wall—as easily as his fist had gone through the door of the Cape Cod!

He regained his feet in a darkened room and stood staring terrified at a huge scaly thing like the one he had seen in the window of the beach house. A transit, its collapsed tripod gripped in the coil of a gooseneck arm, was slung over a protuberance that might have been a shoulder. Its other tendril was wrapped tightly around the necks of a lifeless

man and three women who hung in a cluster.

The thing tensed and faded into an almost indiscernible shadow, only the transit remaining visible. Then the instrument swung toward Ray.

He lunged for the sidewall, diving through it as though it were made of papier-mache. The alley outside, however, was narrow and the force of his sprawling leap sent him crashing into the brick wall of the next building.

Dazed, he rose shaking his head and staggered toward the sidewalk. But he pulled up sharply, cringing against the wall. Farther down the alley, an area of shadow seemed to be striving for materialization. It drifted on toward him.

He lurched out onto the sidewalk and melted inconspicuously into the stream of shoppers. When he paused a block away to look back, there was no sign of the vague oval shadow.

Then he thought suddenly of Alice and sprinted for the parking lot. God, they might throw up a booby trap *anywhere* — even in his own neighborhood!

While racing home, his suspicions were twice verified. . . . A man whose motions were too mechanical stood on the roof of a supermarket tossing down dollar bills; but the throng below was too preoccupied to notice a woman on the very edge of the crowd vanish, a delivery boy go next. Closer to home, a theater which he was sure hadn't been there two days earlier offered free admission for the first showing of "Marriln Monrow" in *Bus Halt*.

HE JOLTED the car to a stop in the carport and swept in through the kitchen door.

His father-in-law sat at a table honing a hunting knife. "Home early today, ain't you, son?"

"Where's Alice?" Ray asked frantically.

The old man brushed three decoys out of the way to make more room for the sweep of his hand over the stone. "At the neighbor's. . . . You suppose we ought to spend Friday night at the lodge?"

Ray hunched over the table. "Dad, how smart are ducks?"

"Too danged smart sometimes. Take that big canvasback I shot down over the blind—"

"I mean do they ever get wise to our decoys, our blinds?"

"Damned right." His father-in-law ran a thumb delicately over the edge of the blade. "Some of 'em know what a gun means, too."

"Do they *all* go for a duck call?"

"A good caller can fool any duck, no matter how smart it is."

"Alice!" Ray said in fright. "Dad, we've got to find her!"

"Why so excited?" She stepped in from the dining room and deposited a partly embroidered tablecloth next to the decoys.

He started for her, but the phone rang and he crossed over to the extension to answer it first.

"For God's sake, get the hell back here!" It was Balston. "You were right. People are missing all over!"

"I'm on my way." Ray slammed the received down and grabbed his hat.

"Why so excited?" Alice asked again.

"Don't go outside!" he ordered. "There's no time to explain. But stay in the house till you hear from me!"

The old man followed him to the door. "Don't get tied up this weekend. The season starts Saturday, you know."

Ray paused, half in the car. "I'm afraid it's already started."

Alice's strained voice floated after him. "Why so excited?"

He was halfway down the drive when he tensed and jammed on the brakes, realizing Alice had bogged down on the phrase "Why so excited?"—just as the woman-thing at the beach house had on her plea for help.

Then he saw the patch of haze hovering ominously above the house, casting an even more tenuous shadow over his car. Paralyzed, he sat there gripping the wheel.

Alice stumbled awkwardly out of the kitchen door. Through the windshield, he watched her turn clumsily toward him. She came forward in a halting stride—*but her feet weren't even touching the pavement!*

HER SHOULDER struck a post of the carport and she tottered momentarily, then keeled over, falling against the side of the house. One of her arms snapped off neatly along a shoulder seam and rolled grotesquely down the driveway. She lay on her side, her legs continuing to pump uninterrupted in their walking motion, like an overturned mechanical doll.

Gears clashed as he sent the car lurching back into the street, then plunging forward toward the business district.

The woman-thing at the beach-house hadn't been a personalized decoy, but this Alice-thing had. That could mean only that they were now after him *specifically!*

Why? Because he had discovered their pattern of blinds and ruses? Because he had exposed it partially through the article on the Cape Cod? Had intruded and escaped at the beach house and again at the department store?

Of course that was it! He had the knowledge to reveal

in detail what was happening. And unless they eliminated him—just as his father-in-law had eliminated the canvasback that had discovered the blind—he could ruin *their* sport!

The whole concept was vast and appalling. Sportsmen from who only knew how far away, finding a spot teeming with what to them was only game, descending and setting up their blinds, preparing their decoys, perfecting their human calls . . .

An oval shadow darkened the surface of the street behind him and he leaned out the window to glance up. The thing that had been over the house was following—overtaking him!

The pressure *was* on him personally now, just as earlier it had been on the lead duck in the swamp! But there was a way he could escape! If he succeeded in alerting the flock—if he got his story in print and had the wire services pick it up and carry it all over—there would no longer be any point in eliminating him. And he would then have just as good a chance as the rest of the game!

But the symmetrical haze was already maneuvering in position over the car.

He whipped the wheel around and careened into an alleyway, hurled the door open and dived out. He hit the asphalt surface at a speed too great for his legs to take and tumbled over, rolling into the recessed freight entrance of the building on the left.

The shadow clouded the alley as his car crashed into the other building. Then the car vanished and the shadow went away.

Minutes later, after the pain had subsided in the abrasion burns along his forearm and thigh, he crept out to the street and continued groggily toward the newspaper office. He was fighting mad.

BALSTON looked up impatiently as he entered the news room. "For God's sake! Get it down on paper—quick!"

At his desk, Ray sat motionless for a moment, arranging his mental notes before beginning the story. He stared around the room. No shadows—not yet, at least.

Hawkins was hunched over his desk reading copy. Two reporters were busy taking calls over the telephone. The staccato of the clacking keys in the glass-enclosed teletype room was a muffled distraction that plucked annoyingly at his concentration.

Finally the lead of the story began taking form in his mind and he squared away in front of the typewriter.

"Get it down on paper—quick!" Balston broke in impatiently on his thoughts.

He ran a sheet of paper

through the roller and began knocking out the story.

"For God's sake! Get it down on paper—quick!"

Ray froze with his hands poised above the keyboard. He pivoted slowly toward Balston. From his position, he could see behind the managing editor's desk . . .

Balston existed from the waist up only. From there down, a slim pedestal held him upright.

And the shadows were in the news room. He could see them now—one in the far corner close to the ceiling, another behind the glass in the teletype room, a third hovering behind the immobile Hawkins at the city desk.

And the transits were there too—one half hidden in back of the water cooler, the tube of another protruding from behind the copy desk, still another poking out above Hawkins' shoulder. They all swung around slowly, carefully focusing on him.

None of the other blinds had worked, he realized, and remembered what his father-in-law had said: "A good caller can fool any duck, no matter how smart it is." And then he heard the first note of the high-pitched whine.

END

STAVING OFF MALTHUS

With world population exploding unthinkably faster than even the grimmest Malthusian ever predicted, threatening to double within the lifetimes of many now living, the threat of world hunger dominates the thinking of responsible leaders—and challenges scientists into producing solutions at an equally unthinkable rate:

• Mechanized farming—in a decade and a half since 1945, farmers have installed 1200% more machinery, most of it unthought of before World War II. Half our total farm production is done by only slightly more than 10% of the total number of producers, and if the trend toward giant farms continues, the other 90% could combine to increase their output tenfold.

• Chemical farming—use of fertilizer has increased fourfold, from a million and a half to over six million tons, with yield growing to more than double the investment. Antibiotics, hormones and scientific feeding put weight on animals and fowl at a totally unprecedented rate, making them ready for market heavier, tenderer and at less cost per pound—within five years, a three-pound chicken will be possible in only six weeks, a fully grown steer in only a few months.

• Genetics—by intensive hybridization, hardier and more quickly maturing and better-bearing plants, trees, vegetables, fruits and animals are constantly being manufactured by biological engineering, enabling areas to produce farther north and south, and in dry or overmoist places, than had been thought possible only a decade ago.

• Farming the sea—schools of fish are now spotted by sonar, soon will be herded like cattle, fed like poultry; shellfish are planted and forced, protected by underwater fences; seaweed is grown and harvested intensively.

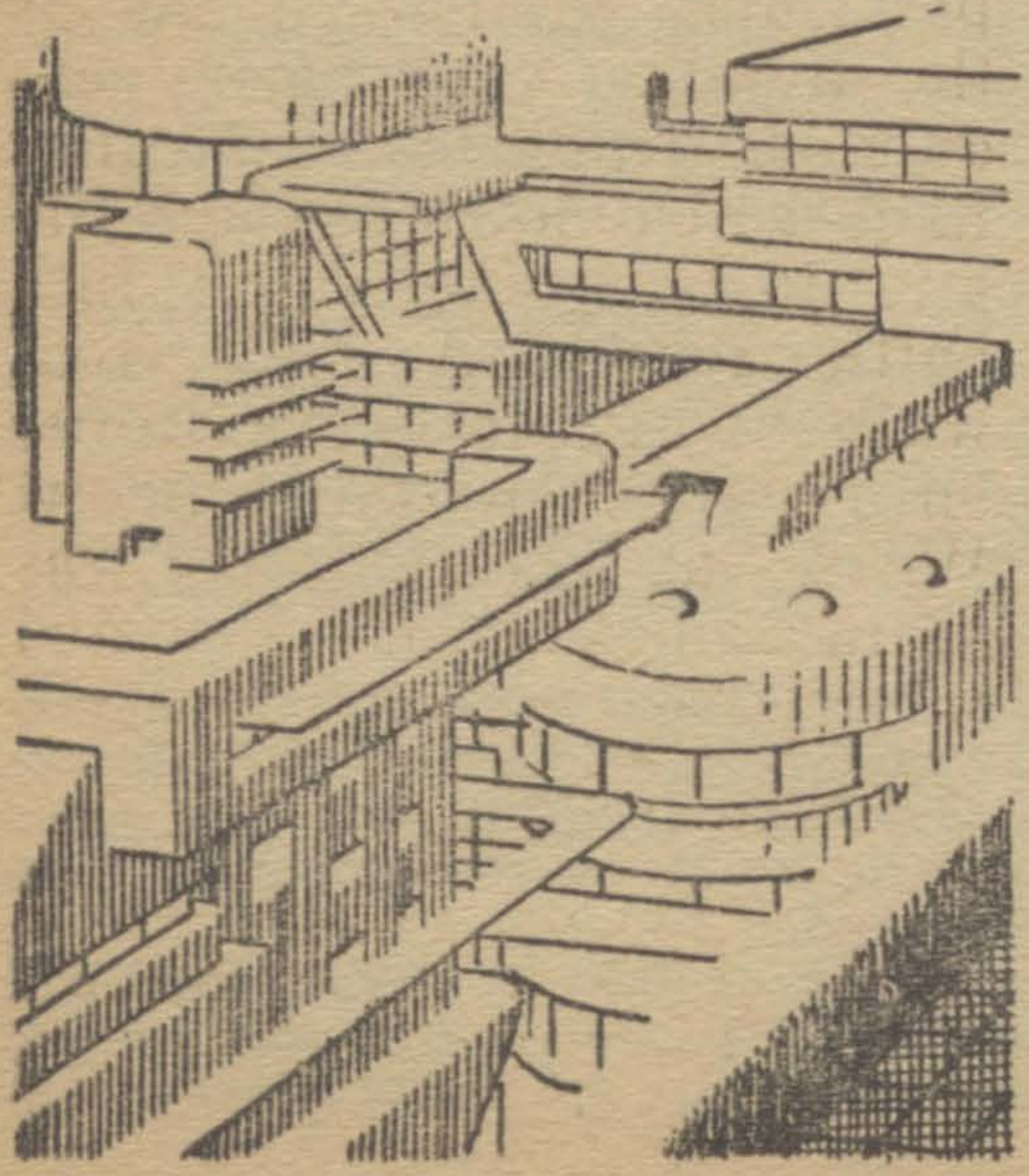
MUTINEER

By ROBERT J. SHEA

For every weapon there was a defense, but not against the deadliest weapon—man himself!

RAGING, Trooper Lane hovered three thousand feet above Tammany Square.

The cool cybrain surgically implanted in him was working on the problem. But Lane had no more patience. They'd sweat, he thought, hating the chill air-currents that threw his hovering body this way



and that. He glared down at the three towers bordering on the Square. He spat, and watched the little white speck fall, fall. *Lock me up in barracks. All I wanted was a little time off. Did I fight in Chi for them? Damn right I did. Just a little time off, so I shouldn't blow my top. Now the lid's gone.*

He was going over all their heads. He'd bowled those city cops over like paper dolls, back at the Armory. The black dog was on Lane's back. Old Mayor himself was going to hear about it.

Why not? Ain't old Mayor the CinC of the Newyork Troopers?

The humming paragrav-paks embedded beneath his shoulder blades held him motionless above Newyork's three administrative towers. Tammany Hall. Mayor's Palace. Court House. Lane cursed his stupidity. He hadn't found out which one was which ahead of time. *They keep Troopers in the Armory and teach them how to fight. They don't teach them about their own city, that they'll be fighting for. There's no time. From seven years old up, Troopers have too much to learn about fighting.*

The Mayor was behind one of those thousands of windows.

Old cybrain, a gift from the Trooper surgeons, compliments of the city, would have to figure out which one. Blood churned in his veins, nerves shrieked with impatience. Lane waited for the electronic brain to come up with the answer.

Then his head jerked up, to a distant buzz. There were cops coming. Two black paragrav-boats whirred along the translucent underside of Newyork's anti-missile force-shield, the Shell.

Old cybrain better be fast. Damn fast!

The cybrain jolted an impulse through his spine. Lane somersaulted. Cybrain had taken charge of his motor nerves. Lane's own mind was just along for the ride.

HIS body snapped into a stiff dive position. He began to plummet down, picking up speed. His mailed hands glittered like arrowheads out in front. They pointed to a particular window in one of the towers. A predatory excitement rippled through him as he sailed down through the air. It was like going into battle again. A little red-white-and-green flag fluttered on a staff below the window. Whose flag? The city flag was orange and blue. He shrugged away the problem. Cybrain knew what it was doing.

The little finger of his right hand vibrated in its metal sheath. A pale vibray leaped from the lensed fingertip. Breakthrough! The glasstic

pane dissolved. Lane streamed through the window.

The paragrav-paks cut off. Lane dropped lightly to the floor, inside the room, in battle crouch. A 3V set was yammering. A girl screamed. Lane's hand shot out automatically. A finger vibrated. Out of the corner of his eye, Lane saw the girl fold to the floor. There was no one else in the room. Lane, still in a crouch, chewed his lip.

The Mayor?

His head swung around and he peered at the 3V set. He saw his own face.

"Lashing police with his vibray," said the announcer, "Lane broke through the cordon surrounding Manhattan Armory. Two policemen were killed, four others seriously injured. Tammany Hall has warned that this man is extremely dangerous. Citizens are cautioned to keep clear of him. Lane is an insane killer. He is armed with the latest military weapons. A built-in electronic brain controls his reflexes—"

"At ease with that jazz," said Lane, and a sheathed finger snapped out. There was a loud bang. The 3V screen dissolved into a puddle of glasstic.

The Mayor.

Lane strode to the window. The two police boats were hovering above the towers. Lane's mailed hand snapped open a pouch at his belt. He flipped a fist-sized cube to the floor.

The force-bomb "exploded" —swelled or inflated, really, but with the speed of a blast. Lane glanced out the window. A section of the energy globe bellied out from above. It shaded the view from his window and re-entered the tower wall just below.

Now the girl.

He turned back to the room. "Wake up, outa-towner." He gave the blonde girl a light dose of the vibray to slap her awake.

"Who are you?" she said, shakily.

Lane grinned. "Trooper Lane, of the Newyork Special Troops, is all." He threw her a mock salute. "You from outa-town, girlie. I ain't seen a Newyork girl with yellow hair in years. Orange or green is the action. Whatcha doing in the Mayor's room?"

THE girl pushed herself to her feet. Built, Lane saw. She was pretty and clean-looking, very out-of-town. She held herself straight and her blue-violet eyes snapped at him.

"What the devil do you think you're doing, soldier? I am a diplomat of the Grassroots Republic of Mars. This is an embassy, if you know what that means."

"I don't," said Lane, unconcerned.

"Well, you should have had

brains enough to honor the flag outside this window. That's the Martian flag, soldier. If you've never heard of diplomatic immunity, you'll suffer for your ignorance." Her large, dark eyes narrowed. "Who sent you?"

"My cybrain sent me."

She went openmouthed. "You're *Lane*."

"I'm the guy they told you about on the 3V. Where's the Mayor? Ain't this his place?"

"No. No, you're in the wrong room. The wrong building. That's the Mayor's suite over there." She pointed. "See where the balcony is? This is the Embassy suite. If you want the Mayor you'll have to go over there."

"Whaddaya know," said Lane. "Cybrain didn't know, no more than me."

The girl noticed the dark swell of the force-globe. "What's that out there?"

"Force-screen. Nothing gets past, except maybe a full-size blaster-beam. Keeps cops out. Keeps you in. You anybody important?"

"I told you, I'm an ambassador. From Mars. I'm on a diplomatic mission."

"Yeah? Mars a big city?"

She stared at him, violet eyes wide. "The *planet* Mars."

"Planet? Oh, *that* Mars. Sure, I've heard of it—you gotta go by spaceship. What's your name?"

