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SCIENCE FICTION

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A TASTE OF TENURE

BY GORDON R. DICKSON

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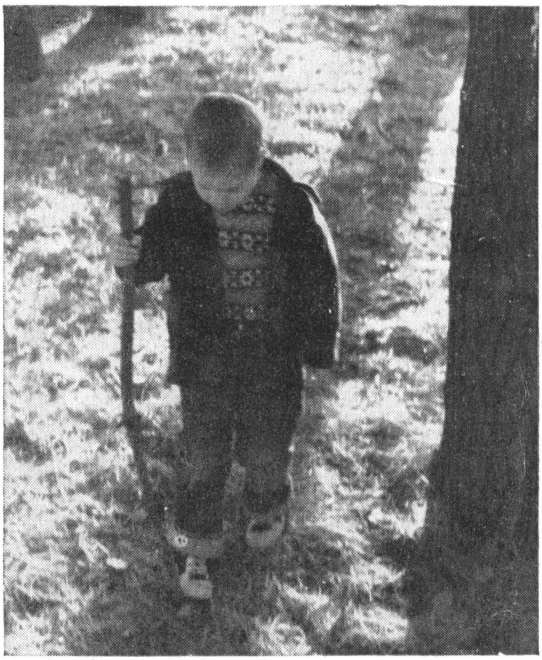

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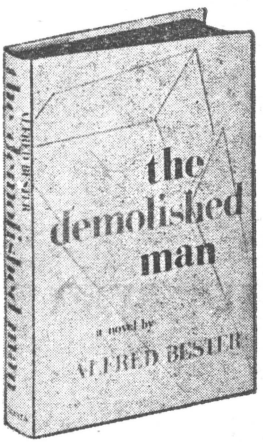

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THE PLANET WITH NO NIGHTMARE

Illustrated by Wood

BY JIM HARMON

The creatures on the little planet were real bafflers. The first puzzler about them was that they died so easily. The second was that they didn't die at all.

I

TENSION eased away as the spaceship settled down on its metallic haunches and they savored a safe planetfall.

Ekstrohm fingered loose the cinches of his deceleration couch. He sighed. An exploration camp would mean things would be simpler for him. He could hide his problem from the others more easily. Trying to keep secret what he did alone at night

was very difficult under the close conditions on board a ship in space.

Ryan hefted his bulk up and supported it on one elbow. He rubbed his eyes sleepily with one huge paw. "Ekstrohm, Nogol, you guys okay?"

"Nothing wrong with me that couldn't be cured," Nogol said. He didn't say what would cure him; he had been explaining all during the trip what he needed to make him feel like himself. His small black eyes darted inside the olive oval of his face.

"Ekstrohm?" Ryan insisted.

"Okay."

"Well, let's take a ground-level look at the country around here."

The facsiport rolled open on the landscape. A range of bluffs hugged the horizon, the color of decaying moss. Above them, the sky was the black of space, or the almost equal black of the winter sky above Minneapolis, seen against neon-lit snow. That cold, empty sky was full of fire and light. It seemed almost a magnification of the Galaxy itself, of the Milky Way, blown up by some master photographer.

This fiery swath was actually only a belt of minor planets, almost like the asteroid belt in the original Solar System. These planets were much bigger, nearly all capable of holding an atmosphere. But to the infuriation of scientists, for no known reason not all of them did. This would be the fifth mapping expedition to the planetoids of Yancy-6 in three generations. They lay months away from the nearest Earth star by jump drive, and no one knew what they were good for, although it was felt that they would probably be good for something if it could only be discovered—much like the continent of Antarctica in ancient history.

"How can a planet with so many neighbors be so lonely?" Ryan asked. He was the captain, so he could ask questions like that.

"Some can be lonely in a crowd," Nogol said elaborately.

"WHAT will we need outside, Ryan?" Ekstrohm asked.

"No helmets," the captain answered. "We can breathe out there, all right. It just won't be easy. This old world lost all of its helium and trace gases long ago. Nitrogen and oxygen are about it."

"Ryan, look over there," Nogol said. "Animals. Ringing the ship. Think they're intelligent, maybe hostile?"

"I think they're dead," Ekstrohm interjected quietly. "I get no readings from them at all. Sonic, electronic, gal-

vanic—all blank. According to these needles, they're stone dead."

"Ekstrohm, you and I will have a look," Ryan said. "You hold down the fort, Nogol. Take it easy."

"Easy," Nogol confirmed. "I heard a story once about a rookie who got excited when the captain stepped outside and he couldn't get an encephalographic reading on him. Me, I know the mind of an officer works in a strange and unfathomable manner."

"I'm not worried about you mis-reading the dials, Nogol, just about a lug like you reading them at all. Remember, when the little hand is straight up that's negative. Positive results start when it goes towards the hand you use to make your mark."

"But I'm ambidextrous."

Ryan told him what he could do then.

Ekstrohm smiled, and followed the captain through the airlock with only a glance at the lapel gauge on his coverall. The strong negative field his suit set up would help to repel bacteria and insects.

Actually, the types of infection that could attack a warm-blooded mammal were not infinite, and over the course of the last few hundred years adequate defenses had been found for all basic categories. He wasn't likely to come down with hot chills and puzzling striped fever.

They ignored the ladder down to the planet surface and, with only a glance at the seismological gauge to judge surface resistance, dropped to the ground.

It was day, but in the thin atmosphere contrasts were sharp between light and shadow. They walked from midnight to noon, noon to midnight, and came to the beast sprawled on its side.

Ekstrohm nudged it with a boot. "Hey, this is pretty close to a wart-hog."

"Uh-huh," Ryan admitted. "One of the best matches I've ever found. Well, it has to happen. Statistical average and all. Still, it sometimes gives you a creepy feeling to find a rabbit or a snapping turtle on some strange world. It makes you wonder if this exploration business isn't all some big joke, and somebody has been *everywhere* before you even started."

THE surveyor looked sidewise at the captain. The big man seldom gave out with such thoughts. Ekstrohm cleared his throat. "What shall we do with this one? Dissect it?"

Ryan nudged it with his toe, following Ekstrohm's example. "I don't know, Stormy. It sure as hell doesn't look like any dominant intelligent species to me. No hands, for one thing. Of

course, that's not definite proof."

"No, it isn't," Ekstrohm said.

"I think we'd better let it lay until we get a clearer picture of the ecological setup around here. In the meantime, we might be thinking on the problem all these dead beasts represent. What killed them?"

"It looks like we did, when we made blastdown."

"But *what* about our landing was lethal to the creatures?"

"Radiation?" Ekstrohm suggested. "The planet is very low in radiation from mineral deposits, and the atmosphere seems to shield out most of the solar output. Any little dose of radiation might knock off these critters."

"I don't know about that. Maybe it would work the other way. Maybe because they have had virtually no radioactive exposure and don't have any R's stored up, they could take a *lot* without harm."

"Then maybe it was the shockwave we set up. Or maybe it's sheer xenophobia. They curl up and die at the sight of something strange and alien—like a spaceship."

"Maybe," the captain admitted. "At this stage of the game anything could be possible. But there's one possibility I particularly don't like."

"And that is?"

"Suppose it was *not* us that killed these aliens. Suppose it is something right on the planet, native to it. I just hope it doesn't work on Earthmen too. These critters went real sudden."

EKSTROHM lay in his bunk and thought, the camp is quiet.

The Earthmen made camp outside the spaceship. There was no reason to leave the comfortable quarters inside the ship, except that, faced with a possibility of sleeping on solid ground, they simply had to get out.

The camp was a cluster of aluminum bubbles, ringed with a spy web to alert the Earthmen to the approach of any being.

Each man had a bubble to himself, privacy after the long period of enforced intimacy on board the ship.

Ekstrohm lay in his bunk and listened to the sounds of the night on Yancy-6 138. There was a keening of wind, and a cracking of the frozen ground. Insects there were on the world, but they were frozen solid during the night, only to revive and thaw in the morning sun.

The bunk he lay on was much more uncomfortable than the acceleration couches on board. Yet he knew the others were sleeping more soundly, now that they had

renewed their contact with the matter that had birthed them to send them riding high vacuum.

Ekstrohm was not asleep.

Now there could be an end to pretending.

He threw off the light blanket and swung his feet off the bunk, to the floor. Ekstrohm stood up.

There was no longer any need to hide. But what was there to do? What had changed for him?

He no longer had to lie in his bunk all night, his eyes closed, pretending to sleep. In privacy he could walk around, leave the light on, read.

It was small comfort for insomnia.

Ekstrohm never slept. Some doctors had informed him he was mistaken about this. Actually, they said, he did sleep, but so shortly and fitfully that he forgot. Others admitted he was absolutely correct—he *never* slept. His body processes only slowed down enough for him to dispell fatigue poisons. Occasionally he fell into a waking, gritty-eyed stupor; but he never slept.

Never at all.

Naturally, he couldn't let his shipmates know this. Insomnia would ground him from the Exploration Service, on physiological if not psychological grounds. He had to hide it.

OVER the years, he had had buddies in space in whom he thought he could confide. The buddies invariably took advantage of him. Since he couldn't sleep anyway, he might as well stand their watches for them or write their reports. Where the hell did he get off threatening to report any laxness on their part to the captain? A man with insomnia had better avoid bad dreams of that kind if he knew what was good for him.

Ekstrohm had to hide his secret.

In a camp, instead of shipboard, hiding the secret was easier. But the secret itself was just as hard.

Ekstrohm picked up a lightweight no-back from the ship's library, a book by Bloch, the famous twentieth century expert on sex. He scanned a few lines on the social repercussions of a celebrated nineteenth century sex murderer, but he couldn't seem to concentrate on the weighty, pontifical, ponderous style.

On impulse, he flipped up the heat control on his coverall and slid back the hatch of the bubble.

Ekstrohm walked through the alien glass and looked up at the unfamiliar constellations, smelling the frozen sterility of the thin air.

Behind him, his mates stirred without waking.

II

EKSTROHM was startled in the morning by a banging on the hatch of his bubble. It took him a few seconds to put his thoughts in order, and then he got up from the bunk where he had been resting, sleeplessly.

The angry burnt-red face of Ryan greeted him. "Okay, Stormy, this isn't the place for fun and games. What did you do with them?"

"Do with what?"

"The dead beasties. All the dead animals laying around the ship."

"What are you talking about, Ryan? What do you think I did with them?"

"I don't know. All I know is that they are gone."

"Gone?"

Ekstrohm shouldered his way outside and scanned the veldt.

There was no ring of animal corpses. Nothing. Nothing but wispy grass whipping in the keen breeze.

"I'll be damned," Ekstrohm said.

"You are right now, buddy. ExPe doesn't like anybody mucking up primary evidence."

"Where do you get off, Ryan?" Ekstrohm demanded. "Why pick me for your patsy? This has got to be some kind of local phenomenon. Why accuse a shipmate of being behind this?"

"Listen, Ekstrohm, I want to give you the benefit of every doubt. But you aren't exactly the model of a surveyor, you know. You've been riding on a pink ticket for six years, you know that."

"No," Ekstrohm said, "No, I didn't know that."

"You've been hiding things from me and Nogol every jump we've made with you. Now comes this! It fits the pattern of secrecy and stealth you've been involved in."

"What could I do with your lousy dead bodies? What would I want with them?"

"All I know is that you were outside the bubbles last night, and you were the only sentient being who came in or out of our alarm web. The tapes show that. Now all the bodies are missing, like they got up and walked away."

It was not a new experience to Ekstrohm. No. Suspicion wasn't new to him at all.

"Ryan, there are other explanations for the disappearance of the bodies. Look for them, will you? I give you my word I'm not trying to pull some stupid kind of joke, or to deliberately foul up the expedition. Take my word, can't you?"

Ryan shook his head. "I don't think I can. There's still such a thing as mental illness. You may not be responsible."

Ekstrohm scowled.

"Don't try anything violent, Stormy. I outweigh you fifty pounds and I'm fast for a big man."

"I wasn't planning on jumping you. Why do you have to jump me the first time something goes wrong? You've only got a lot of formless suspicions."

"Look, Ekstrohm, do you think I looked out the door and saw a lot of dead animals missing and immediately decided you did it to bedevil me? I've been up for hours—thinking—looking into this. You're the only possibility that's left."

"Why?"

"THE bodies are missing. What could it be? Scavengers? The web gives us a complete census on everything inside it. The only animals inside the ring are more wart-hogs and despite their appearance, they aren't carnivorous. Strictly grass-eaters. Besides, no animal, no insect, no process of decay could *completely* consume animals without a trace. There are no bones, no hide, no nothing."

"You don't know the way bacteria works on this planet. Radiation is so low, it may be particularly virulent."

"That's a possible explanation, although it runs counter to all the evidence we've established so far. There's a much simpler explanation, Ekstrohm. You. You hid the bodies for some reason. What other reason could you have for prowling around out here at night?"

I couldn't sleep. The words were in his throat, but he didn't use them. They weren't an explanation. They would open more questions than they would answer.

"You're closing your eyes to the possibility of natural phenomenon, laying this on me. You haven't adequate proof and you know it."

"Ekstrohm, when something's stolen, you always suspect a suspicious character before you get around to the possibility that the stolen goods melted into thin air."

"What," Ekstrohm said with deadly patience, "what do you think I could have possibly done with your precious dead bodies?"

"You could have buried them. This is a big territory. We haven't been able to search every square foot of it."

"Ryan, it was thirty or forty below zero last night. How the devil could I dig holes in this ground to bury anything?"

"At forty below, how could your bacteria function to rot them away?"

Ekstrohm could see he was facing prejudice. There was no need to keep talking, and no use in it. Still, some reflex made him continue to

frame reasonable answers.

"I don't know what bacteria on *this* planet can do. Besides, that was only *one* example of a natural phenomenon."

"Look, Ekstrohm, you don't have anything to worry about if you're not responsible. We're going to give you a fair test."

What kind of a test would it be? He wondered. And how fair?

Nogol came trotting up lightly.

"Ryan, I found some more wart-hogs and they keeled over as soon as they saw me."

"So it *was* xenophobia," Ekstrohm ventured.

"The important thing," Ryan said, with a sidelong glance at the surveyor, "is that now we've got what it takes to see if Ekstrohm has been deliberately sabotaging this expedition."

THE body heat of the three men caused the air-conditioner of the tiny bubble to labor.

"Okay," Ryan breathed. "We've got our eyes on you, Ekstrohm, and the video circuits are wide open on the dead beasts. All we have to do is wait."

"We'll have a long wait," Nogol ventured. "With Ekstrohm here, and the corpses out there, nothing is going to happen."

That would be all the proof they needed, Ekstrohm knew. Negative results would be positive proof to them. His pink ticket would turn pure red and he would be grounded for life—*if* he got off without a rehabilitation sentence.

But if nothing happened, it wouldn't really prove anything. There was no way to say that the conditions tonight were identical to the conditions the previous night. What had swept away those bodies might be comparable to a flash flood. Something that occurred once a year, or once in a century.

And perhaps his presence outside *was re*quired in some subtle cause-and-effect relationship.

All this test would prove, if the bodies didn't disappear, was only that conditions were not identical to conditions under which they did disappear.

Ryan and Nogol were prepared to accept him, Ekstrohm, as the missing element, the one ingredient needed to vanish the corpses. But it could very well be something else.

Only Ekstrohm knew that it *had* to be something else that caused the disappearances.

Or did it?

He faced up to the question. How did he know he was sane? How could he be sure that he hadn't stolen and hid the bodies for some murky reason of his own?

There was a large question as to how long a man could go without sleep, dreams and oblivion, and remain sane.

Ekstrohm forced his mind to consider the possibility. Could he remember every step he had taken the night before?

It seemed to him that he could remember walking past the creature lying in the grass, then walking in a circle, and coming back to the base. It seemed like that to him. But how could he know that it was true?

He couldn't.

THERE was no way he could prove, even to himself, that he had not disposed of those alien remains and then come back to his bubble, contented and happy at the thought of fooling those smug idiots who could sleep at night.

"How much longer do we have to wait?" Nogol asked. "We've been here nine hours. Half a day. The bodies are right where I left them outside. There doesn't seem to be any more question."

Ekstrohm frowned. There was one question. He was sure there was one question . . . Oh, yes. The question was: How did he know he was sane?

He didn't know, of course. That was as good an answer as any. Might as well accept it; might as well let them do what they wanted with him. Maybe if he just gave up, gave in, maybe he could sleep then. Maybe he could. . .

Ekstrohm sat upright in his chair.

No. That wasn't the answer. He couldn't know that he was sane, but then neither could anybody else. The point was, you had to go ahead living as if you were sane. That was the only way of living.

"Cosmos," Ryan gasped. "Would you look at that!"

Ekstrohm followed the staring gaze of the two men.

On the video grid, one of the "dead" animals was slowly rising, getting up, walking away.

"A natural phenomenon!" Ekstrohm said.

"Suspended animation!" Nogol ventured.

"Playing possum!" Ryan concluded.

Now came the time for apologies.

Ekstrohm had been through similar situations before, ever since he had been found walking the corridors at college the night one of the girls had been attacked. He didn't want to hear their apologies; they meant nothing to him. It was not a matter of forgiving them. He knew the situation had not changed.

They would suspect him just as quickly a second time.

"We're supposed to be an exploration team," Ekstrohm said quickly. "Let's get down


wood

to business. Why do you suppose these alien creatures fake death?"

Nogol shrugged his wiry shoulders. "Playing dead is easier than fighting."

"More likely it's a method of fighting," Ryan suggested. "They play dead until they see an opening. Then—*ripppp.*"

"I think they're trying to hide some secret," Ekstrohm said.

"What secret?" Ryan demanded.

"I don't know," he answered. "Maybe I'd better—sleep on it."

III

RYAN observed his two crewmen confidently the next morning. "I did some thinking last night."

Great, Ekstrohm thought. *For that you should get a Hazardous Duty bonus.*

"This business is pretty simple," the captain went on, "these pigs simply play possum. They go into a state of suspended animation, when faced by a strange situation. Xenophobia! I don't see there's much more to it."

"Well, if you don't see that there's more to it, Ryan—" Nogol began complacently.

"Wait a minute," Ekstrohm interjected. "That's a good theory. It may even be the correct one, but where's your *proof?*"

"Look, Stormy, we don't have to have proof. Hell, we don't even have to have theories. We're explorers. We just make reports of primary evidence and let the scientists back home in the System figure them out."

"I want this thing cleared up, Ryan. Yesterday, you were accusing me of being some kind of psycho who was lousing up the expedition out of pure—pure—" he searched for a term currently in use in mentology—"*demonia.* Maybe the boys back home will think the same thing. I want to be cleared."

"I guess you were cleared last night, Stormy boy," Nogol put in. "We saw one of the 'dead' pigs get up and walk away."

"*That didn't clear me,*" Ekstrohm said.

The other two looked like they had caught him cleaning wax out of his ear in public.

"No," Ekstrohm went on. "We still have no proof of what caused the suspended animation of the pigs. Whatever caused it before caused it last night. You thought of accusing me, but you didn't think it through about how I could have disposed of the bodies. Or, after you found out about the psuedo-death, how I might have caused *that.* If I had some drug or something to cause it the first time, I could have a smaller dose,

or a slowly dissolving capsule for delayed effect."

