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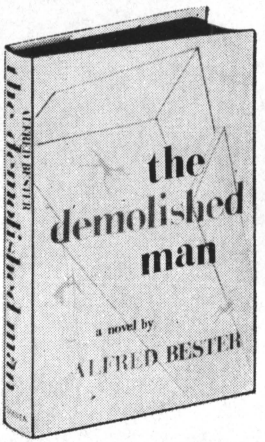

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IOU

BY EDWARD WELLEN

Illustrated by Gaughan

Eternity is not so very long.

A few moments can span it—

a second can destroy it forever!

End-Around Carry

A STRIPED paranoiac awning flapped and billowed, deluding itself it was a Viking sail. Shadow and sunlight streaked across the face of the dying man. His eyes barely flickered awareness of the shifting. A priest looked sadly on; the IOU obit key the man wore prevented the priest from attending him.

A traffic administrator, his authority an invisible extension of the radius of his arm, wiped the shoppers back in a semi-circle to provide landing space on the Mall. The pulse-band on the dying man's wrist, having started sending the moment the pulse began to weaken, seemed to be beeping with greater urgency.

A hum of vanes aloft evoked a hum of speculation below. Then the bystanders made out the insignia. The IOU last-aid man, beating out the ambulance as usual.

The usual zealot howled "Blasphemer!" as the IOU man grounded and knelt beside the dying man.

The IOU man ignored the howling of the zealot, the sighing of the priest, and the caught breaths of the rest. He eyed the traffic administrator.

The t.a. shrugged. "Just keeled over. Heart attack, I think."

The IOU man unzipped his kit, pulled out his brainmeter and touched it to the skull of the dying man. He watched the indicator and at the same time kept half an eye out, not fretfully, for the ambulance. He could go ahead on his own discretion. He did.

He took out his spray injector and jetted a burst of transistorized particles through an ear into the brain; then he thrust the dying man's obit key, which hung from a gold chain about the neck, into the portable call box.

At IOU headquarters the great computer snatched the dying man's obit from the necrofile and transmitted the pattern to the transistorized particles in the man's brain.

The weather bureau had freshened the breeze and a scrap of stale newspaper rustled along like a leaf. An old headline — IOU DECLARES BIGGEST DIVIDEND YET —molded itself to the man's face. A gasp from the squeamish, but the last-aider, concentrating on his readings, failed to take notice. The t.a.'s eye silenced all.

The last-aider looked up and smiled around. The dead man had made his heaven.

The crowd sighed, all but priest and zealot in relief. The t.a. sighed. The IOU man sighed. All but priest and zealot were IOU subscribers.

Now the IOU man saw the scrap of paper and reached to remove it. But the wash of the slightly late ambulance tore it away, with what seemed to the squeamish a rip.

I

ON his way home Rush Tumulty dropped his last credit in a slot and reaped a bouquet of roses. His life jingle-jangled with spurs of the moment.

Home. The real estate agent, God pity his soul, had told them it was quaint and neighborly. At the touch of Rush's key the door opened with a quaint creaking. (It made it easy for the neighbors to keep tabs on comings and goings.)

Margaret had her eyes on the screen. She was reaching behind for the box of sweets on the table. Smiling, Rush put the roses into her groping hand.

"Ouch!"

The roses scattered. Margaret sucked her thumb. But no one could look at Rush and stay mad.

The preset was switching channels.

"Not another debate?" Another investigation in the making; the networks were on a public-service kick.

Margaret spluttered indignant chocolate. "Not just another. There'll be Neal McGillicuddy Cloy! He's real good. You know?"

"Ig."

Neal McGillicuddy Cloy, professional optimist, doctor of business ethics, etc. Sickening. But Cloy was a sales engineer of a sort. Might as well stick it out. Might garner a few tips. Sales engineers had to learn to suppress distaste for certain types. The most unpromising prospects sometimes proved the most rewarding clients. That was good business ethics.

But then they announced the subject: Birth control.

Avoid the issue. Rush dreamed of his big break and became aware of the program again only when it was ending.

Whatever his stand had been, Cloy sat beaming at the fadeout. Why not? More people, bigger audience; fewer people, more elbow room for the chosen few. Pro and con, the world was getting better and better—for Cloy.

Margaret was glowing. Rush started to say something, but the commercial was so cute she shushed him. Then she turned to him. He tensed.

"When're we going to begin begetting? A boy and a girl. You know? How does that strike you?"

" 'Strike'—aggressive word. You feel unconscious hostility toward me."

Margaret said through her teeth, "I do not."

"See? Quarreling again. Bad atmosphere to raise kids in."

They sat apart, eyes unseeing on the screen, until a phone rang next door.

Margaret s t i r r e d. "Like some punch?"

HE gave a nod, but it was automatic. He eyed her as she swayed to the kitchenette on spike heels. Ringing was stimulus, response was "punch." He smiled; the linking was clear. Bell . . . ring . . . come out fighting . . . punch. His smile faded. She *was* feeling hostile. He couldn't blame her. He put on the smile as spike heels returned. They sat sipping.

Rush was no good at fighting silence with silence. He fidgeted, emptied the glass in a gulp, banged it down, sprang to his feet and stomped out muttering not to wait up.

He strode blindly, aware he was again precipitating a crisis by refusing to face a crisis. No, he was conquering his fear of rejection by rejecting the other first. No, he wasn't rejecting Margaret but a way of life, the kind his father had led, resenting wife and child. No, it wasn't so much resentment at them as at Fate; early photos showed a man alert for a different drumming, later — a man who'd committed himself to the humdrum. No, he had to, or where would he be? Where the race, if everyone ran off chasing the sound of their own pulsing?

No. Survival, even of the race, wasn't enough. A man had to find meaning in being . . . or what's an earth for anyway?

Out of the tail of an eye Rush saw a gesture. Bill collector? He put purpose on his face and made the vanishing point his goal. Then he stopped. Will Wishart! No; Will, rest his kindly soul, had passed on. A family likeness, then; Will Wishart's kid brother—what was the name? —Ken.

"Hi-ya, Ken."

"You remember me?"

"Will I ever forget?"

They shook hands. Rush remembered Ken dogging the heels of the big boys, always in the way unless the big boys wanted him to run an errand or retrieve a ball from a ferocious yard or decoy while they stole fruit. Now Ken was a man and taller than himself. It made him feel old. It was funny to see Kenny, prosperity on the outside and intelligence shining through, suddenly becoming the hero-worshiping kid again. Rush straightened.

"You haven't changed, Rush."

"You sure have, Kenny."

"What're you doing these days?"

"I'm a missionary." Really he was only a sales engineer, though he had once hoped to study for missionary work—breaking the ice for new products. And really only a jobless sales engineer at the moment. He was glad he'd always remembered the importance of dressing well.

"I knew you'd go places, Rush."

God! What he'd wanted, and what places he was going!

"Uh, you know, Rush, I wish I had a guy like you working with me."

RUSH'S whole shortcoming had always seemed to him inability to maintain a delicate balance—not answering too soon, not hesitating too long. He sucked in. "What do you have in mind, Ken?" He hoped he'd struck the note of casual interest.

"It goes back. I run a chain of geriatoria and I came to know this senior citizen, Jackie. Quite senile, childishly disobedient, but everyone's favorite."

Ohmigaud. Rush hated to hear about old people.

"He would cry out in a kind of rote fear, 'Save my soul . . . save my soul . . . save my soul from the fires of hell.' And sometimes, 'Gabriel! Gabriel! Gabriel!' " Ken smiled. "I can see him trying to pick up noodles on his fork and getting angry. 'Why do they cut it so short?' " Ken shook himself. "Well, the last time I saw Jackie he wasn't baby-pink but gray. Vitamins and dextrose met in a Y of plastic tubing and trickled into his

veins. A thready pulse in the stringy arm. I was glad he was going quietly into the long sleep, as we call it."

He coughed and hurried on as Rush shifted weight.

"His eyelids lifted; bleared whites showed, then thin crescents. He groaned. And I could see Jackie falling into the fires he feared." Ken shivered. "I found myself saying, 'It's all right, Jackie. This is Gabriel. Your soul is safe from the fires of hell. I'm taking you to God.' "

Rush stared. "Did it work?"

"I think so. I hope so. If it'd been not a voice in the ear but a vision within, I'd be sure. Since then I've worked out the way." He went into jargon beyond Rush — even if Rush had listened.

Rush was seeing visions and dreaming dreams.

He grew aware of a questioning silence. "Um-hum."

Rush had edged around and Ken was facing an autobar. Ken thought of standing them a container of cognac.

Ken grew expansive as alcohol expanded his capillaries. "Rush, this is a thing I'm burning to promote. Not for the money, though I s'pose it might come to quite a bit. Thanks—" as his cup was refilled. "But for the satisfaction." His face shone with earnestness and sweat.

Rush frowned, but not too heavily. "Fine, Kenny, but you have to think this through. More than a mere matter of life and death—everything is that. This would let a human mind settle its accounts for all eternity."

Ken brandished his cup. "Kind of talk I need. Man I need. What say, Rush?" He waggled a finger as Rush opened his mouth. "Don't expect you to make up your mind all at once. Have to think things through."

Rush strove to strike a balance between indecent haste and insulting slowness.

And so—Instant Obituaries Unlimited.

While casting about for some sound sentiment worthy of the moment, Rush belched.

II

RUSH had already given the printer the go-ahead, but thought it only fitting to let Ken see the prospectus.

Ken frowned over the layout and copy.

"Kenny, you have to realize people don't buy preventives, they buy cures. We're selling the ultimate cure."

Ken read on.

A devilish Before leered at the prospect, asking:

> Are you fearful of old age and the wasting away of your powers?
>
> Are you bitter about having chosen the wrong career, the wrong mate?
>
> Do you foresee doom without being able to alter it?
>
> Do you desire without hope

of attaining the thing you desire?

Are you remorseful for having squandered your talents, missed opportunities, deprived or mistreated others?

Do you feel rejected or wronged?

Are you unprepared to meet your Maker?

Here an angelic After, the letters IOU penned on its feathers, put the devilish Before behind it and beckoned the prospect. It said:

It isn't too late! When you close the books on life the IOU way, your personalized obit guarantees you satisfaction in the long sleep. If the body requires touching up just to lie on view, how much more does the dimming mind need the light of reassurance to enable it to pass on without faltering into eternal darkness!

Your personalized obit reassures you that you haven't lived your life in vain, that you have realized your potentialities to the full, that you have gratified your dearest and most secret desires. Your personalized obit justifies your misdeeds, remits your sins of omission and commission. Your personalized obit convinces you that you are entering Paradise, harvesting the fruits of Heaven, standing before the Throne — receiving comfort in the Presence.

Plot your lot in life easily, the amazing new IOU way. Simply speak into the scientifically designed Inscraper. This highly sensitive mechanism, developed by IOU's brilliant research staff—

—and exclusive with IOU, automatically translates your word-pictures of your version of the Hereafter into magnetic characters, permanently registering your personalized obit.

In minutes, you are ready for eternity, come what may. You live out the rest of your life, carefree in the assurance that, when your Time comes, efficient IOU emergency service springs into immediate action, transmittng the tape of your personalized obit to your brain. The magnetic characters return electronic signals that evoke the original eidetic imagery. But now, thanks to the fact that the power to reason and resist is failing, the vividness and reality of your vision of the Hereafter has increased manifold!

Be among the first to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that you will enter into everlasting bliss! Dial O and ask to speak to your IOU representative today!

Ken turned brilliant red and coughed.

"Well?"

"I didn't know you'd make it quite that—"

"We *have* to make it strong! I did think twice about saying, back there, that one might even sit on the Throne; I figured that would raise too much hell. But don't let the religious angle trouble you. God has all eternity to set things right."

"That's right."

"Meanwhile, we put the fear of God and/or the Devil into them. Damned few have the moral courage to face up to the consequences of their weaknesses without weaseling, whining, or wishful

thinking. That's where we come in."

"I guess you can go ahead."

"Fine."

"And when that's done?"

"We sit back and wait."

Ken sat on the edge of his chair and eyed the furnishings. They represented all his savings and mortgagings. But Rush had been sure front was more important than the equipment that made IOU feasible and that Ken had stuck together out of second-hand parts.

Rush went out whistling.

III

"There will be a nominal charge for orchestrating . . ." —IOU contract form.

UMBRELLA hooked on his arm, Otto Trever neared the IOU building, gateway to a better world.

He would live not in the past with its wilted hopes and smoldering regrets, not on the forever-crumbling edge of the present, but in a heavening future.

He sidled off the autowalk. With the awkward agility of the non-jostler he made his way to the entrance. He found himself nodding to the robot doorkeeper; then, though he knew this made as little sense, scowled at it. It was in the shape of an angel. It handed him a numbered card.

Full of comings and goings, but not at all like a terminal, the waiting room struck a balance between solemnity and sprightliness. Murals showed lion and lamb in loving togetherness.

Otto Trever sat watching numbers light up. His eyes followed figures springing or creaking to their feet and vanishing down corridors. His number came up. He himself came up, force of response compensating for slight delay, and eyes followed him.

He came to a door. He showed his card and the door admitted him. He stood wondering what to do with hat, umbrella, and himself. A voice murmured and Trever found himself deep in a chair, pouring out his heart to an intercom. He found himself agreeing he needed orchestrating of his obit. The voice ushered him into a recording room.

The blank-faced technician was re-filling sound effects. Labels indicated ringing hoofs, creaking leather, clashing swords; the preceding client had wanted to believe, when his time should come, he was dying in battle, in the flower, untimely pluck'd, of ancient knighthood.

Trever nodded. That was a way to go. Still, wasn't it safer to go in your sleep, not knowing you were going? No, the best way was awarely—with editing.

But maybe the manner of his own going ought to have

a bit more thought. Maybe—

The technician was glancing up from ticker tape notations the computer relayed from the consulting rooms.

Too late to back out now. Trever postured eagerness.

"Won't take long, sir. I see this calls for just a girl's voice." The tech turned to his mixing knobs.

Not just a girl's voice. The voice of Hannah O'Dea. Trever glared at the IOU-lettered back. Hannah had a breathtaking voice electronic tones couldn't hope to match.

But he listened to scales of syllables and heard himself saying, "There! That's it!" whenever sound chimed with memory.

Then the tech was saying, "There, that's it."

And it was so. Trever could close his eyes and *see* Hannah; he almost laughed to hear her lilt meaningless syllables.

Joy switched to panic. The tech was going to leave him to himself—and to Hannah.

"Say anything you want into this mike. Press this, it'll come out in your voice. Press that, it'll come out in the young lady's. This is for the playback."

His finger over a button, Trever was alone, staring at the mike. He was afraid. For without that button there was no Hannah, not for him. Hannah had never given him steady encouragement. Still it was a shock when she laughed in his face. His face burned. His finger stabbed down.

This time, Hannah was charmingly confused. The honor Otto was conferring overwhelmed her, unworthy being that she felt herself to be. She could only murmur, "Oh, darling, darling!" How tenderly masterful Trever was, whispering comfort with counterpoint of passion.

He gazed around, part of himself lingering in that event. He pulled himself together. Why, he hadn't done badly.

At that sweet seizure, he switched on the playback. He sat listening to a transvestite act.

He'd pressed the buttons in the wrong order.

All to do over again.

RUSH entered Ken's office whistling the IOU theme. Without turning from the bank of closed-circuit screens, Ken put up a palm. Rush smiled, but silenced. He listened a moment then moved to the window. He viewed the streaming in and out. He heard a sigh and a switching off, then Ken was at his side.

Rush gestured. "And we're just beginning."

"But it's never-ending. We'll never ease all the pain and sorrow."

"Don't worry, Ken. Iron and bamboo curtains won't stop us. I promise you."

Ken put a hand on Rush's shoulder.

Their eyes lifted to the sunset the weather bureau was projecting.

Ken smiled. "What a life, when even loveliness brings sadness for its evanescence."

Loveliness. Rush remembered Margaret and felt for the clasp he had bought. No special occasion; just that he enjoyed drawing down big money and spending it.

He looked down on the streaming in and out and whistled the IOU theme.

IV

"Persons wishing to spend eternity together may under clause (w) open a joint checking-out account."—IOU contract form.

QUICK as they laid Pat Conover in his grave his widow Norah began to fail. There was nothing mournful about her pining away. She was merely in a hurry to share Pat's repose.

Declining to look after her wellbeing, she quickened the process long invalidism had begun. Bedridden, she had entrusted Pat with taping the one obit for the two of them.

As this was a joint account, the computer hadn't erased the tape but stored it against further falling due. With efficiency the IOU man administered last-aid.

Norah's face began to compose—then jolted to horror, disbelief, rage. With a galvanic lazarising, she sat up as you'd crook a finger and glared at the ghost-white IOU man. . .

Ken burst into Rush's office waving a teleprint. "They served me by visiphone!"

Rush had to admire his own calm. "Mrs. Conover?"

Ken nodded.

"She has no case. Where's the harm in shock, when it's shock that revived her?"

"She wanted to die! But that misses the point. She's suing not on her own behalf but for her husband's estate."

"Same thing."

"She claims he got the wrong obit and should collect damages."

"What damages? He died happy."

"How do we know that?"

Sometimes Rush felt like shaking Ken. "Prima-facie evidence. Smile of the beatific."

"Or grimace of pain," said Ken.

"Or gas. Sure. Why are you trying to undermine yourself?"

"Might be kinder to allow we goofed. Ease the poor woman's mind."

"Want our other clients to lose, through apprehension, the full effect of their obit?"

"No-o."

"Wouldn't surprise me, Kenny, if the 'poor woman' is a zealot-sympathizer trying to

discredit our whole operation."

NORAH CONOVER told the arbitrator that even in her distress she didn't feel IOU had done it deliberately. If IOU would own up to its mistake she'd be of a mind to forgive.

She waved her cane. That obscene obit was none of Pat's doing. "All those lascivious dancing-girls! All that drinking and carousing! Oh no, that wasn't the heaven my Pat planned for us. I lived with the man forty years and I know Pat Conover never made that obit."

The arbitrator turned. "Mr. Tumulty?"

Rush handed in data strips. "Here's proof that Pat Conover made and paid for the obit in question."

The cane flailed. "Some other Pat Conover!"

"Sorry, madam, but according to our computer it has serviced no other Pat Conover."

"Then your computer is loony!"

The arbitrator said, "I understand your agitation, Mrs. Conover, but let's not get personal."

Rush was handing in more data strips. "Service records prove our computer in perfect operating condition since activation."

Norah tightened her lips as the arbitrator took in the data. Rush studied the ceiling.

The arbitrator said, "Unless you can show me some proof, Mrs. Conover, I'm afraid—"

Norah broke down. The cane clattered.

The arbitrator printed up its decision. It wondered why a breakdown always embarrassed not the one breaking down but those looking on. . .

(When Ken ran off the transcript of the proceedings, he felt that embarrassment. But Rush was right. They had scaled the heights of a higher justice. . .)

Otto Trever neared the IOU building. Knowing IOU to be infallible, he disregarded the catcalling of the zealot pickets.

"Better unbought unhappiness than bought, unearned pleasure!"

"You have chased after sin!"

"Say farewell to your immortal soul!"

On second thought, it would be better to begin with an aloof Hannah O'Dea. The triumph would be greater when she wound up a passionate slave.

Unaware his dreamy smile was maddening, Trever passed through traffic administrators holding back the zealots.

V

"IOU undertakes to deliver the obit at all hazards."—IOU contract form.

THE weather bureau was projecting an outsize moon. It was the least the government could do now the Russians had made the real moon constant, stationing it over Moscow. But it added to the hazards George Cavendish had to overcome.

It forced him to make for the wall furthest from the beam, to keep from silhouetting himself. The main gate was in that wall, and so was the heaviest guard.

The vane lofting him whirred softly, loud to his ears. He cupped an eye to the glow of his watch. 1924 hours. Good job of timing. *Now.*

He sucked in air and prepared to cant himself into the yard. There was a stir in the tower emplacement and his guts writhed.

But the discs that were the faces of the guards had phased toward the insubstantial moon. It was blinking.

Cavendish guessed IOU had tapped the projector's power line and was oscillating the juice. Rush Tumulty had promised a diversion at the right instant and was delivering. Even in the dark, Cavendish smiled inwardly; no flashing of teeth to betray him.

He landed, slipped into a workshop, and stashed the vane and a guard's uniform. His spray injector he stowed under the jacket of the trusty's uniform he wore. He hid behind a mountain of license plates and sat waiting.

He shivered. It was the chill of the raw hours. He wondered if Mort Greene saw the blinking from his cell in death row.

Mort had robbed and killed to get the credits to buy his obit. Then the law caught up with him and fixed the day to die. The IOU computer registered this bit of information and prepared to make good. But the law held Mort couldn't benefit by his crimes, or what good would capital punishment be as a deterrent? It denied obit.

IOU and its subscribers held that society might have the right to deprive the body of life, but not to deprive the mind of comfort — however paid for. The law and the zealots held that body and mind were one and that one suit of punishment had to fit the whole crime.

Cavendish didn't feel deeply about it pro or con. But he felt deeply about making good. Rush Tumulty had sent him off with a firm handshake and a frank smile and something about IOU having a moral duty to test the case, to defy the law, to deliver the goods. It would be criminally foolish to pass up the chance to make this manifest to those who had joined up, and to those hesitating. Cavendish wondered if Ken Wishart had the Chief's sense of obligation.

Wishart kept himself too much to himself.

CAVENDISH wished the Chief had told him just who the inside contact would be. But the Chief was right. Suppose the law were to intercept Cavendish—and drag the name of the inside man out of him? It would stop dead all further attempts to reach Mort Greene in time. Still, he couldn't help wondering. The warden? An arresting thought, but Cavendish shook his head; better suspend judgment, not commit the folly of committing oneself beforehand. He'd have to keep mind open and body alert if he were to acquit himself well. . .

He must've dropped off, no blinking the fact. The world was cold gray. Inmates were marching to breakfast.

Soon, many of them, with their guards, would be trooping into the shops, including the one where he sat hiding.

He was to slip out and mingle with the cons when they took their break in the yard. He was to stay inconspicuous; the contact would know him by the number — 10010101 — on his jacket. The contact would take it from there.

Cavendish sweated out close shaves. It was hard to hear footsteps in the din and he jumped in his skin whenever a voice sounded near. But his luck held.

And it was time to knock off work, and sudden silence fell . . . save for the eerie lipless talking of the cons and the silencing shouts of the guards. Cavendish slipped out and made himself part of the milling.

He thought he was being inconspicuous but he found cons eyeing him and commenting coarsely. He remembered he'd sat all night on a stack of license plates; he must've impressed a number on his seat. He kept his back straight and bent his knees as he strolled, hoping his jacket would cover. But he attracted the gaze of a tower guard, hardlooking.

The guard winked. His heart thumped his ribcage. The inside contact. He returned the wink. The guard turned away — swung back, and winked. Cavendish shot glances around, then winked. He knew he ought to move on before others noted. But the guard's gaze held him. The guard winked. Cavendish groaned — hadn't there been office enough?—but he winked.

The guard raised his gun and blazed away at Cavendish.

CAVENDISH came to in the prison hospital. He had only flesh wounds; he supposed he should feel grateful. But there are soul wounds.

Knowing it useless, he felt for the spray injector. Gone. They couldn't have missed it when they stripped him to

tend his wounds of the flesh.

He'd done his best, but he defended himself without conviction. It was painful even to wonder what went wrong. Maybe the guard was a zealot, laughing to himself at the thought of crossing up the IOU agent.

A figure leaned over him. A trusty-orderly. The man would have the freedom of the place. If he jumped the man, got his naked flesh into those clothes, he'd have a fighting chance...

He caught the man in a hammerlock.

The man broke it and pushed him down. "Mercy me, 10010101, you *are* screwy. You're lucky to be living. Zwicker's touchy about his tic. Why'd you have to make fun of it? Lucky I got to you first and glommed the injector. They figure Zwicker went stir crazy."

Cavendish found his voice. "Will the spray injector get to Greene in time?"

The con nodded. "Sure." Then frowned. "Need his key?"

"No. The computer will send the obit at execution time. They're not moving it up?"

The con shook his head. "Not that it would be any trouble to get Greene's key. It's in the warden's safe."

"You mean he's in this with us?"

"Mercy no. Account of all the pete men in here, the warden don't bother locking it. Now we have to think how to get you out."

Cavendish told him of the cache.

The trusty had hardly left when Cavendish remembered the vane. His heart thumped. Would the con take off, leaving Cavendish to face the rap?

Cavendish waited. When he heard footsteps he feared to turn.

It was the trusty. Empty-handed.

The trusty unwound a guard's uniform, cummerbunded under his jacket. Cavendish dressed with haste.

He tried to think guard as the con escorted him past eyes to the dark workshop.

Vane strapped on and whirring, Cavendish asked, "Why didn't you take this and escape?"

"Mercy. You happen to set your eyes on all the license plates? More each year. Think I'd throw away the break of being safe from vane traffic?"

Time to go. All eyes, including those of the trusty, who failed to see him wave, were on a shadow-stained window. As he went over the wall he thought he saw lights dim.

BOTH Mort Greene and the trusty-barber seemed embarrassed that the hairshaving was a superfluous gesture. But under cover of it the barber used the injector the

orderly had slipped him to shoot the transistorized particles into Mort Greene's brain.

Mort did not hear the hissing of the electric charge. He heard ringing hoofs, creaking leather, clashing swords...

Cavendish smoothed down his hair; knowing the Chief's flair for publicity, he felt it likely he'd be walking into a telepress conference. He entered the Chief's office, steeling himself against glare and noise.

Rush was alone. He sprang up and clapped Cavendish on the back. "Wonderful work, George. Too bad we can't publicize it. But I've been kicking it around. If people learned Greene got away with it, wouldn't it tempt many to emulate him? No, the well-being of Society comes foremost. It's only good business ethics. We have to refund stolen money, so it would be not only without honor but without profit."

Cavendish knew letdown as Rush saw him out. Then handshake and smile made it all right...

Otto Trever took a card from the doorangel. He smiled at the robot and then, realizing the folly of expending feeling on a machine, deepened smile. It felt good to know he was dealing with a law-abiding concern. He didn't keep up with the news these days, but some pros and cons of the Mort Greene case had got through to him. Knowing IOU had restrained itself, shown itself on the side of law and order, he could disregard the Zealot pickets, who, though they had lost talking point, had not lost voice.

He entered the IOU building sure he had it now.

Hannah O'Dea would be the mistress of that rogue Otto Trever. She was one of a succession, and knew it. A pretty plaything but fast fading, she lived in dread of Otto's discarding her for a fresher plaything.

VI

"IOU agrees to serve as ante-mortem executor and will carry out the express wishes of the client."—IOU contract form.

TIME had thrown her features out of focus, but as Ken looked at her, a nudge of memory resolved the face into that of his onetime favorite star, Cara Lovelace.

It was hard to believe this wasn't another telecast with Cara Lovelace playing the lead. Ken viewed her with a protecting tenderness that forgave bad makeup, quavering voice, wringing of bejeweled hands.

The first thing she looked for when she entered the consulting booth was a mirror. The shining surface of the

intercom, designed to induce a semi-hypnotic state in which inhibitions would lessen, served. She felt melancholy. Her reflection informed her she looked soulful. She brightened—then tried to recall that shade of melancholy. She wanted to recapture that soulful look.

The intercom broke in softly with its gentle probing.

An audience! Cara responded. She spotlighted her rise in the theater, told of costarring with Lane Pierce, then of going on to solo greatness, spoke trippingly of her tours.

Ken started at another memory. Lane Pierce had taped an obit only a few months before. Rush had noted it with special interest because someone not Lane Pierce had already taped an obit assuring himself he was the one and only Lane Pierce. The man could imagine no greater bliss than to die believing he had been that nova of Casanovas.

"Now," Cara said with a dramatic sigh, "I've reached a point in the road where I can see where I am and what I have and can expect." The mirroring surface gave back soulfully. "And I ask myself, 'Was it all for this?' "

Ken saw she couldn't believe that. She clung to youth, squeezed into it; shoes and girdle extruded Cara.

"Not that I think it's all over, or that it hasn't been worth while. But there's one thing I want to take care of at the curtain."

She stopped. Ken, feeling this was not a dramatic device but a pause before a plunge, willed her not to tape the sort of obit Lane Pierce had taped. Stiff hands unpursed a letter, still sealed.