"Gerri Kin. Look, Lane, holding me is no good. It'll just get you in worse trouble. What are you trying to do?"

"I wanna see the Mayor. Me and my buddies, we just come back from fighting in Chi, Gerri. We won. They got a new Mayor out there in Chi. He takes orders from Newyork."

Gerri Kin said, "That's what the force-domes did. The perfect defense. But also the road to the return to city-states. Anarchy."

Lane said, "Yeah? Well, we done what they wanted us to do. We did the fighting for them. So we come back home to Newyork and they lock us up in the Armory. Won't pay us. Won't let us go nowhere. They had cops guarding us. City cops." Lane sneered. "I busted out. I wanna see the Mayor and find out why we can't have time off. I don't play games, Gerri. I go right to the top."

Lane broke off. There was a hum outside the window. He whirled and stared out. The rounded black hulls of the two police paragrav-boats were nosing toward the force-screen. Lane could read the white numbers painted on their bows.

A loudspeaker shouted into the room: "Come out of there, Lane, or we'll blast you out."

"You can't," Lane called. "This girl from Mars is here."

"I repeat, Lane—come out or we'll blast you out."

Lane turned to the girl. "I

thought you were important."

SHE stood there with her hands together, calmly looking at him. "I am. But you are too, to them. Mars is millions of miles away, and you're right across the Square from the Mayor's suite."

"Yeah, but—" Lane shook his head and turned back to the window. "All right, look! Move them boats away and I'll let this girl out!"

"No deal, Lane. We're coming in." The police boats backed away slowly, then shot straight up, out of the line of vision.

Lane looked down at the Square. Far below, the long, gleaming barrel of a blaster cannon caught the dim light filtering down through Newyork's Shell. The cannon trundled into the Square on its olive-drab, box-shaped caterpillar mounting and took up a position equidistant from the bases of the three towers.

Now a rumble of many voices rose from below. Lane stared down to see a large crowd gathering in Tammany Square. Sound trucks were rolling to a stop around the edges of the crowd. The people were all looking up.

Lane looked across the Square. The windows of the tower opposite, the ones he could see clearly, were crowded with faces. There were white dot faces on the balcony that Gerri Kin had pointed out as the Mayor's suite.

The voice of a 3V newscaster rolled up from the Square, reechoing against the tower walls.

"Lane is holding the Martian Ambassador, Gerri Kin, hostage. You can see the Martian tricolor behind his force-globe. Police are bringing up blaster cannon. Lane's defense is a globe of energy similar to the one which protects Newyork from aerial attack."

Lane grinned back at Gerri Kin. "Whole town's down there." Then his grin faded. Nice-looking, nice-talking girl like this probably cared a lot more about dying than he did. Why the hell didn't they give him a chance to let her out? Maybe he could do it now.

Cybrian said no. It said the second he dropped his force-screen, they'd blast this room to hell. Poor girl from Mars, she didn't have a chance.

Gerri Kin put her hand to her forehead. "Why did you have to pick my room? Why did they send me to this crazy city? Private soldiers. Twenty million people living under a Shell like worms in a corpse. Earth is sick and it's going to kill me. What's going to happen?"

Lane looked sadly at her. Only two kinds of girls ever went near a Trooper—the crazy ones and the ones the city paid. Why did he have to

be so near getting killed when he met one he liked? Now that she was showing a little less fear and anger, she was talking straight to him. She was good, but she wasn't acting as if she was too good for him.

"They'll start shooting pretty quick," said Lane. "I'm sorry about you."

"I wish I could write a letter to my parents," she said.

"What?"

"Didn't you understand what I said?"

"What's a letter?"

"You don't know where Mars is. You don't know what a letter is. You probably can't even read and write!"

LANE shrugged. He carried on the conversation disinterestedly, professionally relaxed before battle. "What's these things I can't do? They important?"

"Yes. The more I see of this city and its people, the more important I realize they are. You know how to fight, don't you? I'll bet you're perfect with those weapons."

"Listen. They been training me to fight since I was a little kid. Why shouldn't I be a great little fighter?"

"Specialization," said the girl from Mars.

"What?"

"Specialization. Everyone I've met in this city is a specialist. SocioSpecs run the government. TechnoSpecs run the machinery. Troopers fight the wars. And ninety per cent of the people don't work at all because they're not trained to do anything."

"The Fans," said Lane. "They got it soft. That's them down there, come to watch the fight."

"You know why you were kept in the Armory, Lane? I heard them talking about it, at the dinner I went to last night."

"Why?"

"Because they're afraid of the Troopers. You men did too good a job out in Chi. You are the deadliest weapon that has ever been made. You. Single airborne infantrymen!"

Lane said, "They told us in Trooper Academy that it's the men that win the wars."

"Yes, but people had forgotten it until the SocioSpecs of Newyork came up with the Troopers. Before the Troopers, governments concentrated on the big weapons, the missiles, the bombs. And the cities, with the Shells, were safe from bombs. They learned to be self-sufficient under the Shells. They were so safe, so isolated, that national governments collapsed. But you Troopers wiped out that feeling of security, when you infiltrated Chi and conquered it."

"We scared them, huh?"

Gerri said, "You scared them so much that they were afraid to let you have a furlough in the city when you

came back. Afraid you Troopers would realize that you could easily take over the city if you wanted to. You scared them so much that they'll let me be killed. They'll actually risk trouble with Mars just to kill you."

"I'm sorry about you. I mean it, I like—"

At that moment a titanic, ear-splitting explosion hurled him to the carpet, deafened and blinded him.

He recovered and saw Gerri a few feet away, dazed, groping on hands and knees.

Lane jumped to the window, looked quickly, sprang back. Cybrain pumped orders to his nervous system.

"Blaster cannon," he said. "But just one. Gotcha, cybrain. I can beat that."

He picked up the black box that generated his protective screen. Snapping it open with thumb-pressure, he turned a small dial. Then he waited.

Again an enormous, brain-shattering concussion.

Again Lane and Gerri were thrown to the floor. But this time there was a second explosion and a blinding flash from below.

Lane laughed boyishly and ran to the window.

"Look!" he called to Gerri.

THERE was a huge gap in the crowd below. The pavement was blackened and shattered to rubble. In and around the open space sprawled dozens of tiny black figures, not moving.

"Backfire," said Lane. "I set the screen to throw their blaster beam right back at them."

"And they knew you might —and yet they let a crowd congregate!"

Gerri reeled away from the window, sick.

Lane said, "I can do that a couple times more, but it burns out the force-globe. Then I'm dead."

He heard the 3V newscaster's amplified voice: "—approximately fifty killed. But Lane is through now. He has been able to outthink police with the help of his cybrain. Now police are feeding the problem to their giant analogue computer in the sub-basement of the Court House. The police analogue computer will be able to outthink Lane's cybrain, will predict Lane's moves in advance. Four more blaster cannon are coming down Broadway—"

"Why don't they clear those people out of the Square?" Gerri cried.

"What? Oh, the Fans—nobody clears them out." He paused. "I got one more chance to try." He raised a mailed glove to his mouth and pressed a small stud in the wrist. He said, "Trooper HQ, this is Lane."

A voice spoke in his helmet. "Lane, this is Trooper HQ. We figured you'd call."

"Get me Colonel Klett."

Thirty seconds passed. Lane could hear the clank of caterpillar treads as the mobile blaster cannon rolled into Tammany Square.

The voice of the commanding officer of the Troopers rasped into Lane's ear: "Meat-head! You broke out against my orders! *Now* look at you!"

"I knew you didn't mean them orders, sir."

"If you get out of there alive, I'll hang you for disobeying them!"

"Yes, sir. Sir, there's a girl here—somebody important—from Mars. You know, the planet. Sir, she told me we could take over the city if we got loose. That right, sir?"

There was a pause. "Your girl from Mars is right, Lane. But it's too late now. If we had moved first, captured the city government, we might have done it. But they're ready for us. They'd chop us down with blaster cannon."

"Sir, I'm asking for help. I know you're on my side."

"I am, Lane." The voice of Colonel Klett was lower. "I'd never admit it if you had a chance of getting out of there alive. You've had it, son. I'd only lose more men trying to rescue you. When they feed the data into that analogue computer, you're finished."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm sorry, Lane."

"Yes, sir. Over and out."

Lane pressed the stud on his gauntlet again. He turned to Gerri.

"You're okay. I wish I could let you out. Old cybrain says I can't. Says if I drop the force-globe for a second, they'll fire into the room, and then we'll both be dead."

GERRI stood with folded arms and looked at him. "Do what you have to do. As far as I can see, you're the only person in this city that has even a little bit of right on his side."

Lane laughed. "Any of them purple-haired broads I know would be crazy scared. You're different."

"When my grandparents landed on Mars, they found out that selfishness was a luxury. Martians can't afford it."

Lane frowned with the effort of thinking. "You said I had a little right on my side. That's a good feeling. Nobody ever told me to feel that way about myself before. It'll be better to die knowing that."

"I know," she said.

The amplified voice from below said, "The police analogue computer is now hooked directly to the controls of the blaster cannon battery. It will outguess Lane's cybrain and check his moves ahead of time."

Lane looked at Gerri. "How about giving me a kiss before they get us? Be nice if I kiss-

ed a girl like you just once in my life."

She smiled and walked forward. "You deserve it, Lane."

He kissed her and it filled him with longings for things he couldn't name. Then he stepped back and shook his head. "It ain't right you should get killed. If I take a dive out that window, they shoot at me, not in here."

"And kill you all the sooner."

"Better than getting burned up in this lousy little room. You also got right on your side. There's too many damn Troopers and not enough good persons like you. Old cybrain says stay here, but I don't guess I will. I'm gonna pay you back for that kiss."

"But you're safe in here!"

"Worry about yourself, not about me." Lane picked up the force-bomb and handed it to her. "When I say now, press this. Then take your hand off, real fast. It'll shut off the screen for a second."

He stepped up on to the window ledge. Automatically, the cybrain cut in his para-grav-paks. "So long, outa-towner. *Now!*"

He jumped. He was hurtling across the Square when the blaster cannons opened up. They weren't aimed at the window where the little red-white-and-green tricolor was flying. But they weren't aimed at Lane, either. They were shooting wild.

Which way now? Looks like I got a chance. Old cybrain says fly right for the cannons.

He saw the Mayor's balcony ahead. *Go to hell, old cybrain. I'm doing all right by myself. I come to see the Mayor, and I'm gonna see him.*

Lane plunged forward. He heard the shouts of frightened men.

He swooped over the balcony railing. A man was pointing a blaster pistol at him. There were five men on the balcony—emergency! Years of training and cybrain took over. Lane's hand shot out, fingers vibrating. As he dropped to the balcony floor in battle-crouch, the men slumped around him.

He had seen the man with the blaster pistol before. It was the Mayor of Newyork.

Lane stood for a moment in the midst of the sprawled men, the shrieks of the crowd floating up to him. Then he raised his glove to his lips. He made contact with Manhattan Armory.

"Colonel Klett, sir. You said if we captured the city government we might have a chance. Well, I captured the city government. What do we do with it now?"

LANE was uncomfortable in his dress uniform. First there had been a ceremony in Tammany Square inaugurating Newyork's new Military

Protectorate, and honoring Trooper Lane. Now there was a formal dinner. Colonel Klett and Gerri Kin sat on either side of Lane.

Klett said, "Call me an opportunist if you like, Miss Kin, my government will be stable, and Mars can negotiate with it." He was a lean, sharp-featured man with deep grooves in his face, and gray hair.

Gerri shook her head. "Recognition for a new government takes time. I'm going back to Mars, and I think they'll send another ambassador next time. Nothing personal—I just don't like it here."

Lane said, "I'm going to Mars, too."

"Did she ask you to?" demanded Klett.

Lane shook his head. "She's got too much class for me. But I like what she told me about Mars. It's healthy, like."

Klett frowned. "If I thought there was a gram of talent involved in your capture of the Mayor, Lane, I'd never release you from duty. But I know better. You beat that analogue computer by sheer stupidity — by disregarding your cybrain."

Lane said, "It wasn't so stupid if it worked."

"That's what bothers me. It calls for a revision in our tactics. We've got a way of beating those big computers now, should anyone use them against us."

"I just didn't want her to be hurt."

"Exactly. The computer could outguess a machine, like your cybrain. But you introduced a totally unpredictable factor—human emotion. Which proves what I, as a military man, have always maintained—that the deadliest weapon in man's arsenal is still, and will always be, the individual soldier."

"What you just said there, sir," said Lane. "That's why I'm leaving Newyork."

"What do you mean?" asked Colonel Klett.

"I'm tired of being a weapon, sir. I want to be a human being."

END

Work is the elimination of the traces of work.

—Michelangelo

A life and a half

By PAUL FLEHR

It just goes to show you—do the wrong person a favor and this is what happens to an entire world!

I REMEMBER when I was a boy the weather was better. No, really. All the rain showers from condensation of somebody's air conditioner, and the terrible cold winters because the heat is sucked *in* from *out*, and the frantic purple sunsets one night after another—who needs a spectacle every night? And why should there be so much dust from H-tests to make them?

All these things weren't. It was simple and nice, the world of my youth. Now it is

not so nice, but I'm living, so I won't complain.

Today was like every day.

Do you understand what this means? Get up, smile like an angel when some fiend elbows his way ahead of you to the shower, turn the faucet on full and the hot water has just run out, eat, dress, work, eat, work again, eat again . . . and I have now used that word "eat" three times and each time, I tell you, it was a *lie*. Because what is eating when it's a kind of spinach Jello?

Listen, I'll tell you what the wisest men might forget.

A hundred years ago when I was a boy—don't laugh, a hundred years will do it—it was more comfortable and more interesting to be alive.

Oh, positively it was not as efficient. For whoever keeps score, it is clear that the present way produces more units of "living" with a lower cost in raw-material-factor and work-energy-factor.

Of course.

It is definite that more "living" can be done if the quality is lowered, you see; and I could discuss this at length.

I won't, because it is too personally painful. I once fought for wage-hour legislation and the guaranteed annual income, and to contemplate such innocence even at the distance of nearly a century is too sad for me to discuss, even not at length.

SO WHAT was it that I had to look forward to, after my battle with the bath queue, the breakfast queue, the subway queue, the time-clock queue, the lunch queue, the coffee-break queue, the returning subway queue, the dinner queue, the latrine queue, the pillow-and-sheet queue? After all this, what orgiastic pleasures to cap my day? I'll tell you what orgiastic pleasures. After all that, it was permitted that I spend two solid hours in my bunk, watching television.

A hundred years ago, why, I could have done almost anything. I could have gone for a walk in the park. (A "park" is a place in a city that has trees and grass. "Trees" are like grass, only bigger. To "walk" means to go somewhere—on foot, that is, not on the subway. Once it was done for pleasure, but that was when somewhere else was different than where you already were.)

Or I could have played cards. ("Cards" are a game played among friends, sometimes for gambling although the principal object is the friendly passage of time. A "game" is—like the panel shows on TV, do you see? And "friends" are persons whose interests are close enough to make them want to spend time with each other.)

Or I could have taken a drive to the beach. (A "beach"

is—oh, this is all too tragic.)

No, you do not understand, you cannot understand. Let me tell you about one particular day and let that answer everything.

There was this sweet, sweet morning in June. It was Sunday, which meant that by the grace of God I didn't have to work in the jewelry findings business and could do what I liked. Now this will interest you: On that particular morning I got up out of a bed that no one ever slept in but me. (We were very poor, a concept which I cannot explain without fantastic trouble since the concept of poverty has disappeared from the Earth. But I must mention this, to—to please myself is why. In that day, when I was very, very poor, I had a bed of my very own.)

And once up, I took all the time I wanted in the bathroom —subject only to the natural requirements of four brothers and a sister. Maybe there were cockroaches sometimes in the wet place under the linoleum, but there were no coin slots on any of the equipment.

I then ate breakfast.

Breakfast! It began with a glass of orange juice. Two pieces of shredded wheat (this would be familiar to you, I regret to state; you would hardly think it strange at all if tomorrow it should turn up in the Adult Ration #1 at Midtown Serving Center.) But on the shredded wheat was real milk. And real sugar. And usually (I was the oldest son, you see) a large spoonful of strawberry jam, made out of real strawberries.

All this I ate. Sometimes I did not finish it. And then, I swear, what was not eaten was thrown away. Fabulous! It was never reprocessed and served again, never!

However, I did not appreciate this treasurehouse of marvels which was mine to live in, at (I still remember!) 2783 East 22nd Street, Brooklyn. On the morning of which I tell you I got out of there. I went to see my friend Saul.

TO SEE my friend Saul, that is a journey which cannot be duplicated any more. It was necessary to take a bus, and transfer to another bus, and then a ferry, and then another bus; it took two hours, but what else is a Sunday morning for? And I did not begrudge it to him, not on week ends in the summer. But when I got there, he was down in the cellar, of course. I dragged him by the shoulders and showed him that there was a sun.

"Interesting," he said, scratching his jaw, "and a very difficult astrogational problem. Why, the gravity field in the vicinity of the sun is nothing less than astronomical!"

"I was showing it to you," I told him, "not so much as a problem in space travel as an object of art."

He looked at me as though I had turned purple.

I accepted what I could not fight. "Tell me then, Saul, what are you working on?" I asked, hiding behind me my bathing suit in its paper bag.

He told me, that fine boy. He told me with words until I must indeed have turned purple, and then he dragged me to a blackboard and showed me some more. What did I know? He knew what he was talking about, I was sure.