The two men stared at him, their eyes beginning to narrow.

"I could have done that. *Or either of you could have done the same thing.*"

"Me?" Nogol protested. "Where would my profit be in that?"

"You both have an admitted motive. You hate my guts. I'm 'strange,' 'different,' 'suspicious.' You could be trying to frame me."

"That's insubordination," Ryan grated. "Accusations against a superior officer. . ."

"Come off it, Ryan," Nogol sighed. "I never saw a three-man spaceship that was run very taut. Besides, he's right."

Beet-juice flowed out of Ryan's swollen face. "So where does that leave us?"

"Looking for *proof* of the *cause* of the pig's pseudo-death. Remember, I'll have to make counter-accusations against you two out of self-defense."

"Be reasonable, Stormy," Ryan pleaded. "This might be some deep scientific mystery we could never discover in our lifetime. We might never get off this planet."

That was probably behind his thinking all along, why he had been so quick to find a scapegoat to explain it all away. Explorers didn't *have* to have all the answers, or even theories. But, if they ever wanted to get anyplace in the Service, they damned well *better*.

"So what?" Ekstrohm asked. "The Service rates us as expendable, doesn't it?"

BY Ekstrohm's suggestion, they divided the work.

Nogol killed pigs. All day he did nothing but scare the wart-hogs to death by coming near them.

Ryan ran as faithful a check on the corpses as he could, both by eyeball observation and by radar, video and Pro-Tect circuits. They lacked the equipment to program every corpse for every second, but a representative job could be done.

Finally, Ekstrohm went scouting for Something Else. He didn't know what he expected to find, but he somehow knew he would find *something*.

He rode the traction-scooter (so-called because it had no traction at all—no wheels, no slides, no contact with the ground or air) and he reflected that he was a suspicious character.

All through life, he was going around suspecting everybody and now *everything* of having some dark secret they were trying to hide.

A simple case of transference, he diagnosed, in long-discredited terminology. He had something to hide—his

insomnia. So he th[illegible] everybody else had their guilty secret too.

How could there be any deep secret to the pseudo-death on this world? It was no doubt a simple fear reaction, a retreat from a terrifying reality. How could he ever *prove* that it was more? Or even exactly that?

Internal glandular actions would be too subtle for a team of explorers to establish. They could only go on behavior. What more in the way of behavior could he really hope to establish? The pattern was clear. The pigs keeled over at any unfamiliar sight or sound, and recovered when they thought the coast was clear. That was it. All there was! Why did he stubbornly, stupidly insist there was more to it?

Actually, by his insistence, he was giving weight to the idea of the others that he was strange and suspicious himself. Under the normal, sane conditions of planetfall the phobias and preoccupations of a space crew, nurtured in the close confines of a scout ship, wouldn't be taken seriously by competent men. But hadn't his subsequent behavior given weight to Ryan's unfounded accusations of irrational sabotage? Wouldn't it seem that he was actually *daring* the others to prove his guilt? If he went on with unorthodox behavior—

That was when Ekstrohm saw the flying whale.

TENSION gripped Ekstrohm tighter than he gripped the handlebars of his scooter. He was only vaguely aware of the passing scenery. He knew he should switch on the homing beacon and ride in on automatic, but it seemed like too much of an effort to flick his finger. As the tension rose, the capillaries of his eyes swelled, and things began to white out for him. The rush of landscape became blurred streaks of light and dark, now mostly faceless light.

The flying whale. He had seen it.

Moreover, he had heard it, smelt and felt it. It had released a jet of air with a distinctive sound and odor. It had blown against his skin, ruffled his hair. It had been real.

But the flying whale *couldn't* have been real. Conditions on this planetoid were impossible for it. He knew planets and their life possibilities. A creature with a skeleton like that could have evolved here, but the atmosphere would never have supported his flesh and hide. Water bodies were of insufficient size. No, the whale was not native to this world.

Then what, if anything, did this flying alien behemoth have to do with the pseudo-

death of the local pig creatures?

I'll never know, Ekstrohm told himself. Never. Ryan and Nogol will never believe me, they will never believe in the flying whale. They're explorers, simple men of action, unimaginative. Of course, I'm an explorer too. But I'm different, I'm sensitive—

Ekstrohm was riding for a fall.

The traction-scooter was going up a slope that had been eroded concave. It was at the very top of the half-moon angle, upside down, standing Ekstrohm on his head. Since he was not strapped into his seat, he fell.

As he fell he thought ruefully that he had contrived to have an accident in the only way possible with a traction-scooter.

Ekstrohm's cranium collided with the ground, and he stopped thinking. . . .

EKSTROHM blinked open his eyes, wondering. He saw light, then sky, then pigs.

Live pigs.

But—the pigs shouldn't be alive. When he was this close they should be dead.

Only they weren't.

Why. . . why. . .

He moved slightly and the nearest pig fell dead. The others went on with their business, roaming the plain. Ekstrohm expected the dropping of the pig to stampede the rest into dropping dead, but they didn't seem to pay any attention to their fallen member.

I've been lying here for hours, he realized. I didn't move in on them. The pigs moved in on me while I was lying still. If I keep still I can get a close look at them in action.

So far, even with video, it had been difficult to get much of an idea of the way these creatures lived—when they weren't dead.

Observe, observe, he told himself.

There might be some relationship between the flying whale and the pigs.

Could it be the whales were intelligent alien masters of these herds of pigs?

Ekstrohm lay still and observed.

Item: the pigs ate the soft, mosslike grass.

Item: the pigs eliminated almost constantly.

Item: the pigs fought regularly.

Fought?

Fought?

Here was something, Ekstrohm realized.

Why did animals fight?

Rationalizations of nature-lovers aside, some fought because they had plain mean nasty dispositions—like some people. That didn't fit the pigs. They were indolent grazers. They hadn't the energy left over for sheer-cus-

sedness. There had to be a definite goal to their battles.

It wasn't food. That was abundant. The grassy veldt reached to all horizons.

Sex. They had to be fighting for mates!

He became so excited he twitched a foot slightly. Two more pigs dropped dead, but the others paid no heed.

He watched the lazily milling herd intently, at the same time keeping an eye out for the flying whales. Back on Earth porpoises had been taught to herd schools of fish and of whales. It was not impossible an intelligent species of whale had learned to herd masses of land animals.

But Ekstrohm knew he needed proof. He had to have something to link the pseudo-death of the wart-hogs to the inexplicable presence of the whales. Perhaps, he thought, the "death" of the pigs was the whales' way of putting them into cold storage—a method of making the meat seem unattractive to other animals, on a world perhaps without carrion scavengers. . .

Something was stirring among the pigs.

ONE under-sized beastie was pawing the dirt, a red eye set on the fattest animal in sight. Then Shortie charged Fatso. But abruptly a large raw-boned critter was in Shortie's path, barring him from Fatso.

Faced by Big Boy, Shortie trembled with rage and went into a terrible temper tantrum, rolling on the ground, pawing it in frenzy, squealing in maddened rage. Then Shortie was on his feet, desperate determination showing in every line of his body. With heedless, desperate, foolhardy courage he charged Big Boy.

Big Boy took the headlong charge in his side with only a trifling grunt.

Shortie bounced ten feet in the light gravity, and grimly wallowed to his feet. He leveled an eye at Big Boy, and his legs were pumping in frenzied fury again.

Big Boy shifted his kilos of weight casually and met Shortie head on.

The tremendous *ker-rack* reverberated from the bluff behind Ekstrohm.

Shortie lay on the ground.

No, Ekstrohm thought, he isn't dead. His sides were pumping in and out. But he was knocked cold.

Ekstrohm had to sympathize with him. He had never seen a more valiant try against insurmountable odds.

Big Boy was ambling over towards Fatso, apparently to claim his prize. Fatso apparently was the sow.

But Big Boy stalked on past Fatso. She squealed after him tentatively, but he turned and blasted her back with a bellowing snort.

Ekstrohm watched the scene repeated with other actors several times before he was sure.

The older males, the Big Boys, *never* collected the favors of the harem for themselves.

Instinctively, the pigs were practicing *birth control.* The older males abstained, and forced the younger males to do the same.

On a world like this, Ekstrohm's first thought was of death.

He thought, these pigs must be like lemmings, deliberately trying to destroy their own race, to commit geno-suicide.

But that didn't answer any of the other questions, about the *pseudo*-death, the alien whales. . .

And then Ekstrohm thought not of death but of *life.*

IV

THE traction-scooter was where he had left it, hanging upside down on the underside of the concave slope. It had stopped automatically when his weight had left the seat. He reached up, toggled the OVERRIDE switch and put it manually into reverse.

Once straightened out, he was on his way back to the base.

I feel good, he thought. I feel like I could lick my weight in spacemen.

Only then did he realize why he felt so good.

What had happened had been so strange for him, he couldn't realize what it had been until now.

While he had been knocked out, he had been asleep.

Asleep.

For the first time in years.

Sleep. He felt wonderful. He felt like he could lick all of his problems. . .

Ekstrohm roared back into the base. The motor was silent on the traction-scooter, of course, but the air he kicked up made its own racket.

Ryan and Nogol came out to greet him sullenly.

"Listen," he told them, "I've got the answer to all of this."

"So have we," Ryan said ugly. "The first answer was the right one. We've been scaring pigs to death and watching them, scaring and watching. We learned nothing. You knew we wouldn't. You set us up for this. It's like you said. You fed all of these beasts your stuff in advance, something that acts when they get excited. . ."

It didn't make sense, but then it never had. You couldn't argue with prejudice. He was "different." He didn't act like they did. He didn't believe the same things. He was the outsider, therefore suspect. The alien on an alien world.

Ekstrohm sighed. Man

would always be the final alien, the creature man would never understand, sympathize with or even tolerate.

There was no point in trying to argue further, Ekstrohm realized.

"You'll never understand, Ryan. You could have seen all the things I saw if you'd bothered to look, but you were too anxious to blame me. But if I can't make you understand, I can at least beat you into acceptance."

"Huh?" Ryan ventured.

"I said," Ekstrohm repeated, "that I'm going to beat some sense into your thick skull."

Ryan grinned, rippled his massive shoulders and charged.

EKSTROHM remembered the lesson Shortie had taught him with Big Boy. He didn't meet the captain's charge head on. He sidestepped and caught Ryan behind the ear with his fist. The big man halted, puzzled. Ekstrohm sank his fist into the thick, solid belly.

Slowly, Ryan's knees gave way and he sank towards the ground.

When his chin was at the right level of convenience, Ekstrohm put his weight behind his right.

Ryan swayed dreamily backward.

But he threw himself forward and one ham of a fist connected high on Ekstrohm's cheek. He was shaken to his toes, and the several hours' old pain in the back of his head throbbed sickeningly. One more like that would do for him.

Ekstrohm stood and drove in a lot of short punches to Ryan's body, punches without much power behind them because he didn't have it. But he knew better than to try a massive attack on a massive target.

When he couldn't lift his arms any more, Ekstrohm stopped punching. He realized Ryan had fallen on his face a few seconds before.

Then he remembered, and whirled. He had left his back exposed to Nogol.

Nogol smiled. "I'm not drawing Hazard Pay."

After a while, Ekstrohm stopped panting and faced Nogol and the captain who was now sitting, rubbing his jaw. "Okay," he said, "now you'll listen or I'll beat your skulls in. I know what's behind all of this on this planet."

"Yeah? What do you think it is, Stormy?" Ryan asked.

"First of all, I think there's a basic difference between this world and any other the ExPe has investigated."

"Now what could that be?" Nogol wanted to know with a tiny smile.

"These worlds are *close*. The gravity is low. You

wouldn't need much more than a jet plane to get from one of these planetoids to another. Some animals have developed with the power to travel from one of these planetoids to another—like a squid jetting out water. They harnessed some natural power system."

"What does that prove?" Ryan wanted to know.

"It proves that this world and others in this belt are *prepared* for interplanetary travel. It's probably a part of their basic evolutional structure, unlike that of heavy, independent planets. This false 'dying' is part of their preparation for interplanetary visitors."

"Why would these aliens want others to think that they were dead?" Ryan asked.

"Correction, captain. They want visitors to believe that they *can* die."

RYAN blinked. "Meaning that they *can't* die?"

"That's right. I think everything on this planet has immortality," Ekstrohm said. "I'm not exactly sure how. Maybe it has to do with the low radiation. Every individual cell has a 'memory' of the whole creature. But as we age that 'memory' becomes faulty, our cells 'forget' how to reproduce themselves exactly. Here, that cell 'memory' never fades. Bodies renew themselves indefinitely."

"But why hide it?" Nogol asked.

"This planetoid can just support so many creatures. They practice birth control among themselves," the surveyor said. "The natives naturally want to discourage colonization."

Ryan whistled. "Once we report this, every rich and powerful man in the Federation will want to come here to live. There's not enough space to go around. There will be wars over this little hunk of rock."

Nogol's hard, dark eyes were staring into space. "There's only one sensible thing to do. We'll keep the world to ourselves."

"I don't like that kind of talk," Ryan growled.

"Ryan, this little ball of dirt isn't going to do the Federation as a whole any good. But it can be of value to us. We can make ourselves comfortable here. Later on, we can bring in some women. Any women we want. Who wouldn't want to come here?"

Ryan began to argue, but Ekstrohm could see he was hooked. The man who risked his life, the man who sought something new and different, the explorer, was basically an unstable type removed from the mainstream of civilization. Nothing was liable to change that.

By nightfall, Ryan and Ekstrohm had agreed.

"We'll have to keep a constant watch," Ryan was saying. "We'll have to watch out for ExPe scouts looking for us. Or, after a few generations, another ship may come to complete the mapping."

Nogol smiled. "We'll have to keep an eye on each other too, you know. One of us may get to wanting more room for more women. Or to have children, a normal biological urge. Death by violence isn't ruled out here."

"I don't like that kind of talk," Ryan blustered.

Nogol smiled.

Ekstrohm thought of the others, of the sleepless, watchful nights ahead of them. That was probably his trouble, all of his life. He didn't trust people; he had to stay awake and keep an eye on everybody. Well, he would be one ahead here.

Of course, it was wrong not to trust anybody, but Ekstrohm knew habit patterns were hard to break.

Sleep is a habit.

RYAN and Nogol were jarred awake in the night by the spaceship blasting off without them. They ran out and shook their tiny fists in fury at the rising flame.

Operating a spaceship alone was no cinch but it could be done. Ekstrohm would get back to the nearest Federation base and report the planetoid without death. He didn't have absolute confidence in any government, no. But he suspected the Federation could do more with the world than two men like Ryan and Nogol.

Ekstrohm took his fingers off the punchboard and lay back on his couch.

He yawned.

Ryan and Nogol were slow, but in time they might have learned to do without sleep, and to guard their treasure night and day.

Fortunately, Ekstrohm knew from long experience what the two others didn't.

An eternity without sleep isn't worth the price.—END

In our next issue—

SPAWNING GROUND by Lester del Rey

THE FROZEN PLANET by Keith Laumer

MIRROR IMAGE by Daniel F. Galouye

—and many more!

Naturally human work was more creative, more inspiring, more important than robot drudgery. Naturally it was the most important task in all the world . . . or was it?

THE REAL HARD SELL

BY WILLIAM W. STUART

BEN TILMAN sat down in the easiest of all easy chairs. He picked up a magazine, flipped pages; stood up, snapped fingers; walked to the view wall, walked back; sat down, picked up the magazine.

He was waiting, near the end of the day, after hours, in the lush, plush waiting room —"The customer's ease is the Sales Manager's please"—to see the Old Man. He was fidgety, but not about something. About nothing. He was irritated at nobody, at the world; at himself.

He was irritated at himself because there was no clear reason for him to be irritated at anything.

There he sat, Ben Tilman, normally a cheerful, pleasant young man. He was a salesman like any modern man and a far better salesman than most. He had a sweet little wife, blonde and pretty. He had a fine, husky two-year-old boy, smart, a real future National Sales Manager. He loved them both. He had every reason to be contented with his highly desirable, comfortable lot.

And yet he had been getting more sour and edgy ever since about six months after the baby came home from the Center and the novelty of responsibility for wife and child had worn off. He had now quit three jobs, good enough sales jobs where he was doing well, in a year. For no reason?

For petty, pointless reasons.

With Ancestral Insurance, "Generations of Protection," he'd made the Billion Dollar Club—and immediately begun to feel dissatisfied with it—just before cute, sexy, blonde Betty had suddenly come from nowhere into his life and he had married her. That had helped, sure. But as soon after that as he had started paying serious attention to his job again, he was fed up with it. "Too much paper work. All those forms. It's work for a robot, not a man," he'd told Betty when he quit. A lie. The paper work was, as he looked back on it, not bad at all; pleasant even, in a way. It was just—nothing. Anything.

Indoor-Outdoor Climatizers—sniffles, he said, kept killing his sales presentation even though his record was good enough. Ultra-sonic toothbrushes, then, were a fine product. Only the vibration, with his gold inlay, seemed to give him headaches after every demonstration. He didn't *have* a gold inlay. But the headaches were real enough. So he quit.

So now he had a great new job with a great organization, Almagamated Production for Living — ALPRODLIV. He was about to take on his first big assignment.

For that he had felt a spark of the old enthusiasm and it had carried him into working out a bright new sales approach for the deal tonight. The Old Man himself had taken a personal interest, which was a terrific break. And still Ben Tilman felt that uneasy dissatisfaction. Damn.

"Mr. Robb will see you now, Mr. Tilman," said the cool robot voice from the Elec-Sec Desk. It was after customer hours and the charming human receptionist had gone. The robot secretary, like most working robots, was functional in form — circuits and wires, mike, speaker, extension arms to type and to reach any file in the room, wheels for intra-office mobility.

"Thanks, hon," said Ben. Nevertheless, robot secretaries were all programmed and rated female—and it was wise to be polite to them. After all, they could think and had feelings. There were a lot of important things they could do for a salesman—or, sometimes, not do. This one, being helpful, stretched out a long metal arm to open the door to the inner office for Ben. He smiled his appreciation and went in.

THE Old Man, Amalgamated's grand old salesman, was billiard bald, aging, a little stout and a little slower now. But he was still a fine sales manager. He sat at his huge, old fashioned oak desk as Ben walked across the office.

"Evening, sir." No re-

sponse. Louder, "Good evening, Mr. Robb. Mr. Robb, it's Ben, sir. Ben Tilman. You memo'd me to come—" Still no sign. The eyes, under the great, beetling brows, seemed closed.

Ben grinned and reached out across the wide desk toward the small, plastic box hanging on the Old Man's chest. The Old Man glanced up as Ben tapped the plastic lightly with his fingernail.

"Oh, Ben. It's you." The Old Man raised his hand to adjust the ancient style hearing aid he affected as Ben sank into a chair. "Sorry Ben. I just had old Brannic Z-IX in here. A fine old robot, yes, but like most of that model, long-winded. So—" He gestured at the hearing aid.

Ben smiled. Everyone knew the Old Man used that crude old rig so he could pointedly tune out conversations he didn't care to hear. Any time you were talking to him and that distant look came into his half closed eyes, you could be sure that you were cut off.

"Sorry, Ben. Well now. I simply wanted to check with you, boy. Everything all set for tonight?"