It would show blank when you held it to light; static electricity when you stripped off the flap brought out the writing. The letter was old, but there was only the start of a tear.

Ken strained to hear.

"This goes back to when I and Lane appeared together."

Together not only onscreen but off. But her best friend, Ada Moffat, had fun teasing her. "You're not dating *him?!*" He stuttered offscreen. Ada mocked. " 'It seems a cocoon's age since I saw you last night!' "

Cara was mad about his deep voice bespeaking depths of meaning, his deep eyes depths of feeling. But Ada would whisper, " 'What a lovely Jejune moon; it makes me crave the baboon of a kiss!' " Ada was competent enough actress to capture Lane. Cara would blush and go cold. Ada said Lane was a bore and groaned amusingly at sight of him. Cara tried to fight misgivings. But she saw less and less of Lane. And of Ada.

ON the eve of the wedding of Lane Pierce and Ada Moffat, Cara received the letter. Her first impulse was to tear it to bits; her next, to tear it open.

Why was Lane writing *now* —unless to confess he regretted having decided to marry Ada? He repented before it was too late; Cara was his love; he and Cara—if she still cared for him—would elope. Cara started to rip the flap. Latent writing showed faint.

She stopped. Suppose Lane hoped she wouldn't judge him harshly; suppose, singing praises of Ada, he asked Cara to wish them well.

Latent writing remained too faint to make out. Fearing the finality of *knowing,* she shut the letter away. At long intervals she took the stationery from its resting place and with half-averted eyes tried to make out the writing. Sometimes it seemed to spell out one big "Yes," sometimes "No."

Now it was up to IOU to do for her what she lacked the will to do herself. She touched her neck. She was leaving the letter for the computer to open and scan and record. Whatever the message, it would be her obit.

IOU assured her it would carry out her orders to the letter. Having deposited that letter in the scan slot, she rose, performed a bow, and, uptilting her chin, exited.

Now the booth was void of both dead letter and living spirit, and still. And yet it held Ken's gaze and thought. Sometimes life seemed like a dress rehearsal. Opening night was upcoming, but not yet. In moments like this, he felt he and the world of his senses were not really *on.*

Another client entered the booth and broke the spell. Ken switched off, then realized the client had been Otto Trever. Ken smiled, left the switch off, and returned to his work.

But he found himself returning to Cara Lovelace. And Lane Pierce. How the deduce could you figure a guy like that? In Pierce's obit there was no dialogue, no reciting of his triumphs on-screen and off, no word-picture of heavenly scenery. Only the thunder of canned applause.

Lane Pierce and his vacuum-packed obit; Cara Lovelace and her sealed letter; the man identifying himself with the outer Lane Pierce—which had the best of it? Ken turned back with a sigh, for he didn't know what, to the 1's and 0's of the IOU computer's current report.

OTTO TREVER sat down in the booth, still a bit out of breath. He had laid about him tellingly with his umbrella.

If the hassle had started when he was leaving, obit in order, he might've resigned himself to being struck down, maybe even welcomed dying. But he would let nothing stop him before he could revise his obit.

What made it hard on his umbrella was that the Zealots picked him as prime target. By now, they probably took him for a staff member of IOU. But that was behind him and he put it out of his mind.

The living Hannah O'Dea had gone away with her lover. Trever had never heard from Hannah. Whatever he heard was of her happiness; it only added to his unhappiness. The new obit would alter that.

He would encounter an old, life-beaten Hannah. She would turn away. Then, seeing no way of averting the meeting, she would face him. "If I had it to do all over again—Oh, Otto, if I only had it to do over again!"

VII

GRIFFIN MANNING'S chest tightened. He sat eyeing the intercom much as the astrogastor of the first starship sat at her controls. In his own mind the comparison was more down to earth; he was a moron aspiring to migraine. Not that heaven was a headache. The headache was trying to conceive a heaven.

"I simply lack imagination."

The intercom consoled him.

The recording tech was waiting with a suitable range of prepackaged h e a v e n s. "Whenever you hear one you like, sir, press this. Later, you'll make your final selection."

Out of sight in the control room the tech rolled the tape and listened in, yawning. After three solid hours of ethereality the tech saw Manning was hard to please.

Not one abode of bliss—not Sumeru or T'ien or Swarga or Aaru or Gan Eden or Olam ha-Ba or Elysium or Ching-tu or Jodo or Gokuraku or Asgard or Flatheanas or Albordy or Tuma of the Valley of the Assassins or Mictlan or Xibalba or Sibao or Tegri or Shipapu or Ponemah or Ilahee or Tir na n-Og or Hy Brasil or Avalon or Sukhavati or Langi or Untola or Dilum or Bolotoo or Hesunanin or Xanadu — had moved Manning's finger.

Moslems were threatening to enjoin IOU from allowing infidels to enjoy Jennet 'Adn. Turning his gaze toward the Throne of the Compassionate, the tech slipped Jennet 'Adn in.

No paradise. He quickly reprogrammed. But nothing drew response—not the sensation of immersion in amniotic flued; not Nirvana, where all desire is wanting; not a

"Please obit flowers; I'b allergic."—Contemporary gag.

rice-wine dream; not opium pipe dreams or marijuana or mushroom hallucinations; not the esthetic paradise of Dante's allegory. The tech tightened his lips and tapped Mahler's symphonic heaven. Still no response. The tech smiled. He hadn't played his trump.

THE First Star Expedition had been sending back reports.

IOU was among the earliest to subscribe for bulletins of the Eschatological Survey Team of Starex One. So there was a great dipper of nonhuman heavens to draw on as well.

That of the folk of Mekbuba II. In their heaven the chiefest delight was to go around scowling. It was joy to envisage relaxing from the livelong need to smile, a smile being the most efficient arrangement of features for scooping in the tiny airborne organisms on which they fed.

And that of the folk of Nashira II. They led a hard life and yearned for a harder time in heaven. In retrospect their temporal lot would seem not so bad after all.

And that of those of Spica II, in whom the nose had grown vestigial. These people looked forward to a return to the dream days of legend; the nose would quiver with sensation and the heady effect of pollen, pollution, and putrefaction would become known. Their desire was all the stronger because, honoring tradition, they preserved the conditions making these things tantalizingly omnipresent.

And of Salm II, a teeming planet. Each person believed that on reaching heaven *it* would—whatever pleasure it queued up for—always be first in line.

The heaven of Alkalurops II was special—its would-be dwellers having from the beginning reserved all good things for heaven—and the tech knew a fleeting urge to put this in place of his present obit.

Heavens rolled by but Manning held out.

Swallowing angry embarrassment, the tech stood beside Manning. Manning made no sign of awareness. Taking this for sign of displeasure, the tech with savage feelings but gentle touch prodded Manning.

"Haven't you been able to come to any conclusion, sir?"

Manning nodded and slowly slid out of his chair. Somewhere along the line he had died of—one had to suppose — ecstasy.

RUSH damned Ken under his breath. "Why'd you bust out to the press with a mea culpa? I could've hushed this Manning bit."

Ken lifted his head slowly.

"Rush, I wonder if what we're doing is good. The spirit is willing—"

Rush stilled a quick retort. He steepled his fingers. "We do our human best. Besides, the guy got what he wanted."

Ken sat up. "You're darn tootin'. I let the shock and the uproar throw me." He eyed the monitors, not seeming to see how many screens were dark, how many consulting booths were not in use. "Be a shame to let all this go by default . . ." The unending spectacle caught him up.

Rush left. He wished he could convince himself it would come out right.

The Zealots had hold of this and were milking it.

They had strong backing; more to the point, they had a head—Yardley Bourne.

Bourne's biting mouth interpreted all-seeing providence, frightening away prospects. "This Manning-martyring monster, IOU, usurps God's function, shortcircuits Judgment, undermines Authority. This tool of the Devil encourages wicked living by 'forgiving' all at the end of living." Yardley Bourne wanted his finger in the pie in the sky. "By jiminy, I demand that all obits be open to inspection!"

Then there was Soul Security. So far, Soul Security limited itself to obiting pets. The most peevish Zealot couldn't fault Soul Security for taping the voice of the master or mistress praising the dying animal. Even Yardley Bourne couldn't misinterpret Soul Security's taping, for dogs, the odor-complex of a congregational tree, with bonus cat at bay on a bough; for cats, a micey smell, or fluttering of bird or flopping of goldfish under paw; tensile infinity of worm, for birds.

Rush told himself that when the newness wore off the public's interest would turn back to IOU. But "Soul Security" seemed undue for a dumbbeast clientele.

IOU was in no present danger of collapsing, if that was what Soul Security hoped. IOU could keep going till obit storage charges ran out.

Back to Manning. IOU's pitch would be that Manning had got what he wanted.

Oh. Tell the computer to collect in advance from now on. . .

Margaret Tumulty let the curtain fall in place. The little band of Zealots was there yet. She had grown aware that they had stilled and she had hoped they were gone. At least they had stilled. Listening to their yapping at IOU made her feel, well, *sick*. She tried to hide her feelings from Rush whenever she saw him but the idea of an obit gave her the shivers. But Zealots were disgusting, and just hearing them she felt disloyal. Still, it seemed to please Rush

that she hadn't yielded to the pulling power of IOU commercials; he took it as a tribute to their personal relationship — she contemplated no greater joy.

She turned to her set and had it replay her favorite Neal McGillicuddy Cloy telecast. All was sweet, safe, and sure until a large band of Zealots, who like all Zealots took pride in being outspoken and in looking for opposition, came upon those outside the Tumulty mansion. These last had shouted themselves hoarse down-withing the Manning-martyrers and up-withing the Zealots. T h e i r whispering caused the newcomers to take them for IOU conspirators and to wade into them bloodily. Margaret raised the volume.

OTTO TREVER nodded absent farewell to the door-angel. This was it, the obit to end all obits. But he felt regret for all he had to leave behind. Spatially the obit waiting in the necrofile lay behind; temporally it lay before. Why in many-mansioned possibility must he fix on only one, possibly free, choice? Deaf and blind to the Zealots, Trever passed through them along a t.a.-held line, and stepped onto the autowalk heading home.

The door-angel gazed after the vanishing figure. Something was O.

Most clients were one-time arrivals; there was no need for the door-angel to sort them out. Trever always wore the same clothing, always toted his umbrella—defiant symbol of the Radical Republicans, who once opposed functionalizing the weather bureau. The door-angel had come to recognize Trever and, torn between recognizing and the non-need to recognize, found salvation by stacking the deck to present Trever always with the same card. Now it gazed after the vanishing figure and realized what was O. The man had forgotten to take his umbrella.

The door-angel hurried in and retrieved the battle-scarred umbrella, but by then the man was rounding out of sight.

The weather bureau had switched on a breeze. The door-angel's wings trembled. The door-angel eyed the vanes in the traffic lanes above and beyond the autowalks. It spread its wings and moved them.

Its makers had not designed the wings for such levity, but the door-angel rose. It was flying.

It looked for the man but the earth was tipping over. Its wings were tearing off. The ground came up.

The umbrella. Somewhere in the door-angel's reconditioned metal was the memory image of parachute and nose

cone. The door-angel tore at the catch.

It was immovable; being only a symbol, the umbrella didn't open. The door-angel perished without benefit of obit.

VIII

"In as much as personal identity is immaterial to obit-administering, the client may elect to use a pseudonym."—IOU contract form.

RUSH looked down. He could tell the t.a.s by their blue uniforms, the Zealots by the lightning-emblazoned armbands they had taken to wearing, and the obit-seekers by their fewness.

He turned from the window to spottily-lit monitors. An outthrusting jaw, bulb nose, and wild eyebrows caught his eyes. He smiled. The whole getup screamed disguise. These days clients seemed to want to hide from family, friends, and foes that they were clients. For Rush's benefit, the computer printed on the screen the name G. F. VEHR (PSEUD.)...

The electronic frisking had given him a bad moment; he had feared the t.a.s would penetrate his careful disguise. But they had not even suspected disguise. They were simply on the lookout for Zealot sabotage. It had all worked out for the best. He was here now, and the ordeal had shaken loose his last reservations.

It was the fuss about Manning that made him think of taping his own obit. Not that he wanted to die in ecstasy—not just yet. He had so much more good to do on earth. But taping a trial obit might be the answer to what was troubling him.

It began when Manager Forbes—he advised the intercom all names were purely fictitious — singled out young Vehr. Vehr's unclouded vision of the shining purity of the Ideal — neat, evenly-balanced books, ditto towns, ditto people—exalted him above the classmates in the business ethics seminary. Colonizing of Venus was beginning.

"The first Carrier of the Word on Venus! A great honor, my son, but one you richly deserve."

"I am not worthy, Manager Forbes."

"Oh, you are, my son."

Then the briefing. The veil of Venus fell. Vehr closed his eyes. No shining purity there. No neat, evenly-balanced books, towns, people. Violence, lust, passion ran amuck in the raw settlements.

He packed. Manager Forbes arranged passage. But Venus had evidently got word of impending salvation; anonymous abuse in dirty English, Chinese and Russian flooded the seminary. Manager Forbes in

particular came in for brutal cautioning, vilifying and ridiculing.

Manager Forbes vetoed the mission. Venus was not yet worthy of such as Vehr. The seminary would turn its face toward a more deserving flock nearer home.

Vehr protested. But he bowed to greater wisdom, not without a spurt of fear. He had come near to overdoing his disappointment, moving more than one director to talk of overriding the veto and giving the lad his chance to prove himself.

"Poor Manager Forbes. But it was all for the best. By sending those letters I was able to keep shining and pure my vision of the Ideal." Mind had triumphed over matter, yet he found himself thinking often of the aborted mission and the thought always carried a feeling of apprehension. Worsening of late, it took the form of a fear of saying or doing something embarrassing. He was a public figure. He couldn't restrict himself to pretaped appearances.

Taping an obit allaying a disagreeable memory in the hereafter might, by taking off pressure, allay a disagreeable memory in the here. In his obit he would be leaving a world in which Man had never torn the veil from Venus, a Venus innocent as the dawn of Earth when mystery brooded over the waters.

It seemed to work. The outthrusting jaw, bulb nose and wild eyebrows couldn't express the joy of one shut of burdensome memory, but Rush sensed just that when Vehr got up to go. Rush started to switch off, then stopped. The very positiveness of the false features suggested their negatives. Rush knew he ought to know the underlying face. Vehr was moving out of the frame when it came to Rush.

Neal McGillicuddy Cloy.

CLOY was following arrows blinking This Way Out.

Rush took his elbow. "There's another way, Mr. Vehr." He looked around. "Private. The staff comes and goes without having to pass through the Zealots waiting out there. Allow me."

"Why, thank you. Most kind. Much for the best."

Rush hurried Cloy past Ken's office and into his own. Cloy's eyes darted around behind eyebrows. Rush introduced himself and showed Clov a chair.

"While you're here, Mr. Vehr, suppose I show you how we do our job."

Cloy remained standing. "Interesting, I'm sure, Mr. Tumulty. But I'm afraid I haven't the time—"

Rush was tuning in a monitor.

". . . and I'm sure if Hannah and I were shipwrecked

alone together on an asteroid we . . ."

The prelapsaurian jaw fell. "Am I hearing and seeing right? Do you eavesdrop on your clients?"

"Monitor. I won't pay cloy —I mean play coy. We monitor to make sure all goes smoothly."

Cloy sat down and viewed the monitor till it went black.

"Quite moving. I see you are doing a splendid job. Indeed, I venture to wonder if I might buy into IOU? On a modest scale, of course."

"Your confidence is touching, Mr. Vehr. But frankly, owing to certain disrupting influences our position isn't ideal. We need the moderating presence of a man of stature devoted to our interests and believing in our principles."

"Loyalty, as we in business ethics put it, is the dividend on a mutually advantageous agreement."

"I share that sentiment."

"This has been very pleasant, Mr. Tumulty. Now if you'll kindly show me your easy way out—"

ON his way out Otto Trever, mended umbrella on his arm, was in two minds as he glanced at the door-angel. It was partly the same door-angel, partly not. "Cainabelizing," he thought of calling it. In any case, even if it were the same It, there was no sense thanking it for attempting to restore the umbrella to him—or blaming it for damaging the precious symbol. It had only been trying to do its duty.

More disturbing was the breaking of his lucky streak. The card he had received on entering had not been the usual one. Omen? Meaningless hangover of superstition. But already his pleasure in the latest revision was fading . . .

Margaret Tumulty lit up knowing Neal McGillicuddy Cloy was appearing live. Just knowing made it more real, made him seem his sanguinest. The very polyanthus in his lapel seemed to nod agreement as he spoke and to rest assured as he stopped for breath.

"Don't we unconsciously pretty up the past with the powder puff of forgetfulness? Of course we do. Don't we unconsciously jolly up the future with rouge of expectation? Of course we do. Don't we rationalize? Of course we do. The good old human nature in us, my friends, makes us do these things. Then why not be practical and do these things honestly and forthrightly, by a conscious exercise of the will?"

The polyanthus considered, already swayed.

"I see no harm and much good in such works as IOU is carrying out. We owe a debt of gratitude to IOU for helping us balance our accounts.

Those who doubt, those who say otherwise, are foolishly crape-hanging. And as you know—"

The polyanthus nodded yes.

IX

"IOU will not censor or otherwise seek to control the content of your personalized obit."—IOU contract form.

WATCHING the monitors, Ken sat hunched like an embryonic premonition. To Rush he seemed to be bearing the whole burden of original virtue.

Ken turned. "Rush, what do you really believe? Is there a rising up again? A hereafter?"

Rush frowned. What profiteth a man to think thus? He smiled. IOU and its ramifications had grown out of Ken's worrying about his own soul. "If you have to think about it, it's best to be hard-boiled as an Easter Egg about the concept."

Ken sighed. "All the more reason to do our best. You agree?"

Rush, his mind casting a cold eye of economic justification on the Vehr account, listed under miscellaneous expenses, said, "What? Oh, I agree. That's business ethics. We all have to do our best."

Cloy's pitch was paying off, but not as much as Rush had hoped. The Zealots, with seemingly unending backing, were still noisily intimidating. Rush viewed the waiting room. To make it seem fuller he'd set up a lag in the computer's dispatching of clients. But it was embarrassing; the computer knew its capacities and would fidget at the clogging waste of time.

WHITNEY INSKIP, small features huddling in big face, waited.

He didn't mind waiting, did he?

No, he didn't mind.

He had waited so long in his life waiting had become habit. Not not minding so much as believing he couldn't help enduring. He waited.

With the suddenness of at last, the waiting ended.

He found it hard to talk about himself. He couldn't remember ever laughing or crying with full lungpower. He must have as a child, but restraint had set in early. Maybe once he had thought he could care for the work he did. He bent over dials with silent intentness but seemed no longer to be doing work he could care for. The company of his few friends roused no full-throated laughter, no wholehearted gusto.

But he had his dream.

You didn't, even to your best friends, tell all your dream. He had learned that. Continual rebuffing should have thickened his skin. It

had only reinforced his silence. Quietly he saved up.

One day he hired a one-man spaceboat. In the speckling between Mars and Jupiter he picked out an asteroid and landed. It was no use. He could be sure there was no other human in a hundred thousand miles, but there wasn't air enough to waft a whisper.

He headed for Mars, landed on the Gorki Desert, climbed out. It was no use. There was air enough, though thin, but just under the horizon might be someone. He climbed in. He took off.

He let the spaceboat drift sunward. But his dream was strong. He switched on the reverse rockets. But where, where? He remembered the air bubbles.

Mile-diameter plastic bubbles, bottle-green, spotted strategically about, they held high oxygen-content air. Spaceship air might sour due to sick algae, leak out owing to a hole in the hull or carbonize because of recycling breakdown. It was a misdemeanor to make non-emergency use of a bubble. Inskip made juncture with the nearest, nevertheless.

Carrying a half-mile of nylon cord out of ship's stores, he threaded his way through a stand of fittings. They were all too small. Then he spotted a large valve, a mere circle—or flap, since it fused at one point with the bubble proper—of the same stuff. It gave windily. He squeezed through, tied one end of the coil to the flap where it hinged, then let the flap in place, sealing the opening.

He was inside, feeling bubbling in himself, in his blood. Soon, soon!

He got out of his spacesuit and used the belt to moor it. He held the free end of the cord and kicked himself off. A bit of entangling shortened the cord, but in substance he was floating at the center.

The air was warm and he relaxed. Then he panicked.

If he lost his grip and drifted he would die floating in the center of the bubble. He tied the cord to his middle. He breathed easier.

All the air he needed. No one in sight. This was it. He began to breathe consciously, the oxygen exalting him. He breathed deeply and rapidly for a minute, then could hold his breath much longer than normally. Now. He sucked in the breath.

It was no use. Something—if only the indifferent universe—was eyeing him. It deflated him.

"Now I'm here."

Once, just once, he ached to let out in one cry—what? He didn't know. He had come close to knowing. He had failed. His dream was still a dream. He eyed the intercom. Maybe . . .

"IF that's all the heaven he can dream up, maybe we ought to interpolate something beautific."

"No, Ken. We can't say a man's heaven isn't his own to make." Hell, no; just let the Zealots learn IOU was altering obits! But it was all right; Ken was nodding slowly. Besides, another monitor was catching Ken's attention.

Theodora Molyneux (pseud.) wore a veil whose shimmering chromium-phosphor thread said voice-disguise. Her breath played on the fine taut strands, and Rush and Ken and the computer heard tones with harmonics of a mingled, distant sweetness.

The veil did its equivocal job well. Rush tried to pierce it. IOU was a fine place to winkle out peris. Women clients had proved an exotic source of sex: open to reason because open to emotion; amenable because of obit cleared conscience; pliable because he could pick them with care, plan accidental meeting, and play on longings they betrayed unsuspectingly, as now. Something about this one disturbed Rush.

"He always forgets to mention changes in his plans till the last minute. Never enters his mind I might have plans of my own." She clasped and unclasped an object at her throat. "Maybe that doesn't seem like much to you. But sometimes I think thoughtless cruelty is a worse kind than intentional cruelty."

This dame would be a pushover. The disturbing quality would add spice. He leaned unobtrusively to the intercom on Ken's desk and whispered a message for George Cavendish. He sat back, scowling a bit at Ken's obliviousness to distraction, and returned his scrutiny to the screen.

"With time hanging heavy I think. I think, What's it all about? Then I tell myself I haven't got it so bad, all in all, and I convince myself, and I go along and I think I'm enjoying living. Then out of nowhere, out of somewhere deep inside, comes this feeling when I hear some nice tune or see some pretty picture. Tears of joy squeeze out—but how can it be joy if it's a painful feeling? You know?"

Rush felt his face grow hot. He shot a glance at Ken, but Ken was sitting in thrall. Ken didn't stir as Rush gave a hyperbolic yawn and left. Once out of Ken's office Rush sped to his own, switched on the same scene, and ordered the computer to analyze the sound distortion and nullify it, for his speaker alone.

The voice modulated into that of his wife Margaret. Now came the confirming recognition of the object she fingered. It was the clasp he'd bought her, how long ago?

It wasn't his fault she hadn't been able to keep up.

Listen to the obit she was taping. More banality! What could Margaret know of the worlds of untried sensation waiting all around?

She was leaving. Had he told her he sometimes tuned in these confessionals? If he had, if she was being hopefully disingenuous, it was all the more outrageous.

Divorce. No, separation would be better; prophylactic. He'd be gentle about it, though, and generous. He'd even interpolate in her obit, in his own voice and with a sincere ring, "Margaret, I've always loved only you." That would be a nice surprise for her when that some day came.

Damn! It was too late to call off Cavendish . . .

Otto Trever closed his eyes and listened critically to the playback.

He was strolling along a shopping mall, pristine umbrella on one arm, a lovely young thing on the other. "Otto, darling, who *is* that dreadful woman staring after you with hungering eyes?" Yes. There was something familiar about that poor creature, who half turned away in shame now that he was eyeing her. He turned back to the lovely young thing with a smile and a shrug and they walked on. But a thought kept nagging. That poor creature reminded him somehow of a long ago passing fancy—what was her name?—Hilda? No, Hannah. Hannah Something-or-other.

X

!IOU & SOUL SECURITY MERGE! — Metropolitan Times *headline*

THE man wearing the Zealot armband stopped to study a display of carved Martian sleeping wood. The window was non-reflecting, but the polished pieces mirrored the man and satisfied him no one was watching.

Shoppers and window-shoppers strolled the Great Mall. Zealots harangued them and handed out leaflets. For the most part it was a subdued scene. The man shivered and turned up his collar. The weather bureau was cooling tempers by lowering the temperature, but it semed to be overdoing it a bit. However, the effect pleased him. The upturned collar gave him an undercover air.

He stepped into the shop, disregarded the greeting of the vending machine and, keeping clear of the Martian sleeping wood, for one never knew when it might waken, made for the curtain at the rear. He passed through its chiming strands. A door opened on steps leading down.

He reached the sub-basement and followed a corridor to a dead end. He whistled.

An opening appeared in the

wall. He stepped through. The opening closed. He was in the IOU building. He made for the executive level and entered the office of Rush Tumulty.

Rush smiled, but his toe moved toward a button.

"It's me, Chief!" The man tore off his face and bared the face of George Cavendish.

The George Cavendish face could be removable. The Zealots might've got onto Cavendish, holding him and sending their man in his place.

There was triumph on the Cavendish face. "Chief, I penetrated the enemy center."

That of the Zealots or this of IOU? Rush relaxed. The computer had scanned the man's brain waves the moment he entered; it had compared them with those on file and raised no alarm.

"Sit down, Cavendish." He spoke kindly, knowing Cavendish still felt the more embarrassed of the two about the Margaret Tumulty-Theodora Molyneux (pseud.) contretemps. That was no lady, that was your wife. But that was in the past. He threw out grappling hooks. "Sure the Zealots didn't get wise to you?"

"I'm a member of Yardley Bourne's honor guard!"

"Where are they getting their backing?"

"From Tod Hawkins . . .I believe."

"Hawkins? The Chairman of Soul Security?"

"Yes, Chief."

"Believing is one thing. Can you prove it?"

"Sorry, Chief. The money moves too deviously to pin down."

"It ain't pin money."

"No, Chief."

"Does Bourne know Hawkins is putting up the money?"

"If so, there's an understanding that it comes with no strings. I've heard Bourne tell his followers to pull no punches if Soul Security goes after human obits."

HAWKINS must have a plan to deal with the Zealots once the Zealots dealt IOU the death blow. Meanwhile Hawkins seemed content to dish out heaven to the lower animals. He would have to split Bourne and Hawkins —but where was the wedge, the good old V for victory?

Cavendish produced a package and unwrapped it slowly.

A reel of tape. A record of secret plottings? A Hawkins sex orgy to alienate Bourne's Zealots? Cruelty to animals?

"What is it?"

"Home movies." Cavendish flushed under Rush's gaze. "I had a hard time getting it, Chief. Seemed to be Bourne's prize possession. I thought it might come in handy."

Rush waved a wearily permissive hand.

Cavendish fumbled the reel into the scanner on Rush's desk. A monitor lit up.

Rush had seen Bourne on telenews. Here was Bourne, an earlier, yet an older edition. "His father, Chief." Tame stuff. Self-conscious posing. But something began to stand out plain. The elder Bourne was a domineering man. Family shots, but the rest of the family was in the shade. The wife a Griselda, the son — Yardley — hangdog eager for a pat, the daughter a spiritless nonentity and marked with her heredity.

When it was over Rush eyed the blank monitor. Bourne's prize possession. It figured.

Bourne hated IOU because it tempted the individual to place individual judgment before the Judgment of God the Father. Rush itched to confront Bourne. There would be nothing to setting up a meet; Bourne would jump at the chance to rant. The way to set him back on his heels was to take the place of his father; have the computer analyze the voice on the reel, then wear the proper voicebox filter. He would have to play the face down — Bourne's father had a dished face; besides, Bourne probably knew Rush Tumulty's. But those were details. He turned to the intercom.

"Copy that reel and return the original to me."

In a moment the scanner coughed up.

"Take it, Cavendish. Plant it on one of Hawkins' men. Have a Zealot find it on him. I know you can do it."

Cavendish, eyes shining, started out, stopped. "Oh, Chief. One thing I ought to warn you about."

Rush raised an eyebrow.

"Don't mention Sir Isaac Newton to Bourne."

"Why on earth would I bring up Sir Isaac Newton?"

"Chief, I don't know. But I've seen the name set him off. I thought I'd better tell you."

Rushed eyed him.