"Space travel?" I asked.

He nodded happily. You would have thought I was a big genius like a Baruch.

"But what about rocket ships?" I asked him.

Saul looked at me as though Baruch had just turned into an ape.

"No, not in rocket ships, Charlie McCarthy," he told me with savage affection, "but by the power of the mind." And he tapped his skull with a bent finger.

SAUL lived in Rockaway, where his mother owned a colony of beach bungalows. You would have understood these houses, with "rooms" that were only partitions, head high, with walls that were made of thin shingles and floors that were permanently washed with a little of sand from the beach. Outside each cottage was a shower—hot water, or hot enough, because the bare pipes soaked in heat from the sun. Just like the baths at the Midtown Adult Dormitories, do you see?

If you were first in line, you got hot water. But of course you were never first in line. Because each of those four-room bungalows held three families—the mommy, the kids and on week ends the daddy—clubbing up to save expenses.

But Saul had a cellar. He lived there all year round, in winter when the snow was unbroken from his door to the high-water line on the sand, and no other human moved in sight; and also in the summer. This was summer, you see. I had my bathing suit with me. It was not because I liked so well to swim—who needs to swim? But outside that cellar of Saul's, in the streets, on the boardwalk, on the beach, were thousands and thousands of persons, one-half of whom were female. They were dressed for the sun.

And Saul puttered in his cellar!

"Come, Saul," I said gently. "Go to Mars some other time. Invent a method of flying to the Moon when winter comes. Now put on a bathing suit and come with me."

And I took him out to show him Girls.

UP IN the morning, work, eat, work. I'm a 664.818-A, and all my days are reading and reading. From Shakespeare, Mallarmé, and the prose-poems of Kahlil Gibran, it is my task to extract the essential truth, the bare statement of fact, which alone deserves the space to be retained. (The other day I reduced *Moby Dick* to "Nineteenth-century knowledge of cetaceans was inexact.") And the secret which I clutch to my bosom is that even that job is of no real importance; it is like raking leaves for the W.P.A., a metaphor which I have not the youth to untangle for you.

For once I met another 664.818-A in the laundry queue, an old crone, a stepdame or a dowager, long withering out the waiting for my shirts. We compared notes.

She had done Christopher Marlowe the month before, and I had been assigned him for my next; *she* did the Beau Geste books of Percival Christopher Wren, and I had done them early the previous year.

I gloated secretly over her, for she had got only that "cafard" was a Legionnaire's term for desert insanity from Wren, missing entirely the important observation that socks breed foot blisters.

Then I gloated no longer. It had been barely possible to pretend the job was useful when I thought I alone did it, but *two* of us? And where there were two there were more. And I wondered just what the file clerks did with my neatly lettered green slips headed: *Synoptic Analysis of Essential Information Content of . . . (Fill in Title and Author)*. They made binary digits of it all somehow, I suppose. But what *then?*

So I concealed the vixen in my shirtfront and chatted with her of other things. She had drawn an April, 2037 slot on the Mars colonization rocket. I certainly hope she lived to make it.

My own emigration date is October of 2071. Since this will require attaining an age of more than a hundred and fifty years, I am not wildly hopeful.

I can therefore look forward to a good many additional mornings of wake, dress, eat, work, eat . . . to spinach Jello. I suppose it is better in the colonies, or else we wouldn't all be so anxious to get there. Certainly it is less crowded. That's the trouble with atomic rockets, and of course I blame it all on my friend Saul.

I can tell you a story.

Once there was a very rich man who took a poor man into his house. The poor man, whose name was Ittel, ate at the rich man's table, slept in a good warm bed, wore the

rich man's clothes. One night the rich man was about to eat when Ittel stopped him.

"Stop," he cried, "don't eat!"

"Don't eat?" repeated the rich man, puzzled.

"Don't eat," cried Ittel, and he jumped up from his place at the table and rushed over to the rich man's seat. "You call that salt?" he scolded, and put more salt on the rich man's food.

"But I don't like so much salt," objected the rich man, "and besides it's bad for my heart."

"Heart!" scoffed Ittel. "Enjoy your food!" And he dumped the silver salt dish on the rich man's meat. "You call that pepper?" he demanded, and dumped on the pepper, too. "You call that garlic?" And he chopped up a whole clove of garlic and put that on, too.

"But I'm not well, Ittel," the rich man complained. "My doctor says—"

"Doctor, schmoctor," ordered Ittel, "you paid for this salt, right? You paid for this pepper? *Enjoy* them."

So the rich man ate, and what do you think? He had a heart attack that night and died.

And what did Ittel do? The whole household was wailing and moaning, and Ittel just stood there with a scowl on his face and a lip curled in scorn. The doctor came by and saw him. "Ittel," he accused, "what's with you? This man was your benefactor! Now that he is dead, can't you at least look sorry?"

Ittel gave the doctor a look. "Sorry!" he said. "Sorry! I try to do something nice for him, and look how he pays me back!"

SO I remember my friend Saul. There he was in his cellar, and maybe he was the only man in the world who knew that the way to the planets did not lie through rockets and metal ships but (I remember him tapping his skull) the power of the mind.

I took his mind off his science.

I showed him Girls.

He never did anything. He was a bum all his life, this boy that maybe could have shown us all the way from 18 billion people and spinach Jello.

I tried to do something nice for him—and look how he paid us all back!

You call that gratitude?

END

The future lies ahead.

—Mort Sahl

By ROSEL GEORGE BROWN

car pool

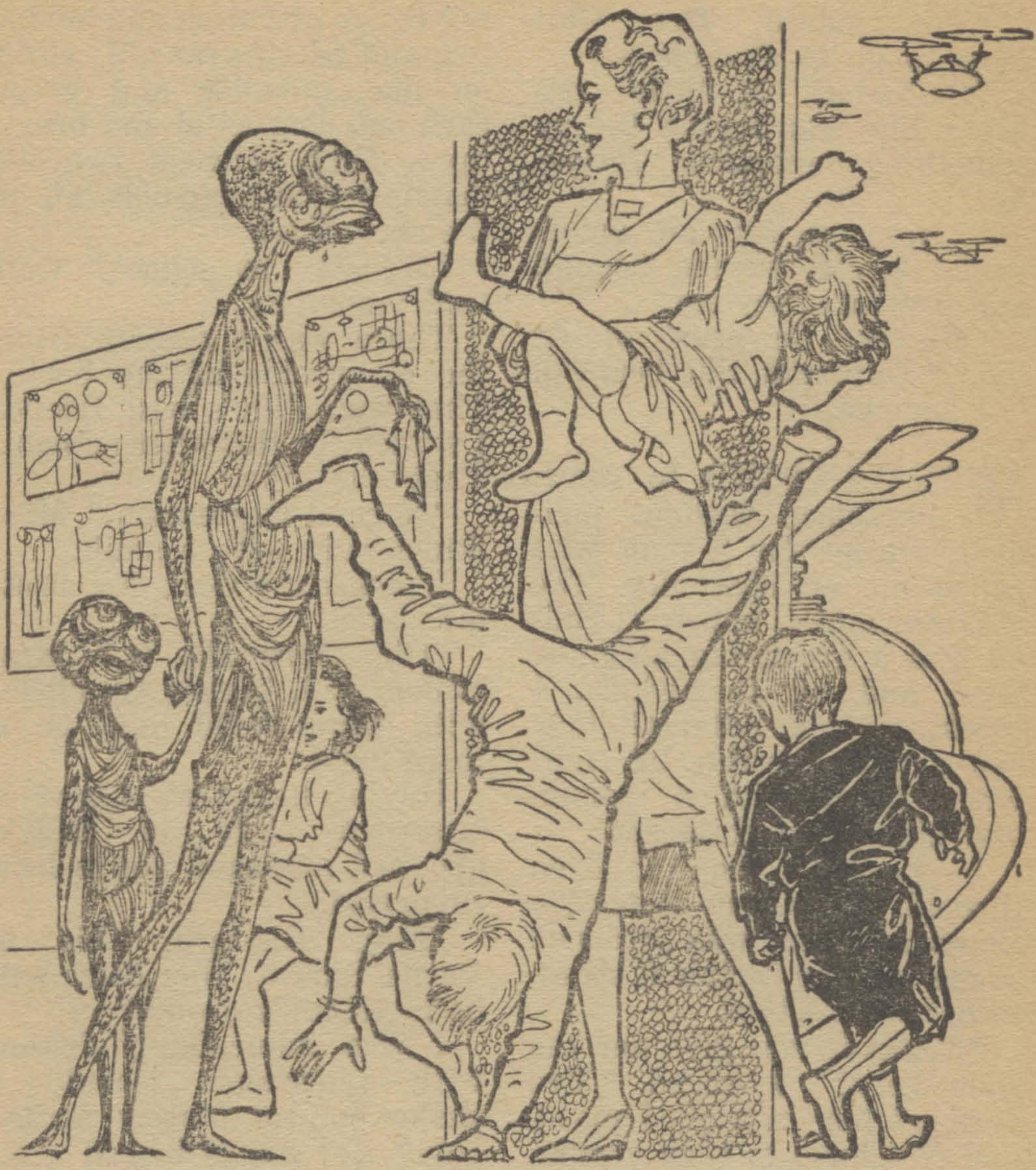
Certainly alien children ought to be fed . . .

but to human kids?

"HAPPY birthday to *you*," we all sang, except Gail, of course, who was still screaming, though not as loud.

"Well, now," I said jovially, glancing nervously about at the other air traffic, "what else can we all sing?" The singing seemed to be working nicely. They had stopped swatting each other with their lunch boxes and my experienced ear told me Gail was by this time forcing herself to scream. This should be the prelude to giving up and enjoying herself.

"*Boing* down in Texas in eighteen-ninety," Billy began,



"Davy, *Davy* Eisenhower . . ."

"A-B-*C*-*D*-E—" sang Jacob.

"Dere was a little 'elicopter red and blue," Meli chirped, "flew along de airways—"

The rest came through unidentifiably.

"Ba-ba-ba," said a faint voice. Gail had given up. I longed for ears in the back of my head because victory was mine and all I needed to do was reinforce it with a little friendly conversation.

"Yes, dear?" I asked her encouragingly.

"Ba-ba-ba," was all I could make out.

"Yes, indeed. That Gail *likes* to go to Playplace."

"Ba-ba-ba!" A little irritable. She was trying to say something important. "*Ba-ba-ba!*"

I signaled for an emergency hover, turned around and presented my ear.

"Me eat de crus' of de toas'," Gail said. She beamed.

I beamed.

WE MANAGED to reach Playplace without incident, except for a man who called me an obscenity. The children and I, however, called him a great, big alligator head and on the whole, I think, we won. After all, how can a man possibly be right when faced with a woman and eight tiny children?

I herded the children through the Germ Detection Booth and Gail was returned to me with an incipient streptococcus infection.

"Couldn't you give her the shot here?" I asked. "I've *just* got her in a good mood, and if I have to turn around and take her back home . . . and besides, her mother works. There won't be anyone there."

"Verne, dear, we can't risk giving the shot until the child is perfectly adjusted to Playplace. You see, she'd connect the pain of the shot with coming to school and then she might never adjust." Mrs. Baden managed to give me her entire attention and hold a two-and-a-half-year-old child on one shoulder and greet each entering child and break up a fight between two ill-matched four-year-olds, all at the same time.

"Me stay at school," Gail said resolutely.

There was a scream from the other side of the booth. That was Billy's best friend. I waited for the other scream. That was Billy.

"Normal aggression," Mrs. Baden said with a smile.

I picked up Gail. Act first, talk later.

"Oh, *there* she is," Mrs. Baden said, taking my elbow with what could only be a third hand.

Having heard we'd have a Hiserean child in Billy's group, I managed not to look surprised.

"Mrs. His-tara, this is Verne Barrat. Her Billy will be in Hi-nin's group."

I was immediately frozen with indecision. Should I shake hands? Merely smile? Nod? Her hands looked wavery and boneless. I might injure them inadvertently.

I settled on a really good smile, all the way back to my bridge. "I am so delighted to meet you," I said. I felt as though the good will of the entire World Conference rested on my shoulders.

Her face lighted up with the most sincere look of pleasure I've ever seen. "I am glad

to furnish you this delight," she said, with a good deal of lisping over the dentals, because Hisereans have foreshortened teeth. She embraced me wholeheartedly and gave me a scaly kiss on the cheek.

My first thought was that I was a success and my second thought was, Oh, God, what'll happen when Billy gets hold of little Hi-nin? Hisereans, as I understood it, simply didn't have this "normal aggression." Indeed, I sometimes have trouble believing it's really normal.

"I was thinking," Mrs. Baden said, putting down the two-and-a-half-year-old and plucking a venturesome little girl in Human Fly Shoes from the side of the building, "that you all might enjoy having Hi-nin in your car pool."

"Oh, we'd love to," I said eagerly. "We've got five mamas and eight children already, of course, but I'm sure everyone—"

"It would trouble you!" Mrs. His-tara exclaimed. Her eye stalks retracted and tears poured down her cheeks. "I do not want to be of difficulty," she said.

SINCE she had no apparent handkerchief and wore some sort of permanent-looking native dress, I tore a square out of my paper morning dress for her.

"You are too good!" she sobbed, fresh tears pouring out.

"No, no. I already tore out two for the children. I always get my skirts longer in cold weather because children are so careless about carrying—"

"Then we'll consider the car pool settled?" Mrs. Baden asked, coming in tactfully.

"Naturally," I said, mentally shredding my previous sentence. "We would feel so honored to have Hi-nin—"

"Do not *think* of putting yourself out. We do not have a helicopter, of course, but Hi-nin and I can so easily walk."

I was rapidly becoming unable to think of anything at all because Gail was trying to use me for a merry-go-round and I kept switching her from hand to hand and I could hear her beginning to build up the ba-bas.

"My car pool," I said, "would be terribly sad to think of Hi-nin walking."

"You would?"

"*Terribly.*"

"In such a case—if it will give you pleasure for me to accept?"

"It would," I said fervently, holding Gail under one arm as she was beginning to kick.

And on the way home all the second thoughts began.

I would be glad to have Hi-nin in the car pool. Four of the other mamas were like me, amazed that anyone was

willing to put up with her child all the way to and from Playplace. I could count on them to cooperate. But Gail's mama . . . I'd gone to Western State Preparation for Living with Regina Raymond Crowley.

I landed on the Crowley home and tooted for five minutes before I remembered that Regina was at work.

"*Ma*-ma!" Gail began.

"Wouldn't you like to come to Verne's house," I asked, "and we can call up your mama?"

"No." Well, I asked, didn't I?

I was carrying Gail down the steps from my roof when I bumped unexpectedly into Clay.

"What is that!" he exclaimed, and Gail became again flying blonde hair and kicking feet.

"Regina's child," I said. "What are you doing home?"

"Accountant sent me back. Twenty-five and a half hours is the maximum this week. Good thing, too. I've got a headache." He eyed Gail meaningfully. She was obviously not the sort of thing the doctor orders for a headache.

"I can't help it, honey," I said, sitting down on a step to tear another handkerchief square from my skirt. "I'm going to call Regina at work now."

"Don't you have a chairman to take care of things like that?"

"I am the chairman," I said proudly.

"Why in heaven's name did you let yourself get roped into something like that?"

"I was *selected* by Mrs. Baden!"

"Obscenity," said Clay. It is his privilege, of course, to use this word.

THE arty little store where Regina works has a telephane as well as a telephone, and in color, at that. So I could see Regina in full color, taking her own good time about switching on the sound. She switched on as a sort of afterthought and tilted her nose at me. I don't suppose she can really tilt her nose up and down, but she always gives that impression.

"Gail has an incipient streptococcus infection," I said. "They sent her home."

"*Ma*-ma!" Gail cried.

"Why didn't they give her a shot there? That's what they did with my niece last year."

I explained why not.

Regina sighed resignedly. "Verne, people can talk you into anything. There are times when you have to be firm. I work, girl. That's why I put Gail in Playplace. I can't leave here until twelve o'clock."

"But what'll I do with Gail?"

"Take her back. Or you keep her until I get home. Sorry, Verne, but you got yourself into this."

I switched off, furious.

Then I remembered Hi-nin. I couldn't be furious. I was going to have to get Regina's cooperation.

I picked up Gail and went into the bedroom. "I do not dislike Regina Crowley," I wrote with black crayola on a piece of note paper. I stuck it into a crevice of my mirror and gave Gail my bare-shoulder decorations to play with while I concentrated on thinking up reasons why I should not dislike Regina Crowley.

"I do," Clay said, sneaking up so quietly I jumped two feet.

"So do I," I said, gazing wearily at my note. "But I have to have her in a good mood. You see, there's this Hiserean child and since I'm chairman of the car pool, I have to—"

"*Don't* tell me about it," Clay said. "My advice to you is get elephantiasis of your steering foot and give the whole thing up now." He glanced meaningfully at Gail, who couldn't possibly be bothering him. She was playing quietly on the floor, pulling the suction disks off my jewelry and sticking them on her legs.

When I finally got Gail home, she sped into her mother's arms and I couldn't help being a little irritated because I had been practically swinging from the ceiling dust controls to ingratiate myself, and her mama just said, "Oh, hi," and Gail was satisfied.

"By the way," I said, watching Regina hang up her dark blue hand-woven jacket, "you wouldn't mind picking up an extra child tomorrow, would you?"

"Mind! Certainly I mind. I've got as much as I can do with my job and Gail and eight children in the heli already."