"Well, yes, sir. Everything is set and programmed. Betty and I will play it all evening for the suspense, let them wonder, build it up — and then, instead of the big pitch they'll be looking for, we'll let it go easy."

"A new twist on the old change-up. Ben, boy, it's going to go. I feel it. It's in the air, things are just ripe for a new, super-soft-sell pitch. Selling you've got to do by feel, eh Ben? By sales genius and the old seat of the pants. Good. After tonight I'm going all out, a hemisphere-wide, thirty day campaign I'll put the top sales artist of every regional office on it. They can train on your test pattern tapes. I believe we can turn over billions before everybody picks up the signal and it senilesces. You give an old man a new faith in sales, Ben! You're a *salesman.*"

"Well, sir — " But the Old Man's knack with the youthful-enthusiasm approach was contagious. For the moment Ben caught it and he felt pretty good about the coming night's work. He and Betty together would put the deal over. That would be something.

Sure it would . . .

"How do you and your wife like the place, Ben?" It was some place, for sure, the brand new house that Amalgamated had installed Ben, Betty and Bennie in the day after he had signed up.

"It's — uh — just fine, sir. Betty likes it very much, really. We both do." He hoped his tone was right.

"Good, Ben. Well, be sure to stop by in the morning. I'll have the tapes, of course.

but I'll want your analysis. Might be a little vacation bonus in it for you, too."

"Sir, I don't know how to thank you."

The Old Man waved a hand. "Nothing you won't have earned, my boy. Robots can't sell." That was the set dismissal.

"Yes, sir. Robots can't manage sales, or — " He winked. The Old Man chuckled. An old joke was never too old for the Old Man. The same old bromides every time; and the same hearty chuckle. Ben left on the end of it.

DIALING home on his new, Company-owned, convertible soar-kart, he felt not too bad. Some of the old lift in spirits came as the kart-pilot circuits digested the directions, selected a route and zipped up into a north-northwest traffic pattern. The Old Man was a wonderful sales manager and boss. The new house-warming pitch that he and Betty would try tonight was smart. He could feel he had done something.

Exercising his sales ability with fair success, he fed himself this pitch all along the two hundred mile, twenty-minute hop home from the city. The time and distance didn't bother him. "Gives me time to think," he had told Betty. Whether or not this seemed to her an advantage, she didn't say. At least she liked the place, "Almalgamated's Country Gentleman Estate — Spacious, Yet fully Automated."

"We are," the Old Man told Ben when he was given the Company-assigned quarters, "starting a new trend. With the terrific decline in birth rate during the past 90 to 100 years, you'll be astonished at how much room there is out there. No reason for everyone to live in the suburban centers any more. With millions of empty apartments in them, high time we built something else, eh? Trouble with people today, no initiative in obsolescing. But we'll move them."

Home, Ben left the kart out and conveyed up the walk. The front door opened. Betty had been watching for him. He walked to the family vueroom, as usual declining to convey in the house. The hell with the conveyor's feelings, if so simple a robot really had any. He *liked* to walk.

"Color pattern," Betty ordered the vuescreen as he came in, "robot audio out." With people talking in the house it was still necessary to put the machines under master automatic and manual control. Some of the less sophisticated robots might pick up some chance phrase of conversation and interpret it as an order if left on audio.

"Ben," said Betty, getting up to meet him, "you're late."

Ben was too good a sales-

man to argue that. Instead, he took her in his arms and kissed her. It was a very good sixty seconds later that she pushed him away with a severeness destroyed by a blush and a giggle to say, "Late but making up for lost time, huh? And sober, too. You must be feeling good for a change."

"Sure — and you feel even better, sugar." He reached for her again. She slipped away from him, laughing, but his wrist tel-timer caught on the locket she always wore, her only momento from her parents, dead in the old moon-orb crash disaster. She stood still, slightly annoyed, as he unhooked and his mood was, not broken, but set back a little. "What's got into you tonight anyway, Ben?"

"Oh, I don't know. Did I tell you, the O.M. may give us a vacation? Remember some of those nights up at that new 'Do It Yourself' Camp last summer?"

"Ben!" She blushed, smiled. "We won't get any vacation if we blow our house-warming pitch tonight, you know. And we have three couples due here in less than a half hour. Besides, I have to talk to you about Nana."

"THAT damned new CD-IX model. Now what?"

"She's very upset about Bennie. I'm not sure I blame her. This afternoon he simply refused his indoctrination. All the time he should have been playing store with Playmate he insisted on *drawing* things — himself, mind you, not Playmate. On the walls, with an old pencil of yours he found someplace in your things. Nana couldn't do a thing with him. She says you've got to give him a spanking."

"Why me? Why not you?"

"Now Ben, we've been over that and over it. Discipline is the father's job."

"Well, I won't do it. Bennie's just a baby. Let him do a few things himself. Won't hurt him."

"Ben!"

"That Nana is an officious busybody, trying to run our lives."

"Oh, Ben! You know Nana loves little Bennie. She only wants to help him."

"But to what?"

"She'd never dream of lifting a finger against Bennie no matter what he did. And she lives in terror that he'll cut her switch in some temper tantrum."

"Hmph! Well, I'm going up right now and tell her if I hear another word from her about spanking Bennie, I'll cut her switch myself. Then she can go back to Central for reprogramming and see how she likes it."

"Ben! You wouldn't."

"Why not? Maybe she needs a new personality?"

"You won't say a thing to her. You're too soft-hearted."

"This time I won't be."

This time he wasn't. He met Nana CD-IX in the hallway outside Bennie's room. Like all nurse, teaching, and children's personal service robots, she was human in form, except for her control dial safely out of baby's reach, top, center.

The human form was reassuring to children, kept them from feeling strange with parent's back. Nana was big, gray-haired, stout, buxom, motherly, to reassure parents.

"Now, Mr. Tilman," she said with weary impatience, "you are too late. Surely you don't intend to burst in and disturb your son now."

"Surely I do."

"But he is having his supper. You will upset him. Can't you understand that you should arrange to be here between 5:30 and 6 if you wish to interview the child?"

"Did he miss me? Sorry. I couldn't make it earlier. But now I am going to see him a minute."

"Mr. Tilman!"

"Nana! And what's this about your wanting Bennie spanked because he drew a few pictures?"

"Surely you realize these are the child's formative years, Mr. Tilman. He should be learning to think in terms of selling now — not *doing* things. That's robot work, Mr. Tilman. Robots can't sell, you know, and what will people, let alone robots think if you let your boy grow up—"

"HE's growing up fine; and I am going in to see him."

"Mr. Tilman!"

"*And* for two credits, Nana, I'd cut your switch. You hear me?"

"Mr. Tilman — no! No, please. I'm sorry. Let the boy scrawl a bit; perhaps it won't hurt him. Go in and see him if you must, but do try not to upset him or— All right, all right. But please Mr. Tilman, my switch—"

"Very well Nana. I'll leave it. This time."

"Thank you, Mr. Tilman."

"So we understand each other, Nana. Though, matter of fact, I'm hanged if I ever did quite see why you senior-level robots get so worked up about your identities."

"Wouldn't you, Mr. Tilman?"

"Of course. But—well, yes, I suppose I do see, in a way. Let's go see Bennie-boy."

So Ben Tilman went into the nursery and enjoyed every second of a fast fifteen-minute roughhouse with his round-faced, laughing, chubby son and heir. No doubt it was very bad, just after supper. But Nana, with a rather humanly anxious restraint, confined herself to an unobtrusive look of disapproval.

He left Bennie giggling and doubtless upset, at least to a point of uneagerness for Nana's bedtime story about Billie the oldtime newsboy, who sold the Brooklyn Bridge.

So then he was run through a fast ten-minute shower, shave and change by Valet. He floated downstairs just as Betty came out of the cocktail lounge to say, "Code 462112 on the approach indicator. Must be the Stoddards. They always get every place first, in time for an extra drink."

"Fred and Alice, yes. But damn their taste for gin, don't let Barboy keep the cork in the vermouth all evening. I like a touch of vermouth. I wonder if maybe I shouldn't—"

"No, you shouldn't mix the cocktails yourself and scandalize everybody. You know perfectly well Barboy really does do better anyway."

"Well, maybe. Everything all set, hon? Sorry I was late."

"No trouble here. I just fed Robutler the base program this morning and spent the rest of the day planning my side of our Sell. How to tantalize the girls, pique the curiosity without giving it away. But you know—" she laughed a little ruefully— "I sort of miss not having even the shopping to do. Sometimes it hardly seems as though you need a wife at all."

Ben slid an arm around her waist. "Selling isn't the only thing robots can't do, sugar." He pulled her close.

"Ben! They're at the door."

They were, and then in the door, oh-ing and ah-ing over this and that. And complimenting Barboy on the martinis. Then the Wilsons came and the Bartletts and that was it.

"Three couples will be right," Ben had analyzed it. "Enough so we can let them get together and build up each others' curiosity but not too many for easy control. People that don't know us so well they might be likely to guess the gimmick. We'll let them stew all evening while they enjoy the Country Gentleman House-Warming hospitality. Then, very casually, we toss it out and let it lie there in front of them. They will be sniffing, ready to nibble. The clincher will drive them right in. I'd stake my sales reputation on it." If it matters a damn, he added. But silently.

They entertained three couples at their house-warming party. It was a delightful party, a credit to Ben, Betty and the finest built-in house robots the mind of Amalgamated could devise.

By ten o'clock they had dropped a dozen or more random hints, but never a sales pitch. Suspense was building nicely when Betty put down an empty glass and unobtrusively pushed the button to cue Nana. Perfect timing.

They apologized to the guests, "We're ashamed to be so old-fashioned but we feel better if we look in on the boy when he wakes in the night. It keeps him from forgetting us."

Then they floated off upstairs together, ostensibly to see Nana and little Bennie.

Fred Stoddard: "Some place they have here, eh? Off-beat. A little too advanced for my taste, this single dwelling idea, but maybe— Ben sure must have landed something juicy with Amalgamated to afford this. What the devil is he pushing, anyway?"

Scoville Wilson (shrug): "Beats me. You know, before dinner I cornered him at the bar to see if I could slip in a word or two of sell. Damned if he didn't sign an order for my Cyclo-sell Junior Tape Library without even a C level resistance. Then he talked a bit about the drinks and I thought sure he was pushing that new model Barboy. I was all set to come back with a sincere 'think it over'—and then he took a bottle from the Barboy, added a dash of vermouth to his drink and walked off without a word of sell. He always was an odd one."

Lucy Wilson (turns from woman talk with the other two wives): "Oh no! I knew it wasn't the Barboy set. They wouldn't have him set so slow. Besides didn't you hear the way she carried on about the nursery and that lovely Nana? That must have been a build-up, but Ben goofed his cue to move in on Sco and me for a close. Doesn't Amalgamated handle those nurseries?"

Tom Bartlett: "Amalgamated makes almost anything. That's the puzzle. I dunno—but it must be something big. He has to hit us with something, doesn't he?"

Belle Bartlett: "Who ever heard of a party without a sell?"

Nancy Stoddard: "Who ever heard of a party going past ten without at least a warm-up pitch? And Betty promised Fred to send both Ben and Bennie to the Clinic for their Medchecks. You know we have the newest, finest diagnosticians—"

Fred Stoddard: "Nancy!"

Nancy Stoddard: "Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't be selling you folks at *their* party, should I? Come to think, you're all signed with Fred anyway, aren't you? Well, about Ben, *I* think—"

Lucy Wilson: "Sh-h-h! Here they come."

SMILING, charming — and still not an order form in sight — Ben and Betty got back to their guests. Another half hour. Barboy was passing around with nightcaps. Lucy Wilson nervously put a reducegar to her sophisticated, peppermint-striped lips.

Quickly Ben Tilman was on his feet. He pulled a small,

metal cylinder from his pocket with a flourish and held it out on his open palm toward Lucy. A tiny robot Statue of Liberty climbed from the cylinder, walked across Ben's hand, smiled, curtsied and reached out to light the reducegar with her torch, piping in a high, thin voice, "Amalgamated reducegars are cooler, lighter, finer."

"Ben! How simply darling!"

"Do you like it? It's a new thing from Amalgamated NovelDiv. You can program it for up to a hundred selective sell phrases, audio or visio key. Every salesman should have one. Makes a marvelous gift, and surprisingly reasonable."

"So that's it, Ben. I just love it!"

"Good! It's yours, compliments of Amalgamated."

"But—then you're not selling them? Well, what on earth—?"

"Damn it, Ben," Fred Stoddard broke in, "come on, man, out with it. What in hell *are* you selling? You've given us the shakes. What is it? The Barboy set? It's great. If I can scrape up the down payment, I'll—"

"*After* we furnish a nursery with a decent Nana, Fred Stoddard," Nancy snapped, "and get a second soar-kart. Ben isn't selling Barboys anyway, are you, Ben? It *is* that sweet, sweet Nana, isn't it? And I do want one, the whole nursery, Playmate and all, girl-programmed of course, for our Polly."

"*Is* it the nursery, Betty?" Lucy pitched in her credit's worth. "Make him tell us, darling. We have enjoyed everything so much, the dinner. the Tri-deo, this whole lovely, lovely place of yours. Certainly the house warming has been perfectly charming."

"And that's it," said Ben smiling, a sheaf of paper forms suddenly in his hand.

"What? Not—?"

"The house, yes. Amalgamated's Country Gentleman Estate, complete, everything in it except Bennie, Betty and me. Your equity in your Center co-op can serve as down payment, easy three-generation terms, issue insurance. Actually, I can show you how, counting in your entertainment, vacation, incidental, and living expenses, the Country Gentleman will honestly cost you less."

"Ben!"

"How simply too clever!"

Ben let it rest there. It was enough. Fred Stoddard, after a short scuffle with Scoville Wilson for the pen, signed the contract with a flourish. Sco followed.

"There!"

"There now, Ben," said Betty, holding Bennie a little awkwardly in her arms in the soar-kart. They had moved out so the Stoddards could move right in. Now they were on their way in to their re-

served suite at Amalgamated's Guest-ville. "You were absolutely marvellous. Imagine selling all three of them!"

"There wasn't anything to it, actually."

"Ben, how can you say that? Nobody else could have done it. It was a sales masterpiece. And just think. Now salesmen all over the hemisphere are going to follow your sales plan. Doesn't it make you proud? Happy? Ben, you aren't going to be like *that* again?"

No, of course he wasn't. He was pleased and proud. Anyway, the Old Man would be, and that, certainly, was something. A man had to feel good about winning the approval of Amalgamated's grand Old Man. And it did seem to make Betty happy.

But the actual selling of the fool house and even the two other, identical houses on the other side of the hill—he just couldn't seem to get much of a glow over it. He had done it; and what had he done? It was the insurance and the toothbrushes all over again, and the old nervous, sour feeling inside.

"At least we do have a vacation trip coming out of it, hon. The O.M. practically promised it yesterday, if our sell sold. We could—"

"—go back to that queer new 'Do It Yourself' camp up on the lake you insisted on dragging me to the last week of our vacation last summer. Ben, really!" He *was* going to be like that. She knew it.

"Well, even you admitted it was some fun."

"Oh, sort of, I suppose. For a little while. Once you got used to the whole place without one single machine that could think or do even the simplest little thing by itself. So, well, almost like being savages. Do you think it would be safe for Bennie? We can't watch him all the time, you know."

"People used to manage in the old days. And remember those people, the Burleys, who were staying up there?"

"That queer, crazy bunch who went there for a vacation when the Camp was first opened and then just stayed? Honestly, Ben! Surely you're not thinking of—"

"Oh, nothing like that. Just a vacation. Only—"

Only those queer, peculiar people, the Burleys had seemed so relaxed and cheerful. Grandma and Ma Burley cleaning, washing, cooking on the ancient electric stove; little Donnie, being a nuisance, poking at the keys on his father's crude, manual typewriter, a museum piece; Donnie and his brothers wasting away childhood digging and piling sand on the beach, paddling a boat and actually building a play house. It was mad. People playing robots. And yet, they seemed to have

a wonderful time while they were doing it.

"But how do you keep staying here?" he had asked Buck Burley, "Why don't they put you out?"

"Who?" asked Buck. "How? Nobody can sell me on leaving. We like it here. No robot can force us out. Here we are. Here we stay."

THEY pulled into the Guestville ramp. Bennie was fussy; the nursery Nana was strange to him. On impulse, Betty took him in to sleep in their room, ignoring the disapproving stares of both the Nana and the Roboy with their things.

They were tired, let down. They went to bed quietly.

In the morning Betty was already up when Ben stumbled out of bed. "Hi," she said, nervously cheerful. "The house Nanas all had overload this morning and I won't stand for any of those utility components with Bennie. So I'm taking care of him myself."

Bennie chortled and drooled vita-meal at his high-chair, unreprimanded. Ben mustered a faint smile and turned to go dial a shave, cool shower and dress at Robather.

That done, he had a bite of breakfast. He felt less than top-sale, but better. Last night *had* gone well. The Old Man would give them a pre-paid vacation clearance to any resort in the world or out. Why gloom?

He rubbed Bennie's unruly hair, kissed Betty and conveyed over from Guest-ville to office.

Message-sec, in tone respect-admiration A, told him the Old Man was waiting for him. Susan, the human receptionist in the outer office, favored him with a dazzling smile. There was a girl who could sell; and had a product of her own, too.

The Old Man was at his big, oak desk but, a signal honor, he got up and came half across the room to grab Ben's hand and shake it. "Got the full report, son. Checked the tapes already. That's selling, boy! I'm proud of you. Tell you what, Ben. Instead of waiting for a sales slack, I'm going to move you and that sweet little wife of yours right into a spanking new, special Country Gentleman unit I had in mind for myself. And a nice, fat boost in your credit rating has already gone down to accounting. Good? artistic sales challenge that is Good. Now, Ben, I have a real, crying for your talent."

"Sir? Thank you. But, sir, there is the matter of the vacation—"

"Vacation? Sure, Ben. Take a vacation anytime. But right now it seems to the Old Man you're on a hot selling streak. I don't want to see you get off the track, son; your into

WILLIAM W. STUA

ests are mine. And wait till you get your teeth into this one. Books, Ben boy. Books! People are spending all their time sitting in on Tri-deo, not reading. People should read more, Ben. Gives them that healthy tired feeling. Now we have the product. We have senior Robo-writers with more circuits than ever before. All possible information, every conceivable plot. Maybe a saturation guilt type campaign to start—but it's up to you, Ben. I don't care how you do it, but move books."

"Books, eh? Well, now." Ben was interested. "Funny thing, sir, but that ties in with something I was thinking about just last night."

"You have an angle? Good boy!"

"Yes, sir. Well, it is a wild thought maybe, but last summer when I was on vacation I met a man up at that new camp and — well, I know it sounds silly, but he was writing a book."

"Nonsense!"

"Just what I thought, sir. But I read some of it and, I don't know, it had a sort of a feel about it. Something new, sir, it might catch on."

"All right, all right. That's enough. You're a salesman. You've sold me."

"On the book?" Ben was surprised.

"Quit pulling an old man's leg, Ben. I'm sold on your needing a vacation. I'll fill out your vacation pass right now." The Old Man, still a vigorous, vital figure, turned and walked back to his Desk-sec. "Yes sir," said the secretarial voice, "got it. Vacation clearance for Tilman, Ben, any resort."