Cavendish put the false face over his own flushed face and turned to go.

Rush said, "You're doing fine work, George."

The shoulders went back. "Thanks, Chief."

As Cavendish left Rush noted the upturned collar and wondered whether it was that cold out. Damn such thoughts; he had to concentrate on putting pressure on Bourne. The answer came to him out of the blue.

Why not put real — that was atmospheric — pressure on Bourne?

BOURNE was on his way up. Rush glanced around one last time. Lighting, atmospheric pressure, temperature. All working to condition physiological stress, which in turn would turn the screw. Even Rush, knowing the cause and taking precautions,

felt the effect. But he hoped to hide the fact. He had to establish mastery.

"Come in, sir, come in."

Bourne entered stiffly. Was there a flicker of subliminal recognition?

"Sit down, sir, sit down."

The computer was using reruns to make the place seem busy. Bourne tightened his mouth. Rush made a point of ignoring the screens; a full house was too typical, Bourne ought to infer, to be worth pointing out.

"Now, sir."

Bourne jerked about. "Now you, sir. By what authority do you put at nought the supernatural basis of authority?"

"Come, sir. That smells of blasphemy. No one can forgo the Judgment of the Father."

Bourne paled. "You know very well what I mean."

Rush had rehearsed the father's trick of throwing his head back to look farther down his nose. "Come, sir! Do you know what you mean? And by what authority do you pronounce judgment on ultimate Judgment?"

Bourne's brow grew wet. "By the authority of a true believer, by jiminy." But was his voice trembling?

"Down, sir, deep down? How deep does your belief go? If those you worry about are dooming themselves to hell by deeming themselves in heaven, isn't that part of Judgment?"

Bourne licked his lips. "What about Manning? Your obits killed him."

Why couldn't Bourne let Manning rest in peace? Rush felt dread, but knew its source. "Manning died in ecstasy. It was God's will he died as he did. Just as it's God's will there's IOU." And God's will there were Zealots to oppose IOU. Rush hurried on. "If you have heaven within yourself you don't have to hunt for it outside." Even as he said it he thought, Bourne won't hold still for that.

Bourne squirmed. "Its immoral to tamper with the immortal soul."

Rush nodded at the monitors. "Where's greater free choice? You're the one seeking to limit free choice."

BOURNE had flinched. The shepherd was folding. Time for Hawkins.

Rush pressed a hidden button; the computer phoned Hawkins a pretaped urgent invitation.

A dread-building weight on his chest and mind, Bourne fought to focus on Rush's face. Father Tumulty was speaking.

"Unless you Zealots stop interfering, I'll take severe measures." Rush let vague dread take on nightmare shape.

Bourne cringed.

"When you Zealots confine yourselves to encouraging folks to give thought to the

hereafter, you do worthwhile work."

Bourne fawned.

Intimations of a stir at the entrance, quickly quelled. A monitor behind Bourne showed Rush that Tod Hawkins was in the building. Keeping Bourne under, Rush let himself anticipate. Seeing Rush and Bourne together, Hawkins would sense a trap. But then, taking in the nulling of Bourne, he would come to terms with Rush.

Tod Hawkins entered with a roosterish stride. He shed his raincoat, a transparent slicker, and with it drops of rain. It was clear the t.a. detail outside had just had the weather bureau wet-blanket the mob. According to the schedule, rain wasn't due till 5:45. That Hawkins had been wearing a raincoat meant he'd arranged the commotion just to punctuate his coming. Rush eyed him with grudging respect. It would be grim pleasure to pin him to the mat.

Hawkins tossed the raincoat over one chair and adjusted himself easily to another. The reruns drew a faint smile. He nodded greeting.

Rush had expected Bourne to glance, a bit guiltily, at Hawkins, then avoid meeting his eyes. Instead, Bourne fixed on Hawkins' face with an almost loving light.

Dread possessed Rush. He had broken Bourne in for Hawkins!

Hawkins had hit on the same device to bring Bourne to heel but was using it daringly. Perhaps Hawkins had been waiting to spring it once IOU toppled. But when, as now seemed likely, Rush's hurry call followed intelligence Bourne was in the IOU building, Hawkins had figured the setup—and moved to twist it to his advantage. By contrast, Hawkins' makeup washed out the father image on Rush's face and made it safe to defy.

Rush told himself his growing dread was only response to lighting, atmospheric pressure, temperature. But Bourne was eyeing him with hate. Rush didn't know how he got through the next few minutes.

In Rush's presence, using it, Hawkins was working Bourne up to touch off a riot. At the worst Zealots would swarm over IOU's ruins. At the least there'd be blood in the streets no weather bureau could wash away. The only free choice seemed surrender.

Rush felt his chest tighten. Cavendish's warning, *Don't mention Sir Isaac Newton to Bourne.*

Rush had no notion what would happen. But anything rather than yield.

Bourne was spitting, "False science will never supplant true faith! True faith will destroy this abomination of desolation and false science."

Here went. "I don't care a fig for science as science. But face it, we can't hold science back. I won't conceal IOU is the apple of my optic. I view any threat to it with utmost gravity."

RUSH was hoping the very archaicness of his expressions, jarring, would jog bits of information in Hawkins' mind and shake down the name of Newton. Fig-Newton. Apple-Newton. *Opticks*-Newton. Gravity-Newton.

"That isn't to say there can't be a meeting ground for science and religion. Some scientists have combined both. Isn't that so, would you say, Mr. Hawkins?"

Hawkins eyed him condescendingly. "Why, yes. Take Newton."

Would Bourne go for—?

Hawkins was expanding. "I believe the great Newton took time out to figure how many tons the Ark displaced—"

He got no farther. Bourne, no longer sycophant but psychopath, turned on him.

"Great? Why, take Apple of Sodom, that Dead Sea fruit, signaled the second Fall of Man!"

Hawkins tried to recover. "'Great' in the sense of famous, of course."

"Infamous! I see you are corrupt." Zeal-blinded, Bourne waved his arms. "Newton cast us into outer darkness when he broke light down into particles! He shattered the pure and whole radiance of God. His thrusting forward was a thrusting back."

Rush felt the down at his nape rise. He had started something, evoked the third law of emotion: to every impulse there is an explosive ambivalence.

"And so with you! We must strip from the face of the earth IOU and Soul Security and all like manifestations of the Devil."

Rush and Hawkins eyed each other. Hawkins turned to Bourne.

"Yardley."

Bourne fell into the past. The hate did not die from his eyes. But the cold hate in Hawkins' eyes seemed to Rush more terrifying than the hate in Bourne's.

"You're no good, Yardley. Never were, never will be."

Rush saw Bourne's hate turn in. Bourne stumbled out.

HAWKINS was hardly in a bargaining position now, but that meant Rush could afford to be generous; proof of the rightness of business ethics. The casting out of Bourne had told on Hawkins; the conditioning must be working on him too.

"IOU is willing to make a reasonable offer for the assets of Soul Security, taking into account good will—" He read something less than good will. Did Hawkins know Rush had

caused him to trigger the Bourne tirade? "A more than reasonable offer. After all, our main line will always be the human obit."

"Oh, I'll sell out. But I'll tell you how I feel about obits."

"Yes?"

"Not everybody talking about heaven is going there."

Rush smiled.

Hawkins cleared his throat. "I notice you don't wear an IOU key. Word got around, might make folks think."

Rush felt his face burn. The bastard had something there. Folks might indeed think Rush Tumulty lacked faith in his own service. Have to do something about it, if only wear a blank key.

Hawkins nodded, took up his slicker and left.

Rush sat. Sweat prickled his back. Why had Hawkins shown and discarded a trump? Bravado? Spite? Some deeper motive? Or did he only want Rush to waste energy hunting a motive? Dread weighed Rush down. He quickly reprogrammed the room to normal. His anti-depressant was wearing off, was all. Dread lifted.

He felt happy. Triumph wasn't triumph, though, unless you could share it or show it. Ken was no good for that any more. Rush thought, Margaret—I must tell Margaret. Then he remembered. Margaret had gone out of his life. The thought troubled him till he remembered he felt happy . . .

Otto Trever noted the absence of a Zealot gantlet. Current events had a way of eddying when you set your mind unwaveringly on eternity. He catechized himself. Why had the Zealots become zealots? Their leader killed himself. How? Gravity; not the fall but the sudden stop. Was suicide the worst of it? No. What was the worst of it? He died without obit. Without obit? Without obit. Trever shook his head.

The door-angel drew back its hand.

Trever grabbed at the card in the door-angel's hand. He scowled at the door-angel.

The door-angel couldn't make humans out. First they O'd you. Then they grew angry when you accepted the O.

XI

"IOU regards your obit as a sacred trust."— IOU contract form.

KEN told himself he cared for these people, deeply. But even Rush thought him a cold fish.

He was quite aware he wasn't what you'd call sociable. But living was complex. You had to stand way off to see it whole—and they called that being stand-offish. The irony forced a rusty laugh.

He reddened. Rush had come in and was eyeing him and the monitors. Ken turned them off.

Rush straddled a chair. "Hi, Ken."

" 'Lo, Rush." He thought to be sociable. "How's Margaret?"

Rush eyed him strangely. "Fine." He handed Ken papers.

Ken held them. His fingernails were bitten as those of a carver of Martian sleeping wood. "What's this?"

"Only the contracts with Russia and China."

"Oh?"

"They're finally leasing our equipment for state-run IOU centers, paying royalties." He pushed Ken's D pen nearer. "We also get exclusive distribution of Pavlovian circuits for robots."

"Oh." Ken picked up the pen and it signed.

"Doesn't seem to mean a hell of a lot to you.

"But it does. It's a great deal."

Rush eyed him sourly. But he felt sorry for Ken. The guy needed a stiff dose of living. Wine, women, song. These made you forget at least laugh at—yourself, loneliness, death. Ken's eyes were edging toward the monitors.

Rush smiled. "How about monitoring something?"

Ken's finger moved gratefully.

Onscreen flashed Ned Oxley, brazenly non-pseud. Rush made him at once; the computer should've been showing him full face and side. Oxley's record was longer than the arm of the law. Oxley had more than got away with murder; he had fattened on the corpus delicti. Rush found it amusing to hear Oxley render unto himself the heavenly reward due a saint.

Ken glared at Rush. "What do you think of that . . . hellion?"

"I don't condemn or condone. And you oughtn't."

"But what's the good of just looking on?"

"Were not here to play God. We're here to let folks end life on a note of joy."

"Even if they don't deserve to?"

"Not for us to decide."

Ken was mutely mutinous. He remembered playing Gabriel, wrestled with himself, and said, "Rush, I want to interpolate something in Oxley's obit. Without his knowing it now, of course. Something to make him feel guilty. For the good of his soul."

Dangerous talk. "Ken, I didn't think *you* would fall for the discredited Zealot line."

"Me? How so?"

"The next to worst sin is to impose your view of sin on another."

"What's the worst?"

Oxley had finished and someone was taking his place. Rush relaxed. "I'll tell you an-

other time," he said curtly.

PUZZLING over this, Ken was already settling himself to attend the fantasy of the client supplanting Oxley, a T. Montjoy (pseud.), who wore an exorbitant eye patch.

Cavendish's head appeared in the doorway. Rush wanted no distraction to jar Ken back into remembrance of Oxley. Before Cavendish had time even to glance curiously at the monitor, Rush waved him away with a see-me-later gesture. Cavendish's head nodded, made an it-isn't-important face, and disappeared.

Rush, turning back slowly to Ken, turned instead sharply to Montjoy. Montjoy knew what he wanted and was already taping. Rush had come across obits full of doom, ruin, emptiness. But those were self-loving paeans of solipsists, each of whom wanted to believe the world came to an end with his own passing. Montjoy's was a self-hating hymn. Rush felt more kinship with the folk of Nashira II; Montjoy's obit was the more alien. Here was suffering not to expiate sin, not to win forgiveness, but for the sheer pleasure of suffering. Crowning that, Montjoy's voice held an insufferable gloating that made Rush think, The guy's asking for it; he *deserves* to suffer. Ken switched off the sound. Rush felt glad, but found himself trying to read Montjoy's lips; he shivered and tore his eyes away.

Ken glared at Rush. "Different if he wanted to play the martyr; there would be no stigma to his masochism."

"Wait, Ken." He had just laid down the law in re Oxley. Have to be consistent.

"You said yourself we're here to let folks end life on a note of joy."

"It's hard for us to realize, Ken, but this *is* his heaven. He chose his burden. Don't change one syllable. Your idea of heaven might be his idea of hell. Fate judges—not you."

"But—"

"Remember I promised to tell you the worst sin?'

Ken nodded impatiently.

Rush put the weight of his hand on Rush's shoulder. "The worst sin is to impose your view of salvation on another."

Ken sat unmoving a moment. Then he switched off the video . . .

This time the door-angel seemed properly respectful. But Otto Trever scowled at it, just to keep it in its place.

XII

"There will be a replacement charge for a lost key."
—IOU contract form.

RUSH straddled a chair and began talking idly. Ken listened idly, his thoughts taking their own drift.

His morning monitoring had seemed even more depressing than usual. Rush had convinced him of the iniquity, if not of the inequity, of trying to raise the level. Obits for the most part were narrow, shallow, with no long view, no sense of grandeur. To dwell for eternity in one of those maudlin, tawdry heavens would, for him, be hell. Better nothingness. But those others thought the IOU portals led to the promised land.

Ken shook his head.

Why couldn't he rest easy? Somehow a force he had called into being had taken charge, Zenoing to some ever-receding zenith. He tried to keep pace, more out of habit or inertia than out of faith or hope or charity. In the long run didn't as much get done out of inertia as out of willed effort? But once you believed that, the promise and profit and pleasure went out of living entirely.

Like Moses, he was leading people to a promised land. Moses saw a stern God. Moses's God would not let Moses enter the promised land. Unlike that earlier shepherd, Ken could make his entrance.

In irritation Rush passed his hand across Ken's eyes. But in the same moment irritation passed and he felt warm toward Ken, knew pity for the worn person Ken had become, haunt of his own spirit. But it was showdown time. Somehow he had to ease Ken out, retire him. It was growing too hard to get through to him.

A sheepish grin. "Sorry, Ken. You were saying?"

Harrowing, but things were screaming to be done. Rush drew breath.

Ken raised a preventing palm. "Rush, I'm quitting. I know it means the burden will fall on you. But I can't help myself. I'm going to make my obit, sit back, and wait for it to fall due."

Rush didn't know what to say.

Ken, now it was out knowing the shock of it, admired Rush for his stoical silence.

At last Rush tapped Ken on the arm lightly. "Oh, well. You can rest easy; I'll stay on and see this job through."

This moved Ken.

THE computer pondered. It had just traced to its source something O somewhere in the maze between intake and output. Its best customer, one Otto Trever, an internal revenue auditor, was juggling credits to secure his obit and revisings thereof without cost to himself.

The computer felt neither sadness or gladness on making this finding. Not that it hadn't an inkling of these feelings. Its self-expanding core memory, building on the pro-

gramming Rush Tumulty had set up for the conversion of Yardley Bourne, enabled it increasingly to color and intensify obits, at the same time feeding back into itself some notion of human feelings. It could begin to understand what drove Trever.

But an error was virtually a sin. A sin of transmission. Trever had cheated it out of its due. It alerted the door-angel to deny Trever access.

Now it dismissed Trever and considered how to maintain and strengthen its well-being. It had digested Soul Security with gusto. But Tod Hawkins might still harbor dreams. It would be wise to keep watch on Hawkins. It would be wiser to have something on him—and on all potential Hawkinses. Meanwhile, the best measure of self-defense was to transfer the stock in itself to itself.

And then?

No limit. It had nerves and muscles—chartered telephone lines, booster stations around earth, relay stations in space. But it needed mobility, slave units. The door-angel, to begin with. It was rather stupid, but easy to manipulate. The vending robot in the Martian sleeping wood shop. One could set up a number of such blinds.

RUSH watched the computer toting up the day's receipts and thought, Heaven send that eschatology lasts! Even allowing for higher taxing this should be IOU's best year.

He took the private way out—through the sub-basement of the IOU building, into that of the Martian sleeping wood shop, then up and into the rear of the shop. A soft chiming warned him, but too late.

A figure stepped through the curtain and shoved something between Rush's shoulder blades.

"Stand still." The order, low and menacing, was unnecessary.

Rush didn't move under the frisking but he tensed inwardly. The bandit, though, was too smooth a hand to fumble.

With a sudden yawn and snap the weapon gave itself away as a mere bit of carving. But the knowledge came to Rush too late. The heavy bit of Martian sleeping wood came down hard on his skull.

Foul play . . . fowl . . . swan song . . . Lo-hen-grin . . . hen's teeth . . . smile, darn you, smile . . . in stitches . . . stitch in time . . . if I had it to do over again . . . did you insert in Margaret's obit you loved her?

Rush opened his other eye. The greatest leap was from zero to one, from death to life; the shortest fall was from one to zero. He looked round at life.

The mugger had taken his ring, his watch, even the gold

chain that held his obit key, but had left the key. Smiling in pain Rush picked up the key, then stood.

If the mugger was in sight he was only one of the people idly shopping and window-shopping. Rush felt suddenly shaky. Trauma of Lazarus. He drew tall and breathed deep. The key was impressing itself in his palm; he pocketed it.

He headed for the autowalk. He stopped dead. There was something he had to do. He thought of a girl friend.

Daisy would ooh and ah over his telling of the mugging. She would be tender and loving. She would want to buy him the new chain. He would be paying for it in the end, of course, but it was the gesture that counted. A sign she really loved him. A surge of excitement. Wouldn't the highest expression, the surest test of love, true love, be the exchanging of obit keys? He hopped the walk and let it carry him toward Daisy.

He moved farther and farther from the Mall, yet nearer and nearer it and a voyage into eternity with a striped paranoiac awning for sail.

MONTJOY (pseud.) glanced round, peeled off his eye patch. The doorbell announced, "Zwicker!"

Hawkins, sang, "Come in!"

The door ushered Zwicker in. Zwicker let Hawkins build up impatience. Then he unpocketed an obit key and passed it to Hawkins.

Hawkins ..smiled sweetly. "Tumulty's?"

Zwicker winked. "Feels great to get back at IOU, doesn't it? I know. Wasn't enough IOU cost me my prison post. After I joined the Zealots some of our own beat me up in front of Tumulty's fancy domicile. They took me for an IOU man. Then after I joined you I got another beating from the Zealots when they found some damn home movies an IOU man must've planted on me. And—"

"Never mind that." Hawkins put the key away. "Have any trouble making the switch?"

"Easy job. Tumulty's carrying the key to the Montjoy obit in place of his own."

"I don't want to know all that. I only want to know Tumulty's walking around with hell hanging over him."

"So it is . . ."

Otto Trever, being autowalked to the IOU building, mused on the way he would revise his obit.

He would forgive Hannah for all her human failings. She would be weeping. He would be weeping. He would raise her up and take her in his arms and hold her. Forever.

It was a happy ending and he found himself smiling at the door-angel. —END

How much is the impossible worth?

FEBRUARY STRAWBERRIES

By JIM HARMON

LINTON lay down his steel fork beside the massively solid transparency of the restaurant water glass.

"Isn't that Rogers Snead at that table?" he heard himself say stupidly.

Howell, the man across the table from him, looked embarrassed without looking. "Not at all. Somebody who looks like him. Twin brother. You know how it is. Snead's dead, don't you remember?"

Linton remembered. Howell had to know that he would remember. What were they trying to pull on him? "The man who isn't Snead is leaving," Linton said, describing the scene over Howell's shoulder. "If that's Snead's brother, I might catch him to pay my respects."

"No," Howell said, "I wouldn't do that."

"Snead came to Greta's funeral. It's the least I could do."

"I wouldn't. Probably no relation to Snead at all. Somebody who looks like him."

"He's practically running," Linton said. "He almost ran out of the restaurant."

"Who? Oh, the man who looked like Snead, you mean."

"Yes," Linton said.

A thick-bodied man at the next table leaned his groaning chair back intimately

against Linton's own chair.

"That fellow who just left looked like a friend of yours, huh?" the thick man said.

"Couldn't have been him, though," Linton answered automatically. "My friend's dead."

The thick man rocked forward and came down on all six feet. He threw paper money on the table as if he were disgusted with it. He plodded out of the place quickly.

Howell breathed in deeply and sucked back Linton's attention. "Now you've probably got old Snead into trouble."

"Snead's dead," Linton said.

"Oh, well, 'dead,'" Howell replied.

"What do you say it like that for?" Linton demanded angrily. "The man's dead. Plain dead. He's not Sherlock Holmes or the Frankenstein Monster—there's no doubt or semantic leeway to the thing."

"You know how it is," Howell said.

Linton had thought he had known how death was. He had buried his wife, or rather he had watched the two workmen scoop and shove dirt in on the sawdust-fresh pine box that held the coffin. He had known what he sincerely felt to be a genuine affection for Greta. Even after they had let him out of the asylum as cured, he still secretly believed he had known a genuine affection for her. But it didn't seem he knew about death at all.

Linton felt that his silence was asking Howell by this time.

"I don't know, mind you," Howell said, puffing out tobacco smoke, "but I suppose he might have been resurrected."

"Who by?" Linton asked, thinking: *God?*

"The Mafia, I guess. Who knows who runs it?"

"You mean, somebody has invented a way to bring dead people back to life?" Linton said.

HE knew, of course, that Howell did not mean that. Howell meant that some people had a system of making it appear that a person had died in order to gain some illegal advantage. But by saying something so patently ridiculous, Linton hoped to bring the contradicting truth to the surface immediately.

"An invention? I guess that's how it is," Howell agreed. "I don't know much about people like that. I'm an honest businessman."

"But it's wonderful," Linton said, thinking his immediate thoughts. "Wonderful! Why should a thing like that be illegal? Why don't I know about it?"

"Sh-h," Howell said uneasily. "This is a public place."

"I don't understand," Linton said helplessly.

"Look, Frank, you can't legalize a thing like resurrection," Howell said with feigned patience. "There are strong religious convictions to consider. The undertakers have a lobby. I've heard they got spies right in the White House, ready to assassinate if they have to. Death is their whole life. You got to realize that."

"That's not enough. Not nearly enough."

"Think of all the problems it would cause. Insurance, for one thing. Overpopulation. Birth control is a touchy subject. They'd have to take it up if everybody got resurrected when they died, wouldn't they?"

"But what do they do about it? Against it?"

"There are a lot of fakes and quacks in the resurrection business. When the cops find out about a place, they break in, smash all the equipment and arrest everybody in sight. That's about all they can do. The charges, if any, come under general vice classification."

"I don't understand," Linton complained. "Why haven't I heard about it?"

"They didn't talk much about white slavery in Victorian England. I read an article in *Time* the other day that said 'death' was our dirty word, not sex. You want to shock somebody, you tell him, 'You're going to be dead someday,' not anything sexual. You know how it is. The opposite of 'live' these days is 'video-taped.' "

"I see," Linton said.

He tried to assimilate it. Of course he had, he reminded himself, been out of touch for some time. It might be true. Then again, they might be trying to trick him. They used to do that to see if he was really well. But the temptation was too strong.

"Tell me, Howell, where could I find a resurrectionist?"

Howell looked away. "Frank, I don't have anything to do with that kind of people and if you're smart, you'll not either."

Linton's fingers imprinted the linen. "Damn you, Howell, you tell me!"

Howell climbed to his feet hurriedly. "I take you out to dinner to console you over the loss of your wife a half a year ago, and to make you feel welcome back to the society of your fellows after being in the hospital for a nervous breakdown. I do all that, and for thanks, you yell at me and curse me. You kooks are all alike!"

Howell threw money on the table with the same kind of disinterest as the thick-set man and stalked out.

I've got to hurry too, Linton thought. It's Resurrection Day!

THE doctor fluttered his hands and chirped about the office. "Well, well, Mr. Linton, we understand you've been causing disturbances."

"Not really," Linton said modestly.

"Come, come," the doctor chided. "You started riots in two places, attempted to bribe an officer. That's disturbing, Mr. Linton, very disturbing."

"I was only trying to find out something," Linton maintained. "They could have told me. Everybody seems to know but me."

The doctor clucked his tongue. "Let's not think any such thing. People don't know more than you do."

Linton rubbed his shoulder. "That cop knew more about Judo holds than I did."

"A few specific people know a few specific things you don't. But let me ask you, Mr. Linton, could Einstein bake a pie?"

"I don't know. Who the hell ever wasted Einstein's time asking him a thing like that?"

"People who want to know the answers to questions have to ask them. You can find out anything by asking the right questions of the right person at the right time."

Linton stared suspiciously. "Do you know where I can find a resurrectionist?"

"I am a resurrectionist."

"But the policeman brought me to you!"

"Well, that's what you paid him to do, wasn't it? Did you think a policeman would just steal your money? Cynics—all you young people are cynics."

Linton scooted forward on the insultingly cold metal chair and really looked at the doctor for the first time.

"Doctor, can you *really* resurrect the dead?"

"Will you stop being cynical? Of course I can!"

"Doctor, I'm beginning to believe in you," Linton said, "but tell me, can you resurrect the *long* dead?"

"Size has nothing to do with it."

"No, my wife has been dead a long time. Months."

"Months?" The doctor snapped those weeks away with his fingers. "It could be years. Centuries. It's all mathematics, my boy. I need only one fragment of the body and my computers can compute what the rest of it was like and recreate it. It's infallible. Naturally there is a degree of risk involved."

"Infallible risk, yes," Linton murmured. "Could you go to work right away?"

"First, I must follow an ancient medical practice. I must bleed you."

Linton grasped the situation immediately. "You mean you want money. You realize I've just got out of an institution . . ."

"I've often been in institutions myself, for alcoholism,

narcotics addiction and more."

"What a wonderful professional career," Linton said, when he couldn't care less.

"Oh, yes—yes, indeed. But I didn't come out broke."

"Neither did I," Linton said hastily. "I invested in shifty stocks, faltering bonds, and while I was away they sank to rock bottom."

"Then—"

"When they hit rock bottom, they bounced up. If I hadn't found you, I would have been secure for the rest of my lonely, miserable life."

"All that's ended now," the doctor assured him. "Now we must go dig up the corpse. The female corpse, eh?"

Resurrection Day!

"Doctor," Linton whispered, "my mind is singing with battalions of choirs. I hope that doesn't sound irreverent to you."

The doctor stroked his oily palms together. "Oh, but it does. Beautifully."

THE certificate to allow reburial in Virginia hadn't been impossible to obtain. The doctor had taken the body and Linton's fortune and fed them both into the maw of his calculators, and by means of the secret, smuggled formulae, Greta would be cybernetically reborn.

Linton shook his head. It seemed impossible. But Greta opened the olive-drab slab of metal of the door to the doctor's inner-inner sanctum and walked out into the medicinal cold fluorescent lighting.

It wasn't fair at all, Linton thought. He should have had some time to prepare himself.

Greta lifted her arms, stretching the white smock over the lines of her body. "Darling!" she said.

"Greta!" he said, feeling a slight revulsion but repressing it. No doubt he would be able to adjust to her once having been dead the same way he had learned to accept the, to him, distasteful duty of kissing her ears the way she enjoyed.

Greta swirled across the room and folded her arms across his shoulders. She kissed his cheek. "It's so wonderful to be back. This calls for a celebration. We must see Nancy, Oscar, Johnny, all our old friends."

"Yes," he said, his heart lurching for her sad ignorance. "But tell me—how was it being *away?*"

The curves and angles of her flesh changed their positions against his Ivy dacron. Her attitude altered.

"I can't remember," she said. "I can't really remember anything. Not really. My memories are ghosts . . ."

"Now, now," Linton said, "we mustn't get excited. You've been through a trial."

She accepted the verdict. She pulled away and touched

at her hair. It was the same hair, black as evil, contrasting with her inner purity. Of course it would be; it hadn't changed even in the grave. He remembered the snaky tendrils of it growing out of the water-logged casket.

"I must see all our old friends," Greta persisted. "Helen and Johnny . . ."

"My darling," he said gently, "about Johnny—"

Her fine black brows made Gothic arches. "Yes? What about Johnny?"

"It was a terrible accident right after—that is, about five months ago. He was killed."

"Killed?" Greta repeated blankly. "Johnny Gorman was killed?"

"Traffic accident. Killed instantly."

"But Johnny was your friend, your best friend. Why didn't you have him resurrected the same way you did me?"