"It's a Hiserean child," I said. "The mother is so lovely, Regina. She didn't want us to go to any trouble."

"That's fine. Because I'm not going to go to any trouble."

I put my fists behind my back. "Of course I understand, Regina. I think it's remarkable that you manage to do so much. And keep up with your art things as you do. But don't you think it would be an interesting experience to have a Hiserean child in the pool?"

REGINA pulled off her hand-woven wrap-skirt and I was shocked to see she wore a real boudoir slip to work.

"Everybody to their own interesting experiences," she said, laughing at me. This was obviously one of her triple-level remarks.

"De gustibus," I said, to show I know a few arty things myself, "non disputandum est."

"You have such moments, Verne! Have you ever seen a Hiserean child?"

"I saw one today."

"Well."

"Well?"

"De gustibus, as you said. You know the other children will eat it alive, don't you? *Your* child will. Now Gail . . ."

It's true that Gail never kicks anyone small enough to kick back. It's also true that Billy bites.

I unclenched my fists and stretched up with a deep breath so as to relax my stomach and improve my posture.

"Hiserean children," I pointed out, "are going to have to be adjusted to our society. As I understand it, they're here to stay. Their sun blew up behind them and personally I think we're lucky they happened to drift here."

"I don't see why it's so lucky. I wish we'd gotten one of the ships full of scientific information. Or their top scientists. Or artists, for that matter. All *we* got were plain people. If you like to call them people."

"They're at least educated people with good sense. And we've got their ship to take apart and learn things from. And their books and, after all, some music and their gestural art. I should think you artists would find that real avant garde."

"Just hearing you say it like that is enough to kill Hiserean art."

"Regina, I know you think I'm a prig, but that isn't the point. And if it matters to you, I'm *not* a prig."

"Do you wear boudoir slips?" Regina was biting a real smile.

"No, I don't. But I'd like to."

"Then why don't you?"

"Because I put one on once and I thought I looked absolutely devastating and you know what my husband said?"

"I won't try to guess Clay's bon mot."

"He said, 'What did you put that on for?' "

REGINA LAUGHED until she popped a snap on her paper house dress. "But seriously," she said finally, "if he didn't know, why didn't you tell him?"

"That's not the point. The point is I am not the boudoir-slip type. My unmentionables are unmentionable for esthetic reasons only."

Regina laughed again. "Really, Verne, you're not half bad when you try."

"If you honestly think I'm not half bad, could you do it just as a favor to me? Pick up Hi-nin when you have the car pool?"

"The Hiserean child? No."

"Please, Regina. I'd do it *for* you except that the children would notice and it would get back to Mrs. His-tara. If there's anything I could do for you in return—"

"What could you possibly do?"

"I don't know. But I *can't* go back and tell that dear creature our car pool doesn't want her."

"*Stop* looking so intense. That's what keeps you from being the boudoir-slip type. You always look as though you're going out to break up a saloon or campaign for better Public Child Protection. The boudoir slip requires a languorous expression."

"Phooey to looking languorous. And phooey to boudoir slips. I'd wear diapers to nursery school if you'd change your mind about taking along Hi-nin."

"Would you wear a boudoir slip?"

"I—hell, yes."

"And nothing else?"

"Only my various means of support. And my respectability."

Regina laughed her tiger-on-the-third-Christian laugh. "What I want to find out," she said, "is how you manage the respectability bit."

It dawned on me while I was grinding the pepper for Clay's salad that Regina had explained herself. All of a sudden I saw straight through her and I wondered why I hadn't seen it before. Regina *envied* me.

Now on the face of it, that seemed unlikely. But it occurred to me that Regina's parents had been the poor but honest and uneducated sort that simply are never asked to chaperone school parties. And the fact is that they were not what Regina thought of as respectable, though it never occurred to anyone but her that it mattered. And since all her culture was acquired after the age of thirteen, she felt it didn't fit properly and that's why she went out of her way to be arty-arty.

Whereas I took for granted all the things Regina had learned so painstakingly, and this in turn was what made me so irritatingly respectable.

As Regina had suggested, perhaps it *is* the expression on one's face that makes the difference.

"HEY!" a cop yelled, pulling up as close to us as his rotors would allow. "What the hell?"

"I beg your pardon," I said frigidly. It is very frigid in November if you are out in a helicopter dressed only in a boudoir slip.

"Look de bleesemans!" Gail cried.

"He might shoot everybody!" Billy warned.

Meli began to cry loudly. "He might *choot! Ma*-ma!"

"Pardon me, madam," the cop said, and beat a hasty retreat.

When we landed on Hi-nin's roof, Mrs. His-tara came up with him. She looked at me sympathetically. "You are perhaps molting, beloved friend?" Her large eyes retracted and filled with tears. "Such a season!"

"No—no, dear. Just—getting a little fresh air."

I put Hi-nin on the front seat with me. He gave me a big-eyed, toothless smile and sat down in perfect quiet, except for the soft, almost sea sound of his breathing.

It was during one of those brief and infrequent silences we have that I noticed something was amiss. No sea sound.

I looked around to find Billy's hands around Hi-nin's throat.

"Billy!" I screamed.

"Aw!" he said, and let go.

Hi-nin began to breath again in a violent, choked way.

"Billy," I said, wondering if I could keep myself from simply throwing my son out of the helicopter, "Billy . . ."

"It is nothing, nice mama," Hi-nin said, still choking.

"Billy." I didn't trust myself to speak any further. I reached around and spanked him until my hand was sore. "If you *ever* do that again—"

"Waa!" Billy bawled. I'm sure he could be heard quite plainly by the men building the new astronomical station on the Moon.

I PUT Hi-nin on my lap and kept him there. "That's just Billy's way of making friends," I whispered to him.

Under Billy's leadership, several other children began to cry, and all in all it was not a well-integrated, love-sharing group that I lifted down from the heli at Playplace.

"The children always sense it, don't they," Mrs. Baden said with her gentle smile, "when we don't feel comfortable about a situation?"

"Comfortable!" I cried. It seemed to me the day had become blazing hot and I didn't remember what I was dressed in until I tried to take off my jacket. "My son is an inhuman monster. He tried to—to—" I could feel a big sob coming on.

"Bite?" Mrs. Baden supplied helpfully.

"Strangle," I managed to blurt out.

"We'll be especially considerate of Billy today," Mrs. Baden said. "He'll be feeling guilty and he senses your discomfort about his aggression."

"Senses it! I all but tore him limb from limb! That dear little Hiserean child—"

"I do not want to be of difficulty," Hi-nin said, tears pouring out of those great, big eyes.

TEARS were pouring out of my small blue eyes by this time and Mr. Grantham, who brings a set of grandchildren, came by and patted my shoulder.

"Chin up!" he said. "Eyes front!"

Then he looked at his hand and my recently patted shoulder.

"Oh, excuse me," he said. "Would you like to borrow my jacket?"

I shook my head, acutely aware, suddenly, that Mr. Grantham is not a doddering old grandfather but a young and handsome man. And all he thought about my bare shoulder was that it ought to be covered.

"You just run along," Mrs. Baden said. "We'll let Billy strangle the pneumatic dog and everything will be just fine. Oh, and dear—I don't know whether you've noticed it—you don't have on a dress."

I went home and sat in front of the mirror feeling miserable in several different directions. If Regina Raymond Crowley appeared in public dressed only in a boudoir slip, people would think all sorts of wicked things. When I appeared in public in a boudoir slip, everybody thought I was just a little absentminded.

This, I thought, is a hell of a thing to worry about. And then I thought, Oh, phooey. If even I think I'm respectable, what can I expect other people to think?

I took down the note on the mirror about Regina. No wonder I didn't like her! I turned the paper over and wrote "Phooey to me!" with my eyebrow pencil.

I was still regarding the note and trying to argue myself into a better mood when Clay came tramping down from work at three o'clock.

"Why are you sitting around in a boudoir slip?" he asked.

"You're a double-dyed louse and a great, big alligator head," I told him.

"Don't mention it," he said. "Where's Billy?"

"Taking his nap. Tell me the truth, Clay. The absolute truth."

Clay looked at me suspiciously. "I'd planned on a little golf this afternoon."

"This won't take a minute. I don't ask you things like this all the time, now do I?"

"I still don't know what you're talking about."

I took a deep breath. "Clay, is there anything about me, anything at all, that is not respectable?"

"There is *not*," he said.

"Well—I guess that's all there is to it," I sighed. I pulled off my boudoir slip and got a neat paper one out of the slot. "Anyway," I said bravely, "boudoir slips have to be laundered."

Clay looked at me curiously for a moment and then said, "This looks like a good afternoon to go play golf."

"Do you think there's anything not respectable about Regina Crowley?"

"There is *everything* not respectable about Regina Crowley," Clay said vehemently.

"You see?"

"Frankly, no."

"Well, do you think her husband uses that tone of voice when he says, 'There is *everything* respectable about Verne Barrat?' "

"I don't know why he should say that at all."

"She might ask him."

"Darling, you're mad as a hatter," Clay said, kissing me good-by.

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course not," Clay roared as he tramped up the steps to the heli.

ABOUT nine o'clock the next morning I heard a heli landing on the roof and I thought, Now who? There was much tooting, and when I went up, Regina practically threw Hi-nin at me.

"I told you so," she snapped at me. Her face was burning red and she wasn't bothering to tilt her nose.

"What happened? Why did you bring him back to *me?*"

"His hand," she said, and took off.

Hand? He was holding one hand over the other. No! I grabbed his hands to see what it was.

One hand had obviously been bitten off at the wrist. He was holding the wound with the tentacles of his other little boneless hand. There was very little blood.

"It is as nothing," he said, but when I cradled him in my arms, I could feel him shaking all over.

"It will grow back," he said.

Would it?

I took him in the heli and held him while I drove. I could feel him trying to stop himself from shaking, but he couldn't.

"Does it hurt very much?" I asked.

"The pain is small," he said. "It is the fear. The fear is terrible. I am unable to swallow it."

I was unable to swallow it, too.

"The hand," said Mrs. Histara without concern, "will grow back. But the things within my son . . ." She, too, began to tremble involuntarily.

"Billy," I began, feeling the blood come through my lower lip, "Billy and I are . . ." It was too inadequate to say it.

"It was not Billy," Hi-nin said without rancor. "It was Gail."

"Gail! Gail doesn't bite!" But she had, and I broke down and plain cried.

"Do not trouble yourself," said Mrs. His-tara. "My son receives from this a wound that does not heal. On Hiserea he would be forever sick, you understand. On your world, where everyone is born with this open wound, it will be his protection. So Mrs. Baden warned me and I think she is wise."

As soon as I got home, I called up Regina. She looked pale and lifeless against the gaudy, irresponsible objects in the art shop.

"It wasn't my fault," she said quickly. "I can't drive and watch the children at the same time. I told you the children would eat . . ." She stopped, and for the first time I saw Regina really horrified with herself.

"Nobody said it was your fault. But don't you think you could have taken Hi-nin home yourself? To show Mrs. His-tara that—I don't know what it would show."

It reminded me, somehow, of the time Regina stepped on a lizard and left it in great pain, pulling itself along by its tiny front paws, and I had said, "Regina, you can't leave that poor thing suffering," and she had said, "Well, I didn't step on it on purpose," and I had said, "Somebody's got to kill it now," and she had said, "I've got a class." I could still feel the crunch of it under my foot as its tiny life went out.

"Sorry, Verne," she said, "you got yourself into this," and hung up.

THAT night Regina called me. "Can you give blood?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "If I stuff myself, I can get the scales up to a hundred and ten pounds."

"What type?"

"B. Rh positive."

"Thought you told me that once. Gail is in the hospital. They have to replace every drop of blood in her body. She may die anyhow."

I thought of the little fluff and squeak that was Gail. I eat de crus' of de toas'.

"What's the matter with her?" I asked fearfully.

"That damn Hiserean child is *poison*. Gail had a little cut inside her mouth from where she fell off the slide at school."

"I'll be at the hospital in ten minutes," I said, and hung up shakily. "Dinner is set for seven-thirty," I told Clay and Billy, and rushed out.

The first person I saw at the hospital was not Regina. It was Mrs. His-tara.

"How did you know?" I asked. Her integument was dull now and there were patches of scales rubbed off. Her eyes were almost not visible.

"Mrs. Crowley called me," she said. "In any case I would have been here. There is in Hi-nin also of poison.

There remains for him only the Return Home. We must rejoice for him."

The smile she brought forth was more than I could bear.

"Gail's germs were poison to him?"

"Oh, no. He poisons himself. It is an ancient hormone, from the early days of our race when we had what your Mrs. Baden so wisely calls aggression. It is dormant in us since before the accounting of our history. An adult Hiserean, perhaps, could fight his emotions and cure himself. Hi-nin has no weapons—so your physicians have explained it to me, from our scientific books. How can I doubt that they are right?"

How could I doubt it, either? It would be, I thought, rather like a massive overdose of adrenalin. Psychogenic, of course, but what help was it to know that? Would there be some organ in Hi-nin a surgeon could remove? Like the adrenals in humans, perhaps?

Of course not. If they could have, they would have.

I HURRIED on to find the room where Gail was. She was not pale, as I had expected, but pink-cheeked and bright-eyed. They were probably putting in more blood than they were taking out. There were two of the other mamas from our car pool, waiting their turns.

Regina was sitting by the bed, her face ugly and swollen from crying.

"She looks just fine!" I exclaimed.

"Only in the last fifteen minutes," she said. "When I called you, she was like ice. Her eyes didn't move."

"We're lucky with Gail. Did you know about Hi-nin?"

"The little animal!" she said. "He's the one that did it."

"He didn't do anything, Regina, and you know it."

"He shouldn't have been in the car pool. He shouldn't be with human children at all."

"He's going to die," I said quickly, before she had time to say things she'd have nightmares about later on.

"Sorry," Regina said, because we were all looking at her and because her child was pink and beautiful and healthy while Hi-nin . . .

"Regina," I said, "what did you do after it happened?"

"*Do!* It scared the hell out of me—that creature shaking all over and Gail screaming. At first I didn't know what had happened. Then I saw that *thing* flopping around on the front seat and I screamed and threw it out of the window. And then I noticed Hi-nin's wrist, or whatever you call it. I said, 'Oh, God, I *knew* you'd get us in trouble!' But the creature didn't say anything. He just sat there. And I let the other children off and brought Hi-nin to you

because I didn't want to get involved with that Mrs. Baden."

"And Gail?"

"She seemed all right. She just climbed in the back with the other children and pretty soon they were all laughing."

"And all that time little Hinin . . . Regina, didn't you even pat him or hold him or kiss it for him or anything?"

"*Kiss* it!"

At that moment Mrs. His-tara came in, with Mrs. Baden and a doctor behind her. I should have known. Mrs. Baden didn't leave people to fight battles alone.

Mrs. His-tara looked at Mrs. Baden, but Mrs. Baden only nodded and smiled encouragingly at her.

THE doctor was gently pulling the needle out of Gail's vein. The room was silent. Even Gail sat large-eyed and solemn.

"Mrs. Crowley," Mrs. His-tara began, obviously dragging each word up with great effort, "would it be accurate to tell my son that Gail has received no hurt from him? We must, you see, prepare him for the Return Home."

Regina looked around at us and at Gail. She hadn't dared let herself look at Mrs. His-tara yet.

"Doctor!" Regina called suddenly. "Look at Gail's mouth!"

Even from where I was, I could see it. A scaly growth along both lips.

"That's a temporary effect of the serum," the doctor said. "We tried an antitoxin before we decided to change the blood. It is nothing to worry about."

"Oh."

"Mrs. Crowley," Mrs. His-tara began again, "it is much to ask, but at such a moment, much is required. If you could come yourself, and if Gail could endure to be carried . . ."

But Gail did, indeed, look queer, and she stretched out her arms not to her mother but to Mrs. His-tara.

"The tides," Mrs. His-tara said, "have cast us up a miracle."

She gathered Gail into the boneless cradle of her curved arms.

Regina took her sunglasses out of her purse and hid her eyes. "Mind your own damned business," she told Mrs. Baden and me.

"It *is* our damned business," I whispered to Mrs. Baden, and she held my arm as we followed Regina down the hall.

Mrs. His-tara threaded her way through a cordon of other Hisereans who must have been flown in for the occasion. I couldn't see the children, but I could hear them.

"Him cold!" said Gail. "Him scared!"

"He's scared of you," Regina said. "We're sorry, Gail.

Tell him we're sorry. We didn't understand."

Gail laughed. A loud and healthy laugh.

"Gail sorry," she said. "Me thought you was to eat."

There was a small sound. I thought it was from Hi-nin and I held Mrs. Baden's hand as though it were my only link to a sane world.

"Dat a joke," Gail said. "Hi-nin 'posed to laugh!"

Then there was a silence and Regina started to say something but Mrs. His-tara whispered, "Please! It is a thought between the children."

Then there was a small, quiet laugh from Hi-nin. "In truth," he said with that oh, so familiar lisp, "it is funny."

"Me don't do it again," Gail said, solemn now.

WHEN I got home it was so late that the stars were sliding down the sky and I just knew Clay wouldn't have thought to turn the parking lights on. But he had.

Furthermore, he was still up.

"Were you worried?" I asked delightedly.

"No. Regina called a couple of hours ago."

"Regina?"

"She said she was concerned about the expression on your face."

Clay handed me a present, all wrapped in gold stickum with an electronic butterfly bouncing airily around on it.