"And family," said Ben.

"And family. Very good, sir."

The Old Man made his sign on the pass and said heavily, "All right then, Ben. That's it. Maybe if you go back up to that place for a few days and see that psycho who was writing a book again, perhaps you'll realize how impractical it is."

"But sir! I'm serious about that book. It really did have —" he broke off.

The Old Man was sitting there, face blank, withdrawn. Ben could feel he wasn't even listening. That damned hearing aid of his. The Old Man had cut it off. Suddenly, unreasoningly, Ben was furious. He stood by the huge desk and he reached across toward the hearing aid on the Old Man's chest to turn up the volume. The Old Man looked up and saw Ben's hand stretching out.

A sudden look of fear came into his china blue, clear eyes but he made no move. He sat frozen in his chair.

Ben hesitated a second. "What—?" But he didn't have to ask. He knew.

And he also knew what he was going to do.

"No!" said the Old Man. "No, Ben. I've only been trying to help; trying to serve your best interests the best way I know. Ben, you mustn't—"

But Ben moved forward.

HE took the plastic box on the Old Man's chest and firmly cut the switch.

The Old Man, the Robot Old Man, went lifeless and slumped back in his chair as Ben stretched to cut off the Desksec. Then he picked up his vacation clearance.

"Robots can't sell, eh?" he said to the dead machine behind the desk. "Well, you couldn't sell me that time, could you, Old Man?

Clumsily, rustily, Ben whistled a cheerful little off-key tune to himself. Hell, they could do anything at all—except sell.

"You can't fool some of the people all of the time," he remarked over his shoulder to the still, silent figure of the Old Man as he left the office, "it was a man said that." He closed the door softly behind him.

Betty would be waiting.

Betty was waiting. Her head ached as she bounced Bennie, the child of Ben, of herself and of an unknown egg cell from an anonymous ovary, on her knees. Betty 3-RC-VIII, secret, wife-style model, the highest development of the art of Robotics had known instantly when Ben cut the Old Man's switch. She had half expected it. But it made her headache worse.

"But damn my programming!" She spoke abruptly, aloud, nervously fingering the locket around her neck. "Damn it and shift circuit. He's right! He is my husband and he is right and I'm glad. I'm glad we're going to the camp and I'm going to help him stay."

After all, why shouldn't a man want to do things just as much as a robot? He had energy, circuits, feelings too. She knew he did.

For herself, she loved her Ben and Bennie. But still just that wasn't enough occupation. She was glad they were going to the new isolation compound for non-psychotic but unstable, hyper-active, socially dangerous individual humans. At the camp there would be things to do.

At the camp they would be happy.

All at once the headache that had been bothering her so these past months was gone. She felt fine and she smiled at little Bennie. "Bennie-boy," she said, kissing his smooth, untroubled baby forehead. "Daddy's coming." Bennie laughed and started to reach for the locket around Mommy's neck. But just then the door opened and he jumped down to run and meet his daddy. **END**

The Stainless-Steel Knight

BY JACK RACKHAM

illustrated by IVIE

He had everything a knight needed:
gallant steed, fair lady
and the most unconquerable little home-made dragon
in a billion solar systems!

I

WHEN the twisted and radioactive wreckage screamed down out of space on to their dark planet, the Shogleet were instantly intrigued. To that incredibly ancient race, evolved to the point where energy, matter and form had no more secrets to hide and only curiosity remained, anything new was an occasion for rejoicing. And this was new.

Metals, plastics, physical and chemical combinations — they were familiar enough. But this strange mass had been formed into a particular shape. They probed at once, and at once found that there was something more.

Something lived, but only just.

Using their combined talents, they caught at the fragile remnant, preserved it, studied it, reconstructed it. From the still viable patterns of intelligence, they deduced the whole. They remade a man. They went further, discovering his history and, from that, something of the history of the whole species. They were unwilling to admit that such a monstrosity could be genuine, yet their probings could not be argued. So they remade his ship, which had obviously been only a small part of the whole tangled wreckage, and they sent it back whence it had came. And they appointed one of their number to go with it, and him, to investigate.

THE Shogleet crouched by Lancelot's beautiful boots, and purred. The purr was not a sign of pleasure, but the by-product of producing an outline-blurring vibration and a curiosity-damping field. The corridor outside the Agent-Director's office was a busy place, and the Shogleet had no wish to be observed.

Yet it was pleased. These things called Men were even more fantastically odd than it had at first imagined. With its perceptors extended, it was listening to the conversation on the other side of the wall. Voices were discussing Lancelot.

"— not only made us a laughing-stock, but he's getting to be a damned pest! Hanging about outside my office, demanding to be sent on a mission. I wouldn't trust him to empty my waste-basket. What the hell am I going to do with him?"

"Perhaps we might cook up a mission for him, Chief."

"Don't be obscene, Peters. That moron, on a mission? Don't forget, this is the blasted idiot who tried to rescue a disabled star-ship with a one-man raft!"

"Just the same, Chief, we could pick out something."

"But I can't send a Prime G-man on a routine call, damn it. Not that he is a Prime,

except on paper. But you know what I mean."

"Ah, but wait until you hear what I've dug up. It's from a Vivarium planet. We don't usually handle those. What generally happens is that the local man goes in, disguised, and re-sets the alarm, then smoothes out the fuss. Doesn't affect us unless it's a case of external invasion, you know."

"All right, all right. I know all that. But what's it to me? Some inside problem on a Viv planet. So?"

"Yes. But this planet is called Avalon. It's static in the 'pseudo-feudal' stage, with a culture based on Arthurian legend. Get it?"

The Shogleet, recording all this avidly, head a gasp. Putting mental query marks against the new terms, it went on listening.

"Arthurian!" Hugard breathed. "Peasants. Knights in armor. Sword and shield stuff. Go on."

"I thought we could play it up big, and let him have it. Make it sound a desperate emergency. Give him something to do."

"Yes. Quite harmless, of course. But I like the sound of it. Where is this Avalon?"

"That's the best part, Chief. It's in the Omega Centaurus cluster. That's twenty thousand lights away!"

"That settles it for me. It will take him a month, real time, just to get there. I'll be shut of him for a while. Sure we're not treading on any private toes with this?"

"Absolutely. Strictly a routine call, on a waiting list."

"Fine. Fine! Get me the data so I can blow it up big, and then shoot him in here. Peters, I won't forget this. To think that I'm going to be rid of that moron, for a while at least —"

THE Shogleet crept to Lancelot's shoulder, shivering gently with anticipation. When the summons came, it rode into the office with him and saw him stiffen into a stern salute before the Director's desk.

"Ah, Lake," Hugard nodded portentously. "At last I have a mission for you. Something I cannot pass on to anyone else. It will tax your powers to the utmost. I am not asking you to volunteer; I am *ordering* you to go. That is how serious it is. You understand?"

"I do, sir," Lancelot said, sternly. "Rely on me!"

"Good man! I was counting on that. Now, you'll take full details with you to study en route, of course, but I can give you the gist. The planet is Avalon. The alarm is urgent. Avalon is a closed culture. No one, not even we of Galactopol, can intervene in a closed culture, unless the situation is desperately critical." The Shogleet felt Lancelot stiffen, saw the swell of

his chest and the fire in his eyes, and wondered anew at these strange creatures who thrilled to the prospect of imminent danger.

"Most importantly—" Huggard hushed his voice — "As this is a closed culture, I can only send one man. You will be alone. Single-handed. You will be equipped, of course, as fully as possible, compatible with the culture. But everything else will be up to you. You're on your own."

"I understand, sir," Lancelot said simply. "Rely on me. If it's called for, I'll stake my life, rather than let down the Service." Huggard turned his face away, obviously overcome by some strong emotion. Then, coughing, he handed a form to Lancelot and stood up.

"That's your authorization. You'll pick up the rest of the documents at the front office. How soon can you leave?"

"At once!" Lancelot snapped, saluting crisply. Hugard put out a hand.

"Good luck, my boy. You'll need it."

"Thank you, sir." Lancelot took the hand with an enthusiasm that made the Director wince. "Don't worry about me. I'll come through!" He spun on his heel and marched from the office.

"You know," he confided to the Shogleet, "Hugard isn't such a bad old guy, after all. I thought he was neglecting me. But I can see his point, now. I've misjudged him."

"Lancelot," the Shogleet whispered, "do something for me. Get a stock of visio-tapes on feudal cultures, vivarium planets and the Arthurian legend."

"All right. Anything to oblige. But you pick the queerest things to be curious about. Arthurian legends, is it? My Dad used to be interested in them."

THIS the Shogleet already knew, as well as much more. It had learned, for one thing, the truer version of how Lancelot Lake came to be cast away in the first place. This it had picked up from various sources, in and about Galactopol headquarters.

Lancelot Lake had been a humble technician in the lowest grades of Galactopol, serving his time in a spaceways emergency - and - observation station, and passing his time in dreams of glamor and glory. He shared the simple faith of his equally simple parents, that it was just a matter of time before he had his big "break." And Fate had been very obliging.

The star-class liner *Orion*, carrying wealthy passengers but very little else, had developed a major defect in her main drive. Her skipper, in angry calm, warped out of hyper-drive, gave the order "Abandon Ship!" and pointed his lifeboat cluster toward the

nearest E-and-O station. It had not been an emergency. There had not been the least danger — only nuisance, and the loss of a valuable ship. The lifeboat signals had plainly said so.

But Lancelot had read his own special brand of understanding into those signals. On the run, fired with holy zeal, he had broken out his one-man raft, designed purely for short-range forays about the surface of his planetoid-station. Linking in to the powerful, all-wave, sub-etheric emergency radio of the station and giving a blow-by-blow account of his effort, he had stormed off to rescue the *Orion* single-handed.

No one could hear the lifeboat signals, after that. The *Orion* company reached the E-and-O station quite safely. There, in company with every other open planet in the Galaxy, they had listened, fascinated, to the classic broadcast that Lancelot was pouring out.

Dedicated, always brave, heedless of personal safety, washed with the radiation from a rapidly disintegrating nuclear drive, he kept on to the inevitable, hopeless, gallant end. Like a gnat grappling a runaway elephant, he went spiralling down into the great gravity sink of Antares, until the thermal radiation from that giant sun overwhelmed his transmission.

The rest was silence.

Now, a stupid, gloriously gallant, *dead* hero, is one thing. Posthumous awards are a matter of little consequence. It was nothing — the least they could do — to make the deceased Lancelot a Prime G-man. But the same hero returned from the dead was something else again, as the Shogleet had learned.

Perhaps, it pondered, they had done too good a job of the reconstruction. They had made him strictly according to the images in his own brain. Consequently, he was big, brawny, blue-eyed, golden-haired, handsome, and well-nigh indestructible . . . translating literally the concept "You can't keep a good man down." Had Lancelot known Hamlet, he would have agreed with his description: "What a piece of work is Man; how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties; in form and moving, how express and admirable; in action how like an angel; in apprehension how like a god!" But Hamlet was insane, whereas Lancelot was sincere, simple, and assured of the reality of his dream. Hence — as Hugard had said — a damned pest.

II

LANCELOT'S happy glow lasted well into the second week. Then he grew bored. The ship, though small, was

comfortable and almost self-directive. There was nothing to do.

He decided to check his equipment. The Shogleet, engrossed in the tortuous language of Mallory, was interrupted by its ward, who came bearing a long and shining rod tipped with a razor-edged blade.

"This thing," he said. "It's a lance, isn't it? And there's another thing, like a big blade with a cross-bar and a hand-grip. A sword?"

"I would think so. There should be armor, also. I gather you are to masquerade as a knight. From the literature, it seems there actually was a knight named Sir Lancelot."

"That's so. My Dad used to tell about him. Oh, Hugard knew what he was doing when he picked me for this mission! Fate, that's what it is." The Shogleet had other views, but kept discreetly silent about them.

"The concept of a vivarium culture interests me," it said. "Apparently not all men seek change, only a small percentage?"

"That's so," Lancelot nodded, sagely. "The happy man is the adjusted man. Knows what he's good at and where he belongs, and gets on with it. Like me, for instance. Natural born adventurer — and here I am."

"But you were originally a station-keeper. A mistake?"

"Oh, no. Psycho-dynamics is infallible. That station-keeper job was just a starter, so that I could work up."

The Shogleet, knowing full well that Lancelot knew nothing at all about the science of psycho-dynamics, wished it had asked for a tape on that. It was curious to see how the technique would work out on a whole planet seeded with one psycho-type.

Eventually, warning bells gave tongue and their little ship went down, on a guide beacon, over a green and peaceful world, dotted with islands, laced with blue sea, into a small glade ringed with rugged hills. It was just on sunrise, on a glorious spring morning.

Lancelot breathed deep of unfiltered air and the sweet scent of growing things, and found an immediate complaint to make.

"WE'RE about a hundred miles away from the chief city, Camlan," he said, as he frowned at a map. "And no transport. I mean, that kit I have to wear, it's a weight. It's not going to be easy just getting it on, much less walking."

"According to the accounts," the Shogleet said. "A knight rode something. A steed, I believe, or horse. What is a horse, Lancelot?"

"Damned if I know. I vaguely recall drawings, when I was

a kid. Sort of big animal, four legs, head at one end, tail at the other. But stop a bit, that explains something —" and he lugged out some massive pieces of metal-work. "These had me baffled, but they must be horse-armor. And this thing is a seat, to go on its back, I guess."

"I shall have to approximate," the Shogleet decided. "From your memories, and what I have read, I will transform myself into a horse."

"All right, but give me a hand with this hardware first. I can't get it on alone. In fact, I don't see how it *can* all go on one man!"

But, with patience and struggling, trial and error, they got the pieces that a skilled synthesist had fabricated from the patterns of museum relics buckled, strapped and locked about Lancelot.

His guess had been good. He could hardly hold upright under the load of metal.

"How the hell does anybody hop about," he complained, making a few labored steps, "and swing a sword in this lot? It's not possible!"

The Shogleet paid no attention. It was busy on its own account. Swallowing great quantities of air and energy, and speeding its metabolism to a great rate, it was converting its mass to a something that would fit that armor. Lancelot, shambling round, gave advice according to his blurred memories. Then, struggling mightily, he hoisted up the pieces one at a time, and then the saddle. Sweat was dribbling into his boots by the time he was done.

"Hell! This is a day's work by itself," he groaned, bashing his helmet in a vain attempt to wipe away the sweat from his brow. "There must be an easier way."

"I imagine," the Shogleet-horse guessed, "that this is why the knight had a squire, as it says in the tapes." Lancelot grunted his heartfelt agreement at this, hung the blank shield on a saddle-hook, the sword and sheath on the opposite side, stood the long lance by a handy tree, and eased his visor down past his nose, which was already raw from the first, light-hearted try.

Then he eyed the stirrups.

"You'll have to kneel," he said. "I'll never make it up there."

He climbed aboard gingerly, and they left the glade at a sedate walk. "First thing," he said firmly, "we get a squire. I'll never make it to Camlan at this rate."

"Very well," the Shogleet agreed, trying to work out a method of progress that would not unseat Lancelot. It compromised on a rubber-legged shamble which carried them at a smooth glide through what it assumed was a "woody glen." Half an hour of this

brought them to a clearing, laid out in a chessboard of little fields, with a huddle of timber shacks in the center. Their arrival was the signal for a bedlam of shouts, screams and frantics barking from a horde of half-wild dogs.

The uproar lasted only a second or two. Then all was silent, apart from furtive rustlings in the nearby bushes.

"Where did everybody go?" Lancelot demanded, grabbing the saddle-horn. "How am I going to round up a squire, if they all run off like that? No, wait — there's one, over by that tree."

HE was an old man, grizzle-haired and cramped with rheumatic stiffness. In his simple brown smock, he clung to the tree and trembled at their gliding approach. Lancelot let go the saddle-horn and tried to sit up, impressively.

"Ho, there!" he called. "Why did everyone run away?"

"Marry, fair sir," the oldster mumbled, cringing. "It would have been at sight of the strange beast thou ridest. No mortal eye ever saw such a mount before."

"What's wrong with me?" the Shogleet demanded curiously. "Isn't a horse like this?"

"Now strike me dead!" the peasant blanched, clutching the tree. "It spoke like a Christian. I heard it!"

"Naturally," Lancelot said grandly. "'Tis a magic steed, just as I am a holy knight. I have need of a squire. Call the others, that I may choose."

"Nay, noble sir, we are but humble peasants. Wilt find no squire here."

"Oh, blast!" Lancelot relapsed into Galactic in his irritation. Then, with strained patience, "Where then shall a knight find himself a squire?"

"The Baron Deorham has many such," the old man offered. "Steeds, too, though none such as thou ridest. But he is a wonderly wroth man, and a great warrior. He will surely attack thee, an thou come near him."

"Fear not for me, old man. I am Sir Lancelot. I will to Deorham."

"Lancelot! Now am I dead and in hell, forsooth. Lancelot is legend!"

"Never mind that. Just point the way, you old fool." The old man cringed again, and wobbled a shaky arm in the direction of a rough track. The Shogleet went into its gliding run again.

"A pity I couldn't get him to put me right on this shape," it said. "I must study a real horse at the first opportunity."

"This feels all right," Lancelot argued. "Still, I suppose you're right. It won't do to scare the locals out of their wits all the time . . . Say, that looks a likely place."

They had broken clear of trees, and before them the

grass went away in a slow rise to a hill, where there was a massive gray building. "Just let me do the talking. Apparently horses aren't supposed to talk." He clutched the saddle-horn valiantly, and they went on at a fair speed.

Suddenly the Shogleet sensed life and movement nearby, and swung round.

"What did you do that for?" Lancelot demanded, clinging desperately. Then he saw what the Shogleet had detected. About seventy yards away, just rounding an outflung clump of trees, came three riders. On either side the figures were slight, but the man in the center was gross, his steed huge, his armor bright in the sun. His shield bore the device of a mailed fist, and his lance carried a fluttering blue plume at its tip.

"That's what I want," Lancelot muttered. "A picture on my shield and a flag on my stick. Then they'll know who I am."

"So that," the Shogleet murmured, interestedly, "is what a horse is like." And it discreetly began modifying its shape. "We should keep still," it advised. "Let him come to us. I want to see that creature move."

As if in answer to the thought the big man put up a mailed fist. They distinctly heard the click of his visor as it snapped into place. Then he applied his heels to his mount and began thundering at them over the turf.

"LOOK at him go!" Lancelot said, admiringly. "I must learn to ride like that." The mighty figure thundered nearer, and Lancelot grew uneasy. "He'll never be able to stop in time," he muttered. "Not at that clip. Now what's the fool up to?" — for the stranger had dropped his lance to the horizontal, and the point was aimed straight at Lancelot. The Shogleet, ever curious, stood quite still.

"Hey! You lunatic! Point that thing the other way!" Lancelot yelled. But it was obvious even to him that the other had no intention of doing any such thing. At the last minute, he managed to fumble up his shield. There was a rending crash as point met shield, fair and square. Lancelot shot backwards over the Shogleet's cruppers, to land with a jarring thud on the ground. The Shogleet spun round, to watch as the young man groaned, sat up and then struggled to his feet.

"Art unhorsed!" the stranger roared. "Dost yield?"