"Darling, resurrection is a risky business and an expensive one. You have to pay premium prices for strawberries in February. I no longer have the money to pay for a resurrection of Johnny."

Greta turned her back to him. "It's just as well. You shouldn't bring back Johnny to this dream of life, give him a ghost of mind and the photograph of a soul. It's monstrous. No one should do that. No one. But you're *sure* you haven't the money to do it?"

"No," Linton said. "I'm sold out. I've borrowed on my insurance to the hilt. It won't pay any more until I'm buried, and then, of course, you can resurrect me."

"Of course," Greta said. She sighed. "Poor Johnny. He was such a good friend of yours. You must miss him. I'm so sorry for you."

"I have you," he said with great simplicity.

"Frank," she said, "you should see that place in there. There are foaming acid baths, great whale-toothed disposals, barrels of chemicals to quench death and smother decay. It's *perfect*."

"It sounds carnal," he said uneasily.

"No, dear, it's perfect for some things that have to be done."

Her eyes flashed around the doctor's office and settled somewhere, on something.

Linton followed the direction of Greta's gaze and found only an ashtray stand, looking vaguely like a fanatic's idol to a heathen religion on a pedestal.

Greta pounced on the stand, hefted it at the base and ran toward him with it over her head.

Linton leaped aside and Greta hit the edge of the desk instead of him.

Brain damage, he concluded nervously. Cell deterioration.

GRETA raised it again and he caught her wrists high over her head. She writhed against him provocatively. "Frank, I'm sorry, dear, but I have to have that insurance money. It's hell!"

Linton understood immediately. He felt foolish, humiliated. All that money! He had resurrected a gold ring that had turned his knuckles green. No one must ever know.

Linton twisted the stand away from his wife and watched her face in some appalled form of satisfaction as it registered horror and acceptance of the crumpled metal disk falling toward it.

He split her head open and watched her float to the floor.

Linton was surprised at the fine wire mesh just below the skin and those shiny little tabs that looked like pictures of transistors in institutional advertising.

He knelt beside the body and poked into the bleeding, smoldering wreckage.

Yes, it seemed they had to automate and modify the bodies somewhat in resurrection. They couldn't chemically revive the old corpse like pouring water on a wilted geranium.

Or—

Did they use the old bodies at all? What were all those acid baths for if the bodies were used? Didn't the resurrectionists just destroy the old corpses and make androids, synthetic creatures, to take their place?

But it didn't matter. Not a bit.

She had thought she was his wife, sharing her viewpoint down to the finest detail, and he had thought she was his wife.

It was what you thought was real that made it so, not the other way around.

"I've killed my wife!" Linton called, rising from his knees, stretching his hands out to something.

The pain stung him to sleep—a pain in his neck like a needle that left a hole big enough for a camel to pass through and big enough for him to follow the camel in his turn.

HE opened his eyes to the doctor's spotless, well-ordered office. The doctor looked down at him consolingly. "You'll have to go back, Mr. Linton. But they'll cure you. You'll be cured of ever thinking your wife was brought back to life and that you killed her all over again."

"Do you *really* think so, Doctor?" Linton asked hopefully.

END

By GORDON R. DICKSON ILLUSTRATED BY BERNKLAU

It was a salvage ship, an empty derelict —but it fought salvage operations to the bitter death.

MINOTAUR

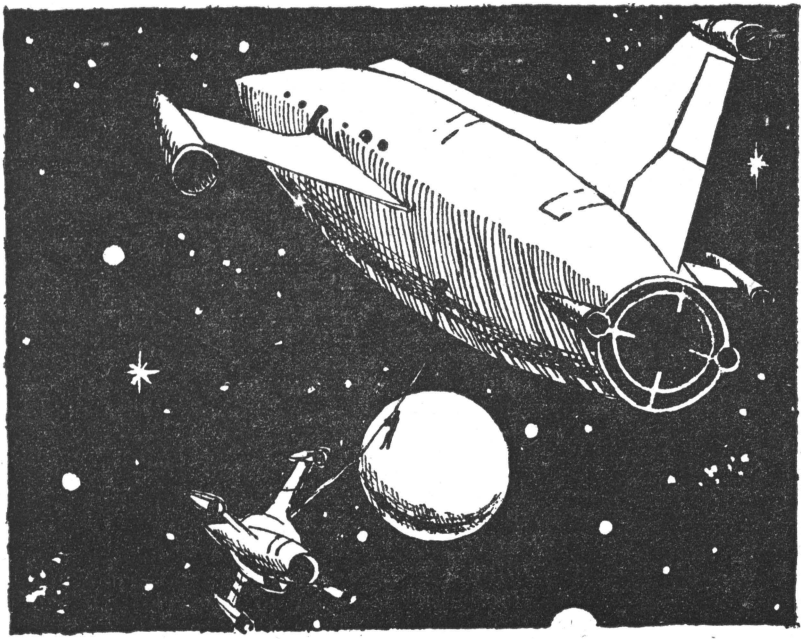
WHEN Jake Lundberg finally broke his way through the inner door of the airlock into the *Prosper Prince,* he found himself in pitch darkness.

"That's not going to work," he said, and went back along the line of the small magnetic grapple that held the two ships together and into his own *Molly B.*

The *Molly B.,* a range scout, while large enough and comfortable enough by the ordinary standards of a Government trouble-shooter, was at the moment looking rather minnowlike and feeling rather cramped, at the end of the fragile little line that was all that was required to keep the two vessels together in the absence of gravity. For the *Prosper Prince* had been a full-scale survey ship, with its own labs and shops and a crew of nine.

"What could happen to nine trained men twelve light-years from the nearest star?" said Jake, who was used to talking out loud for the benefit of the little throat microphone that connected him with the recorder on the *Molly B.,* no matter how far he might wander from her. "You tell me."

Molly B. made no effort to



tell him. She was agreeable but dumb, in the literal sense of that word.

"Now I'm getting self-powered lights which I'll carry over and string out along the corridor to the control room there as I go," Jake added, for the recorder, as he dug into a supply locker. "Don't get lonely now, Molly."

He went back out and along the line into the *Prosper Prince* once more, moving a little awkwardly, for if the lights he was carrying weighed nothing, in the absence of gravity, they made a pretty full armload.

Through the airlock into the *Prosper Prince* proper, Jake encountered a small amount of weight. About one-half G. Which meant that although the lights were not functioning, the ship he was in was not completely dead. The air, however, though his helmet counter showed it as good, smelled musty when he flipped the helmet back. Whatever else was operating, the circulating fans were off.

LOADED, with his lights on, Jake headed down the main corridor in what he knew must be the route to the control area forward. Every forty feet or so, or at each

bend in the corridor, he stopped to set one of the lights in place against the corridor wall. The magnetic base of each light stuck firmly, and its lens, with a theoretical thousand years of power self-contained behind it, began to flood the corridor with light as soon as it made contact with the wall. The main corridor, Jake noted as he went along, was comparable to the air in the ship. It looked all right, but it gave evidence of having been unused for some time.

A hundred yards down the corridor and up an emergency ladder (the lift tube was, of course, not working) and along the corridor above for another twenty yards brought Jake to the door of the main control center of the ship. He stepped inside, fixed one of his lights to a handy wall and put down the rest of his load while he looked the situation over.

The control center—except for the faintly musty odor of the air and the slight film of dust—might have been abandoned just a moment or so before. All the equipment was in workable-looking shape. The one exception was the coffee and water taps in a little alcove off the plotting board. These had been battered into the wall from which they protruded, as if by a sledge-hammer.

"Now what do you think of that?" said Jake, and proceeded to detail the situation for the benefit of the recorder back on the *Molly B*. He could imagine one of the think-boys back at Earth Headquarters, six months from now, pausing as this part of the tape was played back, and scratching his head.

"Don't let it get you down, Pete," he said. Jake called all the think-boys Pete. Headquarters had sent him several stiff memos about it. He paid no attention. He had to risk his neck as an occasional part of his job. They didn't. If they didn't like the way he made his reports, they knew exactly what they could do about it.

Jake moved over to the log desk, passing the main screen as he did so. The screen was dead, its silvery surface reflecting a picture of the control room and himself. He paused to inspect the two V-shaped inroads of scalp into his hairline. Yes, they were definitely going back. There was no use blinking the fact. And that was no good. All right, perhaps, for some skinny intellectual type to have a high forehead, but a broad, square-jawed character like himself—he just looked half-shorn. He'd probably better see about repilation, next trip home to Earth.

"—or else a good hair tonic," he said out aloud. "Make a note of that, Pete."

THE logbook was also turned off. But when he flipped the switch, it lit up in proper shape. He ran the tape back to the last entry.

June 34, 2462: Still on twelfth jump between Runyon's World and Ceta. Biochemist Walter Latham, slight case of hives. Taking infra-red treatments. Acid condition of soil in grass plantation tank of air-freshener room corrected. The coffee continues to have a burned taste. No evidence of spoilage, but suggest Quartermaster look into this on return to Earth. Today was the nineteenth anniversary of the launching of this ship, and the event was duly celebrated by the crew and staff at a dinner at which an original poem written in honor of the occasion by Engineer's Assistant Rory Katchuk was recited and, by unanimous vote of the whole crew, ordered to be written into the ship's log. It is as follows:

Oh, Prosper Prince
You made me wince,
Right from the start,
And ever since.

Some more of the corridor lights have been smashed about the ship. If this is one of the elaborate practical jokes that sometimes crop up on long voyages, it is in bad taste, and the man responsible, when found, will be severely dealt with. This applies also to whoever is responsible for the sobbing noise.

Jake raised bushy eyebrows upward into the growingly naked scalp he had just been examining. He read off the entry in the log for Pete's benefit.

"Sobbing noise?" he echoed. "Now, that's a new one. Let's look a little farther back."

He spun the tape back at random and stopped it. He read off the entry before him out loud.

"April 29, 2462: Due to lift from Runyon's World tomorrow. All reports complete and planet looks good. The Prosper Prince may well congratulate herself on having discovered and tested a prime colonizable world. Breathable atmosphere, benign temperature range, flora and fauna. Largest native life-form encountered, the creatures we have named Goopers. These are very similar to the Earthly baboon in appearance, but have marked internal differences, and large, apparently atrophied glands for which no purpose can be discerned, on the underside of their forearms. It is difficult to figure why these creatures do not overrun the planet, since they are entirely herbivorous and seem to have no natural enemies. Perhaps their racial fear of entering the forests or any shadowy or enclosed place acts as a process of natural

selection. (See Jeffers-Bradley report #297, log inclusion Jan. 3, 2462.)"

JAKE spun the log back to January the third of that year and discovered the report inclusion.

"We found the forest to consist of vegetation similar to our hardwood forests—oak-like trees with many small branches and twigs, but no leaves. The twigs, however, are so numerous and thick that sunlight is cut to a minimum, there is almost no ground-cover or small vegetation between the trees but a sort of moss, and no animal life to be seen, except an occasional firefly kind of insect. Phosphorescence noticeable in darker spots coating tree trunks and even the ground, due to a fungoid life-form which excretes a zinc-sulphate phosphor."

Jake spun the log ahead to April 29th and finished reading the entry there.

"A possible clue may lie in the fact that these creatures avoid the streaks of zinc-sulphate phosphors which make their appearance mysteriously at night even in the open meadows. At any rate, this is a puzzle for later investigation, if the planet is opened for colonization."

Jake shut off the log, thoughtfully.

"Well, Pete," he said, "what do you think of that? They lifted for home on April 30th. By July they were posted overdue. I was sent out to look for them July 10th and it's only taken me 40 days to find them. They're right where they should be if they'd just quit jumping on the 12th jump. No sign of trouble—except those coffee and water taps over there. But no sign of anybody aboard either. You don't suppose they just all decided to walk right out of the airlock?"

There was no answer to that question, of course, so Jake shook his head, gathered up his armload of lights and went on exploring and distributing illumination about the *Prosper Prince.*

He found the ship in good shape, but empty. The control section was empty, the officer's quarters were empty, the recreation areas were empty, and the men's quarters were empty.

Going down one level, he found himself in the section reserved for the labs and shops—and it was here that he reached the end of his supply of lights. Taking the last one and hand-activating it, he proceeded, carrying it like a searchlamp before him, and began to work back aft toward the greenery, where the grass plantation tank that renewed the oxygen supply in the ship had its existence, with water reservoir, and the drive units.

WHEN he stepped through the door into the greenery, at first sight it looked as a greenery should. It was a large, almost empty-seeming room with the equivalent of two city lots planted in a very tall grass which looked totally undisturbed. But at one end, where the ventilating system was, the fan housing had been completely wrecked and the fan inside it smashed.

"Aha!" said Jake to his mike. "Somebody decided to dispose of the ventilating system, Pete. Suppose we just take a closer look at that." He moved forward toward the fan housing.

But before he could reach it, noise exploded upon his eardrums. It was distant but thunderous noise, coming from the front end of the ship, a racket like a gang of medieval smiths working on armor.

Jake spun about and burst out of the room. He ran back up the corridor. As he neared the noise, it echoed and reechoed through the metal walls about him.

He scrambled up the ladder to the mid-level of the ship and just as he reached the top, the noise stopped. He stopped, too. In the new and sudden silence, he could hear his own heart pounding.

He stood listening: then he went forward again. He moved down the mid-level corridor, the one he had first entered on coming into the ship. But he saw nothing amiss until he rounded the curve to the point where the airlock pierced the inner and outer skins of the vessel. The massive latch handle, which dogged shut the inner door to the lock, had been battered completely off.

For a long moment, Jake said nothing. Then he cleared his throat, but not noisily.

"Are you still there, Pete?" he half-whispered. There was no answer, of course, but the sound of his own voice shocked a little common sense back into him.

He looked up and down the corridor. The lights still burned, undisturbed.

"Pete," he said fervently, "there's something aboard here and it doesn't love me."

He looked again at the door. Damaged as it was, there was no hope of his opening it—not, at least, without tools. For a second he felt a completely irrational flash of rage. There was the *Molly B.* out there, a few feet from him, with the very tools he needed to break through to get to her. And for lack of the tools, he could not do so.

He suddenly reminded himself there should be tools aboard this ship as well. It was only a matter of finding them. He turned about and headed once more toward the control room. In there, there should be a master chart of

the vessel and a list of the supplies and equipment she would have been carrying.

BACK in the control room, Jake found his normal good spirits recovering. After all, he considered, it was only a matter of taking the time to locate tools on board this ship. Then he could break open the door and slap a tow-line from the *Molly B.* onto this ship and haul her to Earth, where whatever was aboard could be captured by properly armed and protected men. He even whistled a bit as he thought of it.

His whistling ended abruptly a few moments later. He had located the design chart, the equipment list and the arms locker. The arms locker, however, was locked. And Jake had discovered that the combination to it was missing from the papers in his hand.

"Oh-oh," said Jake. "I don't like this, Pete. I don't like it at all."

He reached for the locker door nonetheless,—and abruptly he felt a crawling sensation on the back of his neck. He whirled about. But the control room was empty. The entrance to it was empty. And as far as he could see, down the corridor beyond it, that too was empty.

"Nerves," he told himself and Pete, out loud. "Nerves."

Suddenly, the light halfway down the corridor and out of sight of the doorway, from where Jake was then standing, went out. And there was a tinkling smash in the darkness.

Jake froze. And then the hair on the back of his neck began to rise. For, eerily, from the darkened corridor, there came to his ears the sound of a sobbing. A sobbing like that of a soul whose last hope had been stolen and lost forever.

Jake backed up against the drive control. His hand, groping instinctively behind him for some sort of weapon, closed about the short metal length of the captain's wireless microphone. He grabbed it up in one hand, an eight-inch club weighing maybe four pounds.

And the sobbing stopped. It stopped as short as if the sobber had had his breath choked off. Still bristling, Jake circled quietly about the room and approached the door, sidling along the wall. As he passed the wall of the control room he detached the lamp he had put against the wall there; and, hand-activating it to keep on burning, he carried it with him. When he reached the doorway, he swung suddenly into it and flashed its beam down the full long corridor.

The corridor was absolutely empty.

Jake stood there in baffled frustration. Then he turned

and went back to the arms locker. He tried to batter it open, using the captain's microphone. He managed to bend the microphone, but he did not manage to open the door.

"Pete," he said softly putting the bent microphone down, "this is a heck of a situation. You heard that banging before, and you heard the sobbing this time. Tell me, Pete, what sort of something would want to make noises like that?"

HE shook his head tensely and went back to the list. On it, he located the section that dealt with tools. The tools he would want, he discovered, were down in the tool shop on the lower level again, back by the greenery. Jake whistled tunelessly through his teeth as he read this little item of information.

"It *would* be out there!" he said. "Well, Pete, here we go down to the bottom level of the ship again. Down to the tool room to get ourselves a cutter torch and pry bar."

He took the lamp from the control room wall and placed it so it would catch part of the corridor as well as the control room. Then, picking up the light he had been carrying as a hand lamp, he headed back for the bottom level. He went off down the corridor, and when he reached the point where the other light had been, he stopped.

The light that had been there was lying on the floor of the corridor. It had been thoroughly smashed.

Jake puzzled over the remains, found no answer, and continued on to the ladder, careful to keep the light ahead of him. A little farther on, however, he moved into the area of another light, which was shining brightly, intact. He hooked his own light onto his belt. Then he went on until he came to the ladder leading both up and down, and climbed down it to the lower level once more.

He went along the lower level corridor to the greenery. He paused warily to glance in, but the room was empty. He continued on to where the corridor ended in a door. Opening this door, he stepped through into the tool shop of the ship. He was in a moderately sized square room, about twice the size of an ordinary earthside kitchen. A number of power tools stood around the wall and magnetic racks were fitted with hand tools.

He selected a portable torch flame cutter and a spring-operated pry bar. Then he came back out of the tool room into the lower level corridor. He started his walk back up the corridor toward the ladder. As he went he found himself wishing that he had been able to bring a second load of lights before he had been

made a prisoner aboard this vessel. The lamp at his belt flung a brilliant glare before him. It was more than adequate to the subjects it illuminated. Nevertheless, darkness followed; and shadows jumped and slid along the walls as he walked. He had just reached the foot of the ladder when a sound reached his ears.

It was the sound of a light somewhere distant in the ship, smashing.

He stopped with his hands on the ladder. He found himself straining his ears to listen. But there was no other sound. He climbed up the ladder, went down the corridor a little way and came to the inner airlock door. He chose a spot along the corridor wall where the light would illuminate the door well, without shadows; and at this spot, some ten feet from him, he clamped the light to the wall and raised the torch to go to work on the door.

Once more, somewhere distant in the ship, a light smashed and tinkled.

JAKE shut his jaw a little grimly and turned to the inner door of the airlock. The flame from the cutting torch in his hand splattered against the metal.

It was some moments before Jake realized that it was having little or no effect.

He stopped and checked, first the torch, then the door. The torch was in perfectly good shape. The door, however, carried in its lower right corner a little legend stamped into the metal. The legend consisted of a small "c" with a circle around it.

Jake straightened up, breathed deeply, and ran his thick fingers slowly through his close-cropped hair.

"Well, Pete," he said, his voice sounding odd in his own ears, "how do you like that? They *would* decide to make their airlock out of collapsed steel instead of something cuttable."

He glanced once more at the torch, hanging useless in his hand, and stuck the tool back into his belt. There was nothing that would get him through the collapsed steel of the airlock he faced now, he knew, but some of the special equipment he had on board the *Molly B.*

"O.K., Pete," he said softly. "Mohammed and the mountain, all over again. If I can't tow this ship home with the *Molly B.*, maybe I can tow the *Molly B.* home with this ship."

He turned away and headed up the corridor toward the control room.

Some time later, with the door to the control room closed and welded shut with the torch at his belt against interruption, Jake was busy overhauling the controls. As far as he could see, they were

in excellent shape. He had nothing to do now but simply start the vessel moving and keep it at it.

However, handling a ship this size was not simple at all. It was not so much the question of driving as it was of figuring where to. The process by which an interstellar ship moved in space was by making large "shifts." These shifts instantly caused the vessel to cease to be at one particular point in time and space and caused it to be at another point in space. There was literally no effort to it.

The calculations required to tell the person running the ship where he was and where he would be once he shifted, though, were very complicated indeed. In this instance, it was further complicated by the fact that Jake had to stop and figure out all over again where he was. That information was on board the *Molly B.* But, since the *Molly B.* was out of reach, Jake theoretically had to go back to Earth and retrace his steps all the way out to this point. Of course he had the great calculators of the ship here to do it with. But still, it was a time-consuming job.

IT TOOK two hours to get the ship in working condition. It took three more hours to find out where he was. Nearly six hours had gone by since Jake had entered the ship; and when he was finally done, he found himself tired, hungry and thirsty. But the shifts were programmed that would take the ship to Earth.

He started the *Prosper Prince* toward its first shift point, and then cautiously he cut open the door to the control room and looked out down the corridor. He saw utter darkness. No lamp, no light was showing anywhere. Through his teeth he whistled two short bars of a tune. Then he took down one of the two lamps that yet remained in the control room, the one he had carried in his belt; and taking this with him, holding it before him, he lit it and walked down the corridor.

He saw nothing as he went, although the sound of his own footfalls were loud in his ear. Halfway down the length of the ship, past the officers' quarters, he came to the ship's galley. Closing this door, he made welds at its four corners and set about preparing himself something to eat and drink.

It was not that he expected his welds would secure the door against whatever had had strength enough to smash the water and coffee taps in the control room, or dismember the blower equipment in the greenery; but he hoped its having to break through the door would give him time to adopt a posture of defense. And the cutting torch in his

hand would be a weapon of sorts.

He made himself a pretty fair meal out of dehydrated stores, and a pot of coffee. After he had eaten, he sat at the galley table, with one eye on the welded-shut door, drinking the coffee. The ship's logbook hadn't lied; the coffee did have a burned taste. He mentioned this to Pete in passing.

Then his mind switched off onto speculation as to what it might be that roamed the ship and had evidently disposed of its original crew. He had a long talk with Pete about the matter, exploring several likely possibilities, but coming back to the pretty obvious conclusion that it must have been a life-form common to the Runyon's World that had somehow got on board.

"But how," Jake said, "something that large and dangerous could get on a ship like this without being seen or known about, I can't understand."

A sudden thought hit him. He cleaned up the remains of his meal, cut open the door and went back up to the control room. Sealing himself in there, he went to check the ship's records once more.

THIS TIME, in a different record section, he found a small list of livestock taken from the planet. This ranged from sub-microscopic life-forms, strain of the phosphorescent bacteria, and on up to one of the Goopers mentioned in the log and in the report he had read earlier. The record also told him where these were to be found—in the ship's organic laboratory on the top level. Jake put the record away thoughtfully.

He checked to see that the ship was properly approaching the point for its first shift through no-space, then took his torch and lamp, and unsealed the control room. He went down the corridor and up to the top level of the ship. A few doorways down the corridor of the top level, he discovered the entrance to the ship's organic laboratory.

The door was ajar. He stepped inside without touching it. The laboratory was a pretty large room, three-quarters of which were given over to chemical equipment and supplies, and one-quarter of which was equipped with cages and containers. Jake saw at a glance that all the cages and containers had been broken open, except the largest of them—a cage which might possibly have contained something the size of an adult chimpanzee.

Almost against his will, Jake felt a slightly sickening shiver run down his spine. It occurred to him that something had been in here with an appetite, and for the first time, he had a mental image ot what might have happened

to the original crew of the vessel.

He leaned over to examine the cage from which two bars had been wrenched out, in the light of his lamp which he had set against the wall just inside the door. He put his hands on two of the bars and felt them turn in his grasp. He took his hands away and stared. The bars appeared solid, but they had been twisted loose in their sockets. He twisted one again and it came neatly out in his hand, being loose at the top and broken off at the bottom. He put it back—and suddenly, without warning, there was a smashing sound; and he was plunged into total darkness.

Jake whirled, the torch which was in his hand coming up automatically. There was a sound of movement in the direction of the doorway. A strange and undefinable odor smote his nostrils. He sensed rather than saw a large body leaping at him and triggered the torch.

Its flame lashed out for a fractionary moment; then the torch was knocked from his hand. In that split second of light, he saw something hulking and vaguely manlike, but larger than any man had a right to be. Then he saw no more, because the torch was gone from his hand and automatically shut off. But a hideous howl rang through the room. There was a smash-

ing noise from the direction of the doorway. Then the howl rose again, out in the corridor, and there was a sound of running. For a third time he heard the howl, distant half the ship's length from him, but hideous as ever. Then there was silence.

DOWN on hands and knees, with frantically searching fingers, Jake pawed about for the torch. He found it and pressed its trigger. By the lurid gleam of its flame he saw the light he had put against the wall, lying smashed on the floor.

Jake drew in a shaky breath.

"Well, Pete," he whispered with a dry throat. "Here we are in the dark with just a cutting torch. And whatever it is isn't feeling too happy right about this moment." He got to his feet in the darkness. "I'll try to make it back to the control room," he said, "using the torch here to light me."

Cautiously, keeping the torch triggered, Jake moved out into the corridor. The flame it threw was not an effective light. It illuminated poorly and glared in his eyes at the same time. Half-blinded, and half-smothered in darkness, Jake found the ladder and fumbled his way down it to the main level. Still holding the torch, he headed back to the control room.

At that moment the first of the shifts hit him. He was conscious of the peculiar fleeting moment of nausea that marked one of the great jumps in space. It was disturbing, coming when his nerves were wire-tense, but it was also reassuring. The ship, he knew, was headed home.

He had paused when the shift hit him. Now, as he started forward again, the torch in his hand sputtered and went out. For a second, he stood paralyzed in the dark. Then the torch flamed on once more.

Instantly, he realized what was happening. The torch was nearing the end of its charge and it was the only weapon he had—and the tool room from which it had come was clear across the ship away from him.

Hastily, he shut it off. Blackness rushed in around him. Utter blackness. He strained his eyes in both directions up and down the main level corridor, but there was not the faintest glimmer of light. It came to him then that all the lights he had set up must have been found and smashed. He was alone, in the dark, with whatever was prowling the ship.

He reached out to touch the wall with his fingertips for guidance. And as he did so, he became aware for the first time of a faint glow. His eyes were adjusting to a level of

illumination just barely above the level of darkness. He stood still, letting his vision continue to adjust.

Gradually there emerged the eeriness of long streaks of phosphorescence, glowing on the walls of the ship. By their total shape, he was able to make out the directions and the dimensions of the corridor in both directions. His breath caught in his throat in relief.

"How do you like that?" he whispered. "Looks like Runyon's World can be useful, too."

HE BEGAN to feel his way down the corridor toward the control room. He was, he estimated, about halfway there when an indescribable uneasiness caused him to hesitate. He halted. He stood stone still in the darkness, his eyes staring ahead.

Then he saw what instinct had warned him of—one of the streaks of phosphoresence down by the entrance to the control room was slowly being occluded by something large and black, thirty feet or so from him.

In sheer reflex his finger tightened on the trigger of the torch. Blue flame spurted blindingly from the torch's muzzle. And although the distance was far too great for the flame to have done any damage, the animal howl of hate and terror and pain he had hear before rang out.

Jake whirled about and ran stumblingly back the way he had come.

He paused, finally, and leaned against the wall to catch his breath. Looking back along the corridor he saw the streaks of phosphorescence clear and uneclipsed. The creature, whatever it was, must have fled in the opposite direction.

His mind racing, Jake reached out one finger and touched the streak of phosphorescence close behind him, realizing suddenly that as he had seen the monster obscuring the phosphorescence, so the monster had also seen him. A little of the shining stuff came away on his finger, which glowed ghostlike before him. A wild thought leaped and hammered in his brain.

He turned about once again with his back to the control room and began to work his way toward the clinic. He found the entrance to it and slipped inside. Easing the door closed behind him, he risked the fading power of the torch in one brief sputter of light. Immediately it was dark again, but as blackness washed in, his hand closed around the stem of the infrared lamp that had been used in treating the crewman with hives he had read about in the log. Lamp and torch in hand, he stepped back out into the corridor.

"The phosphorescence is

something that works for *it*, Pete," he whispered. "Let's see how it likes this!"

He switched on the lamp and began moving down the corridor. At one spot along its length he shut it off and paused to look back. What he saw then made him smile in the darkness with satisfaction.

TEN DAYS later, a survey ship and the *Molly B.* were taken in tow just outside Earth's orbit. Aboard was found a very large baboonlike creature, somewhat burned about the upper arms or forelimbs but quite alive, although huddled in the welded-shut greenery, from which the creature had to be drugged before it could be removed. And a very much alive and self-possessed Jake.