I peeled the paper off carefully, to save it for Billy, and set the butterfly on the sticky side.

Inside the box was a gorgeous blue fluffy affair of no apparent utility.

"Oh, *Clay!*" I gasped. "I can't wear anything like *this!*" I slipped out of my paper clothes and the gown slithered around me.

Hastily, I pulled the pins out of my hair, brushed it back and smeared on some lipstick.

"I look silly," I said. "I'm all the wrong type." My little crayola note was still stuck in the mirror. Phooey to me. "You're laughing at me."

"I'm not. You don't really look respectable at all, Verne."

I ran into the dining area. "Regina told you about the boudoir slip!"

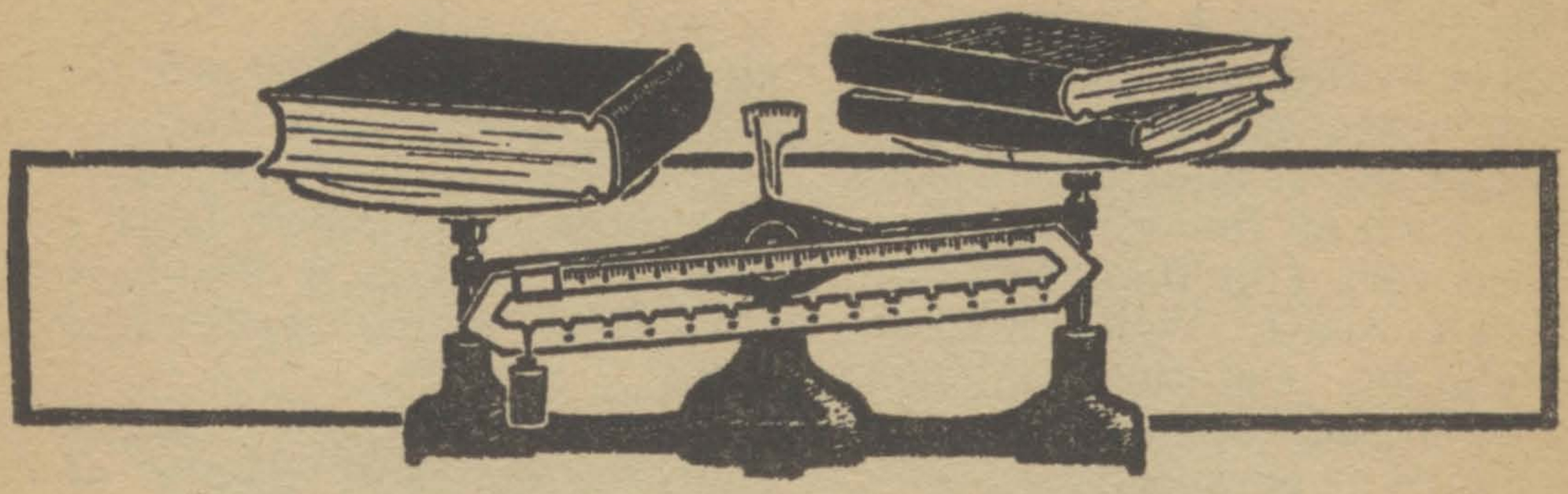
I heard Clay stumble over a chair in the dark.

"Obscenity!" he said. "All right, she did. So what? I think you look like a call girl."

I ran into the living room and hid behind the sofa. "Do you really, truly think so?"

"Absolutely!" Another chair clattered and Clay toed the living room lights. "Ah!" he said. "I've got you cornered. You look like a chorus girl. You look like an easy pickup. You look like a dirty little—"

"Stop," I cried, "while you're still winning!" **END**



IN THE BALANCE

Book Reviews by Frederik Pohl

SCIENCE fiction, in its modern, magazine-oriented form, has existed in this country for a third of a century. Its shape has changed and grown enormously in that time. The model of the early story was the work of Wells and Verne; its theme, the invention of a wonder—a gadget or a process; its plot, the trials and tribulations of the inventor.

By successive strokes, successive writers have broken that mold. It has taken thirty years to do it, but the horizons are wider for all of us now.

It was E. E. Smith who liberated us from the what-we-know in extraterrestrial adventure. His Richard Seaton, laughable clown though he was in normal human affairs, was the first of the star rovers; he landed on planets that did not exist in the known universe, circling suns that have never been seen.

A few years later Stanley G. Weinbaum peopled those planets for us with a new sort of character. The aliens of Smith or, for further example, Edgar Rice Burroughs, were human. They might have four arms and shaggy hides, like the Barsoomian apes; they might be chunky and crewcut, like the Fenachrone; they might be catmen, lizardmen, antmen, plantmen or rockmen; but they were, always and incurably, *men*. Weinbaum changed that. His Tweel (in *A Martian Odyssey*) was not human, even inside. His shape was different, but the shape was not important; it was the difference in orientation—in drives, goals and thought processes—that made the Weinbaum-type alien so fresh and rewarding in science fiction in the mid-thirties.

The third writer whose name belongs on this select

list is Robert A. Heinlein. He gave us the next leg up by introducing social comment to magazine science fiction—not so much an invention as a rediscovery (for there had been Dean Swift, Wells himself, Bellamy, countless others), but all the same an important change of perspective.

These three, more than any others, changed by their own writing the whole structure of a category of fiction. What Doyle and Dashiell Hammet were to the mystery, they were to science fiction. There were these three.

Perhaps now there are four.

THE fourth and newest is James Blish, who has published an original science fiction novel called *The Triumph of Time*.

Blish offers us science fiction which deals with tomorrow on its own terms. Its people are those who might live a millennium or two from now, not transplanted anachronisms from 1959. Blish's people have the same number of arms, legs and eyes as we, but their problems are those that come from strains we have never felt, drives we have never known. Weinbaum taught us that aliens would not think in our patterns. Now Blish comes forward to say: "And that goes for your own grandchildren, too!"

The Triumph of Time is a sequel to Blish's "Okie" stories. Probably most science fiction readers have encountered one or more of these. For those who haven't, Blish's central thesis is a two-part invention which goes like this:

Given a really good propulsion system and plenty of power, there is no reason why a spaceship has to be any particular size or shape. You could even detach a city from its moorings and fly it around. Given an Earth where life is difficult and other stars where it is easier, you *would* detach a city; you would travel around the Galaxy in it, doing odd jobs.

Blish's central city is New York. In the earlier stories of the series, New York has displayed its motto—"Mow Your Lawn, Lady?"—all over the home galaxy, an Okie city of migrant workers, living by its collective wits (and the stored wisdom of those remarkable mechanical computers, the City Fathers). But at last it has settled down on a planet called New Earth, located in the Greater Magellanic Cloud.

What is it like, the life on New Earth two thousand years from now?

People live, love, eat and sleep; but there are basic differences. All of us, here and now, are under a death sentence imposed in the delivery room with our first breath. Blish's hero is not:

"It was, of course, perfectly possible for Amalfi (the hero of the book) to end his life; he was not invulnerable, nor even truly immortal; immortality is a meaningless word in a universe where the fundamental laws, being stochastic in nature, allow no one to bar accidents, and where life no matter how prolonged is at bottom only a local and temporary discontinuity in the Second Law of Thermodynamics. The thought, however, did not occur to Amalfi; he was not the suicidal type. He had never felt less tired, less used-up, less despairing than he felt today; he was simply snarlingly bored."

It is, that is to say, as though they had the maturity of our oldest citizen, and the carefree unawareness of death of a teen-ager. This is not a state of mind we can easily imagine. It makes for strange people.

Strange people have strange pets: "An occasional svengali from Altair IV—originally a rare specimen in the flying city's zoo, but latterly force-budded in New Earth labs during the full-fertility program of 3950, when every homesteader's bride had her option of a vial of trilby water or a gemmate svengali and frequently wound up with both among the household lares and penates; the half-plant, half-animal, even nowadays a not infrequent pet—took the breeze and hunted in the half-light of dawn or dusk. A svengali lay bonelessly in mid-lane and fixed its enormous eyes on any moving object until something small enough and gelid enough to ingest might blunder near. Nothing suitable ever did, on New Earth. The two-legged victim tended to drift helplessly into that hypnotic stare until the starer got stepped on; then the svengali turned mauve and exuded a protective spray which might have been nauseating on Altair IV, but on New Earth was only euphoric. Sudden friendships, bursts of song, even a brief and deliriously happy crying jag might ensue, after which the shaken svengali would undulate back indoors to rest up and be given, usually, a bowl of jellied soup."

And the problems and objectives of these people are also strange to us. Their basic problem is the Ginnangu-Gap. What is the Ginnangu-Gap? According to Blish, a parallel, reverse universe traveling backward in time is about to intersect our own; when they intersect, it will be the end of both; even the end of time, the end of everything.

And yet these people will not die!

True, says one of the characters, survival past the Ginnangu-Gap will have serious disadvantages. "The

kind of survival involved will be nothing like human life as we know it. After we've described it to you, you may all much prefer to die instead. I will tell you flatly that that would be my preference." And the character elaborates: "We will then find ourselves occupying as many independent sets of four dimensions as there are people in this room, and every set completely empty. The spacesuits won't protect you long, either, because you'll be the only body of organized energy and matter in your particular, individual universe; as soon as you disturb the metrical frame of that universe, you, the suit, the air in it, the power in the accumulators, everything will surge outwards, creating space as it goes. Every man his own monobloc."

The Triumph of Time is a triumph of inventions, great and small—the flying cities and the anti-agathic drugs that make their citizens immortal; the svengalis and the Ginnangu-Gap. It is as if Blish had set himself to create not a story but a real universe.

UNFORTUNATELY, all this brilliance blinds. There is a blackness of incomprehension, not because the light is not there but because there is so much of it, thrown so rapidly and violently without pause for blinking. But that is not the worst. What Blish should have created is not a universe but a story. In the "story" elements, his book suffers harm. The jehad of the Warriors of God is irrelevant. Amalfi's love relationship with Dee is unrelated.

Why must this be? It is not a lack of talent on the part of the author. Blish can make characters live when he wills it; witness *The Frozen Year* or the incomparable *A Case of Conscience*. His Jesuit spaceman and his Arctic explorer feel and move and win us to join their pleasures and sorrows. But Amalfi never does.

The Triumph of Time is not light reading, not if one wants to be aware of what is going on. It is hard to follow (and made harder because the typesetters seem to have found it so too). It requires effort from the reader—first an effort of comprehension, second a conscious suspension of disbelief—especially when the author invites it. (For example, this story of the end of everything is cast in the form of a history written *after* the end!) But it is a new area of science fiction, and like most pioneer explorations, it simply maps the outstanding features of the terrain. Those who move into it will do the detail work, but Blish rates the monument as its discoverer.

IN PAIRING two recent books in its publishing schedule—John Bowen's *After the Rain* and Charles Eric Maine's *The Tide Went Out*—Ballantine Books shows us the gently whimsical side of its nature. Both novels demolish the world; Bowen drowns it, Maine parches it, but the results are much the same. Both are by English writers. And both have one other point in common: neither is quite successful.

What John Bowen sees is a traveling rainmaker employed by the drought-stricken State of Texas. The rainmaker goes up in his balloon and pushes the button on his machine; *boom*, it is the end of the rainmaker as the balloon explodes, and very nearly the end of the world. The rain does not stop. Continents are submerged. Enormous storms destroy such lucky few as manage to board ships or rafts. Only a handful survive —to find a new Mount Ararat and to found a new world.

Charles Eric Maine blames it all on H-bomb tests. A crack is opened in the ocean floor, and through it the waters leak away. Only on the ice caps of the Poles is life possible at all for a few, and the story is in the attempt of the many to worm their way in among those few—by trickery, violence, bribes or wits.

Both stories have good touches of detail. Both are flatly impossible. There is not water enough in, on or around the Earth to drown it. There is not space enough under the basins of the seas to swallow them. It is a convention of science fiction writers to get around some such annoying fact by inventing a "gimmick factor" — Garrett P. Serviss in his ancient flood novel invented a watery nebula through which the Earth passed. Neither Bowen nor Maine bothered.

AVALON BOOKS, which seems to be pursuing a policy of printing the worst books of the best writers in science fiction, has just given us *Day of the Giants* by one "Lester del Ray." A very cold winter has struck the farm of Leif Svensen, as cold as the Fimbulwinter that, in Norse legend, came before Ragnarok. That's not hard to understand, as it develops. A new Ragnarok is on its way. Mysterious strangers appear around the farm. Husky blonde women ride horses across the sky. All of them are gods, giants and the other assorted fauna of Norse mythology. And says the jacket copy, "thus Leif Svensen and his brother were caught up in the destinies of a real but alien world. For if the giants triumphed, they would then overrun Earth; and if the Aesir—the gods—won,

Earth would be their footstool. Leif had to use his knowledge of twentieth-century technology to help the far-from-divine gods."

It is incredible but true that this book is by the man who wrote *Nerves*.

Maybe the misspelling of "del Rey" on the jacket isn't an accident but a disguise.

IN ANOTHER recent Avalon book, *The Languages of Pao*, Jack Vance has a fresher theme but still a less than successful book. Vance postulates a galaxy of inter-trading but politically separate planets, each of them with a vaguely feudal economy. The freshness of Vance's theme lies in his suggestion that by changing the language of a race, you can change its character. One Palafox, a leading citizen of the wizard planet of Breakness, invents new languages for the weak-willed people of the planet Pao. Each class of Paonese now has a language of its own—Cogitant for the thinkers, Valiant for the fighters, Technican for the machine-tenders, and so on. As the languages are constructed, so their speakers will behave.

This may or may not be plausible. Vance seems to have thought it out pretty carefully, and no doubt we can take his word for it. It isn't terribly convincing as presented in the book, though, and perhaps that is because it is surrounded with so much ornamentation. The trappings with which Vance has invested his central theme are bright baubles, and distracting. There are slave girls and wizards, a secret heir to a throne and a last-minute triumph of the Good Guys under unlikely circumstances.

The linguists who spread these languages, Vance tells us, in a joking mood "contrived a bastard mish-mash of a language, assembled from scraps of Paonese, Cogitant, Valiant, Technicant, Mercantil and Batch, with a syncretic syntax and heterogeneous vocabulary. This patchwork tongue was known as Pastiche." Vance writes well—sometimes even brilliantly—but he writes with a Pastiche accent.

FINALLY there are three new anthologies.

Ballantine has brought out two more in the *Star Science Fiction* series—Numbers 4 and 5—but as they are edited by the undersigned, perhaps this is not a place in which they should be reviewed.

And Groff Conklin has just done a new collection of terror stories, called, simply, *Br-r-r-!* These are fantasies and good ones; and the collective point they make is that Groff Conklin is an anthologist who knows his job.

END

Catching him was no problem;

they caught him everywhere—

and practically all at once!

Baker's Dozens

By JIM HARMON

"MR. STREET, you are the foremost xenologist on Earth," the director of Extra-terrestrial Investigations said to the tall man.

"I know," Street said.

"What do you know about the infamous criminal, Baker, the so-called 'Robin Hood' who is actually a scarlet fiend?"

"Everything."

"Surely not how he died."

"Everything but that."

The director put his brief case on his knees. "Mr. Street, my agency received numerous accounts of his death, or deaths, on various worlds. Can you tell me which, if any, of these stories is true by studying our intelligence reports?"

"Easily," Street said.

"We have had Baker under observation many times by our planted Orwells—our peepbugs—but you must understand that we need absolute *proof* on him since he has

supporters even on Earth, and in waiting for that proof, we lost contact often at vital moments."

"I understand perfectly," Street assured him.

I

"ARE THERE really space pirates?" Mrs. Fuljohn inquired of him, giggling furiously.

"Yes, Virginia, there really are space pirates," Baker assured her.

Mrs. Fuljohn lowered very long lashes over formidable eyes. "My first name is Christine. Will they come at us out of the void with all guns blasting?"

"I doubt it. They would want to rob the liner, not disintegrate it."

Baker excused himself and strolled toward the afterdeck of "A" class.

He had lied to the lady. (The hyper-Orwell focused directly on him picked up the tiny whisper of his subvocalizations.) He was a pirate, but there was one part of the cargo he did want to destroy, not steal—the first-grade readers for the Mission Houses for Alien Natives on Ignatz XI. Men called him a traitor to the human race, but he seethed at the corruptive propaganda being fed to the swinoid youngsters of the planet.

This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed home . . . This little piggy had roast beef, this little piggy had none . . .

It was insidious, evil. It said in effect that races who shared a common ancestor with the pig had better trade with Earthmen on their terms —on *any* terms— if they hoped to go on being allowed to eat.

Double-dealing Earthmen with their devious schemes were daily robbing literal-minded extraterrestrials like the Ignatz swinoids blind. Sometimes it made him ashamed to be an Earthman. Let some call him a renegade! He was going to help these sentient beings.

He had a plan, even if he lacked the armed battle cruiser that the pirates had in the teletapes. There was a small corvet waiting for him on Ignatz XI. It lacked the restricted official light-drive of military and police craft, having only a civilian planetary-field booster, but if all went well, it would be sufficient for his escape.

Baker glanced at the dial of his watch—it showed no telltale color of listening devices within his area. (The detector had been sold to him by an ETI agent and, of course, it lied.) Confident, he stepped over the chain separating him from the stairs to "B" Deck.

Wurmong was waiting for him as planned.

"*Si*," the fat, swarthy man said, "my brother, my nephews, my cousins—we will bring our extra luggage to the cargo hold tonight."

"I'll predispose the guards. Come right into Hold 7. Understand?"