"Yield nothing," Lancelot gasped, indignantly. "I wasn't even fighting. You want to give a bit of notice, next time you do something like that. Charging up like that without so much as a word . . ." and that was as far as he got. The strange knight, backing up

and tossing away his shattered lance, had yanked out his sword. Putting heels to his horse again, he tore up to where Lancelot stood. His blade rose and fell mightily, and a clang echoed across the meadow. Lancelot went down on his knees, hung there a moment and then kneeled over, groaning. The Shogleet trotted to where he lay and nuzzled him.

"You must get up and fight," it murmured. "I believe you are liable to be taken captive otherwise."

"Fight!" Lancelot mumbled. "I'm half-killed already. That damned lunatic should be put away." He sat up and banged his mailed fist on his helmet to clear his head. The knight backed off a yard or two, waiting.

"Get up, quickly," the Shogleet encouraged, and knelt. This sent the knight's horse into a rearing frenzy, giving Lancelot time to mount — and time to get annoyed, also.

"All right," he growled. "Wants a fight, does he? We'll see about that." He unsheathed his sword with an effort. The strange knight crouched, setting his horse into another gallop. At the critical moment, he stood up in his saddle to give more power to his sword-arm. Lancelot heaved his shield up, the shock numbing his arm, then swung blindly in riposte.

"Turn round," he ordered, as the knight charged past. "Let me have another bash at him. I only nicked him that time."

"You may kill him, you know."

"And what d'you fancy he's been trying to do to me? I'm black and blue all over. Let me have another crack at him, I said!"

"Wouldn't it be wiser to ask him to yield? In that way, we might get some information, which we sadly need." Lancelot grumbled under his breath, but when he saw that his casual swipe had sheared the knight's helmet-spike, and split his shield in half, he agreed reluctantly.

"Ho, knight," he called, and waved his sword. "Wilt yield?"

"To a foul fiend from the pit?" the knight roared, tossing away his ruined shield and bent sword. "Never! Pit thy sorcery against this!" And he unhooked from his saddle a short length of heavy chain, ending in an iron ball studded with vicious spikes. Once again, he came thundering forward.

"There!" Lancelot gasped. "I said the man was raving. If he catches me with that thing, I'm a dead duck."

He put up his shield and peered round it warily. The spiked ball flailed through the air and crashed full on the shield, slamming the young man over to an extreme angle. In sudden, blind rage, he

swung back, lashed out with the sword, felt it bite into something. Then, as the Shogleet bridled off, he looked back, and his stomach squirmed.

The super-hard, razor-keen blade had sliced through armor and knight, from shoulder to groin. There was blood everywhere.

III

"THE fool would have it," he muttered. "Now there'll be trouble."

But the body was hardly flopped to rest before the two attendants rode up, slid from their mounts and went down, each on a knee, heads bowed.

"Spare me, Sir Knight," they said, in unison. "I am thy servant."

"They're only kids," Lancelot said, surprised. "What are your names?"

"I am hight Alaric," said the ginger one, on the left.

"And I, Ector," the other added, shaking his long yellow locks. "How shall we call thee, Lord?" The Shogleet felt Lancelot brace up and stiffen.

"I am Sir Lancelot!" he announced. They promptly fell flat on their faces. "Oh, get up!" he said, irritably. "I'm not going to eat you. Now, one's to be my squire, and the other to look after my horse. Which way do you want it?"

"The horse!" they said, together and at once.

"That won't be necessary," the Shogleet said, forgetting. "I can look after myself quite well." Again the two youths fell to the ground, shaking and white.

"Get up!" Lancelot shouted. "How can I get anything done if you keep passing out, all the time? Now, what happens about him?"

"Thy liege-men will attend to it, Lord," said Alaric, in a shaky voice.

"*My* liege-men?"

"But certainly. Hast slain Deorham. That which was his is now thine."

"Oh!" Lancelot looked round. "Castle and all? Well, that's handy. And that was Deorham, was it? All right, one of you nip off and tell the gang the boss is coming home, hungry . . . and bruised, too!"

"I will, Lord!" Alaric fled for his horse and raced on ahead.

The Shogleet contented itself with a modest canter, finding the new movement intriguing. Lancelot was not impressed.

"You're shaking me to a jelly," he groaned. "Can't we go back to the other way?"

"This is more accurate. You had better learn. You may have to ride a real horse some day." Lancelot forgot to grumble as they reached the courtyard of the castle, and he could appreciate the size of the place. He slid off, and stood agape at high rough-

stone walls and towers, their slit-windows innocent of glass, but with gay cloths trailing from every vantage point. Ector approached, unwillingly, to take the Shogleet's bridle. Lancelot objected at once.

"You can't go off and leave me, not now. What'll I do? I mean, you know more than me about all the customs and things."

"It will be quite all right," the Shogleet consoled him in Galactic, ignoring the flabbergasted stares of the men-at-arms who had drawn near. "Just give orders. Tell them what you want. I will join you as soon as I can."

It went with Ector to a great low stable, where there were many half-wild horses and a great smell. As soon as it could be alone, it cast off the horse-shape. It had given a degree of thought to this, and decided it was best to assume some human-like form. So, on its rapid transit through the stables, courtyard and into the great hall, it settled into a small, dark-hued, manikin shape, thinking to be less impressive and thus less frightening in that guise.

Trotting through the serfs who were busy scattering fresh rushes on the stone-slab floor, it found Lancelot seated at the head of a long, rude table, on which more serfs were arranging platters heaped with hot food. He was deep in conversation with an old, rugged-looking, gray-bearded man, but looked up as the Shogleet came close and scrambled on to the arm of his chair.

"THIS is Gildas," he said. "Calls himself a seneschal. Sort of head-man. Been telling me all about the property."

Gildas backed off warily.

"Now, sooth," he muttered. "I do believe thou *art* Lancelot, and this thy familiar. What is it, a troll?"

"Lancelot," the Shogleet said, in Galactic. "Have you forgotten? We are on a mission? You should be asking Gildas for news of the emergency."

"Say, that's right. I'd forgotten. It's not every day a man gets a barony." He turned in his chair. "Draw near, Gildas. There is nothing to fear."

"Thou sayest it well, Lord," Gildas growled, "but I like it not. A troll that stands and parleys like a man. Still, it is but part and parcel with the strange things that have come on this land but lately."

"Ah, now, that's what I wanted to know about. What's going on? I have to know, because I'm here to stop it." Gildas stepped back, transformed from a sullen graybeard into an angry enemy.

"I knew it!" he roared. "I knew thou wert false! I will hail the men-at-arms, that

they may cut thee down. Nay, strike me dead an thou canst, but I will say it."

"Oh, lord!" Lancelot muttered. "What now? For heaven's sake, man, I'm not going to strike anybody dead. Not again. I've had enough of that for one day. Just get a grip on yourself and tell me what it's all about."

"Methinks yon troll doth already know, and the question is but a trap. Natheless, I will tell. Ye wit well there is but one great sin in this land. It is hight 'Change.' The wise ones tell us this is the best of all worlds, and that it is sin to think otherwise. So all say, where it can be heard. But who can say what a man thinketh in his heart? To labor and sweat and garner the fruits of the land is the old way, the honest way. But who will labor and sweat when his fields may be ploughed, sown, aye, and garnered into his barn, without he turn a hand? This be a change that many welcome."

"I haven't the foggiest idea what you're going on about," Lancelot confessed. "Don't tell me the sky is going to fall over a few ploughed fields? I was thinking of gathering some of those lads out there to ride with me to Camlan —"

"Camlan!" Gildas leaped back again, surprisingly spry for one of his age. "Again I say ye are false!" And he had his mouth open to shout as Lancelot jumped up and seized him.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "I'm getting sick of this double-talk. Why the hell can't you come right out and say what you mean?" He turned to the Shogleet, with Gildas dangling chokingly from his mailed fists. "Can you make any sense out of it? I think they're *all* stark raving mad here."

The Shogleet eyed Gildas.

"Put him down," it said. "Now, what land is this, and who is your king?"

"This is Brython," Gildas said, squeakily, "and our king hight Cadman. Soon to be Cadman of the Fiery Dragon, in sooth. He dwells in Alban, twenty miles south. If ye be the wise troll, advise this your master to ride to Cadman and plead to aid, on our side!"

"I'm beginning to get it," Lancelot sighed "What's Camlan then?"

"Camlan is for Bors, King of the Kellat, and our deadly foe. Even now doth he call an army of knights, to invade our land and seize our dragon. To destroy it, he claims, but many suspect it is but to capture it for his own use."

"Oh, come now. A real dragon?"

"It is sooth, Lord. I myself have seen it, and my eyes were weak for a day after. It is truly a fearsome thing for an enemy. But for us it be great good. It is strange, and we all fear it, but who can argue


LARRY IVIE

against a full barn and tilled fields, all without labor?"

"A DRAGON which labors in the field? That would be something really worth seeing, Lancelot. The tapes said nothing of this."

"A dragon!" Lancelot murmured, dreamily. "That would be right up my street. All right, Gildas, we'll leave the question of politics for a bit. Shove some of that grub my way, would you? And pass some tools." Gildas frowned at this.

"There are no eating implements in this culture, Lancelot," the Shogleet advised, drawing on its studies. "Dagger and fingers only."

Before Lancelot could voice his grumble, Gildas said, "Wilt permit thy wives now, Lord?"

"My what? How do I come to have wives?"

"They were Deorham's, are now thine. They wait thy leave to come to table."

"Good grief! Now I have a couple of wives."

"Nay, Lord. Six."

Lancelot shrank into his glittering armor. He cast an appealing eye on the Shogleet. "What do I do now? Six wives! One would be too many."

"Ask Gildas," the Shogleet advised. "He will know. There was nothing in the tapes about such a situation, so I cannot help you."

"Here a minute," Lancelot gulped. "I have been long in the grave and forget many customs of this land. What shall I do with these — women? What are they all for, anyway? And why six?"

"Marry, Lord, but I understand thee not. A man may take as many wives as he needs and can support, if he be a knight. And what would a wife be for, but to serve? Still, it matters not, now. If thou art truly for our cause, then must eat and depart forthwith. All is to hand. We can fetch Alban by nightfall."

"What, right away?"

"All is to hand," Gildas repeated firmly. "Even this day did Deorham make ready for the journey, to join Cadman and all the other great knights of this land, against the Kellat. Else thou wouldst not have found him in the meadow, where he did but try out his armor and steed." Lancelot groaned and looked about feverishly. The Shogleet, watching, saw him shudder.

"I'm up a tree this time. I can't face a twenty-mile drag, not after what I've just had from the Baron. I ache, I tell you. But I don't fancy all these women hanging about either. I'm caught both ways."

"The Lady Phillipa hath the healing touch," Gildas offered. "If thou wilt shed thy mail, Lord, she will attend thee." And he clapped his hands before Lancelot could stop him.

They came in at once. The Shogleet suspected they had been close at hand, listening. At any rate, there was no need to warn the Lady Phillipa that her services were needed. A large and robust woman of some thirty years, she made at once for the hapless knight and, with Gildas assisting, had him out of his mail as readily as a mother undresses a child, and with as little concern.

It was the Shogleet's first contact with women at close quarters and it was intensely interested in this new phenomenon. What it found particularly puzzling was Lancelot's obvious awkwardness, as if he was afraid the females might see the body that had been built for him. This was not the behavior-pattern that it had traced in Lancelot in the beginning. According to that, he was lordly and quietly compelling in the presence of the opposite sex. It began to suspect that this, too, had been part of the young man's fantasies. It was all very strange.

HALF an hour later, on a real horse, into the saddle of which Lancelot had been hoisted by a primitive block-and-tackle arrangement and three sweating serfs, the young man led a great rout from the castle courtyard. On his arm, the Shogleet listened keenly to the chatter of the men around. A few were mounted, most were afoot, and they all were filled with enthusiasm for the battle ahead. But, of the dragon, there were divided opinions. Some thought it a blessing, a gift from the gods to a deserving country, but they were in a minority. The rest devoutly believed that it was evil. The right and proper thing for a man was to work or to fight, they declared. What man could do either, when a dragon did both so much better than any man? Not so, they said, and this legendary knight was come, for sure, to rid them of it.

Lancelot, jogging along in his armor, was acting and talking in anything but a knightly manner, but the Shogleet paid him little heed. Disguished under the ministrations of Lady Phillipa, it had managed to help him with doses of carefully tuned energy. The young man was as good as new, except in spirit, in which region he was badly bruised.

"I shall never keep this up for twenty miles," he groaned, as his teeth jarred and clicked at every pace. "I'm a nervous wreck, I tell you. If this is knight errantry, then I've had it." They made a good twenty miles an hour, and should have fetched Alban in two hours. But it was nearer five, and the sun lowering in the sky, before the roofs of the city came in sight.

Then the Shogleet recalled, from its studies, the low level of education consistent with this culture. Few of these people could count as far as twenty. For them, forty was wellnigh an infinite number.

Over the bridge and into the narrow streets of Alban, Lancelot was pushed into the lead. The Shogleet sharpened its senses for more information about the dragon. There were whispers on all sides about the "knight with the naked shield" and "how his armor doth glitter, like silver," but not a mention of the mysterious beast. In the center of the city they came to the castle. The crowd of idle sightseers gave way to a great throng of men-at-arms, knights, squires.

They came to the foot of a great flight of steps.

"That's it," Lancelot said, with resigned conviction. "Just let me fall off right here. I'm through."

But Alaric had spurred his mount forward, just as a tall, gray-headed man, with a heavily-lined, strong face, came to the head of the steps.

"Your Majesty," the squire cried in a high but quite audible voice. "I am squire to this knight. This day hath he slain Deorham in a great battle. Whereupon, and without stay for rest, hath he ridden right speedily, with this great company, to offer service with thee against thine enemy. Your Majesty, this is Sir Lancelot!"

The Shogleet could hear the great gasp which ran through the crowd at this awesome name. Even the King himself seemed to shrink a little.

"It is, indeed, a great honor," he said uneasily, "to have such a great one return from the shades to serve in our cause. Dismount, Sir Lancelot. Approach and be welcomed to our presence." Lancelot crawled wearily from the saddle. He stood on shaky legs, looked up the steps and began to climb.

But the Shogleet, with its razor-keen senses, had caught something highly irregular. Alaric had gone on, to keep one pace to the rear of Lancelot, while Ector stayed to hold the horse.

"Ector!" the Shogleet hissed, becoming part-visible for the purpose. "See you that man in the brown jerkin and the cap over his eyes, there close by the knight in the falcon shield?" Ector peered, and nodded.

"Mark him. Discover what you can. When the moment is ripe, have word with him, and say Lancelot has need of him. Have him come."

"And if he will not come, Lord?"

"Whisper in his ear this word. It is a great magic, so forget it not. The word is 'Galactopol.' Hearing it, he will come."

ECTOR repeated the word fearfully, and went off with the horse. The Shogleet scurried up the steps, its curiosity-damping field going full blast. Lancelot was wearily explaining to King Cadman that he had travelled far and fast, and that all he wanted to do, right then and there, was to rest.

"They must be made of steel and leather," he complained bitterly, in the chamber that had been assigned to him, as Alaric helped him unbuckle his armor. "Believe it or not, but that crowd down there are just getting set for an all-night session. Drinking, carousing and eating. Mountains of food. Entertainers standing by. Women all over the place. Don't they ever get tired?" The squire was sent off for bread and wine and a bowl of hot water, and the Shogleet soon had Lancelot easier in body. But his spirits were well down.

"I'm a flop at this game," he gloomed. "All right, I've turned up a dragon. But suppose I can't fight it? And suppose I do? I still don't know what the emergency is all about, and I've no idea how to start looking. I'm a duff, I tell you. Best thing I can do is go back to Director Hugard and turn in my badge."

"Patience," the Shogleet counseled. "I think Ector may have news for us. Ah, here he is now."

IV

ECTOR had found his man. Lancelot looked, indifferently.

"Who might you be?" he asked.

"That's a good question," the stranger replied crisply. "I was going to ask the same thing. Who the hell are you? And what's the big idea of riding around in that fake chrome - silicon - steel armor, hey?"

"That's it," the Shogleet nodded, shimmering into full visibility. "That's what I heard you say, down there by the steps." The man in brown stepped back carefully, blinked a time or two and swallowed.

"I don't believe it," he said. "I see it. I hear it. A little brown pixy, with red eyes, talking Galactic. But I don't believe it."

"Hey!" Lancelot sat up, painfully. "That's a point, too. You're talking Galactic. Who *are* you, anyway?"

"He is obviously a Galactopol agent," the Shogleet said patiently. "The real point is, why is he here? Why would they send two agents?"

"Two agents?" The stranger stared, then pushed his cap back. "I'm beginning to get it, I think. Heard of you, haven't I? Lancelot Lake?"

"That's right. And you?"

"Oh, I'm just a third-level sector man. Name's Alfred North. Pass myself off as a

journeyman blacksmith here. It's a living, with all the armor about. That's how I could spot your stuff. Nothing here to even scratch that. You'd be a pay-off bet in a tourney."

"No fear!" Lancelot said, hastily. "I've had all I want of that. But what is this all about? What's the emergency?"

"It's a dilly, all right." North fished out a case, offered it. "Smoke?"

"Thanks!" Lancelot's eyes shone, until he recalled the squires. "How about them, then? Won't they mind?"

"It'll scare them, but they'll write it off as magic. That's a handy way to cover up anything you don't understand. That's why they can take the dragon so easily."

"There really is a dragon, then?"

"But surely. You mean you didn't know? It's had me stopped, I can tell you. I was thinking of screaming for special aid. How come you're here, if you don't know about it?"

"I guess I'm your special aid. I only got here this morning, and I can't seem to keep still long enough to find out anything that makes sense."

North frowned, then shrugged resignedly. "I suppose you special boys have your own methods. Anyway, I'd say you have the right approach in this case. We usually work under cover, but this one isn't like that at all. When the alarm went off, I wasn't bothered —"

"That alarm," the Shogleet interrupted. "I am curious about that. Is it some form of automatic device?"

North sighed. "I was hoping you'd go away, if I didn't pay any attention. Ah, well." He inhaled thoughtfully. "You see, when these planets are colonized, they implant the compatible beliefs as a dogma. But, just to take care of any sports, there's a ritual, a form of exorcism, that is triggered off by any major change. And that fires the alarm. Doesn't happen very often. It's usually a gene-twist. Some kid gets curious about the stars up there, or begins to fiddle about with experiments in steam-pressure. That kind of thing. But this one is different."

"A real dragon?" Lancelot asked, wide-eyed.

"THAT would be the day," North grinned. Then he sneaked a look at the Shogleet, and his grin slipped a little. "No," he said, stubbing out his smoke-tube. "If you think back a couple of hundred years, when they were terraforming this planet, they used machinery. Big stuff. One gadget was a combined cultivator-harvester. Thorium powered, and just about everlasting. They used hundreds of 'em. And somebody goofed. One got left behind, in a cave they

were using for storage space. Now, after all these years, one of the local boys has found it. He's using it."

"Hold on," Lancelot objected. "He wouldn't know how."

"That's the hell of it. He wouldn't have to; I've checked. The thing is run from a mentrol — a sort of headband, with trimmings. You put it on, and think your orders, like 'stop,' 'go,' 'right,' 'left,' 'fast,' and 'slow.' And what more do you want? The way I figure it, somebody must have found the mentrol and tried it on for size, and that started the whole thing off."