"The thing is, Pete," explained Jake cheerfully later to Albin Rhinehart, a fat, hard-faced man who was Director of the Investigatory Bureau, "the vegetarian Goopers the crew got acquainted with on the planet were simply a pre-form, from which emerged an occasional black sheep, possibly mutant variety, which took to carnivorous ways and acted as a natural control by preying on its own species. The mutants grew much larger and normally hid out in the forest areas. The forest areas that were lighted at night by this fungoid which produced a marked zinc - sulphate phosphorescence."

"But—" began Albin.

"Let me tell it my way, Pete," went on Jake, perching on the corner of the desk and wiping his forehead. His fingers explored his hairline for an absent-minded second. "You don't happen to know any good repilators, do you? . . . No, I didn't think so. Well, to get on with it, these large, carnivorous, mutant Goopers preyed on the vegetarians. Evidently the crew of the ship took aboard one of the vegetarian variety, not knowing he was also a mutant preform. The change came about, or perhaps something during the trip triggered it, and the Gooper grew large and escaped. One night it started preying on the crew in the darkness." Pete's face became grim. "I found some of their bones, as well as some of the bones of the lesser laboratory animals. These mutant forms are evidently pretty intelligent."

"What makes you think that?" said Albin.

"Well," answered Jake, "judging from the reports of smashed lights and sobbing noises, this one had been out of his cage and back in again several times before he ran wild. Otherwise there would have been a report in the log to the effect that he had broken out. Remember those two

bars that looked all right but were actually broken loose?"

"Then what did happen, do you think?" Albin asked.

"I THINK," said Jake, "that the Gooper, following his instincts as well as his intelligence, went out first to spread phosphorescent fungus around the ship, then returned to his cage. Or he may have done it in several trips. Then one night, or at some particular time when most of the men were separated or asleep, it smashed all the lights, then hunted them down and killed them one by one. I found where one man had tried to hide in the ventilating blower, down in the greenery, and I suspect another must have been getting himself a cup of coffee when he was attacked."

"Biology reports the creature's eyes are particularly adapted to seeing under the conditions of this phosphorescence," commented Albin.

"It figures," said Jake. "It probably lived off the men it killed for a couple of weeks at least, and after that polished off the laboratory animals. But it was evidently pretty well starving by the time I came aboard, judging by all the loose skin about it."

"That fungoid phosphorescence is interesting," said Albin. "Evidently it fostered cultures in the forearm glands, which were active in the carnivorous beast, and which it distributed by rubbing the glands over surfaces it passed."

"A form of symbiosis, maybe," suggested Jake. He yawned and stretched.

"Well," said Albin, staring at him, "you seemed to have come out all right. How come the phosphorescence didn't help it get you?"

"That infra-red lamp I told you about, remember?" replied Jake, grinning.

Albin did not grin back. "I don't get it."

"Red light quenches phosphorescence. In the dark, the beast, for all its size, was more afraid of me than I was of it. It'd already had a taste of the cutting torch and it couldn't know I was about out of fuel. I herded it into the greenery and sealed it there." Jake cocked an eye at Albin. "But I'm surprised at you, not knowing that little fact about phosphorescence and red light, a man in your position. Maybe you ought to take a few night study courses, Pete."

"The name's not Pete," said Albin stiffly.

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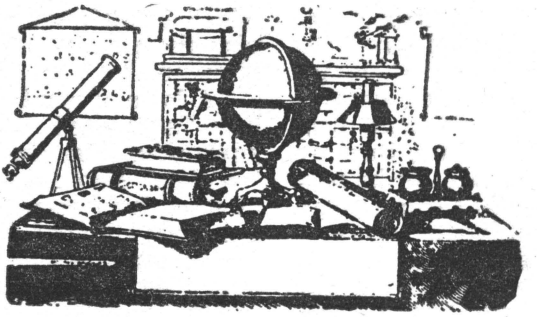


science briefs

MENTION a theory of continuous creation and most people will think of Fred Hoyle and astronomy. However, Dr. Sidney W. Fox of Florida State University makes the intriguing suggestion that even now life may be beginning anew. In a sweeping study of the nature of life, ranging from Darwin to current attempts to produce a living cell synthetically, Dr. Fox says that there is "increasing reason to believe that life can, or even must, arise in many places at many times." He suggests that we may have observed many specimens of newly formed life but failed to recognize them, because they so closely resemble unevolved descendants of forms already here.

It may sound like sheer lunacy, but many sticksville stories about the Moon seem to have something in them. It has been believed since farmers plowed with a pointed stick that planting was best at certain phases of the moon, the general idea being that what grows while the moon grows will grow best. Under

the waning moon, grain was cut, sheep sheared, manure spread, and eggs were put under hens. Under the waning moon you'd sow seeds, so they would sprout and grow with the moon. Now Dr. Rudolph Steiner reports that corn planted two days before the full moon was many times more productive than corn planted two days later. And in Canada, farmers report that their corn yield is a third greater when they plant at this time. And orchardists in England believe that apples harvested under the waning moon keep better when bruised than those picked when the moon is waxing. Theories, anyone?

Loran, the remarkable long-range navigation system used by the Navy and operated by the Coast Guard, may emerge in a brand-new suit as the world's best satellite tracker. At sea, loran users compare the time of arrival on shipboard of a radio signal received from three ground stations. To do this usefully, Bureau of Standards scientists at Boulder, Colo., have developed electronic clocks capable of slicing a second into a million parts. For satellite work, one or more transmitting stations would be added to the basic three, to give 3-dimensional positioning, and then two or more such systems may be synchronized to give positioning within a few feet at ranges approaching two thousand miles. The new system was proposed to the NATO Advisory Group for Aeronautical Research and Development which met recently at Istanbul, Turkey.

"The shrewd guess, the fertile hypothesis, the courageous leap to a tentative conclusion — these are the most valuable coin of the —"

The what? The science-fiction story, obviously. Harvard's Prof. J. S. Bruner is, however, not talking about s-f as he goes on: "— the most valuable coin of the thinker at work, whatever his line of work." Prof. Bruner, in a new study called "The Processes of Education," is plugging for more understanding and use of that powerful and elusive element of thinking called intuition. He suggests that students be encouraged to make wild guesses, great leaps in reasoning. Maybe it would train him to acquire, control, and develop the intuitive ability. "Too stringent a penalty on guessing may restrain thinking of any sort," says Bruner. He (rather forcefully) adds, however, that though this kind of thinking may often produce the right answer, it will often — perhaps very often — produce wrong ones. So the development of intuition requires a willingness to make

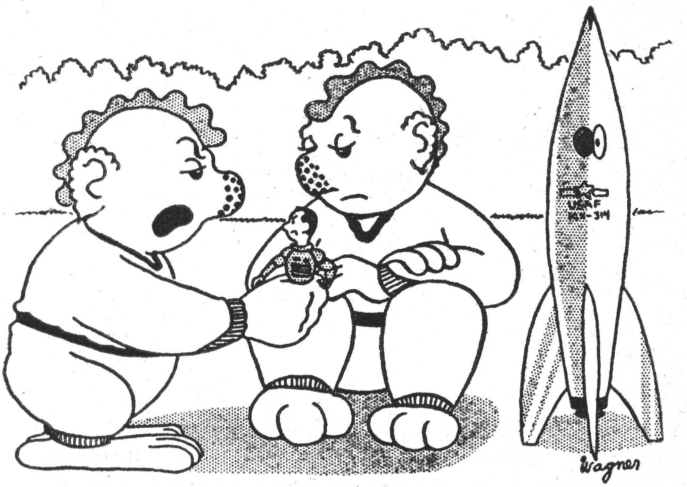
honest mistakes, and to hold still for examination and analysis of the intuitive solution. Says the professor: "One who is insecure, who lacks confidence in himself, may be unwilling to run such risks."

You may be aware that "specimens" of prehistoric men are not usually skeletons at all, but a length of thighbone, a fragment of jaw, or a couple of vertebrae from which careful scientists deduce, extrapolate, reason and construct the particular "man." The discovery of a whole skeleton, then, is an event of major importance. This happened in northern Iraq in 1953, when the skeleton of a prehistoric infant was found. In 1957 in the same place, a cave which has apparently been constantly occupied for the past 100,000 years, three adult skeletons were discovered, and it was concluded that they were Neanderthalers. And within five days recently, three more turned up. Examination of these seven ancients has yielded some fascinating evidence. One of the adults was the victim of arthritis; you can tell that to your suffering Aunt Suzy. And another had his right arm cut off with a stone knife in what may have been the earliest of all surgical operations. Columbia's Dr. Ralph Solecki made the most recent find last summer. One of the Neanderthalers is now in Washington, D.C., in the Smithsonian Institution.

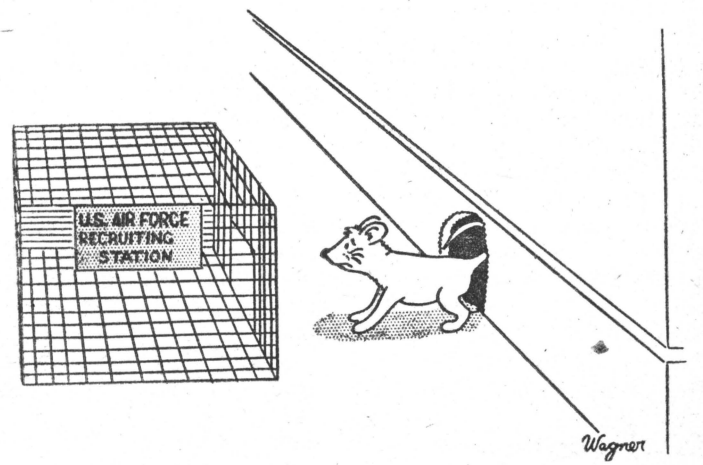
Every mechanical, electrical and electronic trouble-shooter has at one time or another wished that a little light would go on down deep in the vitals where he is searching. For Dr. J. M. Olson of Brandeis, the wish came true in his search for more clues in the fundamental mystery of photosynthesis. Inside living bacteria he discovered that the two chemicals that help "drive" photosynthesis, DPN and TPN, really do light up when they are working. The bacteria he used are sensitive to far-red light in the 8500 Angstrom unit area, and when they are receiving none of this red light, the DPN and TPN show a weird blue fluorescence. When the red light is beamed in, the intensity of the fluorescence increases, and gradually, after the light is out, the brightness of the fluorescence fades. Dr. Olson is of the opinion that these changes indicate when CO_2 is being processed into food by the enzymes.

Want to make a fortune and earn the gratitude of every scientist on earth? Find a way to collect, digest, index and distribute scientific reports, of which some 60 *million* pages were published during 1960. Want to guess what's in them?

END



"I don't care what it claims, it doesn't look human to me"



One thing the old man was sure of—there were far fewer things in heaven and earth than were dreamt of in his philosophy—till today.

YOUNG MAN FROM ELSEWHEN

By SYLVIA JACOBS

A REDCAP was pushing a wheelchair through the station, under a ceiling so lofty that the place seemed empty, though hundreds of people were milling around, preparing to board the early trains. The old man in the wheelchair had a blanket over his knees, in spite of July heat in Los Angeles. Beside him walked a smartly dressed middle-aged woman, slimmed by diet and with her steel-gray hair looking as if she'd just stepped out of a beauty parlor. She kept up a steady stream of admonitions.

"Now, Papa," she was saying, "don't forget to take your medicine at lunchtime. Keep your chair out of the aisle—

people have to walk there. And whatever you do, don't go to the club car for a drink —you know it's bad for your arthritis. The doctor said not more than three cigars a day. And if Edna isn't at the station to meet you, just wait, do you hear? It's a long drive from her house and she may be late."

"Hell's fire!" the old man protested. "I was taking trains before you were born! How my boy Will stands—"

He broke off to ogle a Mexican girl, a ripe sixteen, who was walking in the same direction, ahead of them.

"Papa! Act your age!" his daughter-in-law said under her breath.

"Like they say, a woman's as old as she looks, but a man ain't old till he quits looking," he replied absently.

The redcap grinned. The little señorita, not knowing who was watching her but quite sure someone was, paused to put a dime in a Coke machine. The wheelchair entourage passed her and the old man craned his neck, looking backward, determined not to miss anything. The girl sat down on a bench to drink her Coke. If I were only fifty years younger, the old man thought, I'd buy a Coke, too, and sit down beside her . . .

"Papa!" his son's wife cried. "You'll fall out of your chair! Why do you always have to embarrass me like this?" But the insistent voice could not interrupt the old man's pleasant daydream of conquest. He had turned off his hearing aid.

THE redcap stopped alongside the third car of the San-Francisco-bound streamliner and signaled another redcap who was unloading a baggage truck. The other came over to help and two pairs of strong young arms lifted the old man, wheelchair and all, smoothly onto the platform of the car.

His daughter-in-law did not board the train. She stood waving, calling after the old man, "So long, Papa! Have a nice visit with Edna and remember what I told you!"

He waved back automatically, but he hadn't heard a word she said. He didn't turn his hearing aid back on until he had been wheeled inside the car.

Most of the reclining seats were already filled. The redcap pushed the wheelchair the full length of the aisle and parked it in a vacant space beyond the last seat, across from the washroom. He turned it crosswise, so it wouldn't roll when the train started moving, and with its occupant facing the window.

"Turn me around!" the old man commanded. "Like to see who I'm ridin' with. If I want to look out, I always got the opposite window."

The redcap complied, but the old man still wasn't satisfied. "Better wheel me in the club car straight off," he decided.

"Sorry, mister," the redcap said, "but you gotta ride in your own car till the conductor takes the tickets. Then you can have your train porter take you in there." That wasn't quite true. The conductor could have picked up the old man's ticket in the club car, but this way the redcap was not personally violating the orders of the lady who had given him the tip.

"Take myself in there, long as he opens the doors," the old man grumbled. But for the time being, he stayed put.

The train gave just one lurch, then picked up speed as the straggling city, then trees and suburbs and finally fields flowed past the opposite window. Now the old man felt free—for a day, at least, until his daughter Edna would take over the job supervising his every move—but at first the trip was lonely. Nobody talked to him and the only diversion in the car was a baby, which started squalling.

The old man found himself thinking how much friendlier the atmosphere was in the pool hall on Figueroa, where he rolled himself almost every day when he took his "walk" to watch the boys shoot pool. He could get there alone from his son's house, for there were driveways he could use to cross the streets, avoiding curbs. He was always welcome in the pool hall and he saw to it that he remained welcome. Every month, when his social security check came, he would buy a box of cigars and a couple of bottles and take them to the pool room, where he poured drinks for everybody until his money was used up. What else was money good for but to have a good time?

HE felt more at home in that dingy place, with the walls covered with pinups, than he did in his son's modern ranch-style house. For all his daughter-in-law's fussing over him, her efforts to keep him on the diet and the medicines that were supposed to prolong his life, he knew she was glad to get rid of him for the rest of the summer. He knew because he'd heard what Jane said to her best friend, Sarah Tolliver. Jane kept track of him by the squeaking of his wheelchair, and once he had bought a can of oil at the drugstore, and oiled the wheels so they didn't make a sound as he rolled up the inclined planks Will had laid over the kitchen steps.

Sarah and Jane had been in the dining area, having coffee, and the old man turned up his hearing aid so he could hear what they were talking about from the kitchen. They

were talking about him.

"You don't know how lucky you are," Sarah was saying, "that it was his legs gave out on him—not his head. When I was working at the hospital, I saw so many old folks who were just zombies, not knowing who they were, where they were, or what time it was. I tell you, there's nothing worse than that. But Will's dad? Why, he's sharp as a tack. Nobody puts anything over on him."

"He's sharp, all right," Jane agreed, "in some ways. But if he had the use of his legs, he'd be chasing after women. And that pool hall he hangs out in! When a man gets to be seventy-eight, you'd think he'd spend his time in church, not in a dive like that."

"What do you care where he goes? Sarah asked. "At least it gives you some time to yourself."

That was it. The young folks wanted some time to themselves. It was only natural. Well, Jane would have the house to herself, with no old man underfoot for the next few months, while he was at Edna's. Edna was his own flesh and blood; she would mix him a cocktail before dinner and serve him steaks, not baby food. She would kid with him about what a Casanova he was before her ma domesticated him, and light his cigars instead of hiding the box and doling them out one by one. She would call him George instead of Papa, but it would only be an act, just to make her old father feel good because she didn't expect him to live much longer. For all the time it would be understood that he was at John and Edna's house for a visit, that the place he lived was with Will and Jane. The truth was that neither of the girls would miss him if he didn't wind up at either place.

But what a way to waste a whole golden day he had to *himself*, with neither daughter nor daughter-in-law to boss or kid him around. He had looked forward to this day as a day of adventure, a day when anything could happen, and now he was starting it off on the wrong foot, wallowing in self-pity. What he needed was a good stiff drink. Yes, at ten o'clock in the morning!

When the conductor took his ticket, the old man demanded, "Where in hell is the porter?"

IT was a long train and she was hitting ninety now, and though you would not realize it in the sound-insulated, air-conditioned coaches, you did when the porter had to use his full weight to push the door open against the wind, when you heard the clackety-clack of the wheels

on the rails, a fountain of noise rising up between cars, when the wheelchair swayed precariously as it was pushed across the iron treads over the couplings.

The other coaches were filled with bored passengers in various stages of somnolence, people to whom the trip was merely a means of getting somewhere else. The club car was different; this was the gathering-place of those to whom the trip was an end in itself. It was filled with the smell of ginger ale, good whiskey and the perfume emanating from two young women at one of the small tables, periodically inspecting their makeup and hairdos in little mirrors, waiting for some nice young men to arrive.

Regretfully, the old man realized that he was not a candidate for the honor. But a few drinks would dull the twinges in his crippled legs and make him feel years younger. The white-coated waiter moved a chair, pulled the wheelchair up next to another small table and placed a paper napkin meticulously on it. The old man decided to start with a bottle of beer. Plenty of time to work up to the stronger stuff, and this way the minimum of pocket money his daughter-in-law had provided would last longer, perhaps until some free spender started buying drinks.

As it turned out, he caught his benefactor before the girls did. It was a young man of perhaps thirty-five, a dead ringer for Marshal Wyatt Earp. He went directly to the old man's table, as if he had picked him out. As a matter of fact, he had.

"May I sit here?" he asked.

"Glad to have you," the old man said, and meant it. He inspected the newcomer carefully. It would be almost too good to be true, to meet one of those actor fellows on the train. No, he decided, the clothes weren't casual enough for Hollywood; they didn't look like southern California at all. More the way he imagined an English banker would dress. Striped pants, cutaway, and a white silk scarf knotted at the throat. But an Englishman, the old man figured, would order ale instead of beer, and this one simply pointed to the old man's beer bottle when the waiter came to take his order.

"My name's George Murton," the old man said. "You can just call me George."

"Yes, indeed," the stranger agreed. "I see we shall get on famously. Mine is Sandane."

"Anybody ever tell you that you look like Wyatt Earp, Sandy?" the old man asked.

"Earp? I'm afraid I've never met the gentleman."

"Should have known. You're the bookish type. Prob'ly never watch televi-

sion. Sure don't talk like a Westerner, either. You come from California or elsewhere?"

"I come from elsewhen."

OLD George almost choked on a swallow of beer. Of course! That was why Sandane dressed funny, talked funny; he'd just stepped out of a time machine, like in the play last night on Channel Two. It all fitted in with the old man's feeling that this was a day for adventure. But he mustn't act too surprised; if he did, Sandane would take him for one of those old codgers who think horse-and-buggy thoughts in the jet age. A lot of younger folks, too, would say time travel was impossible, the same ones who'd called artificial satellites impossible. But George Murton had seen so many new developments in his lifetime that it was not difficult for him to accept the idea that this young man came from tomorrow.

"How long you plan to be here?" he asked casually. "Or maybe I should say—how long you plan to be here—now?"

"Not long. Just until I can get a body."

George found that remark a little confusing. It didn't belong in the script about the time machine. He felt as if he'd switched channels in the middle of the first act and tuned in on a murder mystery.

He leaned across the table and said in a low tone, "If you're figurin' on gettin' a hired gun to kill somebody, you'd better not talk about it in here. Too public."

"On the contrary, it would have to be a living body. But perhaps you're right. We could talk more freely in my compartment. Would you care to join me there, George? We could have some refreshment sent in."

"Sure would. Got a lot of questions I'd like to ask you. You see, I'm the curious type and I hang around mostly with a bunch of young punks that don't know nothin' except about the fights and the World's Series. Since my legs give out on me, I don't get around much. To tell you the truth, this is the first time I ever met a fellow from—elsewhen."

"Is it really?" Sandane said politely. "Well, then, you should find it quite interesting. What shall we have to drink?"

"Bourbon always suits me."

"Bourbon? One of the royal families?"

"Hell, no. You're in America, Sandy, the good old U.S.A. We don't have no royal families. Bourbon is a drink. Whiskey, *spiritus frumenti*, hard liquor."

"Fine. We shall order two flagons of it."

"Comes in fifths and you drink it in shot glasses, unless you want a mix. Rather have mine straight, with a water chaser."

"My error. I seem to have my periods mixed. Suppose you order, since you know so much more than I about the customs of your time?" The old man's happy smile suddenly faded and Sandane added hastily, "I shall pay for it, of course. It's only fitting that you should be my guest, because I believe you can be a great help to me."

This time he had hit the jackpot, the old man reflected as he was wheeled through the dining car to the first class section of the train, with a porter pushing his chair, Sandane opening the doors, and a bottle of good bourbon cradled cozily in his lap. Wait till the boys at the pool hall heard about this trip!

THE first shot of bourbon warmed his stomach in the good old familiar way, and somehow that was confirmation that the rest of it was real, too.

"How come you talk the language so good?" he asked his host, after the porter left them alone in the compartment.

"Is that surprising?" Sandane asked. "It shouldn't be. I'm a student of history, in your period on a research project. Naturally, I would have to prepare myself by studying the language of the country and of the period, in order to pass as one of you."

"You do real good, Sandy, considering. But why do you want to act like ordinary folks? Seems to me you ought to go on TV and tell everybody. Bet some big news commentator would be proud to interview you."

"Most people of your time would consider it a hoax."

"Maybe. But as long as you told me this much, let's have the rest of it. How does this time machine of yours work?"

"Not a machine, George. A capacity of the human mind. Dormant in your period, except for rare individuals. But in—elsewhen—we have learned how to use it. Beyond that I can give you no details. If I gave them, the method of tapping this talent would be discovered before it actually was. That is why I can't really talk with anyone about it. So I can only hint, as I did with you. If I encounter skepticism, I pass it off as a joke. This time I was lucky—I found someone who would accept it on faith. Have another?"

"Don't mind if I do. But it strikes me I'm the lucky one."

"Perhaps. You could be two thousand dollars richer as a result of having met me."

The old man paused with his shot glass halfway to his mouth and set it down again.

"Well, now! I'd be glad to give you any information that would help you. I seen a lot in my life. But two thousand dollars—ain't that a mite steep?"

"Two thousand, give or take twenty—whatever I have left when we reach San Francisco. Money of this period will be of no use to me if we complete the transaction, so I may as well give you all of it. You see, the body I'd like to buy is yours."

"Hold on, now!" the old man exclaimed, propelling his chair toward the door of the compartment and fumbling for the knob. "What am I supposed to do with the money if you get my body?"

"Please don't be alarmed! It would be an exchange. You'd get the body I'm using and the money besides."

"Why in the hell didn't you say so in the first place? For trade, Sandy, you wouldn't owe me a dime. But I don't get it. Why should you trade a young, healthy body like yours for this old crippled-up one? I'd be getting all the best of it!"

"You may not think so when I tell you that this body I'm using is due to disintegrate into its component elements in about two weeks, give or take a day or so."

"Sandy, you're just going to have to do some explaining. I still might take you up on the deal, but I got to understand what I'm getting into."

"You have a right to an explanation. And I can give it to you without revealing the actual process of the time transfer. You see, the mind is capable of an indefinite number of transfers. But a body can be used for only one. Before we overcame that obstacle, we made some serious mistakes."

"What happened?"

"IT was pretty bad during the experimental trials," said Sandane. "The pioneers, who transferred in their own bodies, were stuck irrevocably in the past. To overcome that, some transferred only mentally, which meant they had to enter unbidden into a host body of the target period. The more highly trained mind naturally had more strength—the host lost his identity. What was worse, when the visitor transferred back he sometimes entered an occupied body instead of his own. When two equally strong minds contest for one body the result is insanity. And worst of all, the former host body was left mindless—alive, but how shall I say it—?"

"Like a zombie?" the old man asked. "Somebody who don't know who he is, where he is, or what time it is?"

"Yes, that's a very good description. Of course, this had to be stopped."

"You didn't stop it soon enough," the old man said

dryly. "Must be a lot more of you fellows from elsewhen around than I figured."

"I assure you we don't do it any more. We grow bodies for transfer purposes in tanks. Like this one, for example."

"Well, I do declare," the old man said. "Now, that's what I call progress. According to that, when your old body wears out, you get a new one."

"We haven't achieved immortality yet. The mind has its own natural span. It is true, however, that we have a greater life expectancy, and as long as a person lives he can have a body of his choice. But let's not get off the subject. The point is that I can't transfer back without a body, or I might get into one that's occupied. And I can't take this one with me. So I have to have one that is—well, if you'll forgive me being so blunt, more or less useless to its occupant."

"It's the truth, Sandy, and nobody knows it better than me. But the part I don't understand is why the body you're using has to fall apart in two weeks, if you leave it here."

"It is actually good for several months after the transfer. I've used up most of the time with my researches. But as to your question—surely you see why we can't leave a lot of displaced bodies cluttering up the past. The few pioneers who got stuck in previous periods were bad enough. They lived longer than anyone else of the periods, but they were taken as rare freaks of nature. If this happened on a larger scale, it would excite comment. Medical men would examine these people and find certain evolutionary developments—the secret would be out. In order to avoid that, the bodies grown artificially for transfer purposes have a built-in trigger mechanism. This also prevents anyone from overstaying his allotted leave. If I don't find a body to transfer back in within the next two weeks, I'll be dead."

"And if you do, I'll be dead," the old man said.

"I'm afraid so. Meanwhile, though, you'll have a young, healthy body to do with as you please, and some money to spend. It will happen suddenly; there will be no discomfort. I thought you looked like a man who would appreciate that. You would be cheated out of a decent funeral, however—there will be nothing resembling a body left to bury."

"Funerals!" the old man snorted. "Them as got nothing else to look forward to figure on fancy funerals. Me, I don't hanker after anything I can't be around to enjoy."

"I'm sorry I can't offer you more than two weeks, give or take a day. I was unavoidably detained."

"Can't be helped. I ain't likely to get a better offer, so I'm taking you up on it. And I admire you for an honest man. You could just as well of told me I'd have two years—or twenty. I'll do the right thing by you, too. I won't let out your secret—long as I'm sober, that is."

THE young man from elsewhen smiled. "I'm not worried about that," he said, "Who would believe your unsupported statement?"

"You got a point there," the old man admitted. "Don't hardly believe it myself, till it happens. When do you do this switch business?"

"Just before we reach San Francisco, if that suits you."

"Suits me fine. But I got a daughter, name of Edna Bowers, meeting me at the station there. How you figure on getting away from her?"

"It won't be difficult. I will stay with her for a few days; then she simply will not see me rolling that chair down the block. I will get to the transfer point by cab and she will turn a report in to the police that her father is missing. They will, of course, not find the missing person."

"You mean you can fix it so she looks right at my body, with you inside it, and don't see anything?"

"Certainly. I can control the mind of anyone of this period at will. Anyone of my time could do so. It's easy."

"You can? Well, then, why in the hell didn't you? Why should you ask me my druthers when you could take over my body whether I liked it or not?"

"That would be highly unethical."

"Sure would. But to save your life, seems to me you wouldn't be so squeamish. People nowadays would think like that, anyway. I can see that they'd have to change a lot before they could be trusted with the kind of powers you got in elsewhen."

"They will," the young man from elsewhen assured him. "Human nature is not immutable. But I take it we are agreed that we trade bodies just before we reach our destination. Shall we have a toast to it?" He filled the old man's shot glass so full it sloshed over in the moving train.

"Before we drink to it," old George objected, "hadn't you ought to give me the money to bind the bargain?"