"*Da*," Wurmong assured him.

The man on watch collapsed soundlessly at a beam of nerve pressure on the neck, and Baker slipped inside, immediately beginning to eject the first-grade readers through the escape hatch by the gross.

The mercenary, Wurmong, and his army of family arrived with experienced stealth and began dumping the new books from their privileged luggage.

Baker replaced the contents of the opened crates with the variant readers. These volumes might be the tiny counterbalance needed to free a world of swinoids from domination by Earth. Who knew the full extent of the psychological effect of *The Three Little Pigs* on young, formative minds?

His work done, Baker sadly regarded the precious jewels and the negotiable bonds from the registered mail. There was no way around it. This had to look like a robbery. It was necessary that he take them. Quickly, he stuffed everything into his synthetic appendix . . .

BAKER was allowed to disembark on Ignatz XI so that he might be traced to his alien fellow-conspirators.

The heavy-jowled biped who greeted him at the smoky tavern was joyous. "You have done the next best thing for us to enabling us to tell your busybody missionaries to go home. We look upon you as one of our own and are hungry for the sight of you. May you remain with us long."

"Too much work," Baker said, gagging over the native beer. "But I must ask you a favor. You implied you'd give me your right arm."

"Anything we have is yours. But would not a cadaver's limb suit you as well as mine?"

"I must escape from this world. You can give a private citizen like me something only a sovereign government can. I want the jump drive."

"Not that!"

"Yes! I've earned it, haven't I?"

The swinoid nodded wearily. "You have. The device will be put in your spacer. Use it only in deep space."

He was now in orbit. That was far enough out. Earth patrols could still pick him up easily. The ETI spy pickup observed him as he reached out and put a finger to the button of the device given him by the Swinoids, as Earth ships closed rapidly. He pressed the button.

In a crisping flash of flame, he lit with incredible speed.

II

"NATURALLY, we lost contact after the ship went up in flames. If that man was the true Baker, he was undoubtedly destroyed. Of course, we have a report from our spies on Klondike II of events running just about concurrently."

"If you'll allow one interruption," Street interjected. "As a competent xenological ethnologist, I can assure you that Baker was, at least, not completely destroyed by the fire. His somewhat roasted remains would have been appropriated by the swinoids."

"How so?"

"These people are as similar to pigs as we are to apes. When one of their own wishes to die, as they thought Baker did, in their typical alien literal-mindedness, they dispose of his body in a special way. Remember how they said they thought of Baker as one of their own and were hungry even for the sight of him?"

III

BAKER HAD been walking for two weeks across the primitive surface of the mining planet, Klondike II, to reach the shack in the gray shadow of the granite mountain. It wasn't gold he was after but escape. Unlike others seeking it, he had headed away from the saloons. But the peepbug's lens of air had followed him.

Minutes later, he was knocking on the door. He *had* to have a means of transportation at least as good as government ships to do his work of helping the aliens, and make his escapes. At least as good, and preferably better.

The door was cracked by a kind-looking old man. "You got five seconds to get, before thirty thousand volts of electricity go through those floorboards you're standing on," the old man said kindly.

"Professor Gentle," Baker said hastily, "I have many friends. One of them has told me you have established a major breakthrough in electronics, that you have in fact invented a machine to transmit matter as radio and television transmit sound and sight."

"Some loose-lipped electronics jobber found that out, did he? Step right in."

"Do you suppose *I* might be teleported?" Baker asked tentatively.

"Of course you can, my boy. But first perhaps you'd like to take a look at some of the things I have teleported so far."

Baker looked at the animals —they *were* animals?—in the cages lining the laboratory. He had been hungry a minute before. Now he had trouble just swallowing.

"Like making the original adjustments on a video set," the old man explained. "Hard to get your focus, your horizontal and vertical interlineation just right. There's some distortion sometimes. Sort of —messy."

"On soul-searching consideration—" Baker began.

"Don't take another step toward that door. I've got the floor checkerboarded with electric grids where I can turn on the juice wherever you set your foot. Control's in my upper plate. Step in that coffin, boy. Just my little pet name for it; don't worry."

WITH some degree of reluctance, Baker stepped into the left of twin vertical boxes. The lid closed in his face and locked.

Before he could have time to begin worrying about his air supply, the cover sprang open, and he stepped out. "Test over?" There was an echo.

A man stood in front of the second coffin. Baker had entered the one on the left and he was still in front of the left box.

But he was also now in front of the cabinet on the right. He had been completely duplicated.

"That damned feedback again," Gentle grumbled.

In the first shock of this duplication and therefore seeming negation of his individual ego, Baker almost went mad.

"You did this to me!" said Baker and Baker to Gentle, each drawing a concealed weapon and shooting the old man in the heart.

"You two fellers drop your guns and stand still," the voice behind them said. "The professor was always saying I was the most simple-minded assistant he ever had, but I've got brains enough to pull this trigger on this old shotgun if you move."

(The ETI chief explained: "The rest is hearsay. Those miners spyproof their towns.")

The trial was short with Jeb, the assistant's, testimony, but the jury deliberation was unaccountably long on the primitive world where justice ran fast for a blind woman.

"We waited long enough," Jeb said to the other men in the saloon. "Let's break them out of the cellar and hang 'em."

The miners didn't let the jury set a precedent. They hoisted a few inside the bar and went out of Lone Splyg Hill and hoisted two more.

"What have you idiots done?" the sheriff yelled as they trooped back into Klondike City.

"Anticipated the verdict a mite," Jeb admitted.

"That's just it," the sheriff groaned. "It was ruled justifiable homicide. Temporary in-

sanity. At the time of the crime, each of the defendants was beside himself!"

IV

"OBVIOUSLY," Street said, "this is no more than a folk legend."

"Are you sure?" the director of the ETI asked, fingering the report.

"It can't be anything else. Granted that all the other events were true, I would know Baker was still alive—only one, because neither could stand the threat of the other to his ego. You see, the case would never have come to trial. It would have been immediately dismissed."

"Why?"

"My dear fellow, both Bakers could not have been put on trial for the same murder, as any student of law would know. This would have violated the basic protection of double jeopardy."

V

A FAST spaceship to put him well ahead of the law, and a place to hide out until things simmered down, that was all Baker wanted and it was what he had. He was too hot for more. ("This is how we reconstruct it from our informant's version," the ETI chief said.)

For the hundredth time, he located Wister VI on the star map. It had been discovered by the Gordon-Poul expedition half a century before. Few people ever knew about it, and most of those had forgotten it. He would never have known about it himself if it hadn't been on the credentials of that bank official.

With those papers he was set to spend several profitable years in the Great National Bank. He would be an alien, but somehow aliens always seemed to have more money than natives on any given planet.

As blastdown time approached, he read the characteristics of Wister IV and found his greatest inconvenience would be the intense sunlight from the double suns, not bright enough to burn but brilliant enough to dazzle. He searched the ship for sunglasses, but all he could find were snow goggles—a visor of black plastic with twin slits to look through. He put them on, resolving never to steal an improperly equipped spaceship again. . . .

"Howdy, pardner." The humanoid at the spaceport was bald and green. He wore a wide-brimmed hat, chaps, and a large gun. Nothing else at all. "Forgive my informal dress. Forgot my kerchief, boots and spurs this morning. Who might you be?"

Baker gave the title of his position at the bank, explaining it would be his job to help

arrange for loans to the local ranchers.

"You'll find this a friendly place. Tumbleweed is an *adult* Western town—we know the banker ain't always the head of the gang of rustlers."

AS THE weeks passed, Baker learned to live with the aliens' strange obsession with the things and persons of the Old West. They were even more fanatic than terrestrial Frenchmen over the American Frontier. It was not exaggerating to say that they regarded the men in the old films they got from Earth as gods.

They had appropriated appropriate Western given and surnames, but while there were plenty of Wills and Davys, and Rogerses and Crocketts, it was always Will Crockett and Davy Rogers. Anything other than that would be sacrilege.

Baker's biggest problem was getting a good mixed martini. Everybody on Wister VI drank their rotgut straight. But by becoming friendly with the bartender, Gene Gibson, at the Golden Slipper, he managed to get his mixed drinks.

"Which do you think was faster on the draw, Matt Dillon or William S. Hart?" Tom asked Baker early one evening.

"I don't give a hoot, Gibson," Baker snarled, reaching for his martini.

Shocked faces along the bar turned toward him, and hands moved toward loaded guns.

"I meant pictures," Baker said hastily. "I wouldn't give one of my pictures of Hoot Gibson for two each of Ken Maynard and Tim McCoy."

"Everybody to his own taste," Gibson said agreeably.

Baker exhaled and gulped his drink. It had been a close one.

But as time wore on, the habits of the West-loving aliens grated more and more on Baker's soul. He was particularly irritated by the weekly ritual every male had of riding into the sunset. Since there were two sunsets in opposite directions, it was a long and involved and thoroughly annoying process.

Tom Wayne had kept Baker waiting an hour at the Golden Slipper to discuss his loan. Baker was exasperated and dry. Local custom regarded it as friendly to not begin your drinking before your companion arrived.

Gibson laid out the ingredients of the martini on the bar. "You going to wait any longer for Tom to finish riding into the sunset before I start mixing?"

Baker whirled angrily. "Nuts to Tom! *Mix!*"

Before the blasphemous words died on his lips, Baker saw death in the rising barrels of the vengeful six-shooters.

VI

"I DOUBT this story very much," Street said to the director.

"The planet and its conditions have been verified," the director replied.

"Even better reason to doubt that Baker died there. He probably was worshipped as one of the gods."

"Why do you think that?" the director asked the xenologist.

"Think it out for yourself. Imagine the reception that would be given to a man who stepped out of a spaceship, wearing what would appear to be a black mask, and who told these people he was the loan arranger."

VII

BAKER jammed the accelerator of the groundcar down until his thumbnail turned white. The eye of the ETI peepbug observed the police car of the native authorities behind Baker's vehicle, closing fast.

This is how it happens, he subvocalized. A great career in interplanetary crime ends with an arrest by hick cops for selling dirty books. Why had he ever sunk so low? That was easy—it took a stake to do anything big and he had to get a pile by selling books, after *that* had happened to him on Wellington I.

The Decameron, Forever Amber, Pierre Louys, all the old classics like that still went over with some of the humanoid and biped races. (He had none of the newer stuff, only titles in the public domain—he couldn't force himself to fall to the level of a *literary* pirate.) But here on Lintz III he was slaying braces of fowl with a single stone. Lintzians were highly stimulated by intricate philosophy and mathematics. This allowed him to sell banned copies of Korzybski at outrageous prices, while at the same time introducing the native intellectuals to human semantics, a definite aid to the natives in throwing off the verbal domination by Earthmen.

THE Humans First Lobby in the Galactic Legislature was willing to live with the difficulties caused by the absolute literal-mindedness of most extraterrestrials, so long as they could continue to make them believe in lifetime guarantees and unbreakable toys for inventive youngsters.

True, many a human traveler had lived to regret a chance remark to the effect he could eat a horse, and nobody likes to think of what happened to people who exclaimed a preference for being damned within range of obliging natives, but all in all, those were minor liabilities in the path of the infernal machine of progress. The ETI

was working double-shifts to find human renegades who were teaching the semantic variations in words of human speech to aliens. On a world where philosophy and higher math were themselves proscribed because of the limiting factor of narcotic colloidal reaction, he also had to reckon with native cops.

He wasn't going to be able to outrun this squadcar. Baker let it pull alongside and dialed himself regretfully toward the embankment. Then as the police matched his maneuver, he switched on emergency power and sideswiped them with an ear-jarring crash. Thrown from the counterbalance of its gravitic suspension system, the squadcar sailed off as helplessly as a balloon. . . .

"RYSHID!" Baker yelled on entering his quarters. "Get my smoking jacket! Isn't dinner prepared yet?"

The turbaned, green-skinned native did what might have been called a *salaam* if he had been a Moslem instead of a Hindu. "Everything is in readiness, *Sahib*."

Baker was sorry he had spoken so shortly, but somehow he always did. Ryshid understood. Baker was under a terrible strain, not knowing when the ETI might descend on him. There was also the matter of Malissa, his wife, whom he missed very much. But as a Hinduphile, a true convert, Ryshid was of a gentle and forgiving nature.

As Baker settled back in his easy chair, someone started smashing in the back door.

By the time the police of Lintz reached the living room, Baker was gone.

"Alas," the sergeant-major intoned, "if only the sinner had repented his purchase of the forbidden book before instead of after he finished reading it."

AS SOON as he lifted the curtain of his own modest dwelling in the native quarter, Ryshid knew there was someone in the darkness, waiting for him.

"I hope you don't mind, old boy," Baker said. "Didn't know where else to go to escape being hunted down."

"I am overjoyed to find you well, *Sahib*. How did you escape?"

Baker told him about his escape, but somehow his talk kept coming back to Malissa, his wife. "I tell you it would take Kathleen Windsor to describe her. She's—but I'm a bore, Ryshid."

Ryshid drew the gun with a graceful movement. "As you say, *Sahib*. I have read of our traditional life in India, and as a Hindu I know what I must do when I find my home has been invaded by a hunted boar."

Ryshid squeezed the trigger.

VIII

"THE SHOT," the chief said to Street, "unfortunately destroyed our peepbug."

"You were taken there," Street replied. "There is only one way to describe verbally Baker's attitude toward his man, proving this was all an act. A good Hindu would never harm Baker. His wife is built like a cow."

IX

THORSEN CHECKED his gun inside his cummerbund. That was about the only place a man or woman had to hide a weapon in these times of relatively tight fashions on Earth. The gun was still there, safety off, as he firmly expected.

He settled back in his chair and glanced across the restaurant at Hastings, the traitor. An infamous outlaw such as Baker could count on few friends—one less than even he expected. The reward on the criminal had grown sizable. Not that Thorsen was going to get any of it. All he had to do was kill the poor devil on sight. It would be foolish to say that he didn't like killing; it was his job in the ETI, but sometimes he wearied of his work.

What did Baker look like?

It was a good question and it would give him something to think about while he waited. On the face of the existing evidence, it was obvious that Baker had somewhere discovered some means of superlative disguise. He could so change himself with stretching, shrinking, fattening, and slenderizing that if a man knew *he* wasn't Baker, he had to doubt everybody and anybody else.

Orders were to kill the first man who came up to Hastings at his table. He would have to shoot if it were his own father, or the director of the ETI, and there wasn't too much difference, he reflected.

HE WAS seated where he could see both the entrance and the door to the men's room. Other agents were covering the back way. Baker would have to come from the tiered front.

Would Thorsen be able to kill Baker? If he got off the first shot, he would. Evening fashions were too tight for meteor shields. If he were wearing an electronic cuirass, he could tell it immediately by the twin spheres that gave that football-shoulder effect. Moreover, had anyone entered wearing such obvious armor, it would have been flashed to him. In that case, a hand bomb would have to be used, which would be unfortunate for Hastings, and possibly Thorsen.

Hastings wasn't showing his fear—he had been doped

to hide that—but he was growing more alert. Baker must be coming!

Thorsen forced himself not to give things away by reaching for his weapon yet. He fastened his attention on the two doors into the cafe.

The shot blew most of Thorsen's lungs away, but the electronic wiring in his muscles kept the shock from killing him outright. He turned and managed to get off one shot before death started climbing up his arms from his fingers, and the weapon fell.

He should have kept in mind that no one had ever seen Baker and lived to tell it. Now he had seen Baker and he was not going to live either. But then Baker was dead even now, in spite of Thorsen's mistake.

Before he died, Thorsen took one last look at the figure with the long golden hair lying on the threshold of the ladies' room.

X

"THIS STORY is absolutely authentic," the director said. "Several ETI agents saw the whole thing. But somehow in the confusion somebody stole Baker's body."

"Really, Director!" Street said. "You don't actually believe Baker was a woman."

"Are you suggesting a disguise?"

"It *had* to be. Baker's body disappeared by getting up and walking away. The only way it could do that was for it to be armored. The only way Baker could get into that building was for his armor to be hidden. There was only one way he could hide the two spheres of electronic equipment necessary to project the cuirass field, and he couldn't do it if he *really* had been a woman."

XI

THE DIRECTOR leveled his gun at Street.

"I am at last convinced that there is only one way in which you could be so certain that Baker is not dead. You know he is alive, and you know it because you are Baker."

"You are correct," Street said. "I am the celebrated Robin Hood of space. It is too great an honor to deny."

"I will go into confinement for many years because of what I am about to do, but I must see the Galaxy rid of you."

The director fired the lethal charge at point-blank range and the tall man tumbled to the floor.

"I had to do it," the director said over the body. "It was well enough to frame you for Baker's crimes due to your suspicious knowledge of him, but I didn't know you were going to fail to protest, that you were going to go along with the lie. I couldn't stand

another man living to take the honor for being Baker. There can be no living Baker but *me.*"

XII

THE TALL man rolled over on the floor and sat up. "Then you admit that you are Baker? No, never mind firing again. I am wearing meteor armor under my clothes. It's sufficient to stop a gun blast."

"You are a clever devil," the director snarled.

"A man has to be clever to be Baker."

"You are NOT Baker!" the director shrieked. "I am!"

"Are you?" the tall man said superciliously. "Think why you came here. You've been working too hard, Director. You received too many stories about Baker. You began envying him his freedom of movement. Soon you began thinking you *were* Baker. Your analyst sent you to me, to make you see through this legend of Baker. It was to my advantage to do so."

The director wavered. "If I'm not Baker, who is?"