"Yeeow!" Lancelot gasped. "He must have had the hell of a fright when it came rumbling out of its cave. But it all fits. The way they lap up magic here, it wouldn't be any trouble for them to spot that whoever wears the mentrol controls the beast. Which is right, anyway. Who owns it now?"

"That's Sir Brian de Boyce. Next to old Cadman, he's the big boy in these parts. The way I heard it, one of his freemen found the mentrol, so Sir Brian eliminated him, and took charge. And it's ruining the economy. There isn't a peasant in miles who's put his back into his job in months. I'm stymied. I'm only a freeman here. I can't just charge in and tell Sir Brian what to do. But you can. You're a knight."

"That's all right," Lancelot mused, "but how do I get it from him?"

"You'll fight him for it, of course." Lancelot fell back.

"Oh, no! I'm not having any more of that," he groaned. "You didn't see what Deorham did to me. I can show you the bruises —"

"Come off it." Noah was curt. "If you took a stroll down to the main hall right now, you'd find that they're working out the list for the big fight, in the morning. No, not against Bors and his boys. Against each other."

"Eh? What for?"

"It's the culture pattern. Trial by combat. Knights fight for rank, prestige. Cadman wouldn't dream of leading a field of knights unless they had all been graded by prowess. That's how it's done. The winners qualify; the losers flunk out. I'll bet you there's a dozen down there right now, just aching to have a crack at you. You can *call* yourself Sir Lancelot. But they'll want you to prove it. And you can't refuse, either; if you chicken out, your name will smell. Even a serf will spit on you."

"Oh lord!" Lancelot sat up, and put his head in his hands. "I wish I'd never seen this place. What the hell am I going to do?"

"Your best bet is to lash out with a challenge to Sir Brian, right away. If you're lucky, and he's free to take you on,

then all you have to do is chop him down, and you're top man — and the mentrol is yours. You'd better be quick. The competition is fierce."

MASQUERADING as a horse again, the Shogleet carried Lancelot through the busy streets, early the next morning. It was of the opinion that Lancelot had been reasonably fortunate. He had drawn one strange knight from the far west, called Gnut, an unknown about whom fantastic stories were rife.

"Discounting the tales," it argued, "for these people have only the vaguest ideas of accuracy, you are fortunate. You will defeat Gnut, then Sir Brian, and the mentrol will be yours."

Lancelot refused to be cheered. "I'm sick of this knight business," he muttered. "I spend all my time in this blasted metal strait-jacket, jogging my guts out on a horse, people bashing me about. Now I've got to fight a couple of guys I've never seen before. And if I win what happens? Every knight for miles around will be waiting to have a bash at me to show how good he is. And they talk about competition in a dynamic culture! They don't know what they're talking about."

They were turning the corner, by a high-roofed house. The Shogleet was pondering on the unspoken implication in Lancelot's words. He was actually so low in spirit as to entertain the thought that he might not win! Then there came a gentle hail from the balcony, and a gay-colored scrap of silk fluttered through the sunlight, to catch on the tip of Lancelot's lance.

"Tis a troth, Lord," Alaric said. "Wouldst have me seek out its owner?" Then he explained, as Lancelot was completely fogged. He would enter the house find out who had tossed the silk, ask for her glove, and Lancelot would carry it into battle. "An thou art victorious, Lord, the hand which fits the glove is thine. It is the custom."

"But I've got six wives, now!"

"What of that?" Alaric demanded. "Who knoweth what treasures may hap, today? I know not of Gnut, but Sir Brian is a wonderly rich man — and all can be thine."

"Good grief!" Lancelot shuddered. "Doesn't a man ever settle down with just one wife here?"

"To wed, thou meanest? Marry, that is a different matter. That is the way of a man who is old, and would put an end to glory and adventure."

"Precious few of these lads will live so long," Lancelot mumbled. "The way they go at it. What do you call 'old'?"

Alaric frowned. "I can but guess, sire. A great many

years, certainly. As many as thirty."

The Shogleet was amused by Lancelot's sudden silence. It knew he was thirty-three. But there was food for thought, too. If it was rare for a knight to live longer than thirty years, then this would be a self-control mechanism to keep down the numbers of the non-productive to within the capacity of an agricultural community. Knighthood, it seemed, served the multiple function of entertainment, hazard, prestige and the skimming off of the restless few.

But the wives were an enigma. The Shogleet determined to question North at the first opportunity.

THE tournament field was riot of color. Gay streamers flirted with the breeze from the pavilions at either end. Each pennant was a knight. Tabarded heralds carried rosters. The chattering populace was accommodated on rude plank seats along either length of the field. In the privileged center of one side was the royal stand, thick with drapes.

Alaric was kept busy pointing out the various celebrities, reeling off their reputations, their possessions, their pedigrees, until even the Shogleet marvelled a little at such a memory. Then the boy saw Sir Brian's pennant. He indicated it.

"His lands are the most spacious in Brython, second only to the King. Vast herds, great forests and three castles."

"How many wives?"

"As I heard it last, sire, eleven."

"Oh, great!" Lancelot sagged. "That's a hell of an incentive to win. But if I don't kill him, then he'll kill me!"

Bugles rent the chatter, and set the pennants rising and falling. The contest began. Lancelot watched gloomily.

"Look at that!" he muttered to the Shogleet. "Ton and a half of raving insanity, travelling at about thirty miles an hour. Double it, because the other lunatic is doing the same. No wonder they count you out if you fall. By the time you stop that with your belly and fall about five feet onto hard ground, plus all the hardware, it's no wonder they don't get up to argue."

The pennants rose and fell. Trumpets blared. Brass-lunged heralds told the tally of victor and vanquished. Then up went a barred black pennant, with a gold spot. A herald roared.

"Sir Gnut, of the Westland . . . to meet Sir Lancelot!"

Alaric broke out a pure white pennant, and the challenge was shouted back.

"Sir Lancelot to meet Sir Gnut!"

The great surf-roar of the crowd was stilled as that fabulous name spread from lip to lip. Lancelot settled himself in

the saddle, and put out a hand for the lance which Alaric held ready. But the Shogleet had already spotted Gnut, at the other end. A smallish man, in all-black mail, on a small, wiry stallion, he looked fast.

"Leave the lance," it ordered. "Prepare to use your sword." It cantered on to the field before Lancelot could argue "Now sit firm. Fend off his point with your shield, then cut him down with your sword."

"Who, me?" Lancelot chattered. "How the blazes can I, with you bouncing me about like that?" A great yell went up from the crowd as the gallant knight flung his arms about the neck of his steed to keep from falling off.

The Shogleet halted. The warden's flag fell. Sir Gnut went into his gallop at once, head well down, crouching over his crouched lance. Lancelot fumbled for his sword. The Shogleet braced itself. Lance met shield with a rending crash, and splintered into matchwood. The Shogleet pranced backward and round, to keep Lancelot in the saddle. Gnut was equally nimble, tossing away the ruined lance and whipping out his blade. In and out like a snake, he battered Lancelot, again and again, rocking him in his saddle until he was good and angry.

"All right!" he roared. "You asked for it!" And he stood in his stirrups, waiting for the black knight to charge in just once more. Then the Shogleet felt him slash down, viciously . . . and there was a shocked *Aaah!* from the crowd.

"Serve him right," Lancelot growled as they trotted from the field, and the serfs ran on to carry off the sliced remains of Sir Gnut. "Let's hope that made Sir Brian stop and think a bit."

V

BACK in his tent there was a surprise waiting for Lancelot.

The Shogleet, poking its horse-head through the tent flap, saw a slim, girlish figure, with her glossy gold hair done in gleaming braids about her head. This was the youngest female it had seen. It studied her with great interest. Her complexion was curiously translucent, so that the flush of blood in her cheek was clearly visible. And her voice was soft and low, as she greeted Lancelot. Alaric, as usual, was on hand with explanations.

"This is the Lady Jessica, sire. She who threw thee the silk which thou accepted."

"I pray," she said, softly, "that thou'rt willing to accept my glove as a gage, Sir Knight." Timidly she held out a slim hand. Lancelot took it as if it was an eggshell. The Shogleet was completely baffled by his beet-red face and

the glazed look in his eye. This was a side to Lancelot that it had not seen before.

The Lady Jessica had to stand on tiptoe to put her face to Lancelot's. Then she went even more red in the face, and whispered, "I pray that thou wilt be triumphant, Sir Knight — for my sake!"

Then she was gone, leaving Lancelot staring into vacancy and rubbing his cheek. North pushed his way into the tent, grinning.

"Nice work, Lake," he said. "Not much style, but you chopped him down quick."

"Here —" Lancelot said, abstractedly. "Something I wanted to ask you. This business about wives. I mean, I won six from Deorham. Lord knows how many Gnut had, but Sir Brian has eleven. What do I do with all them?"

"Ah!" North chuckled. "You're a bit mixed, there. The word should rightly be 'housewives.' They're a kind of high-class servant. When you think about it, there isn't much else a high-born lady can do, except run the domestic side, while the menfolk are busy battling. They have their duties, you see, like keeping track of the hired help, tending to the kitchen, the bedchamber, the linen — that sort of thing. They tend to the man of the house, too, of course, and entertain his guests. But they're strictly property. No need to be bothered, if that's what you're worried about."

Lancelot's face went red again. "So there isn't any regular getting married and settling down, then?"

"Oh, sure, but that's a different thing. For the knight who is past his prime and wants to settle down. Retire. You know. He usually selects some old place out in the sticks, turns in the rest of his property to the King, to be a prize for some contender, and settles in to raise a family. More squires and ladies, and the whole thing starts all over again. Not many get that far. It's too dull for them. Why?"

Lancelot was saved his stammering explanation by the sound of a herald from the field. Sir Brian's pennant had gone up.

"Take the lance this time," the Shogleet decided, studying Sir Brian.

"Good grief!" Lancelot had been looking, too. "See the size of him! No wonder he's the top man in these parts. He's going to take a bit of knocking out."

The Shogleet pricked up its ears at the sudden change in Lancelot's tone, but it had more urgent matters to consider. "Couch your lance firmly," it advised. "Aim for his midriff." The flag fell. They began to go forward, from a canter into a gallop, Lancelot manfully sitting forward and forgetting to complain. The

mighty Sir Brian thundered toward them, his lance glittering in the sun. At the very moment of impact, the Shogleet stiffened, rearing on its haunches to keep Lancelot in the saddle. There was a deafening double clang from the shields, a wheeze from Lancelot as the wind was punched out of him, the screech of tortured metal and a gruesome gargle from Sir Brian.

Then, despite all the Shogleet could do, it felt Lancelot lifted and dragged from the saddle.

SKIDDING furiously to a stop, it wheeled to look. There was Lancelot, on foot, dazedly clutching the haft of the lance. The other end, with its razor tip, had stabbed through Sir Brian's shield, his armor and Sir Brian himself, and stuck out a hand's breadth on the far side.

With a grunting effort, Lancelot tore the lance free. He staggered back as the Shogleet cantered up, to kneel so that he could remount. The crowd was stunned into momentary silence. Then it went wild.

Even King Cadman looked shaken, as they cantered past the royal stand for the salute and accolade. Back in the tent, Lancelot eased himself out of his helmet and sat.

"That's me," he said flatly. "I'm through, done, finished." North pushed through the tent-flap just in time to disagree with the last word.

"There's still the dragon," he said. "That shouldn't be too hard, now that you've won the mentrol. Nice bout, that was. Just as well you're not staying in these parts. The rest of the boys don't stand a chance against you."

"It's the superior metal, of course," the Shogleet commented, poking its horsehead into the tent. North jumped a clear foot off the ground, knocking his head on the wooden spar of the tent.

"Talking horses, now," he breathed. "Is this routine equipment for you Prime G-men?"

"Forget that," Lancelot snapped. "What about this dragon? Let's get it over with, and we'll see whether I'm staying here or not."

North eyed him thoughtfully. "I suggest you play it this way. There should be a coffee-break, soon. You get an audience with Cadman. Tell him this dragon is a great evil. You've come to kill it and, once done, you'll return to the shades. That way, everybody'll be shut up. All right?"

"Sounds simple enough. But *can* I kill the thing?"

"I'll fix that," North said briskly, "once I have the mentrol." He glanced out of the tent and chuckled. "Here they come now."

"Who?"

"Sir Brian's crowd. His lieges, turning themselves in.

You want the lad with the gadget. Never mind the rest."

"Suppose . . ." said Lancelot, in a tone that made the Shogleet prick up its ears at once. "Suppose I was staying here, and I didn't want all these retainers hanging about — what's the routine procedure?"

"Nothing to it." North gave him that thoughtful look again. "You just manumit them. Give 'em their freedom. They'll just go off and sign up with somebody else. It's not wise, though, because you couldn't run an estate without staff, and they work for their keep."

"That's a point," Lancelot admitted. He went to receive his spoils with a pensive air.

Late that afternoon, with the awed populace keeping a safe distance, the Shogleet bore Lancelot, following North who was on foot, to the meadow where the monster "slept." North had the mentrol in his hand.

"This shouldn't be any trouble," he said. "A bit of expert sabotage, and it will be all over. There she is, folks."

IT was easy to see why the peasants had dubbed it a dragon. Its sectioned body, all of fifty feet long, hugged the ground, rising to a twenty-foot high hump in front. There a single head-lamp gave it a one-eyed, evil look.

"That front scoop," North explained, "can be set to any level you like, and there are controls which can be adjusted so that the stuff is processed, inside. Got a rudimentary 'brain' — enough to identify and reject organic matter that's still alive. It wouldn't touch a man, even if you tried to make it. Not that any of the locals would have the nerve to chance it. Nor do I blame them. Incidentally, it processes wastes and makes its own bags and fertilizer, all in one operation. That's not doing the economy any good, either, believe me. I've been stuck because I couldn't lay my hands on this little gadget. But now I have it, I know that it's immobile. Nothing can happen until I put it on my head. Come on."

But the Shogleet had other ideas.

"Lancelot," it said. "You had better go back. Warn the audience not to come too near. And there is someone you would wish to see, I think?"

"That's right." Lancelot slid down eagerly, and went clanking back.

"You're a smart animal," North said, shrewdly. "What's on your mind?"

"Answer me a question, first. I gather that there is a sort of personal polarity, an attraction and an attachment between humans of opposite sexes, if certain other factors are favorable. It involves such activities as marrying, set-

tling down, raising a family — all of which are concepts which I do not quite understand. But I believe such relationships are not amenable to reason. Yes?"

"If you mean that there's neither sense nor reason in a guy who's in love, that's dead right," North chuckled. "Love makes a fool of a man. There's never been a cure for it yet."

"That is what I thought. Thank you. Now, it is not enough that the dragon be destroyed. It must be *seen* to be destroyed. Impressively."

"It's a good point. What's on your mind?"

The Shogleet proceeded to tell him, in rapid, explicit detail. North's eyes widened.

"I can do it, sure, if that's the way you want it. I hope you know what you're doing, that's all."

He hurried off across the meadow, to disappear into the gaping jaws of the cultivator. Lancelot came clanking back. He had already mounted by the time North returned.

"Let's get it over with," he said impatiently, dropping his visor. "I might as well tell you that, as soon as I've finished with this thing, I'm retiring from Galactopol. I'm through. Now, what do I do?"

"It's all fixed," North said dryly. "I'll get well clear, then I'll put this on and make it look as if you two are battling. When you've had enough, you bash it with your sword."

"Fat lot of good that's going to do!"

"I told you, it's all fixed. Keep an eye out for a yellow danger-plate. It's marked 'DRIVE - UNIT SAFETY COVER.' Just hit that. That's all."

The Shogleet broke into a gentle canter. Lancelot drew his sword. The long, gleaming machine suddenly broke into loud and grumbling life, its great jaws agape. With a growl of gears, it moved and swung its great head round, like a humped serpent seeking prey. Then the headlight lit up, sending out a bright beam.

"You know," Lancelot jerked, as the Shogleet swerved to chase the lumbering machine, "this isn't such a bad place, after all. I mean, once you get away from this armor-plated business. I think I'll retire. I own all Sir Brian's lands now. I could settle down, take life easy —"

"But you are a Prime G-man, Lancelot. It is your duty to return to Headquarter's and report the successful completion of your mission."

"North will take care of that for me."

"But you don't really belong here."

"What's that got to do with it? It's a free country, isn't it?" Lancelot waved his sword valiantly, and the Shogleet swerved suddenly, so that the tip of the blade struck the yellow panel.

THE bang was enough to impress even the Shogleet.

It was very busy, for a few fractionated seconds, warding off blast, radiation and chunks of flying debris. Then there was a ringing silence. In a thick haze of settling dust, it turned, scrambled up out of the hole and crept over the torn and ruptured earth to where North was peering, open-mouthed, from a sheltering bankside. Of the Brythons there was nothing to be seen but the puffs of dust from their flying heels.

"You look all right," North gasped, "but what about him?"

"He is stunned, and in temporary fugue. It will pass. If you would hang the mentrol on my saddle, we will be leaving. You can clear up the odd details?"

"Sure, I can handle those. You're leaving right now?"

"I think it would be wise. Lancelot seems to have formed one of those attachments, for a certain young lady. He intended to remain here permanently. That would have been unwise, I understand?"

"Dead right," North grinned, but there were grim undertones. "With what he's got, and you along, he would be 'Change' in a big way. That wouldn't do. I'd have to interfere. And that might be nasty."

"Yes, that is what I thought. It is better this way."

"Just what are you, anyway — a sort of guardian angel?"

"You might say that, yes," the Shogleet nodded, and set off to gallop the long trail, back to the ship.

But it was still curious. It wondered just what Director Hugard would say when Lancelot got back.

END

Kangaroo Quiz

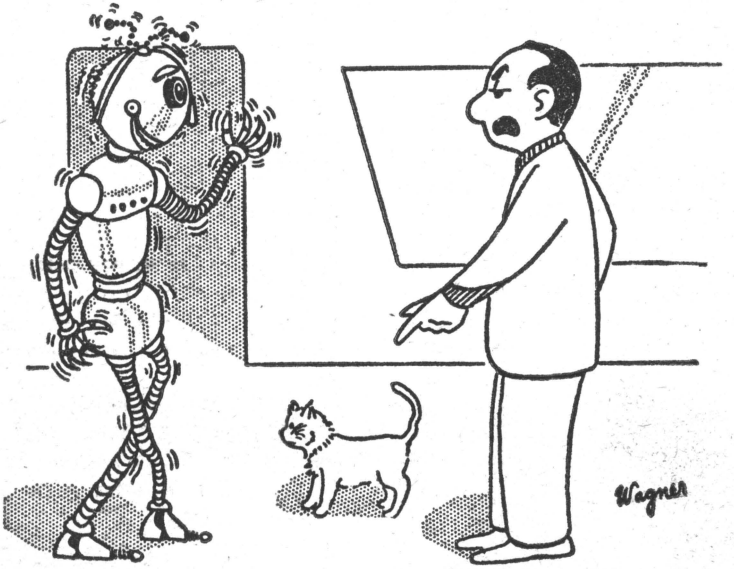
This is a quiz with something in its pocket. Try the problem below, then hop to p. 108 for the answer. There you'll find some surprising information about the quiz — and about *you*.