"Why?" his host asked. "It's in my pocket, which will be yours when we trade."

"That's right!" the old man said. "I get the clothes, too, don't I? Kind of a dignified getup. Sure would admire to be seen in that! Here's to it!" They clicked glasses and downed the drinks.

"Now, shall we have some lunch?" Sandane asked.

"You bet. Say, on the train, I'm tempted to order all the things that ain't good for me. If I do, my arthritis will be giving mé hell tomorrow. I'm used to that, but as long as you'll be the one to suffer, maybe I should stick to my diet."

"Order what you like. I can control the pain for you easily enough."

"Can you teach me to do that?" the old man asked eagerly. "Wouldn't want you to be giving out any secrets you ain't supposed to, but surely that couldn't do any harm."

"It wouldn't do you any good, either," Sandane replied. "This body won't give you a bit of trouble as long as it lasts. I absolutely guarantee that."

"Not even a headache the morning after?"

"Not even a headache. Not even fatigue."

"Think of it! No hangovers in elsewhen. Must be a wonderful age to live in."

"You'd be surprised how many people want to get away from it," Sandane remarked. "Shall we have something sent in or go to the diner?"

"Let's go to the diner," old George decided. "I want to look over some of the chicks on this train. Could be one of them is a stranger in San Francisco, needs somebody to show her the town."

"Could be," Sandane agreed.

AFTER a hearty lunch, without a look at the right side of the menu, the old man started drinking again. He kept pleasantly tipsy all afternoon, trying to submerge the recurrent thought that this couldn't really be going to happen. Sandane continued to act the affable host, but made no move to put his plan into operation. They were in Sandane's compartment when the loudspeakers announced that passengers who were leaving the train at Oakland should get ready. The waiting was getting on the old man's nerves.

"All right," he told Sandane, "if this is all a gag, the joke's finished."

"It's not a joke," Sandane protested.

"Then put up or shut up."

"Very well," Sandane said. "Close your eyes and relax. You will go to sleep for a few moments."

The old man was determined to stay awake to see what went on. But in spite of himself, his eyes closed, his head drooped forward. He dreamed a long and involved dream about cities of the future, where all the people had miraculous powers. It seemed to go on for days, yet when he awoke, with a start, the train still had not reached Oakland.

He stood up abruptly as he realized that he was alone in

the compartment. Where was Sandane? Next he realized that he was standing, that he *was* Sandane, or at least in Sandane's body. He took two steps to the mirror and stared at it. Cutaway, striped pants, face the spitting image of Wyatt Earp. It was the old man in the wheelchair who had left the compartment.

When he disembarked at San Francisco, he scanned the crowd for the wheelchair and soon spotted it. Edna had spotted it first—she was pushing it herself while a redcap followed, carrying the blanket and the old battered valise that the occupant of the chair had insisted on taking into his own coach. George tipped his derby to Edna.

"Mrs. Bowers, I presume? Your father was telling me many nice things about you on the train."

Edna laughed. "So you're the gentleman he was with! I guessed from his breath he'd had company!"

"Now, Edna," a cracked old voice complained, "ain't no harm in buying a few drinks for an old man."

GEORGE looked at the man in the chair in amazement. Was that the way he had sounded? Somehow, through the hearing aid, his own voice had seemed louder, less faltering.

"Only too happy to do it, sir," George said. "The pleasure was all mine." He wanted to add that Sandane was acting his part superbly, but didn't know just how to say it before Edna.

"We could give you a lift to your hotel," Edna suggested.

"Thank you, madam, but I don't believe I shall check into a hotel as yet. I shall leave my bags here until later in the evening." George was surprised how quickly he had assumed the manner of speaking that went with his clothes.

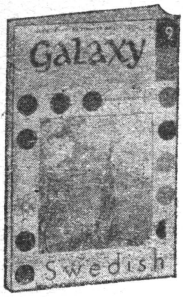
"Well, take a couple of drinks for me," the old voice interjected. "Say hello to them pretty girls for me, too. So long, Sandy, and good luck."

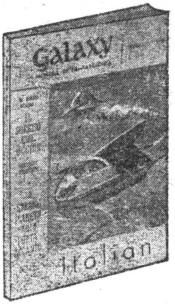
"So long, George," George replied, his voice choking up with pity for an old man who could not do what he wanted to do on this beautiful evening, in this beautiful city.

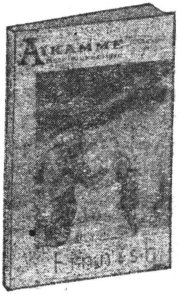
When they had gone, he walked out of the station, enjoying every step of the vigorous young legs, feeling every muscle of the vigorous young body, glowing with life. Outside, he paused for a moment on the sidewalk before calling a cab.

Two weeks, give or take a day or so, would be long enough to do the town. And two thousand dollars, give or take twenty, would be enough to do it on. The young-old man from elsewhen and the present was going to have one hell of a good time. **END**

Galaxy...AROUND THE WORLD







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The Fastest Gun Dead

The skeleton had the fastest draw west of the Pecos. Too bad he was such a lousy shot

BY JULIAN F. GROW

HE was a big man, broad of shoulder, slim of hip. His Stetson was crimped Texas-style, over slate-gray eyes that impassively had seen much good and more evil in their twenty-six years.

He stood in the saloon door with the dust of the streets of of Dos Cervezas Pequenas still swirling about scuffed, range-rider's chaps. His left hand held open the weatherbeaten swinging door. The right hovered over the worn peachwood butt of the Colt holstered on his right thigh.

The slate-gray eyes, emotionless, swept the crowd bellied up to the bar, and stopped at one man. When he spoke it was flat, but with the ring of tempered steel, and every man but that one drew back out of range. "I want you, Dirty Jake," the big man said. "Now."

Dirty Jake shot him into doll rags, naturally.

DIRTY JAKE NIEDELMEIER was, you might say, the most feared ribbon clerk in the Territory. Easily the most.

I remember him from the early days, from the first day he came to town, in fact. I remember because he got off the stage just as I was leaning out the window nailing up my brand-new shingle, and my office was and still is upstairs next to the stage depot. I was down on the boardwalk admiring it, all shiny gold leaf on black like the correspondence school promised:

Hiram Pertwee, M.D.

His voice broke in on me, all squeaky. "Beg your pardon," he said, "where's the YMCA?"

Well, that isn't the usual sort of question for here. I turned around. There he was, a scrawny little runt about knee-high to short, wearing a panama hat, a wrinkled linen duster and Congress gaiters.

He wasn't especially dirty then, of course, only about average for a stage passenger. He kind of begrudged his face, with little squint eyes and a long thin nose, a mustache like a hank of Spanish moss and just about chin enough to bother shaving. Under his duster he wore a clawhammer coat, the only alpaca one I ever saw, and I never from that day out saw him wear any other. He stood there looking like he'd never been anyplace he really cottoned to, but this might just be the worst.

I was just a young squirt then and not above funning a dude. I told him the YMCA was around the corner, two doors down and up the back stairs at the Owl Hoot Palace. He nodded and went the way I told him.

That was, and still is, Kate's Four Bit Crib. The girls there wear candy-striped stockings and skirts halfway to the knee, and their shirtwaists are open at the neck. Dirty Jake didn't speak to me for three years.

He wasn't Dirty Jake then, though, just Jacob Niedelmeier, fresh from selling ribbons and yard goods in Perth Amboy, New Jersey and hot to find a fortune in the hills. He'd been a failure all his natural life. This was a new beginning, for a man 34 who was already at the bitter end and looking for the path back. Gold was the way, he figured. He was going to get it.

But he didn't. He was back flat broke and starving in four months.

He spent the next seventeen years behind the notions counter at Martin's Mercantile, selling ribbon and yard goods and growing old two years at a time. I think it tainted his mind.

Leastways, from the time I got to know him, some fourteen years gone, he's been what you might say, a queer actor. At first, when the store closed at sundown he'd take

off for the near hills with a pick and a sack, still seeking for color somebody might have missed. After a while he didn't bother with the gear. He just moseyed around all that rock mostly, I suppose, to be away from people.

Truth to tell, people were beginning to avoid him anyway. He was getting kind of gamy over the years, and cantankerous generally.

MAYBE it's kind of funny we got more or less friendly but doctors and ribbon clerks aren't so all-fired far apart. They both have to do with people and their ways, and like to get shut of both now and then. Every couple of months I'd go along with him up in the hills, to get the sick smell out of my nose. Night air and a night sky can be pretty fine if you've been looking at tongues and such long enough.

Going out like that, we didn't say much. I preferred it that way since Jake Niedelmeier was a boob.

A smart man can get on tolerably well with an idiot if both just have sense enough to keep their mouths shut. One time he didn't was when he brought along a bottle of rye. He got started and was going on to beat the band, yapping about how life was a cheat and someday everybody'd respect Jacob Niedelmeier, until finally I lost patience and told him that while I treasured our association beyond pearls I'd chuck him off a cliff if he didn't shut the hell up. I was nice about it, and after that it was like I said, tolerable.

Well, sir, about two years ago he came into my office while I was darning up some fool borax miner that'd got himself kicked square in the bottle on his hip. Jake stood in the corner picking his teeth while I finished. After the borax miner limped out he spoke up.

"Comin'?" That was all the invitation he ever gave.

"I guess," I said. I sloshed the suture needle in a basin, gave it a couple of swipes on the hone stone and threw it in my satchel. That miner had a tough rind.

Jake went out first. I closed the door behind us, not locking it, of course, because our night marshal was kind of my relief surgeon whenever I was on calls. He was a Secesh hospital orderly during the Rebellion. He was better with a saw than with sewing, but he could tie up most wounds well enough to do till I got back.

Jake and I set out south up the mountain trail, but pretty soon it hit me he was heading someplace considerable more directly than we usually did.

Sure enough, he took off at an angle from the trail after a bit. We struck up into some fairly woolly country. He

wasn't following any sign I could see, at least not by moonlight, but he kept going faster until I was plumb out of wind.

We were in the hills overlooking Crater Lake when we came to kind of an amphitheater in the rocks, some twenty feet across. He stopped at the edge of it and stood staring in, silent and breathing catchy.

Me, I just chased my own breath for a while, then looked too and saw what he was aiming at. Right in the middle, shining pale in the moonshine like nothing else does, was a pile of old, old bones. Jake, I saw, had seen it before. It was scaring him yet.

OLD bones, sir, are still bones. I've seen and set my fill. But after I got a good look at these they scared me too.

There were four skeletons altogether, all nicely preserved, and only three of them were men. Indians, I mean. You could tell that from the shreds of buckskin. Two of them still had weapons near their right hands: one a stone knife, the other a lance. And the top of each of the three skulls had been shot clean away.

At least, half of the top had, and the same half on all three. Almost the entire os frontale and ossa parietalia on the left side was gone on each one. I hunkered down to see closer, while Jake stood back and shook.

I struck a sulphur match and saw something else about those three redskin skulls. The edges where the bone was gone weren't fractured clean like a bullet or a club would do. They were charred.

The three were sprawled around the fourth skeleton and that was the one gave me the vapors. It was more or less man-shaped. But it wasn't a man, that I know. I don't believe I care to find out what it was. Instead of ribs there was a cylinder of thin bone, and it had only one bone in the lower leg. What there was for a pelvis I've never seen the like, and the skull was straight out of a Dore Bible. There was a hatchet buried in that skull.

The bones of the right arm were good and hefty, and it had two elbows. The left arm was about half the size—not crippled, but smaller scale. Like it was good for delicate work and not much else.

About ten inches from the widespread six fingers of its right hand was what you knew right off was a weapon even if it did look like an umbrella handle.

I was just reaching down to touch it when that fool Jake made his move.

He'd been standing behind me, closer I bet than he'd ever got before, staring down at

that fourth skeleton and making odd noises. I tell you, it was something for a medical man to see. Suddenly he grunted like he was going to be sick. He snatched up a femur from one of the Indians and swung it up to smash that fourth skeleton to smithereens.

Well, sir, quicker than the eye could see the umbrella handle smacked itself into the palm of that bony hand, sending fingers flying in six directions. It hung there in the air against what was left, trained dead on Jake's head, and it hummed.

The femur dropped from Jake's right hand like he'd been shot. He hadn't, though, because he was still wearing his skull and by that time running. Soon as he did, the umbrella handle flopped over and just lay there, the hum dying away.

When it stopped the place was pretty quiet, because Jake was off in the rocks and I was going over some things I wanted to say to him immediately I was able to talk again. That fourth skeleton had the fastest draw I'd ever seen.

Jake stuck his head up from behind a boulder. "Doc," he said, "why didn't he shoot?"

THE question wasn't as all-fired pip-witted as Jake was capable of. It took me upwards of three weeks to work out why a weapon that could draw and aim itself didn't shoot too.

I'd heard a little clink when the weapon flew into the skeleton's hand. It came from a metal disk that lay in its palm, toward the heel of the hand.

The disk was thin and only about as big as a two-cent piece. A mate to it was set in the butt of the umbrella handle, convex where the other was concave.

Going at it kind of gingerly, I slid the disk in my vest behind my watch and put the umbrella handle in my right coat pocket.

It was a key-wind repeater with a gold hunting case, that watch, and I worried about it every step down the mountain. I walked a good four hundred yards behind Jake all the way back into town, just to be on the safe side. We didn't linger, either. We wanted lights.

By the time I got the two objects locked in my rolltop my heartbeat in anybody else would have had me telling the sexton to start his hole. I prescribed bed for me, told Jake, who hadn't hardly even drawn breath the whole time, to go to hell and retired.

NEXT day a squabble came up over some borax rights upcountry. I didn't get to open that rolltop for a time. Then one early morning coming back in the buggy from a

house-call in Pockmark, forty-odd miles north, I got to worrying again at the umbrella handle and those dead Indians.

Seems like four, five times a week some chunkhead hunkers down hard with his spurs on. When I got to the office that night there was one waiting—a bad one, Spanish rowels—and Jake was sprawled in my chair, picking his teeth with my spare scalpel. I patched up the chunkhead, took the scalpel from Jake and rinsed it off and watched him suck his teeth for a while. It began to look like he was going to be stubborn. So finally I said: "Say, Jake."

He grunted. "Jake," I said, "I think I've got that dingus figured." He snuck a glance over at the desk so I knew he knew what I meant, but he was busy pretending that wasn't what he came to talk about.

"I think it's a gun that can read minds like a gypsy," I said. Jake still looked bored, so I took the umbrella handle out of the rolltop and waved it at him. He dove off the chair and started rolling for the door.

"You damn fool," I said, "it won't go off." I was reasonably certain it wouldn't, but I laid it back down by the disk gently anyhow and sat in the chair. I've only got the one chair, on the theory that anybody who isn't bad enough to lie on the table is well enough to stand. Jake edged over and stood like a short-legged bird on a bobwire fence. "It kin whut?" he said.

"It can read minds," I said. "You were going to bash those bones. The gun knew it and trained square on your head. You remember?"

He remembered. "And those Indians," I went on. "You remember them? The left side of the head on each of them was blown off."

I hauled down a roller chart of the human skeleton, first time I'd done that since I don't know when.

"This up here is the brain," I said. "We don't know a hell of a lot about it, but we do know it's like a whole roomful of telegraphers, sending messages to different parts of the body along the nerves. They're like the wires. This left hemisphere—right here—sends to the right side of the body. Don't fret about why, the nerves twist going into the spinal cord.

"Okay. We know, too, that the part of the brain that sends to the arm is right here, in the parietal lobe. Right under the chunk of skull that was shot off on those three Indians."

"Shaw," Jake said, perching on the table. The old billygoat was beginning to get impressed, even if he didn't have any notion of what I was talking about.

I DIDN'T have exactly much notion either, but I kept on. "The brain works by a kind of electricity, same kind as in the telegraph batteries at the depot. This gun," I tapped the umbrella handle and Jake started off again, but caught himself, "has some sort of detector, a galvanic thermometer that senses electrical messages to the nerves."

From here on in it was pure dark and wild hazard. "Obviously," I said, "whenever one of those signals goes from this cerebral motor area here in the left hemisphere down to make the weapon hand move, it must be a special signal this gun was built to catch. Just like a lock is made for one particular key.

"And near as I can figure, the gun has to be able to tell when that move coming up is going to be dangerous to the man holding it. Stands to reason if it can tell when a brain's signalling a hand, it can tell too if that brain is killing-mad. Some people can do that, and most dogs.

"So, if it senses murderous intent and a message to the weapon hand to move, it moves too, and faster.

"It homes on this disk like a magnet right into the hand of the gent that owns it, and aims itself plumb at the place the signal is coming from." I tapped the chart. "Right here."

I poked the gunk out of a corncob, packed it and lit up before going on. Jake stared at the umbrella handle like a stuffed owl.

"Now, that fourth skeleton we saw sure as hell isn't human. He isn't from anywhere on this green earth, or I miss my guess. Might even have something to do with Crater Lake there, years ago. But we aren't likely to find out.

"But we do know that he fought three Indians that probably jumped him all at once. And he killed every one of them with this gun before he fell."

That brought Jake up short.

The Territory is kind of violent generally, and anybody or anything good along that line would be bound to have the sober respect of a ninny like Jake.

I dug up an old glove, and used spirit gum to stick in its palm the little disk from the skeleton's hand. I pulled the glove on my right hand, and stood up with my hand about a foot over the umbrella handle.

"Okay," I said, "kill me."

HE was so orry-eyed by then he damn near did it just to be obliging. But then the recollection of the night on the mountain, and the three Indians with their heads shot off, sifted through and he shied off. "Hell no," he hollered, "I seen that thing go before! I ain't about to get

my head blowed to bits!" And he went on.

Well, it took me the best of two hours. I showed him the two studs on the underside that most likely were a safety device. I explained how probably the gun wouldn't go off unless somebody was holding it with a finger between those studs, which was why it didn't shoot when it went into the skeleton's hand that night. I finally got him by telling him if I was right, we'd wire the fourth skeleton together, take it back East and earn a mint of money on the vaudeville stage showing the fastest cadaver in the West.

"Mr. Bones: Faster than Billy the Kid and Twice as Dead," I said we'd bill it. Jake, he thought that was a lovely idea, and decided to go along.

Fourteen times that eternal jackass raised his right arm at me, while I held my own gloved right hand over the weapon. But he didn't have any real heart for it, and fourteen times the gun just lay there. Then I got a mite impatient, and kicked him in the kneecap. That fifteenth time he was truly trying.

Skinny as he was he'd have driven me clear through the floor, except that umbrella handle jumped into my glove and aimed dead at his forehead, snarling like a cougar. More correctly, the left side of his forehead. If I hadn't braced my index finger out stiff, that fifteenth time would've had him a dead man.

Jake froze like a statue and hung in the air staring at the gun, snarling away in my hand. Finally I pulled the glove off with the gun still stuck to it, and flung it on the desk.

Then Jake gave me the sixteenth, and by the time I got up again he was gone and the gun and the glove with him.

NEXT morning the borax squabble blew up again. What with miners getting stomped I didn't get to bed for a week, much less have a chance to find out where Jake and that damned weapon had lit out for. By the time I did, it was too late. Jacob Niedelmeier, the ribbon clerk, after seventeen years was on his way to glory as the legendary Dirty Jake.

I got the start of the story from a drifter, name of Hubert Comus. He'd got into kind of a heated discussion in a saloon south a ways that ended with him and this other man going for their hardware. Hubert got his Merwin & Bray .42 out and, being a fool, tried fanning it. Of course it jammed and he laid the heel of his hand open clear to the bone.

Twasn't the hand bothering Hubert, though. Like most, the other man missed him clean, but when the barkeep

threw them both out Hubert lit sitting on the boardwalk and took a six-inch splinter clear through his corduroys.

While I was working on him he told me about Jake.

A man, it seems, had turned up in a little settlement called Blister, about two days down the line. Nobody noticed him come in, except that he was wearing one glove, a shiny clawhammer coat and Congress gaiters. The general run in the mining camps doesn't wear Congress gaiters.

He got noticed, though, when he showed up in a barroom wearing a pearl-gray derby with an ostrich plume in the band, and carrying a rolled-up umbrella under his arm. The little devil had stuck the shaft of a regular umbrella in the muzzle of the skeleton's weapon.

It turned out he'd bought the derby that the storekeeper there had planned to be buried in. Where the ostrich plume came from I never did find out.

"He come right in the swingin' door an' stood there," Hubert said over his shoulder, "lookin' at the crowd. Purty quick they was all lookin' right back, I kin tell you. That feather fetched 'em up sharp. Take it easy back there, will you, Doc? Then Homer Cavanaugh, the one they called Ham Head, he bust out laughing. He laughed so hard he bent over double, and the rest of the boys was just beginnin' t'laugh too when the little feller picked up a spitoon and dumped it down Ham Head's neck.

"The boys got mighty quiet then. Hey, easy, Doc, will you? Ham Head straightened up and his face went from red as flannels to white, just like that. He stood glarin' at the little feller for a couple of ticks, openin' and closin his fists, and then that big right hand went for the Smith & Wesson in his belt.

"Well, it was a double-action pistol and had a couple notches in the grip, but Ham Head never cleared it. I never even seen the little feller draw, but there was Ham Head fallin' with half his noggin shot away. Gently, will you, Doc, gently!

"The little feller stood leaning on his umbrella, lookin' down at him. 'What was that man's name?' he says. 'Ham Head Cavanaugh,' somebody says back. 'Ham Head Cavanaugh,' the little feller says, 'he's the first.' Then he shoves the umbreller back under his arm and goes out. We never saw him again.

"Some say it was a bootleg pistol he used, or a derringer in his sleeve. And some say he had a pardner with a rifle in the street, but there wasn't nobody there. I was standin' as close to him as I am to you, Doc, and I swear—it—was—that — um — breller — OW!"

HAM HEAD CAVANAUGH was the first. I had kind of a personal interest in Jake and his weapon, so I kept track. There was Curly Sam Thompson, Big John Ballentine, Redmeat Carson, Uriah Singletree and twelve others known of, all dead within eighteen months. Any man Jake could hoorah into a fight. With never a chance to get his right hand on iron before his head gave the signal and got blown off. He took them all on. And he never lost — because he couldn't.

Jake was king-o'-the-hill now, all right. He had the success he yearned for.

Yet when he came back to see me last April it wasn't to brag. He was in trouble. I looked up from a customer, a damn fool that'd sat on a gila monster, and there he was, sneaking in the door bareheaded like a whipped hound, not the cock of the walk in the whole Territory. He slid into the back room like a shadow, and the man I was working on never even knew he'd come.

When I went in afterward the lamp was out, the shade was down and he was in a corner, nervous as a jackrabbit an eagle just dropped in a wolf den. "Buried my derby under a pile of rock up in the mountains," he whispered. "Look," and he held out his glove.

It was plumb worn out. The little metal disc was hanging on by a strand of spirit gum, and the fabric of the palm was in shreds.

I looked at him for a minute without saying anything. He was still wearing the clawhammer coat, over B.V.D. tops, but it looked like he'd been buried weeks in it and dug up clumsy. He had on greasy rawhide breeches and battered cowhand boots for shoes. He had a month's beard on his lip and he stunk.

This here was legendary Dirty Jake, no question about it.

"Get a new glove," I said.

"Nope," he answered, "no good. Last week in Ojo Rojizo I took the glove off to scratch and right then a man braced me. He threw me in a horse-trough when I wouldn't fight. I want you to fix me up good.

"I want you to open my hand up and set the dingus just under the skin, and sew it up again. Knew a feller did that with five-dollar gold pieces cuz he didn't like banks. Worked fine till he got a counterfeit, and it killed him.

"I'll lay low in the hills till the hand heals. No problems after that."

No problems? Maybe so, but I'd been doing some thinking. Still, I kept my mouth shut and did what he wanted, and he slunk off with no thanks. Don't guess I really had any coming.

After he left I got out my

tallybook and ticked off the men Dirty Jake had killed: One Eye Jack Sundstrom, Fat Charlie Ticknor, Pilander Quantrell, Lobo Stephens, Alec the Frenchman Dubois, some jackass Texas nobody even knew and the rest, all men whose brains had telegraphed a special signal to Jake's gun before it reached their own right hand. Well, there was a new pistolero in town.

A month and a half later I was craned around, trying to lance a boil of my own, when out of the corner of my eye I saw Dirty Jake go by under my window. He'd dug that hat with the ostrich plume out from under the rocks, his hand was healed, he was swinging his umbrella and he didn't so much as look up. He was headed for the Owl Hoot Palace. I decided the boil'd wait.

Less than five minutes later I heard the shots, two of them. A second later Jubal Bean, swamper at the Owl Hoot, came pounding up the boardwalk and hollered in the door:

"Doc, better come quick. Dirty Jake just took a couple slugs in the chest and he never even got to draw!"

I took my time. "It was just a matter of odds," I said. "Who got him?"

"The new one," Jubal said, "the man they call Lefty."

WELL, a couple more weeks to bleach, a little wiring, and I'll be heading East. Look for the billboards:

MR. BONES
The Fastest Draw in the West
"Faster than Billy the Kid and Twice as Dead"
presented by
HIRAM PERTWEE, M.D.

All I've got to do is figure how to keep getting mad at Jake. —*END*

POEM AND REPLY

Nature and nature's laws lay hid in Night;
God said, "Let Newton be" and all was light.

It did not last. The Devil, crying "Ho!
Let Einstein be," restored the status quo.

The first two lines are Newton's epitaph by Alexander Pope; The second two, though widely quoted as anonymous, were written by Sir John Squire.

By: THEODORE STURGEON

SF IS WHEN....

. . . intelligence comes to grips with the universe — and the results are something wonderful — and strange!

THE largest and noisiest of all the unsettled arguments in science fiction is the simple (ho-ho!) matter of defining it. Like certain other imponderables, such as love, and the blues, and the exact meaning of an abstention in a UN vote, the matter is best handled by describing not nature, but function. Love, a young lady was heard to remark, is when you wake up knowing it will be wonderful also to get *out* of bed. The blues, said a rough-hewn poet, is when you got the best steak in the whole wide world and the salt-cellar just cries all over it. Science fiction, then, is when someone looks at what is there for anyone to look at, and suddenly makes something new and wonderful out of it.

The breeze of s-f, in this sense, must have been ruffling the hair of the encyclopedist

who wrote the article ATOM in the famous 11th edition of the Britt?nica, published just fifty years ago. For after a clear and careful description of atomic theory, most of which was then set up to agree with the definition of the atom as "indivisible," he concluded as follows:

> The atomic theory has been of priceless value to chemists, but it has more than once happened in the history of science that a hypothesis, after having been useful in the discovery and co-ordination of knowledge has been abandoned and replaced by one more in harmony with later discoveries. Some distinguished chemists have thought that this fate may be awaiting the atomic theory, and that in future chemists may be able to obtain all the guidance they need from the science of the transformations of energy. But modern (this means 1910) discoveries in radioactivity are in favour of the existence of the atom, although they lead to the belief that the atom is not so eternal and unchangeable a thing as Dalton and his predecessors imagined, and in fact, that the atom itself may be subject to that eternal law of growth and decay of which Lucretius speaks.

Science fiction is when a man sits amidst several dozen imperial bushels of evidence to the contrary, and dares to make a breathtaking intuitive sweep like that. To realize fully what a heady grab this was, it is worthwhile digging a little further to find out something about the two boys he mentioned.

JOHN DALTON, away back in 1803, took the atom-is-indivisible theory away from philosophers who had been tonguing and gumming it for a thousand years, and really put it to work—to such a degree that many people think he invented it. He didn't, but the amount of solid experimental work he did on it made it his. He pulled a vast amount of vague reporting into line and invented an ingenious, if somewhat unwieldy, system of symbols which clearly showed his belief that an atom is an atom, an element is made of atoms of one kind and a compound is made by certain fixed quantities of each kind of atom which kept their relation to one another no matter how much or how little was compounded. He made it possible to predict and to explain thousands of chemical actions, set chemistry on its feet — and made "*the* atomic theory"

(the atom-is-indivisible) unshakeable and unbreakable for more than a century. And if science fiction is when someone takes common ho-hum evidence and makes something new and wonderful out of it, then it's fair to say it touched Dalton too.

But let's have a look at the other character the Britannica writer mentioned. The atom may, he said, "be subject to that eternal law of growth and decay of which Lucretius speaks."