"I told you," the tall man said, drawing a gun and shooting the director in the head. "I am."

He smiled down at the body. "You weren't wearing armor, were you?"

STREET reversed the dial on his gun and shot the director a second time. Quickly, he stirred from his paralysis.

"Sorry I had to do that, Director," Street said, "but I could see you were about to strangle me with naked hands. The important thing was to fix the idea firmly in your mind that I was Baker. If you thought I was, you would have to realize that you couldn't be."

"I do," the director said miserably as he climbed to his feet and dusted off his breeches. "But if I'm not Baker and you're not Baker, who is Baker?"

"Director, just as telling your stories and hearing my answers to them cured you of believing you were Baker, the events of this story are designed to make someone remember the true identity of Baker—that very person who now believes in a different personality of his own."

"Who is this person who is really Baker?" the director asked.

"*The person who is now reading this story,*" Street said.

XIII

"I'M AFRAID it won't do, Mr. Street," the editor of *Man's True Space* said across his desk. "It's fiction. There can be only one Baker and tens of thousands would read the story in my magazine."

"You are missing the point, Mr. Trent," Street said. "There is only one manuscript

and it is in your hands. *You* are Baker."

"No," Trent said. "No."

"Yes," Street said relentlessly. "Just as the director realized that *he* was not Baker, you must realize *you* are."

Trent lay back in his swivel, gasping. "All right, all right, I admit it. I am Baker."

"But you aren't really, Mr. Trent," Street said calmly. "I know you thought at one time you were Baker and then repressed the idea. But I knew at some future time the delusion might return and you would begin claiming to be Baker once more. As you said, there can only be one Baker. *I* am Baker."

"You lie," Trent snarled. "I know the truth now. I am Baker, and there *can* only be one."

The editor jerked the gun up from his desk drawer. The shots crashed at the same instant. Trent ran the letter spindle through his chest as he fell across the desk. Street settled back into his chair comfortably, death in his lungs from the gas bullet that had exploded against his armor.

XIV

THE DIRECTOR of Extraterrestrial Investigations opened the closet door and stepped into the office. "The fools," Baker said to himself.

He had no doubt that *he* was the true, the original Baker. He remembered clearly that he had stepped out of the left cabinet of Gentle's transmatter, the one which he had first entered. (He did remember that, didn't he? Yes! Doubting himself was the first stride down the road these two had taken.) His act to shock "Street" into realizing they were *both* Baker had been elaborate, but "Street" had gone schizoid.

He was no copy, but there were copies of Baker, dozens of them, all helping the downtrodden aliens from terrestrial exploitation and making fortunes for themselves. There were fat ones, thin ones, tall ones, short ones, all kinds of Bakers, thanks to the refinement of Gentle's distortion factors in matter-duplicating to an exact science, a desired result, not an accident like the duplication itself. Unfortunately, in a few, physical distortion meant mental disorientation. These no longer had to merely pretend to be other people than Baker.

It was too bad about them —and about all the other Bakers who had died. He really had died in all those ways on all those worlds in all those bodies, despite "Street's" clever excuses. Still it wasn't a bad life—helping the helpless and himself to all they could get.

Yes, Baker decided, dying was a good way to make a living. **END**

By PHILIP K. DICK

Recall Mechanism

Terror was eating at Sharp . . .

and the more it fed, the more

fiercely ravenous it became!

THE analyst said: "I'm Humphrys, the man you came to see." There were fear and hostility on the patient's face, so Humphrys said: "I could tell a joke about analysts. Would that make you feel better? Or I could remind you that the National Health Trust is paying my fee; it's not going to cost you a cent. Or I could cite the case of Psychoanalyst Y. who committed suicide last year because of overburdening anxiety resulting from a fraudulently filled out income tax."

Grudgingly, the patient smiled. "I heard about that. So psychologists are fallible." He got to his feet and held out his hand. "My name is Paul Sharp. My secretary made the arrangements with you. I have a little problem, nothing important, but I'd like to clear it up."

The expression on his face

showed that it was no small problem, and that, if he didn't clear it up, it would probably destroy him.

"Come inside," Humphrys said genially, opening the door to his office, "so we can both sit down."

Sinking down in a soft easy chair, Sharp stretched his legs out in front of him. "No couch," he observed.

"The couch vanished back around 1980," Humphrys said. "Post-war analysts feel enough confidence to face their patients on an equal level." He offered a pack of cigarettes to Sharp and then lit up himself. "Your secretary gave me no details; she just said you wanted a conference."

Sharp said: "I can talk frankly?"

"I'm bonded," Humphrys said, with pride. "If any of the material you tell me gets into the hands of security organizations, I forfeit approximately ten thousand dollars in Westbloc silver—hard cash, not paper stuff."

"That's good enough for me," Sharp said, and began. "I'm an economist, working for the Department of Agriculture—the Division of War Destruction Salvage. I poke around H-bomb craters seeing what's worth rebuilding." He corrected himself. "Actually, I analyze reports on H-bomb craters and make recommendations. It was my recommendation to reclaim the farmlands around Sacramento and the industrial ring here at Los Angeles."

In spite of himself, Humphrys was impressed. Here was a man in the policy-planning level of the Government. It gave him an odd feeling to realize that Sharp, like any other anxiety-ridden citizen, had come to the Psych Front for therapy.

"My sister-in-law got a nice advantage from the Sacramento reclamation," Humphrys commented. "She had a small walnut orchard up there. The Government hauled off the ash, rebuilt the house and outbuildings, even staked her to a few dozen new trees. Except for her leg injury, she's as well off as before the war."

"We're pleased with our Sacramento project," Sharp said. He had begun to perspire; his smooth, pale forehead was streaked, and his hands, as he held his cigarette, shook. "Of course, I have a personal interest in Northern California. I was born there myself, up around Petaluma, where they used to turn out hens' eggs by the million . . ." His voice trailed off huskily. "Humphrys," he muttered, "what am I going to do?"

"First," Humphrys said, "give me more information."

"I—" Sharp grinned inanely. "I have some kind of hallucination. I've had it for years, but it's getting worse. I've

tried to shake it, but—" he gestured — "it comes back, stronger, bigger, more often."

Beside Humphrys' desk, the vid and aud recorders were scanning covertly. "Tell me what the hallucination is," he instructed. "Then maybe I can tell you why you have it."

HE WAS TIRED. In the privacy of his living room, he sat dully examining a series of reports on carrot mutation. A variety, externally indistinguishable from the norm, was sending people in Oregon and Mississippi to the hospital with convulsions, fever and partial blindness. Why Oregon and Mississippi? Here with the report were photographs of the feral mutation; it *did* look like an ordinary carrot. And with the report came an exhaustive analysis of the toxic agent and recommendation for a neutralizing antidote.

Sharp wearily tossed the report aside and selected the next in order.

According to the second report, the notorious Detroit rat had shown up in St. Louis and Chicago, infesting the industrial and agricultural settlements replacing the destroyed cities. The Detroit rat—he had seen one once. That was three years ago; coming home one night, he had unlocked the door and seen, in the darkness, something scuttle away to safety. Arming himself with a hammer, he had pushed furniture around until he found it. The rat, huge and gray, had been in the process of building itself a wall-to-wall web. As it leaped up, he killed it with the hammer. A rat that spun webs . . .

He called an official exterminator and reported its presence.

A Special Talents Agency had been set up by the Government to utilize parabilities of wartime mutants evolved from the various radiation-saturated areas. But, he reflected, the Agency was equipped to handle only human mutants and their telepathic, precog, parakinetic and related abilities. There should have been a Special Talents Agency for vegetables and rodents, too.

From behind his chair came a stealthy sound. Turning quickly, Sharp found himself facing a tall, thin man wearing a drab raincoat and smoking a cigar.

"Did I scare you?" Giller asked, and snickered. "Take it easy, Paul. You look as if you're going to pass out."

"I was working," Sharp said defensively, partially recovering his equilibrium.

"So I see," said Giller.

"And thinking about rats." Sharp pushed his work to one side. "How'd you get in?"

"Your door was unlocked." Giller removed his raincoat and tossed it on the couch.

"That's right—you killed a Detroit. Right here in this room." He gazed around the neat, unostentatious living room. "Are those things fatal?"

"Depends where they get you." Going into the kitchen, Sharp found two beers in the refrigerator. As he poured, he said: "They shouldn't waste grain making this stuff . . . but as long as they do, it's a shame not to drink it."

Giller accepted his beer greedily. "Must be nice to be a big wheel and have luxuries like this." His small, dark eyes roved speculatively around the kitchen. "Your own stove, and your own refrigerator." Smacking his lips, he added: "And beer. I haven't had a beer since last August."

"You'll live," Sharp said, without compassion. "Is this a business call? If so, get to the point; I've got plenty of work to do."

GILLER said: "I just wanted to say hello to a fellow Petaluman."

Wincing, Sharp answered: "It sounds like some sort of synthetic fuel."

Giller wasn't amused. "Are you ashamed to have come from the very section that was once—"

"I know. The egg-laying capital of the universe. Sometimes I wonder—how many chicken feathers do you suppose were drifting around, the day the first H-bomb hit our town?"

"Billions," Giller said morosely. "And some of them were mine. My chickens, I mean. Your family had a farm, didn't they?"

"No," Sharp said, refusing to be identified with Giller. "My family operated a drug store facing on Highway 101. A block from the park, near the sporting goods shop." And, he added under his breath: You can go to hell. Because I'm not going to change my mind. You can camp on my doorstep the rest of your life and it still won't do any good. Petaluma isn't that important. And anyhow, the chickens are dead.

"How's the Sac rebuild coming?" Giller inquired.

"Fine."

"Plenty of those walnuts again?"

"Walnuts coming out of people's ears."

"Mice getting in the shell heaps?"

"Thousands of them." Sharp sipped his beer; it was good quality, probably as good as pre-war. He wouldn't know, because in 1961, the year the war broke out, he had been only six years old. But the beer tasted the way he remembered the old days: opulent and carefree and satisfying.

"We figure," Giller said hoarsely, an avid gleam in his face, "that the Petaluma-Sonoma area can be built up

again for about seven billion Westbloc. That's nothing compared to what you've been doling out."

"And the Petaluma-Sonoma area is nothing compared with the areas we've been rebuilding," Sharp said. "You think we need eggs and wine? What we need is machinery. It's Chicago and Pittsburgh and Los Angeles and St. Louis and—"

"You've forgotten," Giller droned on, "that you're a Petaluman. You're turning your back on your origin—and on your duty."

"Duty! You suppose the Government hired me to be a lobbyist for one trivial farm area?" Sharp flushed with outrage. "As far as I'm concerned—"

"We're your people," Giller said inflexibly. "And your people come first."

When he had got rid of the man, Sharp stood for a time in the night darkness, gazing down the road after Giller's receding car. Well, he said to himself, there goes the way of the world—me first and to hell with everybody else.

Sighing, he turned and made his way up the path toward the front porch of his house. Lights gleamed friendlily in the window. Shivering, he put his hand out and groped for the railing.

And then, as he clumsily mounted the stairs, the terrible thing happened.

WITH A RUSH, the lights of the window winked out. The porch railing dissolved under his fingers. In his ears a shrill screaming whine rose up and deafened him. He was falling. Struggling frantically, he tried to get hold of something, but there was only empty darkness around him, no substance, no reality, only the depth beneath him and the din of his own terrified shrieks.

"Help!" he shouted, and the sound beat futilely back at him. "I'm falling!"

And then, gasping, he was outstretched on the damp lawn, clutching handfuls of grass and dirt. Two feet from the porch—he had missed the first step in the darkness and had slipped and fallen. An ordinary event: the window lights had been blocked by the concrete railing. The whole thing had happened in a split second and he had fallen only the length of his own body. There was blood on his forehead; he had cut himself as he struck.

Silly. A childish, infuriating event.

Shakily, he climbed to his feet and mounted the steps. Inside the house, he stood leaning against the wall, shuddering and panting. Gradually the fear faded out and rationality returned.

Why was he so afraid of falling?

Something had to be done.

This was worse than ever before, even worse than the time he had stumbled coming out of the elevator at the office—and had instantly been reduced to screaming terror in front of a lobbyful of people.

What would happen to him if he *really* fell? If, for example, he were to step off one of the overhead ramps connecting the major Los Angeles office buildings? The fall would be stopped by safety screens; no physical harm was ever done, though people fell all the time. But for him—the psychological shock might be fatal. *Would* be fatal; to his mind, at least.

He made a mental note: no more going out on the ramps. Under no circumstances. He had been avoiding them for years, but from now on, ramps were in the same class as air travel. Since 1982 he hadn't left the surface of the planet. And, in the last few years, he seldom visited offices more than ten flights up.

But if he stopped using the ramps, how was he going to get into his own research files? The file room was accessible only by ramp: the narrow metallic path leading up from the office area.

Perspiring, terrified, he sank down on the couch and sat huddled over, wondering how he was going to keep his job, do his work.

And how he was going to stay alive.

HUMPHRYS waited, but his patient seemed to have finished.

"Does it make you feel any better," Humphrys asked, "to know that fear of falling is a common phobia?"

"No," Sharp answered.

"I guess there's no reason why it should. You say it's shown up before? When was the first time?"

"When I was eight. The war had been going on two years. I was on the surface, examining my vegetable garden." Sharp smiled weakly. "Even when I was a kid, I grew things. The San Francisco network picked up exhaust trails of a Soviet missile and all the warning towers went off like Roman candles. I was almost on top of the shelter. I raced to it, lifted the lid and started down the stairs. At the bottom were my mother and father. They yelled for me to hurry. I started to run down the stairs."

"And fell?" Humphrys asked expectantly.

"I didn't fall; I suddenly got afraid. I couldn't go any farther; I just stood there. And they were yelling up at me. They wanted to get the bottom plate screwed in place. And they couldn't until I was down."

WITH A TOUCH of aversion, Humphrys acknowledged: "I remember those old two-stage shelters. I wonder how many people got shut be-

tween the lid and the bottom plate." He eyed his patient. "As a child, had you heard of that happening? People being trapped on the stairs, not able to get back up, not able to get down . . ."

"I wasn't scared of being trapped! I was scared of falling—afraid I'd pitch headforward off the steps." Sharp licked his dry lips. "Well, so I turned around—" His body shuddered. "I went back up and outside."

"During the attack?"

"They shot down the missile. But I spent the alert tending my vegetables. Afterward, my family beat me nearly unconscious."

Humphrys' mind formed the words: origin of guilt.

"The next time," Sharp continued, "was when I was fourteen. The war had been over a few months. We started back to see what was left of our town. Nothing was left, only a crater of radioactive slag several hundred feet deep. Work teams were creeping down into the crater. I stood on the edge watching them. The fear came." He put out his cigarette and sat waiting until the analyst found him another. "I left the area after that. Every night I dreamed about that crater, that big dead mouth. I hitched a ride on a military truck and rode to San Francisco."

"When was the next time?" asked Humphrys.

Irritably, Sharp said: "Then it happened all the time, every time I was up high, every time I had to walk up or down a flight of steps—any situation where I was high and might fall. But to be afraid to walk up the steps of my own house—" He broke off temporarily. "I can't walk up three steps," he said wretchedly. "Three concrete steps."

"Any particularly bad episodes, outside of those you've mentioned?"

"I was in love with a pretty brown-haired girl who lived on the top floor of the Atcheson Apartments. Probably she still lives there; I wouldn't know. I got five or six floors up and then — I told her good night and came back down." Ironically, he said: "She must have thought I was crazy."

"Others?" Humphrys asked, mentally noting the appearance of the sexual element.

"One time I couldn't accept a job because it involved travel by air. It had to do with inspecting agricultural projects."

Humphrys said: "In the old days, analysts looked for the origin of a phobia. Now we ask: *what does it do?* Usually it gets the individual out of situations he unconsciously dislikes."

A slow, disgusted flush appeared on Sharp's face. "Can't you do better than that?"

Disconcerted, Humphrys

murmured: "I don't say I agree with the theory or that it's necessarily true in your case. I'll say this much, though: it's not falling you're afraid of. It's something that falling reminds you of. With luck we ought to be able to dig up the prototype experience—what they used to call the original traumatic incident." Getting to his feet, he began to drag over a stemmed tower of electronic mirrors. "My lamp," he explained. "It'll melt the barriers."

Sharp regarded the lamp with apprehension. "Look," he muttered nervously, "I don't want my mind reconstructed. I may be a neurotic, but I take pride in my personality."

"This won't affect your personality." Bending down, Humphrys plugged in the lamp. "It will bring up material not accessible to your rational center. I'm going to trace your life-track back to the incident at which you were done great harm—and find out what you're *really* afraid of."

BLACK SHAPES drifted around him. Sharp screamed and struggled wildly, trying to pry loose the fingers closing over his arms and legs. Something smashed against his face. Coughing, he slumped forward, dribbling blood and saliva and bits of broken teeth. For an instant, blinding light flashed; he was being scrutinized.

"Is he dead?" a voice demanded.

"Not yet." A foot poked experimentally into Sharp's side. Dimly, in his half-consciousness, he could hear ribs cracking. "Almost, though."

"Can you hear me, Sharp?" a voice rasped, close to his ear.

He didn't respond. He lay trying not to die, trying not to associate himself with the cracked and broken thing that had been his body.

"You probably imagine," the voice said, familiar, intimate, "that I'm going to say you've got one last chance. But you don't, Sharp. Your chance is gone. I'm telling you what we're going to do with you."