O O O

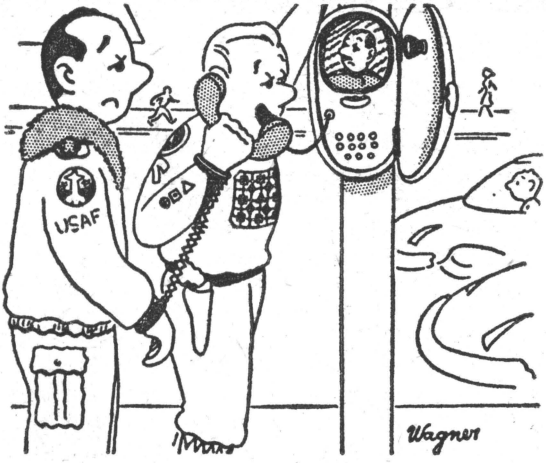
O O O

O O O

Problem: Without raising your pencil from the paper, connect all the above points with four straight lines.



"Lancelot! You've been petting the cat again."



"Yeah Chief, some crackpot that claims to be from outer space."

I HATED TO SEE THAT FELLOW KIDNAP OUR GIRLS, STEAL OUR MONEY, WRECK OUR HOMES — IT WAS ALL I COULD DO TO KEEP FROM SCOLDING HIM ABOUT IT

DOORMAT WORLD

BY J. T. McINTOSH

AFTER watching the stranger drag Rosie Ashwin the length of Main Street, screaming her head off, Bill Garland, the town's Law Enforcement Officer, turned to his cronies and said: "Did you see that? I don't mind telling you, it was all I could do to stop myself going right out there in the street and telling the stranger to let Rosie alone!"

"He doesn't mean any harm," said Taft Barker uneasily. There were still a lot of people in Winsafton who preferred to ascribe anything the stranger did to mere exuberance.

"Sooner or later, Bill Garland," said Sam Basch, who didn't, "you're going to have to do something about that guy. You're the LEO."

Garland pretended not to hear that.

The stranger had Winsafton pretty near the end of its tether. Gradually he had taken complete control of the town. Now he seemed to spend most of his time thinking up new, more capricious, more outrageous ways of exercising his power.

The stranger had a perfectly good name, Ed Ramsay, but nobody in Winsafton ever used it except to his face. "Stranger" meant "colonist" these days. There were seldom enough colonists around for it to be necessary to specify the one you meant.

Few colonists returned to Earth. When they did they usually came to some town where they had family ties, where cousins, uncles, aunts, nephews and nieces still lived. But the stranger apparently had no connections on Earth, certainly not in Winsafton. Every day a dozen people asked resentfully: "What did he have to come here for, anyway?" It must have been a rhetorical question. There was never any answer.

At first he merely pushed people around the way returned colonists always did. When he began to realize just how push-aroundable the people of Winsafton were, however, he began to make his early behavior look like old-fashioned gallantry.

He picked on the best house in Winsafton, the Goodman place, and just moved in. Well, what could the Goodmans do? They could hardly throw him out bodily. They just had to put up with him. And at first everybody but the Goodmans snickered and said it served the Goodmans right for having the showiest place in town.

People snickered even more when it became known, as such things always become known in nothing flat, that the stranger had pulled Sally Goodman into his bedroom one night and kept the door locked until next morning.

There was no jealous lover to get mad about it. Sally was well on in her thirties and hadn't been pretty even at eighteen. It seemed a good joke on the Goodmans that the stranger had not only elected to use their house as his own but also regarded their daughter as part of the furnishings.

THEY stopped snickering when the stranger casually tossed Sally aside and started

helping himself to any pretty women who caught his eye. And to anything else he fancied. After all, you never knew it wouldn't be your own wife next. Or it might even be your car or your house.

It was Hank Hawk's new Chrysler that the stranger eventually took, only two hours after dragging Rosie Ashwin into his lair at the Goodman place and slamming the door. Hawk's complaints to the Law Enforcement Officer were bitter.

"Well, we don't want to go off half-cocked about this, Hank," said the LEO cautiously. "Maybe he's only borrowed your car."

"I didn't say he could borrow it. He stole it."

"Now, you can't go around saying things like that, Hank, even about a stranger. He never even spoke to you, did he? So maybe he *thought* you wouldn't mind."

"I want my car back!" said Hank obstinately.

"Then why don't you just take it back?"

"How can I do that? The stranger knocked Bob Goodman all the way downstairs once, when he'd ordered fried chicken for dinner and got steak instead. I don't want to take any chances. I don't see why I should. You're the Law Enforcement Officer, not me."

"Sure, Hank," said Garland soothingly, "but I can't do a thing until I know a law's been broken. As of now, all I know is, the stranger borrowed your Chrysler. That ain't against the law."

"I want my car back!" Hank screamed.

"Then *take* it back, Hank."

"You're scared of the stranger," Hank said bitterly.

"Now, there's no call to be abusive, Hank. Run along now, and come to me when you have a genuine complaint."

Hank raised his fists to heaven in frustration.

IN this way the LEO managed for a long time to do nothing whatever about the stranger and his actions. However, as time went on, Garland became uneasily conscious that sooner or later he might be forced to speak severely to the stranger. This he was reluctant to do. The stranger was all too liable to spit tobacco juice at him. It wasn't good for a LEO's prestige and authority to have tobacco juice spat at him.

Yet more and more people were starting to talk like Hank Hawk. There was, for example, the storekeeper who said the stranger now owed $3,216.58 and had shown neither inclination nor ability to pay a cent. There was Wesley Coleman, who bumped into the stranger as Coleman emerged from his own front gate. The stranger immediately threw stones at Coleman's house, breaking every single front

window. There was the truck driver who was unable to prevent the stranger denting Hank Hawk's Chrysler against his truck. The stranger not only knocked the truck driver down, he found a can of yellow paint on the truck, tore the truck driver's pants to ribbons and poured the paint on his naked belly. Everybody agreed that this was rude.

As Law Enforcement Officer, Garland was sheriff, police chief, police force, district attorney and public prosecutor rolled into one. There was no one to whom to pass the buck. If anybody did anything about the stranger, it would have to be the LEO.

Garland was so concerned over this that he seriously considered emigrating. He got as far as reading pamphlets about sixteen of the forty-three available colonies. Then he realized something he should have seen at once. On any one of those forty-three pioneer worlds the entire population would consist of people like the stranger.

He dismissed the possibility of emigrating from his mind. There remained, of course, suicide . . .

The trouble was, the stranger got worse every day. Although he didn't appear to give a damn for anybody or anything, the pattern of his behavior showed clearly enough that from the moment he arrived in Winsafton he had been trying things to see if he'd get away with them. When he did, he'd try something a little more extreme.

At first when he took things on credit there had been at least a pretense that he was going to pay eventually. Later he bullied people into saying they'd presented the things to him as gifts. Eventually he simply took what he wanted without explanation or promise.

His caveman tactics with women, too, started quietly with Sally Goodman, extended to young, unmarried girls who were far too timid to describe publicly and in detail exactly what had happened to them and complain about it, and gradually spread to any female the stranger happened to fancy.

THE limit was reached when the stranger arrived at a wedding and carried off the bride, pretty little Lucy Smith, the instant she became Lucy Jaffray. It was no good talking about *droit de seigneur* to citizens of Winsafton. This, they felt, was going too far.

Unable to stall any more, Garland organized a posse of all the men who had least reason to love the stranger —Lucy's father Tom Smith, Harry Jaffray, Hank Hawk, the truck driver, the storekeeper, Wesley Coleman, half a dozen others. They called at the Goodman place.

The stranger came out to stand on the porch and look at them.

He was a big man, but no bigger than Garland or the truck driver. A stronger sun than Sol had burned his face so brown it was almost purple. He was untidily dressed in an off-the-peg suit he had taken from the local tailor—without, of course, paying for it—and there was egg on his chin.

"Well?" he said, grinning wolfishly at them. His act could be as corny as he liked. Nobody was going to laugh at him.

Garland cleared his throat. "Mr. Ramsay," he said, "Winsafton is a peaceable little town. In my ten years as Law Enforcement Officer, all I've ever had to deal with, except for the Saturday night drunks, has been one case of justifiable homicide and three of theft. We're proud of this record, and—"

"Why was the homicide justifiable?" the stranger asked, suddenly interested.

"Husband shot a man who assaulted his wife. You realize, Mr. Ramsay, that if any one of six or seven men shot you dead, they'd go free."

"Six or seven!" the stranger roared suddenly, affronted. "Hell, I been here a month! It must be at least thirty."

As he yelled at them, the whole posse took an involuntary step backwards. The stranger took a step forward. "Say, if anybody has any complaint against Ed Ramsay, he's come to the right place. Let's hear what you've all got to say."

He stepped down from the porch. The group hurriedly rearranged itself, everybody trying to get as far away from the stranger as possible. Coleman was unlucky. He bumped into the truck-driver and couldn't get any further back.

"You," said the stranger, standing so close to Coleman that their breaths mingled. "Have you got something against me?"

Coleman took a deep breath. His voice came out in a high whine. "You broke all my windows!"

"Well, it's summer, ain't it?"

"Yes, but—"

"You want plenty of fresh air, don't you?"

"Yes, but —"

"Want me to sue you for deliberately running into me and trying to knock me down?"

"I didn't deliberately —"

"I say you did. And nobody's going to disagree with me."

Coleman gulped and made no answer.

"Would you like to withdraw your complaint?" the stranger asked, clenching his large, knotted right hand and brandishing it under Coleman's nose.

"I would," said Coleman hastily. "Very much."

"Okay," said the stranger. "Your apology's accepted. Get the hell out of here."

Coleman scuttled off, his ears red, not looking back.

NEXT the stranger stepped up to the truck-driver. "Have you something you want to say?"

"I've still got patches of yellow paint on my stomach!" said the truck-driver indignantly.

"What do you want, the second coat?"

"No, I . . . No, I . . . I just wanted to tell you . . ."

"You've told me."

The truck-driver made off rapidly after Coleman.

Garland saw what was happening but was powerless to prevent it. The posse had felt strong and resolute when there were more than a dozen of them. Now as men left, one after another, those who remained became more and more uneasy and less willing to stand up to Ramsay.

"You. Who are you?" the stranger demanded.

"I'm Harry Jaffray. It was my wife you —"

The stranger chuckled. "Sure boy, I know what you want to know. Very natural." He winked, slapped Jaffray's shoulder, whispered into his ear and pushed him away.

Curiously enough, it was Sam Basch, who had never had any direct cause to hate Ramsay, who stood up to him.

"We don't like you," he said bluntly. "Go away."

"You want me to push your nose out of the back of your head, maybe?"

"No. That wouldn't make me like you any better."

The stranger looked Sam Basch over. Once Sam had been a very powerful man, but Sam was sixty-one now. He was beginning to stoop a little and he limped slightly.

"Old man," said the stranger, "you know what'll happen when I hit you?"

"No," Sam admitted.

"You do now," said the stranger, and shot out his fist like a piston. Sam Basch took it right on the belly-button, and shut up like a jackknife.

That was the end of the discussion. The three who remained picked Sam up, dusted him off, and wouldn't let him go after the stranger, who had disappeared into the house.

"If I was only thirty years younger . . ." Sam gasped, holding his middle.

"But you're not," said Garland regretfully. For a moment of wild hope he had thought he was going to be able to pass the buck to Sam Basch (who, he now remembered, had nearly emigrated once). But Sam was too old. And the stranger was too tough.

No, there was nothing for it now but to keep out of the stranger's way and not catch him at anything. So long as

the LEO did that, he could pretend that Ramsay hadn't done anything.

WHEN the second colonist arrived in Winsafton, the town for a few hours was close to panic.

It was very rare indeed for colonists to visit Earth. The emigration regulations were strict and unequivocal. Anybody who wanted to emigrate was told bluntly that he could either go or stay, but he had to make up his mind one way or the other once for all time. And in all the colonies there was so much to do, and so much more opportunity than there had been on Earth for centuries, that few people had any time to be homesick and bemoan the fact that the emigration authorities wouldn't let them go back to Earth.

Inter-galactic travel was so expensive and demanded so much organization that no individual could actually pay for his passage, any more than any one person could pay for a country's national defense Consequently individuals did not decide for themselves that they'd leave Earth for the colonies or return from a colony to Earth. They submitted their cases to a board which considered each case on its merits.

Since Earth was still the leading manufacturing planet Earth made most of the galaxy's spaceships. They left Earth crammed with emigrants, and not one of them in ten ever returned. They were used thereafter for intergalactic trade, not for ferrying back malcontents to Earth.

The case of the stranger in Winsafton was therefore unusual; and the arrival of a second colonist in the same small town at the same time was even more unusual.

The people of Winsafton weren't worried for long, however. It soon got around that the newcomer was Jim Arlen, Hugh Arlen's youngest boy, who had been born and brought up in Winsafton.

That made all the difference, of course. Everybody remembered Jim Arlen, a tough but likeable youngster who had been chased out of every fruit orchard in the district at one time or other.

"Let's see," people said. scratching their heads, "young Jim must be — why, he must be thirty-five now."

"All of that," others agreed. "Time flies, doesn't it?"

It was Sam Basch, not Bill Garland, who went to see Jim Arlen at the town's one hotel.

"Hi, Jim," he said. "Remember me? I shot you full of buckshot once."

"Nobody ever shot me full of buckshot," Jim replied. "If you shot at me, you missed."

Basch sighed. "I never was much of a shot. Pity. There's somebody in town who needs shooting right now."

"You mean Ed Ramsay?" Jim grinned. "I've heard about him."

Sam Basch wanted to know one thing before he talked to Jim Arlen about Ramsay. "Why'd you come back, Jim?"

Jim was as big as Ed Ramsay, a little younger and not so heavily tanned. He still had the easy grin Sam remembered.

"It seems my father still owns a big plot of land northeast of town," Jim said. "We never gave it much thought when we emigrated. We tried to sell it, but nobody would buy. Now it seems there's some trouble over this land. The board on Zukeen sent me back to straighten out the mess and report on some new agricultural equipment while I'm here."

Basch nodded. "So you'll be going back soon?"

"In a couple of months, I reckon."

"You've heard about Ramsay? You know him, maybe?"

"Hell, no. He comes from Benvice and I'm from Zukeen. Never met anybody from Benvice. Don't know much about the place."

"The fact is, Jim, Ramsay's been terrorizing the town."

"I've heard that. I don't see how."

SAM explained. As he did so, Jim's smile became a puzzled frown.

"I don't get it," he said at last. "You mean he did all this and nobody stopped him?"

"Nobody tried to 'cept me. He gave me a poke in the guts and that was that."

"I still don't get it. He's just one man. How can one man have a whole town licking his boots?"

"You were pretty young when you left here, Jim. You weren't old enough to look around you and do any thinking. Don't you know Earth's been sending out colonists for hundreds of years?"

"Sure, but what's that got to do with it?"

"You were a pretty tough family, Jim, you and your folks and your brother. I bailed your father out of jail two or three times, and as for your mother . . . well. We won't go into that. Point is, you were all pretty hard to handle. Tell me, Jim, are you known as a tough family on Zukeen?"

Jim grinned. "Hell, no. Solid citizens, the Arlens. Hardly ever in jail, any of us. The old man's a counselor. Even my brother hasn't been in any trouble since he shot his father-in-law, and that was five years ago."

"Well, Jim, Earth isn't like the colonies. For centuries anybody with any courage, determination or imagination has emigrated. It's still possible to make a fortune in the colonies. It hasn't been possible here on Earth since the

early twentieth century. Naturally anybody with any initiative emigrates. And this has been going on for hundreds of years."

Jim nodded slowly. "I'm beginning to see what you're getting at."

"Natural selection, Jim. People without courage, determination, imagination and initiative tend to beget children without courage, determination, imagination and initiative. 'Course, they don't always succeed. Even now, a lot of fellows like you are growing up here on Earth. That's why the flow of emigrants to the colonies never dries up. See?"

"Yes, I guess I do."

"Earth's a doormat world, Jim. People here *ask* to be stepped on. Mind, I don't say they like it. But if you apologize every time somebody wipes his feet on you, it's not surprising if you get stepped on a lot. Still, we get on all right when there aren't any colonists around. It's only when men like Ed Ramsay are here that people get stepped on. What can you expect, when there's nobody in Winsafton with enough guts to say boo to a goose?"

"I seem to remember that *you* were always ready to say boo to a goose."

"Maybe, Jim, but do you remember something else? I always wanted to emigrate. Only my wife wouldn't go."

Jim nodded. "I remember."

"Well, look, Jim. You were born here. But you're a colonist. You're not scared of Ed Ramsay. You can get rid of him. Do that for us, and we'll be grateful."

Jim grinned but shook his head. "Hell, Sam, Ramsay's nothing to me. He never did me any harm."

"Wait around," said Sam meaningly. "I guess it won't be long before you change your mind."

SAM was wrong. A month passed and there was no clash between Ed Ramsay and Jim Arlen. Whether by chance or by design, Ramsay avoided antagonizing Jim in any way. Although he didn't stop taking anything he wanted, from whisky to women, Ramsay did nothing new during this period. He didn't seek Jim's company either. When the two colonists met in the street they merely nodded to each other and passed on.

Meanwhile Jim Arlen was finding out for himself how it had been possible for Ed Ramsay to subjugate the whole town so that whenever he appeared, doors and windows slammed, loungers scuttled off down side streets and women ran like startled does.

Resistance had been bred out of Terrans. They weren't scared of each other, and consequently when no colonists were around they acted like

any human society anywhere.

But when somebody who *did* have a strong will said: "Do this," everybody in Winsafton—except Sam Basch—meekly did as he was told.

Out in the square on a hot day, Jim experimentally handed his coat to a man he'd never seen before. "Take that to the hotel, please," he said firmly.

The other didn't say a word. He simply took the coat to the hotel.

Gradually Jim began to understand the situation, and realize what was happening to Ed Ramsay. *All power corrupts*, someone had said, *and absolute power corrupts absolutely*. If it wasn't absolute power that any colonist wielded in Winsafton, it was something very close to it.

Seeing Wesley Coleman one day with an expensive cigarette case, Jim tried another experiment.

"That's a nice case," he said casually.

"You like it?" said Coleman guardedly.

"Sure do. Let me look at it, will you?"

Silently Coleman handed the case to him.

"I sure would like a case like this," Jim said.

He knew perfectly well that if he took it, Coleman would say nothing. He also knew that if he told Coleman to give it to him, Coleman would do so. What he wondered was if Coleman could be made apparently voluntarily to offer him the case.

Coleman could. It took a while, and Jim had to admire the case very pointedly before Coleman said reluctantly that he could have it if he liked. Satisfied, Jim shook his head and handed it back, to Coleman's obvious relief.

That was power. If you had to break the law to get what you wanted, you might find yourself in real trouble eventually, even when the law was represented only by a spineless figurehead like Bill Garland. Among people like this, however, you didn't even have to break the law. You did what you liked and then made anybody else concerned say you had their full permission.

Ramsay was still using Hank Hawk's Chrysler, and Hank was still complaining about it to Garland. But everybody knew, including Garland and Hank, that if the L.E.O. ever brought himself to the point of charging Ramsay with theft, Ramsay would make Hank say he'd lent him the Chrysler. Or even that he'd given it to him.