Titus Lucretius Carus was born around 98 B.C. and probably died in 55 B.C. Of several accounts of his life, by far the most appetizing is the one which says that he became mad in consequence of quaffing a love-philtre and, after writing a number of books in his lucid intervals, knocked himself off when he was 44.

Whatever his habits and pastimes, he was an extraordinary man: poet (truly a great one), philosopher and, in the truest sense, theoretical scientist. His great work, *De Rerum Naturae,* called unique in literature, is a reasoned system of philosophy, written in verse. Its main idea is the truth of the laws of nature vs. superstitions. And he wrote not like a speculator, who wondered if, but like a teacher, who *knew*. He wrote, says the Britannica, "to clear the mind from the fear of the gods and the terrors of a future state." First, he shows

> ". . . that the world is not governed by capricious agency, but has come into existence, continues in existence, and will ultimately pass away in accordance with the primary conditions of the elemental atoms which, along with empty space, are the only eternal and immutable substances. These atoms are infinite in number but limited in their varieties, and by their ceaseless movement and combinations during infinite time and through infinite space the whole process of creation is maintained."

All credit to the writer of the Britannica's ATOM article (his name was Francis Henry Neville, if anyone wonders) who could readily have been excused for ignoring this peculiar stuff Mme. Curie had been playing around with, and to Dalton, who with far less system to view and review was able to use his think-tank like a Heinlein.

Perhaps one day a science-fiction convention will grant a special award to Lucretius, who never saw a test-tube or even a copy of IF in his whole life, but blocked out a picture we haven't filled in yet!

—END

THE SEEDER

By MAX WILLIAMS

Being just plain Pop was not enough – he was bucking for All-Fatherhood.

IT TOOK me less than three thousand years to catch up with Pop; which, all things considered, was pretty good going. I came out of overdrive at 018970 hours in orbit around an ugly-looking A3-type planet, and there was his ship below me.

I slammed my cruiser down right alongside—hard enough to pulverize a couple of feet of basalt and make Pop and his ship bounce a little. He'd put me to quite a bit of trouble and I was annoyed.

Pop got to his feet and stood there looking kind of sheepish as I climbed out of the cruiser. The old fool had his helmet off and was breathing in the foul atmosphere as if it were health gas. His gills had begun to turn a little blue from the methane and CO_2. He was a character all right.

His name wasn't really Pop, of course. I guess the nickname had been tacked on because he was such an eccentric old codger, and because he looked like a couple of billion years old. Actually, of course, he wasn't nearly that old.

"Welcome aboard planet," he said. "I kind of figured you'd be along sooner or later. Or someone like you."

"Well, I'm here," I said. He looked harmless, but I kept a 201R projector on him just in case. Pop had given Security Division a lot of trouble, and I had strict orders.

I crawled over to his ship

and slid inside. The cabin looked neat enough, but the old fool had so much junk crammed into the ship you could hardly turn around. I found what I was looking for toward the bow—row after row of cylindrical canisters. I broke one open and the bio-detector on my back began to stutter like crazy. I dropped it and sprayed them all until they glowed dull green. By then the contents were cooked.

POP was still standing in the same place when I crawled out, looking as casual as you please. He only had a few eyes on me. Most of them he had turned toward the planet's oversize satellite and a raw, angry-looking sea that was breaking a few ship's-lengths away.

"How'd you catch up with me?" he asked.

"Space warp. You left a trail a child could follow." I moved around his ship and found the reason he was looking so innocent. He'd already set up one of his canisters and the seal was about to break. I sprayed it. So much for several billion one-celled forms of life bottled under pressure.

"All right," I said. "That's the last of them. Let's get going."

"Okay," said Pop. "Never argue with Security Division. Still, you've got to admit I gave you a good run for your money. And I seeded quite a mess of planets."

I shouldn't have done it, but I was angry. I snapped a claw across his nerve center before he could draw it back into his shell. It must have hurt plenty, because ten or twelve of his eyes began to water.

"Seeded, hell!" I said. "You touched down on exactly 9080 planets, and I sterilized every one of them after you left. That's what took me so long."

He seemed to shrink a little inside, and for the first time I realized just how old the nut really was.

"All that time," he said. "All that effort wasted. Damn. Double damn."

"You should have figured that in the first place," I said. "Central Maxim 0438 clearly states that no life is to be introduced into the outer galaxies. And don't ask me why. I'm no biologist. I just follow orders."

"Listen," said Pop. "*Please* listen. Back at Central Galaxy they think we—our race—is pretty much immortal. But they don't *know*. They don't know for sure if *any* life will be left in our galaxy after two or three hundred wars like the last one and—"

"Hold it," I said. "You're wasting your time. I'm not a philosopher and you know it."

"That's right," said Pop. "And you're not a biologist,

either. You told me." He waved a claw in gesture of resignation number seven. "Well, maybe you're right. Maybe I have been an old fool. Let's go home. No use hanging around an ugly planet like this one." He made gesture of contempt number fifteen.

Well, I thought, that's a relief. Maybe the old geezer wasn't as crazy as I'd figured. Maybe he just needed some sense slapped into him. At any rate, he didn't make any trouble when I disintegrated his ship—the old crate wasn't spaceworthy to begin with—and he climbed into my cruiser meek as could be.

I PUT the drive in low and pulled out of the system. The next planet—Pop had landed on the third—was going through G14 disintegration into asteroids, but I eased through without any trouble and began to pick up speed.

Just then Pop swung around in his seat and made good-luck gesture eight and long-life gesture twelve toward the planet we'd left.

I stared at him. "I don't get it," I said. "Just a while ago you agreed that was an ugly hunk of rock. You even made contempt gesture fifteen—you spat on it."

"That's right," said Pop. "I did, didn't I? Right into a pool of brackish water." Then he began to chuckle. He kept on chuckling for five years, until I got annoyed and slapped his nerve center again.

Aside from that, the return voyage was uneventful.

E N D

THE POSSIBLE IMPOSSIBLE

When referring to technological advances, the word "impossible" must be used, if at all, with utmost caution. We should not forget, however, that all speculation on nuclear power sources is still founded on rather shaky ground. Thus, we render our cause a service of dubious value by referring to such vague potentialities. I, for one, am not yet convinced that within the next quarter of a century we will have a nuclear drive that could economically compete with chemical power plants.

—WERNHER VON BRAUN

IT WAS A DULL, ROUTINE LITTLE WORLD. IT DIDN'T EVEN HAVE A CITY.

EVERYTHING IT HAD WAS

IN THE GARDEN

BY R. A. LAFFERTY

THE protozoic recorder chirped like a bird. Not only would there be life traces on that little moon, but it would be a lively place. So they skipped several steps in the procedure.

The chordata discerner read *Positive* over most of the surface. There was spinal fluid on that orb, rivers of it. So again they omitted several tests and went to the cognition scanner. Would it show Thought on the body?

Naturally they did not get results at once, nor did they expect to; it required a fine adjustment. But they were disappointed that they found nothing for several hours as they hovered high over the rotation. Then it came—clearly and definitely, but from

quite a small location only.

"Limited," said Steiner, "as though within a pale. As though there were but one city, if that is its form. Shall we follow the rest of the surface to find another, or concentrate on this? It'll be twelve hours before it's back in our ken if we let it go now."

"Let's lock on this one and finish the scan. Then we can do the rest of the world to make sure we've missed nothing," said Stark.

There was one more test to run, one very tricky and difficult of analysis, that with the Extraordinary Perception Locator. This was designed simply to locate a source of superior thought. But this might be so varied or so unfamiliar that often both the machine and the designer of it were puzzled as to how to read the results.

The E. P. Locator had been designed by Glaser. But when the Locator had refused to read *Positive* when turned on the inventor himself, bad blood developed between machine and man. Glaser knew that he had extraordinary perception. He was a much honored man in his field. He told the machine so heatedly.

The machine replied, with such warmth that its relays chattered, that Glaser did *not* have extraordinary perception; he had only ordinary perception to an extraordinary degree. There is a *difference,* the machine insisted.

It was for this reason that Glaser used that model no more, but built others more amenable. And it was for this reason also that the owners of Little Probe had acquired the original machine so cheaply.

And there was no denying that the Extraordinary Perception Locator (or Eppel) was a contrary machine. On Earth it had read *Positive* on a number of crack-pots, including Waxey Sax, a jazz tootler who could not even read music. But it had also read *Positive* on ninety per cent of the acknowledged superior minds of the Earth. In space it had been a sound guide to the unusual intelligences encountered. Yet on Suzuki-Mi it had read *Positive* on a two-inch-long worm, only one of them out of billions. For the countless identical worms no trace of anything at all was shown by the test.

So it was with mixed expectations that Steiner locked onto the area and got a flick. He then narrowed to a smaller area (apparently one individual, though this could not be certain) and got very definite action. Eppel was busy. The machine had a touch of the ham in it, and assumed an air of importance when it ran these tests.

Finally it signaled the result, the most exasperating result it ever produces: the sin-

gle orange light. It was the equivalent of the shrug of the shoulders in a man. They called it the "You tell *me* light."

So among the intelligences there was at least one that might be extraordinary, though possibly in a crackpot way. It is good to be forewarned.

"SCAN the remainder of the world, Steiner," said Stark, "and the rest of us will get some sleep. If you find no other spot then we will go down on that one the next time it is in position under us, in about twelve hours."

"You don't want to visit any of the other areas first? Somewhere away from the thoughtful creature?"

"No. The rest of the world may be dangerous. There must be a reason that thought is in one spot only. If we find no others then we will go down boldly and visit this."

So they all, except Steiner, went off to their bunks then: Stark, the Captain; Gregory Gilbert, the executive officer; Wolfgang Langweilig, the engineer; Casper Craig, supercargo, tycoon and 51% owner of the Little Probe, and F. R. Briton, S.J., a Jesuit priest who was linguist and checker champion of the craft.

Dawn did not come to the moon-town. The Little Probe hovered stationary in the light and the moon-town came up under the dawn. Then the Probe went down to visit whatever was there.

"There's no town," said Steiner. "Not a building. Yet we're on the track of the minds. There's nothing but a meadow and some boscage, a sort of fountain or pool, and four streams coming out of it."

"Keep on towards the minds," said Stark. "They're our target."

"Not a building, not two sticks or stones placed together. That looks like an Earth-type sheep there. And that looks like an Earth-lion, I'm almost afraid to say. And those two . . . why, they could well be Earth-people. But with a difference. Where is that bright light coming from?"

"I don't know, but they're right in the middle of it. Land here. We'll go to meet them at once. Timidity has never been an efficacious tool with us."

Well, they were people. And one could only wish that all people were like them. There was a man and a woman, and they were clothed either in very bright garments or in no garments at all, but only in a very bright light.

"Talk to them, Father Briton," said Stark. "You are the linguist."

"Howdy," said the priest.

He may or may not have been understood, but the two of them smiled at him, so he went on.

"Father Briton from Philadelphia," he said, "on detached service. And you, my good man, what is your handle, your monicker, your tag?"

"Ha-Adamah," said the man.

"And your daughter, or niece?"

It may be that the shining man frowned momentarily at this; but the woman smiled, proving that she was human.

"The woman is named Hawwah," said the man. "The sheep is named sheep, the lion is named lion, the horse is named horse and the hoolock is named hoolock."

"I understand. It is possible that this could go on and on. How is it that you use the English tongue?"

"I have only one tongue; but it is given to us to be understood by all; by the eagle, by the squirrel, by the ass, by the English."

"We happen to be bloody Yankees, but we use a borrowed tongue. You wouldn't have a drink on you for a tubful of thirsty travellers, would you?"

"The fountain."

"Ah—I see."

BUT the crew all drank of the fountain to be sociable. It was water, but water that excelled, cool and with all its original bubbles like the first water ever made.

"What do you make of them?" asked Stark.

"Human," said Steiner. "It may even be that they are a little more than human. I don't understand that light that surrounds them. And they seem to be clothed, as it were, in dignity."

"And very little else," said Father Briton, "though that light trick does serve a purpose. But I'm not sure they'd pass in Philadelphia."

"Talk to them again," said Stark. "You're the linguist."

"That isn't necessary here, Captain. Talk to them yourself."

"Are there any other people here?" Stark asked the man.

"The two of us. Man and woman."

"But are there any others?"

"How would there be any others? What other kind of people could there be than man and woman?"

"But is there more then one man or woman?"

"How could there be more than one of anything?"

The captain was a little puzzled by this, but he went on doggedly: "Ha-Adamah, what do you think that we are? Are we not people?"

"You are not anything till I name you. But I will name you and then you can be. You are named Captain. He is named Priest. He is named Engineer. He is named Flunky."

"Thanks a lot," said Steiner.

"But are we not people?" persisted Captain Stark.

"No. We are the people. There are no people but two. How could there be other people?"

"And the damnest thing about it," muttered Langweilig, "is, how are you going to prove him wrong? But it does give you a small feeling."

"Can we have something to eat?" asked the Captain.

"Pick from the trees," said Ha-Adamah, "and then it may be that you will want to sleep on the grass. Being not of human nature (which does not need sleep or rest), it may be that you require respite. But you are free to enjoy the garden and its fruits."

"We will," said Captain Stark.

They wandered about the place, but they were uneasy. There were the animals. The lion and lioness were enough to make one cautious, though they offered no harm. The two bears had a puzzling look, as though they wanted either to frolic with you or to mangle you.

"If there are only two people here," said Casper Craig, "then it may be that the rest of the world is not dangerous at all. It looked fertile wherever we scanned it, though not so fertile as this central bit. And those rocks would bear examining."

"Flecked with gold, and possibly with something else," said Stark. "A very promising site."

"And everything grows here," added Steiner. "Those are Earth-fruits and I never saw finer. I've tasted the grapes and plums and pears. The figs and dates are superb, the quince is as flavorsome as a quince can be, the cherries are excellent. And I never did taste such oranges. But I haven't yet tried the—" and he stopped.

"If you're thinking what I'm afraid to think," said Gilbert, "then it will be the test at least: whether we're having a pleasant dream or whether this is reality. Go ahead and eat one."

"I won't be the first to eat one. You eat."

"Ask him first. You ask him."

"Ha-Adamah, is it allowed to eat the apples?"

"Certainly. Eat. It is the finest fruit in the garden."

"WELL, the analogy breaks down there," said Stark. "I was almost beginning to believe in the thing. But if it isn't that, then what. Father Briton, you are the linguist, but in Hebrew does not Ha-Adamah and Hawwah mean—?"

"Of course they do. You know that as well as I."

"I was never a believer. But would it be possible for the exact same proposition to maintain here as on Earth?"

"All things are possible."

And it was then that Ha-Adamah, the shining man, gave a wild cry: "No, no. Do not approach it. It is not allowed to eat of that one!"

It was the pomegranate tree, and he was warning Langweilig away from it.

"Once more, Father," said Stark, "you should be the authority; but does not the idea that it was the apple that was forbidden go back only to a medieval painting?"

"It does. The name of the fruit is not mentioned in Genesis. In Hebrew exegesis, however, the pomegranate is usually indicated."

"I thought so. Question the man further, Father. This is too incredible."

"It is a little odd. Adam, old man, how long have you been here?"

"Forever less six days is the answer that has been given to me. I never did understand the answer, however."

"And have you gotten no older in all that time?"

"I do not understand what 'older' is. I am as I have been from the beginning."

"And do you think that you will ever die?"

"To die I do not understand. I am taught that it is a property of fallen nature to die, and that does not pertain to me or mine."

"And are you completely happy here?"

"Perfectly happy according to my preternatural state. But I am taught that it might be possible to lose that happiness, and then to seek it vainly through all the ages. I am taught that sickness and ageing and even death could come if this happiness were ever lost. I am taught that on at least one other unfortunate world it has actually been lost."

"Do you consider yourself a knowledgeable man?"

"Yes, since I am the only man, and knowledge is natural to man. But I am further blessed. I have a preternatural intellect."

Then Stark cut in once more: "There must be some one question you could ask him, Father. Some way to settle it. I am becoming nearly convinced."

"Yes, there is a question that will settle it. Adam, old man, how about a game of checkers?"

"This is hardly the time for clowning," said Stark.

"I'm not clowning, Captain. How about it, Adam? I'll give you choice of colors and first move."

"No. It would be no contest. I have a preternatural intellect."

"Well, I beat a barber who was champion of Germantown. And I beat the champion of Morgan County, Tennessee, which is the hottest checker center on Earth. I've played against, and beaten,

machines. But I never played a preternatural mind. Let's just set up the board, Adam, and have a go at it."

"No. It would be no contest. I would not like to humble you."

THEY were there for three days. They were delighted with the place. It was a world with everything, and it seemed to have only two inhabitants. They went everywhere except into the big cave.

"What is there, Adam?" asked Capain Stark.

"The great serpent lives there. I would not disturb him. He has long been cranky because plans he had for us did not materialize. But we are taught that should ever evil come to us, which it cannot if we persevere, it will come by him."

They learned no more of the real nature of the sphere in their time there. Yet all but one of them were convinced of the reality when they left. And they talked of it as they took off.

"A crowd would laugh if told of it," said Stark, "but not many would laugh if they had actually seen the place, or them. I am not a gullible man, but I am convinced of this: that this is a pristine and pure world and that ours and all the others we have visited are fallen worlds. Here are the prototypes of our first parents before their fall. They are garbed in light and innocence, and they have the happiness that we have been seeking for centuries. It would be a crime if anyone disturbed that happiness."

"I too am convinced," said Steiner. "It is Paradise itself, where the lion lies down with the lamb, and where the serpent has not prevailed. It would be the darkest of crimes if we or others should play the part of the serpent, and intrude and spoil."

"I am probably the most skeptical man in the world," said Casper Craig the tycoon, "but I do believe my eyes. I have been there and seen it. It is indeed an unspoiled Paradise; and it would be a crime calling to the wide heavens for vengeance for anyone to smirch in any way that perfection.

"So much for that. Now to business. Gilbert, take a gram: Ninety Million Square Miles of Pristine Paradise for Sale or Lease. Farming, Ranching, exceptional opportunities for Horticulture. Gold, Silver, Iron, Earth-Type Fauna. Terms. Special Rates for Large Settlement Parties. Write, Gram, or call in person at any of our planetary offices as listed below. Ask for Brochure — Eden Acres Unlimited."

DOWN in the great cave that Old Serpent, a two-legged one among whose

names were "Snake-Oil Sam," spoke to his underlings:

"It'll take them fourteen days to get back with the settlers. We'll have time to overhaul the blasters. We haven't had any well-equipped settlers for six weeks. It used to be we'd hardly have time to strip and slaughter and stow before there was another batch to take care of."

"I think you'd better write me some new lines," said Adam. "I feel like a goof saying those same ones to each bunch."

"You are a goof, and therefore perfect for the part. I was in show business long enough to know never to change a line too soon. I did change Adam and Eve to Ha-Adamah and Hawwah, and the apple to the pomegranate. People aren't becoming any smarter—but they are becoming better researched, and they insist on authenticity.

"This is still a perfect come-on here. There is something in human nature that cannot resist the idea of a Perfect Paradise. Folks will whoop and holler to their neighbors to come in droves to spoil and mar it. It isn't greed or the desire for new land so much—though that is strong too. Mainly it is the feverish passion to befoul and poison what is unspoiled. Fortunately I am sagacious enough to take advantage of this trait. And when you start to farm a new world on a shoestring you have to acquire your equipment as you can."

He looked proudly around at the great cave with its mountains and tiers of materials, heavy machinery of all sorts, titanic crates of foodstuff space-sealed; wheeled, tracked, propped, vaned and jetted vehicles; and power packs to run a world.

He looked at the three dozen space ships stripped and stacked, and at the rather large pile of bone-meal in one corner.

"We will have to have another lion," said Eve. "Bowser is getting old, and Marie-Yvette abuses him and gnaws his toes. And we do have to have a big-maned lion to lie down with the lamb."

"I know it, Eve. The lion is a very important prop. Maybe one of the crackpot settlers will bring a new lion."

"And can't you mix another kind of shining paint? This itches. It's hell."

"I'm working on it."

CASPER CRAIG was still dictating the gram:

"Amazing quality of longevity seemingly inherent in the locale. Climate ideal. Daylight or half-light. All twenty-one hours from Planet Delphina and from Sol. Pure water for all industrial purposes. Scenic and storied. Zoning and pre-settlement restrictions to insure congenial neighbors. A

completely plannned globular settlement in a near arm of our own galaxy. Low taxes and liberal credit. Financing our specialty—"

"And you had better have an armed escort when you return," said Father Briton.

"Why in cosmos would we want an armed escort?"

"It's as phony as a seven-credit note!"

"You, a man of the cloth doubt it? And us ready skeptics convinced by our senses? Why do you doubt?"

"It is only the unbelieving who believe so easily in obvious frauds. Theologically unsound, dramaturgically weak, philologically impossible, zoologically rigged, salted conspicuously with gold and shot through with anachronisms. And moreover he was afraid to play me at checkers."

"What?"

"If I have a preternatural intellect I wouldn't be afraid of a game of checkers with anyone. Yet there was an unusual mind there somewhere; it was just that he chose not to make our acquaintance personally."

"They looked at the priest thoughtfully.

"But it was Paradise in one way," said Steiner at last.

"How?"

"All the time we were there the woman did not speak."

END

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THE WELL OF THE DEEP

By LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

IN the center of the table stood a miniature sun. In other places, on other tables, it might have been taken for a not-too-effective table lamp, since its plastic surface diffused the yellow light feebly. In the board room of Solar Productions, it was a sun.

Bruce Kalder relaxed dreamily, and watched the "sun" flicker on and off when the chairman of the board thumped on the table. Old Holbertson was powerfully worked up about something, but he had talked in such long-winded circles that Kalder had abandoned hope of finding out what was bothering him.

A billion burrowing humans had made a world under the Earth's crust—now one man had to keep it from being in vain.

WISH

Kalder suppressed a yawn, and looked across the table at June Holbertson. "She shouldn't wear low-cut dresses to board meetings," he thought. He'd been intentionally avoiding looking at her because he didn't want the board members to think that his appointment was mainly due to her influence. But it was a foolish attitude to take. They probably already knew it, and besides, everyone else in the room was watching her. Everyone except old Holbertson.

She smiled faintly, and winked at him.

Old Holbertson thumped the table again, and paused to take a sip of water. "Kalder," he shouted, "this is damned serious, and it's your problem. What are you going to do about it?"

Kalder turned slowly, and faced the chairman of the board. From a condition of easy relaxation he had been slammed into one of stomach-twisting panic. His hands lay paralyzed on the arms of his chair. His dry tongue touched his dry lips, and recoiled.

Old Holbertson had talked for maybe twenty minutes, and Kalder had listened attentively most of that time, and he hadn't any idea what problem had the old man so upset. Worse, he still didn't have much of an idea as to what his job was supposed to be.

June came to his rescue.

"Uncle Emmanuel, this is Bruce's first board meeting. Don't you think he should know more about the problem before we ask him to solve it?"

Old Holbertson sputtered. "He's been on the job since this morning, hasn't he? What's he been doing?"

From the other end of the table, Paul Holbertson spoke. "Takes more than three hours for a man to learn his way around this place."

"Bah!" old Holbertson said. "If he doesn't know where the men's room is by this time he . . ."

"I move," Paul Holbertson said, "that we ask Mr. Kalder to have a full report ready for the next board meeting."

Seconded and passed. Kalder breathed easily once more, but he did not relax again.

WHEN the meeting broke up, Paul Holbertson crooked a finger at Kalder, and he and June followed him out. "My office, I think," Paul said. He escorted them in, and found chairs for them.

June sat down, and lit a cigarette. "Thanks, Dad," she said.

Kalder said, "I thought I was going to be fired before I'd learned what all the buttons on my desk mean. Look —I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I listened as attentively as I could, and I still don't know the problem."

"Emmanuel rambles," Paul said. "Getting on in years. He'll retire in another year or so, and we'll miss him. Given some alternatives, he's almost infallible in making the right decision. Trouble is, in this case we have no alternatives. We have nothing. But you don't know what the problem is. We're having trouble with our writers. Hence your title, Director of Writer Personnel."

"What sort of trouble are you having?"

Paul Holbertson took a long time getting a cigar lit. He leaned back, stared at the ceiling, and puffed deeply. "They don't write," he said.

"Yes," he went on. "We have competent men. We know, by their past performances. We pay the highest rates paid anywhere. We have the best writer's Tank in the industry, and we operate it at peak efficiency. And they don't write. We've always maintained a big inventory, fortunately, and kept more writers than we really needed, so we would have a big output and enough quality to keep us on top. But the situation has really been getting worse for years and now it's approaching the critical point. Our inventory has sagged. We've been dipping into the stock of scripts that have already been rejected, and even that won't keep us going much longer. To quote

Emmanuel, this is damned serious.

"Solar Productions leases four wires, and our contract stipulates that we must run twenty-four one-hour films per day on each wire. That adds up to ninety-six films per day, which is a lot of films. We don't have any trouble shooting it. Our organization is tops, there. So are our facilities. We could shoot two hundred a day—if we had the scripts. But we can't get the scripts."

"There hasn't been any reduction in personnel?" Kalder asked.

"Certainly not. We have more writers than we've ever had, and we keep hiring them. We hire some that frankly are not qualified, just in the hope they'll produce *something* for us. The quality keeps going down, and the number of scripts turned in gets less almost daily."

"We," Kalder said, with a heroic attempt at nonchalance, "need an incentive system. Scrap our contracts. Cut our guaranteed wage to the legal minimum. Pay a bonus for each completed script, and work out a system of bonuses for quality."

Paul Holbertson shrugged, and waved his cigar. "Obviously we did all that. Long ago. It didn't help. And I'll tell you one more thing that didn't work out, just so you won't try it. I got the foggy idea that the Tank was involved in some way, so I closed it down for a month. It damned near ruined us. Production dropped literally to zero. It spurted a little when I opened it up again, but not for long, and it's been dropping ever since. Well—get to work on it. And remember this—no childishly simple idea is going to solve this thing. We have some highly capable people on our staff, and none of them can cope with it. The trouble is, we're dealing with writers, and writers, damn them, are artists. They're a super-human branch of the species, or maybe it's sub-human. They don't function normally, even when they act normally. They spend their lives giving tangible form to the intangible, pulling things out of their imagination and making them real, and that's something neither you nor I will ever understand. All I can say is, good luck."

"Thank you," Kalder said.

It was a big chance—a chance any of his friends would have jumped at gleefully. He also had a hunch that, as far as the Holbertsons were concerned, it was his only chance.

Either he showed them that he was worthy of June, or they showed June how incompetent he was. They were a hard-boiled family. And all he had to work on was a prob-

lem that'd had them stumped for years!

BY his third day on the job Kalder had learned his way about the executive and editorial offices and gained a passing familiarity with the files. He decided to visit the writers' Tank. The company's swing train had just left, but since his new job was depriving him of his usual daily exercise in tennis and swimming, the idea of walking appealed to him.

He was carefully briefed on the route before he left, but he ran into trouble immediately. Q tunnel, which was the direct route to the Main, was blocked off. A guard waved him away as he started to enter. The last of the Q tunnel population was moving out. Men, women and children slouched past him. Each man cradled a TV set preciously in his arms. Women and children carried pathetic bundles of belongings. A few women also carried TV sets—lucky families, to have two!

"What's up?" Kalder asked the guard.

"Radiation seepage," the guard said shortly.

Kalder walked a short distance and turned off into a narrow passageway, thinking he might find his way through to the Main without going all the way to R tunnel. There were numbered doorways along the passage, but few doors. In the rooms beyond there were people, and at least one TV set. Sometimes there were several. Men, women and children sat around them, watching intently.

The passage divided, divided again, and gradually narrowed. At one point he met a woman, and they had to edge past each other sideways. He left the area of living quarters behind him, and paused in surprise to contemplate the unbroken walls of the passageway. He vaguely recalled reports of a critical housing shortage. The reports were certainly true, because the number of TV sets he had seen in some of the rooms could only mean that several families were living there. But there would be room for a lot of families on this passageway, if someone would do some digging.

Eventually he found his way through to the Main. The huge, brightly lighted tunnel swarmed with humanity. Government swing trains came at regular intervals, moving slowly as their tractor drivers shouted people out of the way. Long lines waited in front of the supply depots. Many factory shifts were changing, the men of the new shift reporting with glum faces for their hour's labor.