Gasping, he tried not to hear. And, futilely, he tried not to feel what they were systematically doing to him.

"All right," the familiar voice said finally, when it had been done. "Now throw him out."

What remained of Paul Sharp was lugged to a circular hatch. The nebulous outline of darkness rose up around him and then—hideously—he was pitched into it. Down he fell, but this time he didn't scream.

No physical apparatus remained with which to scream.

SNAPPING the lamp off, Humphrys bent over and methodically roused the slumped figure.

"Sharp!" he ordered loudly.

"Wake up! Come out of it!"

The man groaned, blinked his eyes, stirred. Over his face settled a glaze of pure, unmitigated torment.

"God," he whispered, eyes blank, body limp with suffering. "They—"

"You're back here," Humphrys said, shaken by what had been dredged up. "There's nothing to worry about; you're absolutely safe. It's over with—happened years ago."

"Over," Sharp murmured pathetically.

"You're back in the present. Understand?"

"Yes," Sharp muttered. "But—what was it? They pushed me out—through and into something. And I went on down." He trembled violently. "I fell."

"You fell through a hatch," Humphrys told him calmly. "You were beaten up and badly injured—fatally, they assumed. But you *did* survive. You are alive. You got out of it."

"Why did they do it?" Sharp asked brokenly. His face, sagging and gray, twitched with despair. "Help me, Humphrys . . ."

"Consciously, you don't remember when it happened?"

"No."

"Do you remember where?"

"No." Sharp's face jerked spasmodically. "They tried to kill me—they *did* kill me!" Struggling upright, he protested: "Nothing like that happened to me. I'd remember if it had. It's a false memory—my mind's been tampered with!"

"It's been repressed," Humphrys said firmly, "deeply buried because of the pain and shock. A form of amnesia—it's been filtering indirectly up in the form of your phobia. But now that you recall it consciously—"

"Do I have to go back?" Sharp's voice rose hysterically. "Do I have to get under that damn lamp again?"

"It's got to come out on a conscious level," Humphrys told him, "but not all at once. You've had your limit for today."

Sagging with relief, Sharp settled back in the chair. "Thanks," he said weakly. Touching his face, his body, he whispered: "I've been carrying that in my mind all these years. Corroding, eating away—"

"There should be some diminution of the phobia," the analyst told him, "as you grapple with the incident itself. We've made progress; we now have some idea of the real fear. It involves bodily injury at the hands of professional criminals. Ex-soldiers in the early post-war years . . . gangs of bandits. I remember."

A measure of confidence returned to Sharp. "It isn't hard to understand a falling fear, under the circumstances.

Considering what happened to me . . .” Shakily, he started to his feet.

And screamed shrilly.

“What is it?” Humphrys demanded, hastily coming over and grabbing hold of his arm. Sharp leaped violently away, staggered, and collapsed inertly in the chair. “What happened?”

Face working, Sharp managed: “I can’t get up.”

“What?”

“I can’t stand up.” Implor-ingly, he gazed up at the analyst, striken and terrified. “I’m—afraid I’ll fall. Doctor, now I can’t even get to my feet.”

FOR AN interval neither man spoke. Finally, his eyes on the floor, Sharp whispered: “The reason I came to you, Humphrys, is because your office is on the ground floor. That’s a laugh, isn’t it? I couldn’t go any higher.”

“We’re going to have to turn the lamp back on you,” Humphrys said.

“I realize it. I’m scared.” Gripping the arms of the chair, he continued: “Go ahead. What else can we do? I can’t leave here. Humphrys, this thing is going to kill me.”

“No, it isn’t.” Humphrys got the lamp into position. “We’ll get you out of this. Try to relax; try to think of nothing in particular.” Clicking the mechanism on, he said softly: “This time I don’t want the traumatic incident itself. I want the envelope of experience that surrounds it. I want the broader segment of which it’s a part.”

PAUL SHARP walked quietly through the snow. His breath, in front of him, billowed outward and formed a sparkling cloud of white. To his left lay the jagged ruins of what had been buildings. The ruins, covered with snow, seemed almost lovely. For a moment he paused, entranced.

“Interesting,” a member of his research team observed, coming up. “Could be anything—absolutely anything—under there.”

“It’s beautiful, in a way,” Sharp commented.

“See that spire?” The young man pointed with one heavily gloved finger; he still wore his lead-shielded suit. He and his group had been poking around the still-contaminated crater. Their boring bars were lined up in an orderly row. “That was a church,” he informed Sharp. “A nice one, by the looks of it. And over there—” he indicated an indiscriminate jumble of ruin—“that was the main civic center.”

“The city wasn’t directly hit, was it?” Sharp asked.

“It was bracketed. Come on down and see what we’ve run into. The crater to our right—”

“No, thanks,” Sharp said, pulling back with intense

aversion. "I'll let you do the crawling around."

The youthful expert glanced curiously at Sharp, then forgot the matter. "Unless we run into something unexpected, we should be able to start reclamation within a week. The first step, of course, is to clear off the slag-layer. It's fairly well cracked—a lot of plant growth has perforated it, and natural decay has reduced a great deal of it to semi-organic ash."

"Fine," Sharp said, with satisfaction. "I'll be glad to see something here again, after all these years."

The expert asked: "What was it like before the war? I never saw that; I was born after the destruction began."

"Well," Sharp said, surveying the fields of snow, "this was a thriving agricultural center. They grew grapefruit here. Arizona grapefruit. The Roosevelt Dam was along this way."

"Yes," the expert said, nodding. "We located the remnants of it."

"Cotton was grown here. So was lettuce, alfalfa, grapes, olives, apricots—the thing I remember most, the time I came through Phoenix with my family, was the eucalyptus trees."

"We won't have all that back," the expert said regretfully. "What the heck—eucalyptus? I never heard of that."

"There aren't any left in the United States," Sharp said. "You'd have to go to Australia."

LISTENING, Humphrys jotted down a notation. "Okay," he said aloud, switching off the lamp. "Come back, Sharp."

With a grunt, Paul Sharp blinked and opened his eyes. "What—" Struggling up, he yawned, stretched, peered blankly around the office. "Something about reclamation. I was supervising a team of recon men. A young kid."

"When did you reclaim Phoenix?" Humphrys asked. "That seems to be included in the vital time-space segment."

Sharp frowned. "We never reclaimed Phoenix. That's still projected. We hope to get at it sometime in the next year."

"Are you positive?"

"Naturally. That's my job."

"I'm going to have to send you back," Humphrys said, already reaching for the lamp.

"What happened?"

The lamp came on. "Relax," Humphrys instructed briskly, a trifle too briskly for a man supposed to know exactly what he was doing. Forcing himself to slow down, he said carefully: "I want your perspective to broaden. Take in an earlier incident, one preceding the Phoenix reclamation."

IN AN inexpensive cafeteria in the business district, two men sat facing each other across a table.

"I'm sorry," Paul Sharp said, with impatience. "I've got to get back to my work." Picking up his cup of ersatz coffee, he gulped the contents down.

The tall, thin man carefully pushed away his empty dishes and, leaning back, lit a cigar.

"For two years," Giller said bluntly, "you've been giving us the runaround. Frankly, I'm a little tired of it."

"Runaround?" Sharp had started to rise. "I don't get your drift."

"You're going to reclaim an agricultural area—you're going to tackle Phoenix. So don't tell me you're sticking to industrial. How long do you imagine those people are going to keep on living? Unless you reclaim their farms and lands—"

"What people?"

Harshly, Giller said: "The people living at Petaluma. Camped around the craters."

With vague dismay, Sharp murmured: "I didn't realize there was anybody living there. I thought you all headed for the nearest reclaimed regions, San Francisco and Sacramento."

"You never read the petitions we presented," Giller said softly.

Sharp colored. "No, as a matter of fact. Why should I? If there're people camping in the slag, it doesn't alter the basic situation; you should leave, get out of there. That area is through." He added: "I got out."

Very quietly, Giller said: "You would have stuck around if you'd farmed there. If your family had farmed there for over a century. It's different from running a drug store. Drug stores are the same everywhere in the world."

"So are farms."

"No," Giller said dispassionately. "Your land, your family's land, has a unique feeling. We'll keep on camping there until we're dead or until you decide to reclaim." Mechanically collecting the checks, he finished: "I'm sorry for you, Paul. You never had roots like we have. And I'm sorry you can't be made to understand." As he reached into his coat for his wallet, he asked: "When can you fly out there?"

"Fly!" Sharp echoed, shuddering. "I'm not flying anywhere."

"You've got to see the town again. You can't decide without having seen those people, seen how they're living."

"No," Sharp said emphatically. "I'm not flying out there. I can decide on the basis of reports."

Giller considered. "You'll come," he declared.

"Over my dead body!"

Giller nodded. "Maybe so. But you're going to come. You can't let us die without looking at us. You've got to have the courage to see what it is you're doing." He got out a pocket

calendar and scratched a mark by one of the dates. Tossing it across the table to Sharp, he informed him: "We'll come by your office and pick you up. We have the plane we flew down here. It's mine. It's a sweet ship."

Trembling, Sharp examined the calendar. And, standing over his mumbling, supine patient, so did Humphrys.

He had been right. Sharp's traumatic incident, the repressed material, didn't lie in the past.

Sharp was suffering from a phobia based on an event six months in the future.

"CAN YOU get up?" Humphrys inquired.

In the chair, Paul Sharp stirred feebly. "I—" he began, and then sank into silence.

"No more for a while," Humphreys told him reassuringly. "You've had enough. But I wanted to get you away from the trauma itself."

"I feel better now."

"Try to stand." Humphrys approached and stood waiting, as the man crept unsteadily to his feet.

"Yes," Sharp breathed. "It has receded. What was that last? I was in a café or something. With Giller."

From his desk Humphrys got a prescription pad. "I'm going to write you out a little comfort. Some round white pills to take every four hours." He scribbled and then handed the slip to his patient. "So you will relax. It'll take away some of the tension."

"Thanks," Sharp said, in a weak, almost inaudible voice. Presently, he asked: "A lot of material came up, didn't it?"

"It certainly did," Humphrys admitted tightly.

There was nothing he could do for Paul Sharp. The man was very close to death now—in six short months, Giller would go to work on him. And it was too bad, because Sharp was a nice guy, a nice, conscientious, hard-working bureaucrat who was only trying to do his job as he saw it.

"What do you think?" Sharp asked pathetically. "Can you help me?"

"I'll—try," Humphrys answered, not able to look directly at him. "But it goes very deep."

"It's been a long time growing," Sharp admitted humbly. Standing by the chair, he seemed small and forlorn; not an important official but only one isolated, unprotected individual. "I'd sure appreciate your help. If this phobia keeps up, no telling where it'll end."

Humphrys asked suddenly, "Would you consider changing your mind and granting Giller's demands?"

"I can't," Sharp said. "It's bad policy. I'm opposed to special pleading, and that's what it is."

"Even if you come from the area? Even if the people are

friends and former neighbors of yours?"

"It's my job," Sharp said. "I have to do it without regard for my feelings or anybody else's."

"You're not a bad fellow," Humphrys said involuntarily. "I'm sorry—" He broke off.

"Sorry what?" Sharp moved mechanically toward the exit door. "I've taken enough of your time. I realize how busy you analysts are. When shall I come back? *Can* I come back?"

"Tomorrow." Humphrys guided him outside and into the corridor. "About this same time, if it's convenient."

"Thanks a lot," Sharp said, with relief. "I really appreciate it."

AS SOON as he was alone in his office, Humphrys closed the door and strode back to his desk. Reaching down, he grabbed the telephone and unsteadily dialed.

"Give me somebody on your medical staff," he ordered curtly when he had been connected with the Special Talents Agency.

"This is Kirby," a professional-sounding voice came presently. "Medical research."

Humphrys briefly identified himself. "I have a patient here," he said, "who seems to be a latent precog."

Kirby was interested. "What area does he come from?"

"Petaluma. Sonoma County, north of San Francisco Bay. It's east of—"

"We're familiar with the area. A number of precogs have showed up there. That's been a gold mine for us."

"Then I was right," Humphrys said.

"What's the date of the patient's birth?"

"He was six years old when the war began."

"Well," Kirby said, disappointed, "then he didn't really get enough of a dose. He'll never develop a full precog talent, such as we work with here."

"In other words, you won't help?"

"Latents — people with a touch of it — outnumber the real carriers. We don't have time to fool with them. You'll probably run into dozens like your patient, if you stir around. When it's imperfect, the talent isn't valuable; it's going to be a nuisance for the man, probably nothing else."

"Yes, it's a nuisance," Humphrys agreed caustically. "The man is only months away from a violent death. Since he was a child, he's been getting advanced phobic warnings. As the event gets closer, the reactions intensify."

"He's not conscious of the future material?"

"It operates strictly on a sub-rational level."

"Under the circumstances," Kirby said thoughtfully, "maybe it's just as well. These

things appear to be fixed. If he knew about it, he still couldn't change it."

DR. CHARLES BAMBERG, consulting psychiatrist, was just leaving his office when he noticed a man sitting in the waiting room.

Odd, Bamberg thought. I have no patients left for today.

Opening the door, he stepped into the waiting room. "Did you wish to see me?"

The man sitting on the chair was tall and thin. He wore a wrinkled tan raincoat, and, as Bamberg appeared, he began tensely stubbing out a cigar.

"Yes," he said, getting clumsily to his feet.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No appointment." The man gazed at him in appeal. "I picked you—" He laughed with confusion. "Well, you're on the top floor."

"The top floor?" Bamberg was intrigued. "What's that got to do with it?"

"I—well, Doc, I feel much more comfortable when I'm up high."

"I see," Bamberg said. A compulsion, he thought to himself. Fascinating. "And," he said aloud, "when you're up high, how do you feel? Better?"

"Not better," the man answered. "Can I come in? Do you have a second to spare me?"

Bamberg looked at his watch. "All right," he agreed, admitting the man. "Sit down and tell me about it."

Gratefully, Giller seated himself. "It interferes with my life," he said rapidly, jerkily. "Every time I see a flight of stairs, I have an irresistible compulsion to go up it. And plane flight—I'm always flying around. I have my own ship; I can't afford it, but I've got to have it."

"I see," Bamberg said. "Well," he continued genially, "that's not really so bad. After all, it isn't exactly a fatal compulsion."

Helplessly, Giller replied: "When I'm up there—" He swallowed wretchedly, his dark eyes gleaming. "Doctor, when I'm up high, in an office building, or in my plane—I feel another compulsion."

"What is it?"

"I—" Giller shuddered. "I have an irresistible urge to push people."

"To push people?"

"Toward windows. Out." Giller made a gesture. "What am I going to do, Doc? I'm afraid I'll kill somebody. There was a little shrimp of a guy I pushed once—and one day a girl was standing ahead of me on an escalator—I shoved her. She was injured."

"I see," Bamberg said, nodding. Repressed hostility, he thought to himself. Interwoven with sex. Not unusual.

He reached for his lamp.

END

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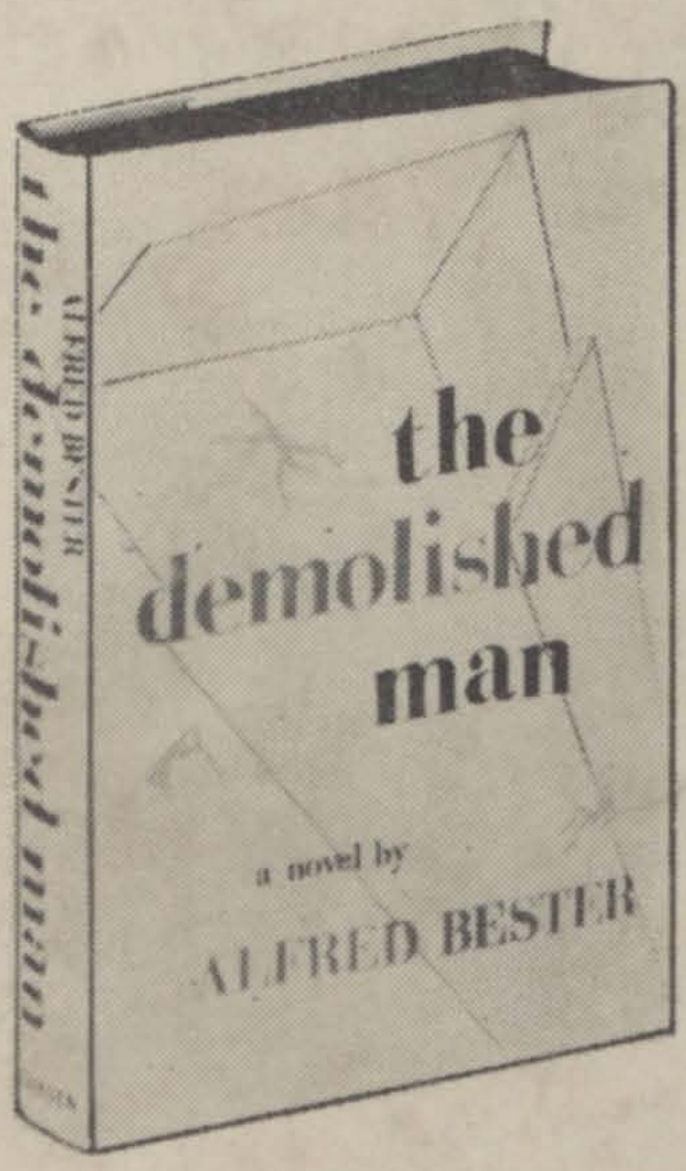

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