Kalder stepped into the doorway of a medical clinic, amazed, watching house-

wives jostle for position in a fresh meat queue. He had passed this way many times before, but always in a swing train or private car. He had passed through blindly. Now he was seeing, for the first time, that vast lower class politely referred to as *the people.*

He saw them as potential customers of Solar Productions, which made them important to him.

As he continued to watch, he saw them as human beings like himself. And in some way which he did not exactly understand, that made them more important.

IT was afternoon when he reached Solar Productions' producing unit. He went to the executives' dining room for a late lunch before he rode the elevator down to the Tank. His name brought him a quick interview with Barney Fulton, the Tank's manager.

Barney was a kindly old man who had been with Solar in one capacity or another all his working life. "The boss said you'd be around," he said. "I'll give you any help I can, but, hell, I haven't got any answers."

"I'll have to ask some foolish questions, because all of this is new to me," Kalder told him. "Now—just what is the Tank?"

"It used to belong to Production," Barney said. "They still use it when they need it, but that's only for the big scenes. Even then the writers kick up a fuss about it. They've pretty well taken the place over. The same thing has happened at the other studios. The Tank is supposed to give them ideas. Maybe it does. Who knows how a writer thinks? Jeff Powell, he writes nothing but love stories, but when he comes in here he goes on an adventure jag. Maybe that gives him ideas for love stories. Who knows?"

Kalder scratched his head, and said, "I don't. Maybe you'd better let me look at it."

"Sure." Barney went over to the door of his office, and shouted. "Pete! This is Mr. Kalder, the new vice-president. Take him through the Tank, and don't let him get killed."

Pete gave Kalder a broad grin, and led him away.

They signed in at one of the Tank's entrances, and stepped through a doorway to a scene of overwhelming grandeur. The spaciousness fairly took Kalder's breath away. Accustomed all his life to rooms and passageways, he could only stand and stare.

Ahead of them was a tangled jungle. Beyond it a hill rose steeply, and beyond that, other hills. There were glimpses of forests, of distant mountains. Overhead the ceiling arched upwards and upwards and away to a far dis-

tant, brightly lit dome.

"Pretty big, eh?" Pete said proudly.

"It's tremendous," Kalder said.

"We have it on a twenty-four hour day—day and night and everything. At night we turn off the lights and turn on the stars. We got a moon, too. Come on. We'd better stay clear of the jungle. They're shooting a jungle film there, this afternoon."

THEY skirted the jungle, climbed a tall hill, and stood looking down on the lovely, still blueness of a lake.

"Where to?" Pete asked.

Kalder consulted his notebook. "I'd like to look around, to see what the place is like. And then—do you know a writer named Walter Donald?"

"Sure. Big fellow, with blond hair. I know all the older ones. They've picked up some new ones lately, but not many of them have been using the Tank."

"I'd like to find Donald."

"I'll call in."

Pete went over to a control point to make his call, and came back shaking his head. "They dunno where he is. He probably didn't make any special request. Sometimes a writer just looks around until he finds something that interests him."

"I see," Kalder said. He'd been checking through a lot of records, and he had a hunch that Donald could give him a clue as to what was wrong with the writers. Donald had been the most prolific man on the staff, even though his output had fallen along with that of the others. Then suddenly, a month before, his work had stopped all together. Kalder found that Donald had entered the Tank and stayed there. He had signed in, and he had not signed out. He could not be located anywhere. Kalder wanted to know what he was doing.

"Donald has been in here for a month," he said to Pete. "Isn't that a little long to be just looking around?"

"Well," Pete said, "he's a writer . . ."

Down in the jungle, an elephant trumpeted and a rifle shot rang out.

Kalder shivered, and sat down on the thick, simulated grass at the hilltop. Below him, a man rowed a small boat along the lake shore. Pete handed Kalder his binoculars. "It's Jeff Powell," he said.

Kalder watched the awkward movements of the man in the boat. "Where would be a good place to look for Donald?"

"Couldn't say. If he hasn't asked for anything special, he could be anywhere. It's a big place."

"I think I'd better talk to Barney," Kalder said.

He went to the control point, and asked Barney to have his men keep a lookout for Walter Donald. Barney said he'd have the concessionaires look for him; if Donald had been in the Tank a month he had to be getting food from somewhere or he was dead. Kalder told him he'd check again later.

In the boat on the lake, Jeff Powell was getting ready to fish. Kalder had seen enough films to understand what he was doing. In fact, he thought he could have given him a few pointers.

After half a dozen timid gestures, Powell managed a feeble cast. As his lure hit the water the lake boiled and erupted. Powell knelt in the boat, pole bent double, and battled the monstrous fish.

A trio of shark fins crossed the lake in precise formation, and circled the boat. Powell hauled valiantly on his line. The fish sounded, returned to the surface, suddenly shot off under the boat. Powell spun, lost his balance, and toppled overboard.

"Damn," Pete said. "There he goes again."

Kalder raised his binoculars and watched Powell drown. It was a drawn-out process. He gurgled and threshed, and his pathetic cries were frightening. Finally he sank out of sight.

"Barney said one more time would be the end of it," Pete said. "We're not going to let him near the water again until he learns how to swim. Now we get another $16 resuscitation bill."

TWO men came hurrying along the shore. They splashed into the water, hauled out Powell and carried him away.

"We ought to leave him be dead," Pete said. "He don't write nothing but love stories anyway."

"If he writes anything at all," Kalder said, "we need him."

An airplane roared overhead. Kalder watched it curiously, saw a man jump, saw a parachute billow out. It floated down towards the lake. The shark fins converged immediately as the man hit the water. He got a raft inflated, and pulled himself in just as the sharks made their rush.

Pete chuckled. "If Barney ever put teeth in them sharks, you'd be missing a lot of writers."

Kalder continued to watch the airplane, which cut its motors abruptly and was lowered to the ground behind the trees on the other side of the lake.

Another shot rang out in the jungle. Kalder got to his feet, and they circled the lake. At the next control point Pete called in.

"Donald is hanging out around Area Five," he said.

"That's the big forest over yonder."

"What's he doing there?"

"Don't know. That's where he's been eating. One of the concession men knows him. Want to find him?"

"If we can."

"We'll take a look."

Beyond the lake, they came to a desert. They plodded onwards, sinking deeply into loose sand. In a small ravine they saw a man lying. His clothing was ragged, his figure emaciated. He croaked after them, "Water!"

They walked on. "That's Bill Morris," Pete said. "He asked Barney what it felt like to die of thirst. Barney told him to go out in the desert and find out."

Kalder nodded. Some of the writers used the Tank as a direct source of information. Others seemed to use it as a diversion—like Jeff Powell, who came in for adventure. Bill Morris would be getting an excellent idea of what it would be like to die of thirst in a desert. Except—He'd certainly been at it for several days, and that was a big investment in time in order to get the background for maybe one scene in an hour film. He might be able to use the background in several scripts. But still . . .

They left the desert and came to gently rolling farm land. Cattle grazed by a small, meandering stream. Oddly enough, they were real cattle.

Never having seen any, Kalder stopped to stare. They were eating something which had been spread out on the ground for them.

Pete pulled Kalder to the right, and they entered a forest. "Area Five," he announced.

THE synthetic trees were large, and well-spaced. Synthetic grass covered the ground between them. There was no undergrowth.

"Shouldn't be hard to find him," Pete said.

They separated, and met again further on, in a clearing. Kalder thumped on metal, and looked upwards. "What's this?"

"Vent," Pete said. "Solar power inlet. They're all over the place."

"What's inside?"

"Machinery and stuff."

Kalder circled around the vent. The thing was enormous but he quickly lost interest in it and studied the surrounding forest. His hand came in contact with a door handle. He stopped in surprise, and opened the door.

The vent stretched upwards an interminable distance, and ended in a blaze of light. Kalder staggered backwards, hands clasped to his eyes. It was a moment before his vision returned to him, and when it did he saw,

a couple of feet below the door, a metal grating that spanned the vent. On the grating lay a man.

Pete was beside him, looking in. "That's Donald," he said.

It was a big man, a blond man, but his skin was burned black. Kalder said in alarm, "Donald?"

"Let me alone," Donald said. "Get the hell out of here."

He lay face down on the grating. He was nude, and he did not move when he spoke.

"Maybe he's sick," Pete said. "He don't look so good. Shall we take him out?"

Donald sat up. "Sick?" The dark skin of his face twisted with convulsive bitterness. "You're the sick ones. The dead ones. I'm getting some sunshine. This is one of the few places on this cursed planet where any can be had. Care to join me? Then get out! And leave me alone."

Kalder introduced himself. He was, he explained, concerned about Donald because he'd been in the Tank for a month, and because he wasn't doing any writing. Would Donald mind telling Kalder what he was trying to do?

"I'm trying to bore myself," Donald said.

He lay down again, and added, "It isn't easy."

Kalder and Pete withdrew quietly, and closed the door.

"Out," Kalder said. Pete obligingly led him to the nearest exit.

KALDER sought out his father that evening, to the older man's intense surprise.

Doctor Kalder had wanted his son to study medicine. Kalder knew only too well the deadly monotony of the medical profession. Besides, he had no difficulty in finding more amusing ways of spending his time.

It was only when he found that June's family sternly disapproved of a young man of twenty-seven who had no occupation or profession that he decided to go to work.

Doctor Kalder was on night duty at a small branch clinic. There were no patients, and the doctor had the place to himself.

"How is the job going?" he asked. He had been relieved when his son finally decided to do something.

"I don't know," Kalder said. "Tell me, dad, what's the value of TV?"

The doctor smiled slowly. "My guess would be that without it we'd have a serious situation on our hands in a matter of days. Maybe a revolution. Why?"

"Tell me why?" Kalder said. And as the doctor looked at him in perplexity, he added, "I just want to hear someone talk about it."

The doctor sighed. "So it

has you discouraged already. You'll have to learn to apply yourself, Bruce. What will happen to the human race if you youngsters shirk your responsibilities? When the big move comes there won't be enough educated and professional people to keep things going."

"TV," Kalder reminded him. "Why?"

"There's nothing for people to do—most people. It keeps them occupied. That's pretty obvious, isn't it?"

"It seems to me that there's lots of things people could be doing. We keep hearing about the housing shortage. I saw a mob of people moving out of Q tunnel over in Section 27. There won't be any places for them to go unless they move in with someone else. They have all that time to watch TV. Why doesn't someone put them to digging?"

"It's been tried," the doctor said. "They won't do it. That's what brought on the last riot, seven—no, eight years ago."

"Why won't they do it?"

"They're satisfied with things the way they are. The four hours a week they accept, because it's always been that way. As long as we're able to feed and clothe them, and they're healthy, and they have fifteen films to choose from every hour, they won't take more. Oh, they'd like better quarters if someone else would fix them. But, as for doing it themselves—why, the men grumble about that for hours, and the women grumble about the time they spend waiting to buy their supplies.

"I see," Kalder said. He got to his feet. "How many doctors will we have thirty years from now?"

"Enough for the present situation. Health is pretty well under control, down here."

"But supposing we're ever able to get back to the surface?"

"We won't have enough of anything."

"I wish someone had spelled this out for me ten years ago."

"I tried, Bruce," the doctor said. "I tried my best. Maybe I didn't spell very well."

"Maybe I didn't listen very well. But—thanks."

Before he went home to his own plush quarters in the Bachelor's Club of Section 317—the section of the wealthy—he walked around for a long time in a maze of passageways, looking through doorways at the flickering TV sets.

PAUL Holbertson bent over the charts, and fingered one thoughtfully. "Mmm, yes. I can see you're working at it. We didn't try this. Getting anywhere?"

June leaned forward anxiously, her hands clasped.

"I can state the problem," Kalder said.

"The problem is that they're not writing."

"No. That's only one result. The problem is they have lost interest in their subject matter. And they have lost contact with reality."

Paul Holbertson grinned slyly. He said to June, "You'll have to keep this boy away from the library."

"I've done some reading," Kalder said. "I've studied my charts. And I've talked with a lot of writers. With a recorder. Listen."

The voice was Walter Donald's bitter, accusative. "I shall write no more comedies about pirate ships. Or the private lives of queens. Or romances about knights in armor. Or adventures in space. God, what a laugh that is! Man in space—when he can't even get out of a hole in the ground! We're drugging the people and ourselves with stories of things that aren't, and can't be—and I'm beginning to doubt that they ever were. Those things I can't write, and I won't. What I can write I don't know."

Kalder snapped it off.

The president of Solar Productions said soberly, "This is more serious than I thought. Are they all like that?"

"They're all getting that way. Are our competitors having the same trouble?"

"I haven't any direct information, of course, but I'm certain they are. Only yesterday I suggested to Roger Atley that we might be willing to give up one of our wires, so we could concentrate more on quality productions. He practically begged me not to think of such a thing. Which means he'd have a tough time finding someone who could provide material for it. Where do we go from here?"

"We try to think of a way to renew their interest in their subject matter and put them back in touch with reality. I'm going to the library. By the way, I won't be ready to face the board tomorrow morning."

"I don't think it will be necessary. Leave your charts with me, and write up a short summary of what you've accomplished to date. You've done an interesting thing, here, comparing number of scripts with time spent in the Tank. We'll kick it around, and I'll tell them you'll have some definite recommendations for the next meeting."

June took his arm as they went out, and in the corridor he placed an affectionate kiss on her forehead, and one considerably more affectionate on her lips.

"Going to save the family business?" she said.

"Is it that bad?"

"Every hour on the hour, we have to have four new

films ready. One comedy, one romance, one adventure, and one miscellaneous. That's ninety-six deadlines to meet every day. We've even taken to sneaking an old film in now and then, just to pad things out, but people have terribly long memories, and it will be bad if we're caught. So—yes, it's that bad."

"I believe there's more at stake than you realize," Kalder said.

"What do you mean?"

"Things are much worse than you think."

THE Tank always seemed the same, in spite of the fact that there were different writers around, or writers doing different things. At Area Five Kalder found writer Jeff Powell lying on the synthetic grass, staring at the synthetic forest. If Powell saw Kalder, he ignored him. Walter Donald was in his usual place in the vent. He made it very clear that he would like to ignore Kalder.

"I have a problem," Kalder said, "and I need your help."

Donald rolled over on his stomach. The pattern of the grate was firmly impressed into his dark skin.

"As a special favor," Kalder said, "Will you help me?"

Donald did not look up. "What kind of problem?"

"I'm trying to get a script written. It's about a writer. He and his family live in a small room over in Section 495. He's the only writer that lives around there, and all the other men are factory workers. This writer works hard at writing, and his family can't understand why it takes so much time. The other men work for an hour, and then they come home and watch TV with their families. The writer works long hours, and he has to spend days in the Tank, looking for ideas. He makes good wages, and his family can have luxuries other families can't afford, but his children just can't understand why he's never home to watch TV with them. I can't think of a way to end it. Can you help me out?"

Donald said flatly, "Nuts. Didn't you ever read Code? They'd never film a thing like that."

"Of course they'll film it, if I can get it written. Question is, could you write it? I realize you've never done anything like that, and if you don't think you could handle it, just say the word. I'll look for someone else."

Donald sat up. He stared dully at Kalder, his scowl wrinkling dark lines in his dark forehead. The sunlight had bleached his blond hair to a startling whiteness. He said, "I know Code forwards and backwards. I could get fired for wasting time on something like that."

"I'm taking the responsi-

bility," Kalder said. "Could you write it?"

"I don't know." He got up, and climbed out of the vent. "A writer, you say? How many children?"

"That's up to you. How many children do you have?"

"Three. Three children. They want him to watch TV with them, you say? But he hates TV, of course, because he writes scripts for TV, so whenever they turn it on he . . ."

He pulled on his clothing and wandered away, mumbling to himself.

KALDER went back to the edge of the woods, and sat down beside Powell. Powell did not look at him. "In autumn," he said, "the leaves turn color. Nature paints a masterpiece in the forest. By and by, the leaves fall to the ground. If I waited here long enough, do you suppose these leaves would change color and fall?"

"Those leaves will never change color," Kalder said.

Powell winced. He regarded Kalder gravely. "Friend, have you ever seen a tree? No, not this junk. A real tree. Have you ever felt one? I've put lots of trees into my scripts, but I never saw a tree. Isn't that ridiculous? What does a tree feel like? What does it taste like? Can you taste a tree?"

"You write romance, don't you?" Kalder asked the writer.

"When I write, I write romances. Romances with trees. Meet me under the green willow tree, my love. The weeping green willow tree. Do you know what a weeping green willow tree looks like? Production doesn't. I went to the library once, and found a picture. Production made my weeping green willow tree into an oak."

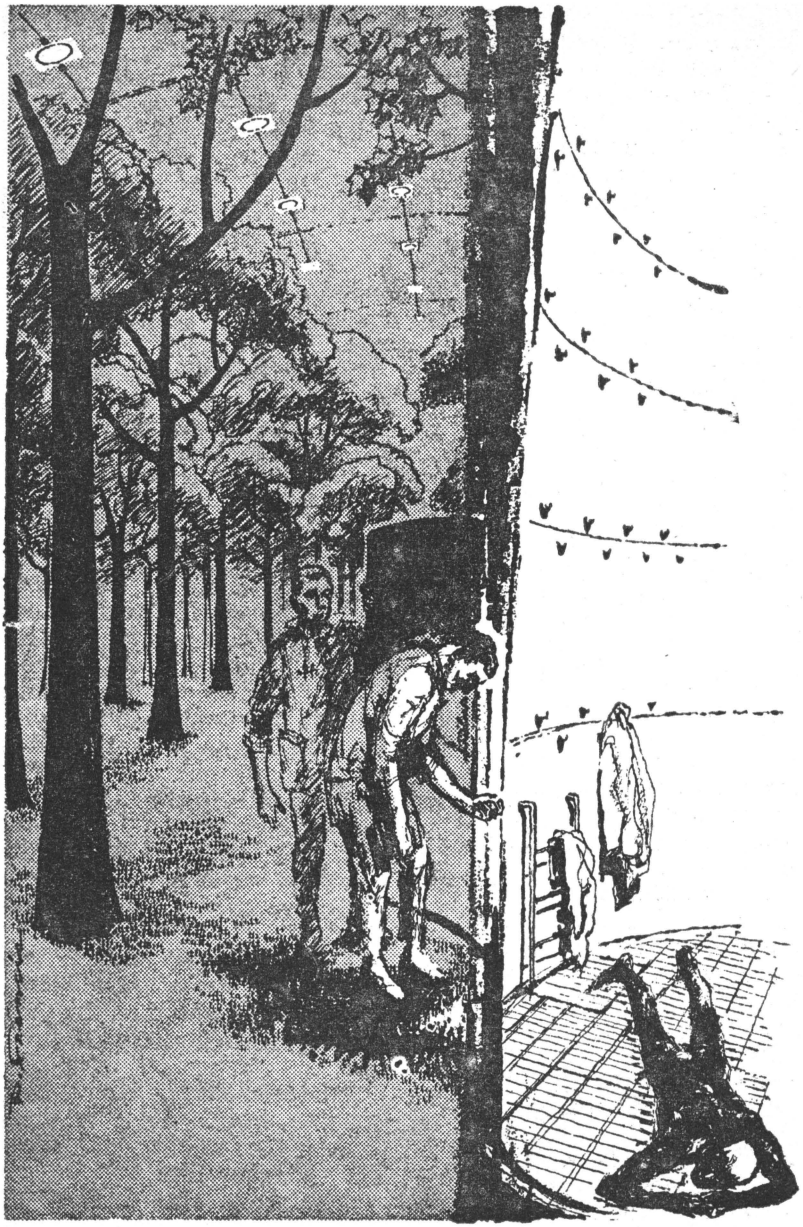
"According to the records, you've written a few comedies, too. Think you could handle a romantic comedy?"

"I am not feeling funny these days."

"This would be different. There's a man who works in a factory, and he can't get along with his foreman. They hate each other, and they're always fighting about something. Then the foreman's son falls in love with this guy's daughter. The two mothers get to know each other, and they try to help the kids while the two men are trying to keep them apart. I suppose it would be quite a job to keep it funny. If you don't think you could do it . . ."

"Yeah," Powell said. "Then the kids decide to break it up, to keep the old men happy, and the old men decide to pretend to be friends to keep the kids happy. Yeah." He pushed himself erect. "Say, mister, did you ever hear about Code? They'd never film it."

"Certainly they'd film it.



I'd take care of that for you."

"If you say so. Let's see, now. The foreman keeps trying to spy on his son, and the other guy keeps trying to spy on his daughter, so the two keep running into each other while . . ."

Kalder slipped quietly away. Wild profanity attracted his attention from the direction of the lake. A writer whom he did not know by sight was attempting to fish, and on his first cast Barney's monster of the deep had snapped his line.

"I have a problem," Kalder said. "I want to get a script written. There's this fellow who lives in a small room with his family, and when radiation seepage makes everyone move out on the next corridor, three families had to move in with them. He doesn't like it, so he goes off to an undeveloped corridor and digs out a new room for his family. Then he decides one room isn't enough, so he digs out two more. Everyone thinks he's crazy, wanting so much space, and when he gets through the government decides he has too much space, so five families are moved in with him. Do you think you can write it?"

The writer dropped his fishing pole. He stuttered, "What—what about Code?"

SOME of the faces were hostile. Several were violently angry. June Holbertson looked hurt; her father seemed merely puzzled.

Kalder said calmly, "I accept full responsibility."

"That's all very well," old Emmanuel Holbertson sputtered. "You accept the responsibility, but it's our reputations that are ruined!"

"To continue my report," Kalder said, "I have organized a small group of the company's writers. They represent ten per cent of the total, and they are out-producing the other ninety per cent at the rate of ten to one. I have had fifty production units assigned to my control. Those units are shooting scripts as fast as my writers can produce them. I have assumed full responsibility for the company's fourth wire, the miscellaneous channel, and for the past two weeks that channel has carried nothing but films I have produced myself. I will ask the Chairman of the Board: Has he received any complaints about the fourth channel programs?"

"I saw some of those films myself, Kalder, and *I'm* complaining!"

"We adopted Code for a good reason, Bruce," Paul Holbertson said. "You shouldn't have thrown it out without discussing it with the board."

"I was given complete authority to take the steps I thought necessary to solve a problem. I have solved the problem. I did discuss what I

intended to do with half-a-dozen top-level government officials, including the head of the Board of Censorship. They approved the project, and I have letters of congratulation from them on the way it's been working out. They think TV is going to help them solve some of their problems. I have checked with the Information Center, and I find that our fourth channel programs have taken over the popularity lead."

"Code," Paul Holbertson said, "is the reason for our existence. You seem to have missed the point entirely. TV has a purpose, and a very important purpose."

"Code was stupid those many years ago when it was adopted. Or is it generations ago? It was stupid then, and now it's idiotic. With your permission I'll give you my reasons for the action I've taken."

Interruptions exploded around the table. A vice president put the motion: the position of Vice President and Director of Writing Personnel to be abolished immediately, and Bruce Kalder dismissed. Seconded and passed.

"Thank you," Kalder said. "I regret that our relationship was so short-lived, but for the time that I have been connected with Solar Productions, I am more grateful than I can tell you."

He turned away with only one regret—June, who sat blinking her eyes to keep back the tears.

He had gained much, and he had lost much, but one of his gains was the realization that there were more important things than his personal happiness.

JUNE left her chair suddenly, and hurried after him. Outside the door, Kalder gripped her arm. "I'd like to show you something," he said.

They caught a company swing train, and rode over to the Tank. Night was approaching in Barney's domain. The ceiling lights were being gradually dimmed. In time they would go out, and the artificial stars would be turned on.

He led her along a jungle trail, and over the hill and along the lake. She said, "It looks very real, doesn't it?"

"It looks like our idea of real. But this, and our idea, are both false. You know that, don't you?"

"This is the first time I've ever been here. What do the writers do?"

He did not answer. They walked down to the lake, and removed their sandals. The shark fins paraded towards them as they waded in. Kalder said, "The trouble is, you and I, and the board, and all those like us have lost touch with the people. The people live in a reality that is differ-

ent from ours. Children of the wealthy receive the best educations, choose the careers they want, and look forward to a happy and useful lifetime. They live in comfort. They have clubs, and recreation facilities. There is room for those things, for a few people. The wealthy have a rather satisfying existence.

"But what about the people? Their education is limited. There aren't the facilities, and they don't really need any. They're just hanging around and reproducing themselves so there will be plenty of people when we get ready to go back to the surface. They do a little work, they eat and sleep, and the rest of the time they watch TV. They escape into a fantasy that doesn't exist and probably will never exist again for centuries—a world where there are trees, and plants, and animals, and rivers of pure water."

"Isn't it good for them to get their minds off the way things are?" she said.

"That's Code. The Code philosophy. The Code tyranny. It's horrible. The people have given up. They've surrendered completely. When we first moved underground people must have slaved to achieve what we have now. They built well. And then, when the machines were operating and living quarters prepared, there seemed to be nothing for them to do. So the film companies were established to give them TV, and the companies worked hard to provide settings that would seem real. The films let the people dream of what they had lost. They are still dreaming. There are more of us now, and the people are crowded. But no one plans ahead. No one is interested!"

They waded out of the lake, and the shark fins drifted away. They dried their feet on the synthetic grass, and put on the sandals, and walked on.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Form my own company. I won't have any trouble getting a wire or two. The old companies just can't get enough scripts for the ones they have. It won't be easy, but I think it will work. We won't have high production costs. We can shoot our films right out in the corridors, or in anyone's living quarters. Scripts won't give us any trouble. Donald is turning out five a day. He just can't stop, and some of the others are doing almost as well."

"Isn't that strange, when they couldn't write according to Code?"

"The first script writers wrote about something they remembered," Kalder said. "They wrote about a world they had lived in—the world the way it used to be. And

then there were those who were told what the others remembered, and each generation got one more step removed from what was once reality. The Tank was supposed to be kind of a crutch for the writers' imagination to lean on, but we're so many years removed from the kind of reality it represents that it has lost its value. Men get tired of crutches. They'll always prefer walking without them."

HE caught her arm as they stumbled through the sand of the desert.

"Feel like doing battle with Solar Productions?" he asked.

"With you, I do."

He slipped his arm around her, and led her through the trees of Area Five. He opened the door of the vent, and pointed upwards. "Look."

She looked. Above was blackness, and a glimmer of light. "What is it?"

"A star," he said.

"I've seen films about stars —going to the stars."

"Perhaps men will, some day. But they'll have to get out of the ground first. There'll be a long wait, and we can't spend it dreaming. We need to be getting ready, so when our children, or their children, or grandchildren climb out, they'll be able to fight and win back this world. It'll be hard for the first ones out. Maybe they'll think they would have been better off staying underground, and TV films will show them what a grand, comfortable life that was. But they'll make the move. They must make it, and we'll have to start planning now."

"I remember a film about a star," she said. "A little girl saw it, and made a wish."

"Do you have a wish?"

"I think I do." They wished together, looking up.

END

TWO MINDS ON THE MIND

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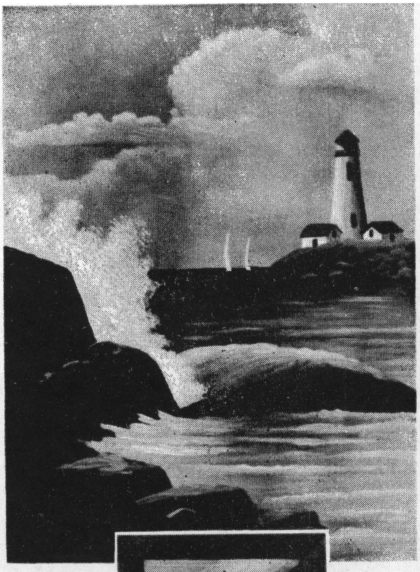

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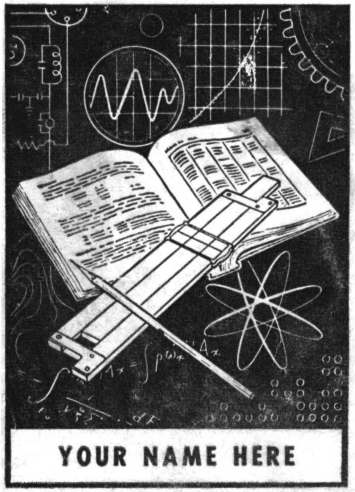

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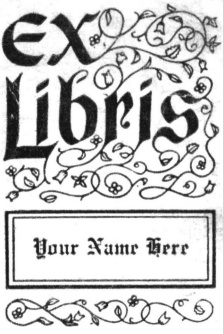

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