Almost involuntarily, Jim found himself ordering people about. After all, when he was sitting down comfortably and suddenly wanted something, why should he go for it when there were others around? When he wanted to go out of town and look round the prop-

erty his father owned, why shouldn't he tell somebody to drive him out and show him?

He knew that Ramsay was simply waiting for him to leave before turning the screw still harder on the citizens of Winsafton. He knew also that Sam Basch hadn't been the only one who had hoped that Jim Arlen would fix Ed Ramsay for them. But now, after a month, they were getting worried. If Ramsay could avoid a clash with Jim Arlen for a month, couldn't he go on doing it for another month? Would Jim Arlen go away from Winsafton, his business completed, leaving Ed Ramsay to extend his power until the whole town literally crawled at his feet?

There had been efforts to make Jim stay longer, but he had pointed out that the only ship from Earth to Zukeen in the next two years left on August 7.

He was sorry for the Winsaftonians and from what he'd heard of him he didn't think much of Ed Ramsay. However, in the colonies your own business took all your time and effort, and you got out of the habit of meddling in other people's.

If Ed Ramsay tangled with him, okay, he and Ramsay would settle the business between them. If Ramsay didn't tangle with him, Jim Arlen had no intention of interfering.

WALKING one day in the square—which was oval—Jim Arlen became aware of something different, without knowing what it was. It took him a couple of minutes to realize that the statue in the center of the grass patch was missing. It was no great loss. The statue had been of some gloomy, long-faced pioneer who had lived long before space travel.

Turning from the empty plinth Jim saw Lucy Jaffray, who was undoubtedly the prettiest girl in town. Another experiment instantly suggested itself to him.

"Lucy!" he called.

She started, and seemed only moderately relieved to find that it was Jim Arlen and not Ed Ramsay who had shouted. She came submissively enough.

"Look, the statue's gone," Jim said.

She nodded. "It's being cleaned," she said guardedly.

"I think you'd make a lovely statue, Lucy."

"Me?"

"Yes, you, Lucy." He put his hands on her waist and lifted her to stand on the empty plinth.

"Please let me come down," she begged, blushingly. Already a hundred spectators had gathered.

Jim looked up at her admiringly. She certainly made a very attractive statue. "Statues don't wear clothes,"

he said. "Anyway, girl statues don't. If you're going to be a statue, I guess you'll have to take your clothes off, Lucy."

"But I don't want to be a statue!"

"You can't help it, Lucy. You're pretty enough to be a statue, and we can't leave the plinth empty, can we? Take your clothes off, Lucy."

Blushing still more violently she unzipped her dress and dropped it to the ground.

"Now when did you see a statue wearing a girdle?" said Jim. "It isn't right, Lucy. It isn't right at all."

Slowly and reluctantly she took off her underclothes, stockings and shoes and crouched on the plinth, covering herself with her arms.

"Really, Lucy, you don't seem to have the idea at all. I don't think you've ever seen a statue. Stand straight up—that's better."

The crowd was huge now. It stayed at a respectful distance, however, and nobody snickered or said anything loud enough for Jim Arlen to hear.

Poor Lucy went white, then red, then white again. It seemed to her as if all the eyes in the world were fixed on her.

"Okay," said Jim at last, "you can come down now."

"Stay where you are," said a voice behind them.

Ramsay was looking at the naked girl with frank lust in his eyes. "I must have been crazy," he said, "taking you home only once."

"I said you could come down, Lucy," Jim said.

"And I said stay where you are," said Ramsay.

Jim lifted the girl down, ignoring Ramsay. Ramsay spat tobacco juice and bellowed like a bull. Jim turned, and in an instant Winsafton had what it wanted—a fight between the two colonists.

LUCY picked up her things and ran. Nobody else went, however.

It was a fight the like of which hadn't been seen on Earth for centuries. Such a fight would have been impossible between two Earthmen, or between a colonist and an Earthman. Both fighters were down at least a dozen times, and no Earthman would have kept getting up.

The winner of any tough, even scrap is not so much the man who *can* take more as the man who *does* take more. Before half the population of Winsafton, neither contestant was prepared to be beaten. Both knew that the loser would be finished in the town.

Ramsay's nose was bleeding copiously, making him look much more badly hurt than he was. Jim Arlen's left eye was closing rapidly and his shirt was torn half off.

For the tenth time Ramsay rushed at Jim and both men rolled on the ground. Both

rose and Ramsay went down. Ramsay leapt to his feet and Jim went down. Now one of Ramsay's eyes was cut and Jim spat out a tooth.

For a long time there was nothing in it. Then Ramsay went down three times in a row. He was slower each time he got up. And the crowd watched him realize that although he could still take a lot more, he couldn't take enough.

The fourth time he went down in a row he stayed down. Perhaps he could have made another try. The fact was that he didn't.

"I don't want to see you in town again, Ramsay," Jim said.

"You won't," Ramsay muttered.

They had both forgotten the crowd, since everybody had kept a very respectful distance away. But at this every citizen of Winsafton let out such a yell of delight that Ramsay, still on the ground, jerked convulsively.

In a moment Jim was surrounded by hundreds of people who wanted to shake him by the hand. In the intoxicating joy of the moment, Wesley Coleman accidentally trod on Ramsay's face. . .

They heard later that Ramsay went back to Benvice.

Jim Arlen was feted for days. He was a public hero. No one who saw that fight ever forgot it. What amazed the spectators was the dogged courage of men who could be knocked down time after time and come back for more. In the exceedingly rare physical arguments which still took place on Earth, it was always taken for granted that if a man hit the ground, that was the end of the fight. Often the first blow was the last.

Curiously enough, it was less than a week before Winsafton's attitude changed dramatically. The start of the change was when Jim made Wesley Coleman give him his cigarette case. Then Jim borrowed Hank Hawk's Chrysler, which Hank had had for four days altogether. Then, since it was obviously the most comfortable house in town, Jim moved in with the Goodmans. And finally Jim Arlen, not so polygamous as Ramsay, took Lucy Jaffray in to live with him.

He was not unaware, himself, of what had happened. *All power corrupts,* he told himself ruefully, pulling Lucy to him, *and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*

Winsafter relied desperately on one thing—Jim Arlen's spaceship blasted off on August 7.

With the warmth of Lucy against him, Jim was wondering vaguely if it might not be possible to miss his ship.

He decided it wouldn't merely be possible. It would be easy. **END**

THE BEM CALLED WINDIGO

What do you do
when you KNOW
you're insane?

"SO she ordered her brother-in-law to strait-jacket her, stun her with an axe and then set fire to her tent. While this was done, her husband and children looked on, for she had an undisputed right to dispose of herself as she chose."

So reads one of the high points — and they are many — in an extraordinary report recently published in the *Proceedings* of the American Ethnological Society, and written by Dr. Morton I. Teicher, a dean at Yeshiva University.

Many years ago — 71, to be exact — one James George Frazer wrote down a similar brief anecdote (a suspenseful description of a priest in an olive grove, naked sword in hand, moving about among the shadows, sleeping in secret, brief snatches, watching, watching every waking second for the man who would murder him to take his place, as he had murdered and replaced his predecessor. Explaining who, where and especially *why* this happened took Sir James a quarter of a century and twelve monumental volumes. The result was *The Golden Bough.*

Such anecdotes, out of context, are provocative in the extreme, and this kind of provocation is just what nudges the best science fiction out of the best science-fiction writers.

What these two anecdotes have in common is the note of

social acceptance they carry, for in one the brother-in-law does the dirty work while the family looks on, and in the other the murderer/victim is a priest.

BUT back to Dr. Teicher and his work. His special field is the Algonkian-speaking group of northeast American Indians — the Cree, Ojibwa, Beaver and others — and their strange and ancient monster, the windigo.

There are few, if any, drawings or sculptures of the windigo, mainly because these people have never gone in for the graphic arts. But their myths are very specific. The windigo has (rather like the Abominable Snowman) yard-long feet with only one toe and long pointed heels. His eyes are bloody and bulging, and you can hear his hissing breath for miles. His lipless mouth, jagged teeth and terrible clawed hands are used to pack the monster full of swamp moss, rotten wood and mushrooms, but only when he can't get human flesh.

Now, these Indians are not cannibals, and have a rather unusually strong taboo against the practice. Yet frequently — in 42 out of the 70 cases here documented — cannibalistic acts were committed, usually against relatives or close friends. And in every one of the cases, which must be termed "insanity", the windigo was involved. Dr. Teicher calls them "windigo psychoses", having used the windigo element in them to tie together a whole collection of case histories which range right across the clinical spectrum, from mild neurosis to the most advanced psychopathological states. These Indians are as familiar with the presence of the windigo, and its ability to cause such a variety of disorders, as we are with the presence of a virus-group which can cause everything from sniffles to epidemic influenza. They too have their therapies. One of these is the ceremonial murder of the infected person, even before he has committed a cannibalistic act.

Which brings us to the case of the bound, axed, doomed woman in the burning tent, and the solemn husband and children who passively witnessed the scene. She had felt that she was becoming a windigo. It got worse; it got so bad that the people around her began to look like beavers; she wanted to eat them. She therefore ordered her own death.

This is undoubtedly insanity, but one must remark in passing that it startlingly lacks the "I'm all right" rationalization of so many major psychoses. She *knew* she was insane. And isn't that the traditional proof of sanity?

END

The rubber plant was only a symbol but it was dangerous. It might endanger a planet—or it might take a human life!

A TASTE OF TENURE

By GORDON R. DICKSON Illustated by Wood

I

IN 2212, when Walt Onegh died, Arm Brewer, Director of Staff, recommended Tom Calloway to fill the empty position as Director of Crews at Midwest Construction. The board, of course, confirmed.

One of Tom's first acts was to drop by Arm's office and thank him.

"I'd hoped—" he said. "But not so soon."

Arm clapped his big hand on Tom's shoulder. His cropped white hair aureoled his healthy pink face.

"Not a moment too soon," he said. "You're management material, Tom. A man of principles is rare in this cutthroat world of ours."

"You overestimate me," said Tom. But he glowed inside. It was true he had hoped; but not quite as modestly as he implied to Arm. Fifty was not old these days. But neither was it young. And he would be fifty-one in three weeks. And with people knifing each other in the back for every little job or advantage...

"Run along and take over your offices," said Arm genially. "You inherit from Walt, lock, stock and barrel. Suite 312."

"Suite 312," echoed Tom, savoring it. For the three hundreds were third level. Executive.

THE meaning of lock, stock and barrel became more apparent when he actually stood in the outer room of his two-office suite, however. It obviously included Christine Nyall and the plant.

It was the plant which, of the two, struck him more strongly at first glance. Among the silver and opalescences, the businesslike glitter of the office, it stood out like a drab of nature, its

thick, shiny green leaves spread out flatly above the crystal pot.

"Why, what is it?" Tom asked, forcing a smile.

"A sort of rubber plant," Christine Nyall replied. She ducked her head above her stenomachine, then added, with almost a touch of defiance, "Mr. Onegh liked a touch of green about the place."

She did not meet his eye when speaking. It was this more than anything else that disturbed Tom, who had taken pride all his life in meeting everyone with a level gaze and a clear conscience. It was painfully obvious to him at this moment that Christine was being turtle-cautious. That was what came from being formerly Walt's secretary, and thus now a holdover.

The plain fact of the matter was that there was now no job for her, with Walt dead. In the glutted labor market of overpopulated Earth, there was not any other position available for her within the company—unless Tom made one. And Tom did not. His own secretary, Bera Karlson, had been with him twenty years. He had no intention of replacing her with this old woman. On the other hand, by virtue of her age and length of service, Christine was Class A Secretarial. She had tenure. She could not be discharged short of the legal retirement age.

It was an uncomfortable situation, with its only possible solution lying in Christine's voluntary retirement. And it was clear she had no present intention of that.

"Um," said Tom, stepping over to the plant. He looked down at it. It was not a pretty thing, he thought; and on one broad and fleshy leaf a small spot showed whitely.

"It seems to have a touch of blight," he said.

"Oh no," said Christine, swiftly. "That's just a little bald spot."

"I see," said Tom. He turned away and went on into the private office to examine that which would be his.

AFTERWARDS, he took the problem of Christine home with him. It was still obsessing him after dinner, when he woke to the realization that his wife had been speaking to him and he had not been listening at all.

"What?" he asked. And looked at her contritely. "Sorry, Josi. I had my mind on the office."

She smiled at him forgivingly, this slim, amazingly youthful woman to whom he had been married for the last nineteen years. He had married late and, as he firmly believed, for love. And all that had come out of his marriage, including his two young sons —one fifteen and one eleven

—had made him idyllically happy.

"What's bothering you?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Tell me what you were talking about, instead." She shook her head.

"I'll save it," she said. "You first."

He stretched and straightened up on his couch, looking across to where she sat half-curled upon an overstuffed hassock, brown against the white of it, her long limbs and the slight angularity of her body softened by the lounging pajamas tightbelted around her slim waist.

"It's Christine Nyall," he said. "She's not retiring."

"Oh?" said Josi. "But that doesn't affect you, does it?"

"I'm afraid so." He grimaced slightly. "She's a holdover. And with no place to go she'll be staying in my outer office. You see—" He explained the holdover system, and tenure.

"But can't you make her do her sitting around someplace else?" asked Josi.

"Not without risking a writ of prejudice and a work fine, if a court convicts me," he said unhappily. "The tenure law reads she must be kept 'on the job'. And the job is that of being secretary to the Director of Crews."

"Oh," said Josi. There was silence. Finally he broke it by asking what had been on her mind.

"I shouldn't bother you with it now," she said.

"Nonsense. I shouldn't bring the office home with me, anyway. Go ahead."

"—Can't you talk her into retiring?"

Tom sighed.

"The only thing I can do is make life in the office a living hell for her," he said. "I've known it done before by other men with the same problem. Only I'm just not built to do something like that."

"No," she answered, looking at him.

"No." He looked down at his hand, which had closed itself into a fist. He opened it, wiggled the fingers, then looked again at Josi.

"We'll forget it," he said.

"Now, what was it you wanted to talk about?"

SHE got up from the hassock and came over to sit down beside him. He looked curiously at her.

"Something important?" he asked.

"Yes. Tom—"

"What?"

"You're class A management now," she said. "You've got tenure. You don't have to work any more. We don't need to go on living close to the Company Offices."

"No—" He still looked at her, slightly puzzled. "But what about it? Where would you want to live?"

"Away from the city."

He looked at her in astonishment, convinced that she must be joking. But her face was unsmiling.

"But there is no *away* from the city," he said. "Not nowadays. You know that, Josi. There's no unimproved land left anywhere in the world."

"There's the Preserves," she said.

"The Preserves!" He blinked. "But you can't live in them. They're parks. Deliberately restricted — you know that—by the government, so we'll have a few scraps of open country to look at and remember the past."

"Oh yes," she said. "But they have tourist lodges."

He smiled with sudden understanding. He reached out for her hands. Josi let him take them, but they lay limp and quiet in his grasp.

"Honey," he said. "I hate to disappoint you, but these cabins and things might as well be on Pluto as far as you and I are concerned. I know it looks like you can live around the Preserves. But you can't. Those tourist quarters have all been bought up years in advance by the big travel agencies. To get them you'd have to sign up for what they call perpetual tours —all-expense luxury set-ups. And the prices are fantastic. Why, for you and me and the boys, just the four of us, it'd be twenty or thirty thousand a year." He smiled at her consolingly.

She still refused to smile back. Her face was calm and still.

"Forty," she said.

"Forty?" He frowned.

"Forty thousand a year, Tom, for the four of us."

He shook his head. Her words seemed to buzz in his ears.

"Forty thousand?" he echoed. "How do you know?"

"I've been checking up."

"But Josi—" He ran out of words, trying not to think what he could not help thinking. "You didn't suppose, seriously—"

"I've never supposed anything else," she replied. And he wondered then how she could look him in the eye and say it. "I've been waiting for this for a long time, Tom—longer than you'd believe. Since my first baby was born."

HE shook his head again, unbelievingly.

"We can do it now," she said. "With your increase in salary and if we use the savings and borrow against your pension. We'll have enough for five years; and by that time you'll have got another income boost."

"Josi!"

"Oh, stop staring like that!" she snapped, suddenly. "Did you think I'd let my boys miss

out on a chance at what the real world once was, if there was any way at all to give them even a taste of it?"

He sat back on the couch, dazed. "It isn't like you."

"Because I've been a good wife all these years and done what *you* wanted, and lived where *you* wanted? You thought I never had a selfish desire of my own? Oh, Tom, *Tom!*" She clutched his hands with a strength that shocked him. "How long are you going to go on pretending that people are still like they were in the old days? There's no civilization left now. You ought to know that! It's claw, tooth and nail! And I'm looking after my children!"

"Josi," he said.

She shook her head at him. "Tom," she said, "Do you know how many people there are on Earth now?"

"Yes," he said. "And I know they're considering laws to control the population expansion."

"Control it!" She laughed like someone he had never seen before. "If they'd talked of controling it fifty years ago, it might have helped us. What's going to help us now? It's my babies that have to grow up in a world where there's ten people for every job and no future for even the ones who get it. The only way they can *live* is if they make the right friends. And the only way they can meet the right friends is to go where they are. And that's the Preserves!"

"Josi!" said Tom. "Nothing like that's necessary. I hope I've made a moderate success of myself in the world. And I can truthfully say I've done it by decent, honorable methods!"

"You!" she cried. "Oh, *you!* The great anachronism!"

"Josi—" But she was beyond all reasoning.

II

AS Tom came in through his outer office on his way to his desk the following morning, the rubber plant took his eye again. It grated on his overwrought nerves like a shabby challenge. He was on the verge of bursting out at Christine to get rid of it, when he became suddenly aware of its extraordinarily protected position on a new little ledge, hugging the wall by her desk—now pushed to the farthest possible distance from the desk of Bera Karlson, who had moved her own equipment in on the opposite side of the room. Abruptly he realized that he had been on the verge of taking out his own unhappiness on an underling—a thing he had never before allowed himself to do. He nodded to both women; and made himself smile.

"Good morning," he said.

They answered together—


wood

Bera with a tinge of tension in her voice, Christine almost in a whisper. He went on into his own private office, the door sucking gently closed behind him.

He dropped in the chair at his own desk; and for a minute he sat limply, his eyes closed. The long, unfinished, unclear, unrewarding argument with Josi the evening before had left him drained of energy and clogged with bitterness. He had gained nothing but her promise to let him think this matter of the Preserves over for a few days before talking of it again.

He straightened with an effort and glanced at his appointment screen. The name of Orval Lasron glowed at him from its gray, opaque surface. He stared at the two words, troubled by some slightly ominous echo at the back of his mind, which they evoked. Surely, he did not know the man? After a moment, he gave up. Buzzing Bera to admit Lasron, he got up and crossed over to the one wall-wide window that looked down to the Executive Waiting Lounge, three floors below.

He heard Bera's voice speak out over the annunciator down there and a stocky, short man in middle age, with lumpy features, rose from a table. He crossed over to where the angle of the wall below cut him off from Tom's sight.

After a second, the man rose into sight on a floating magnetic disk, which came to a stop outside the window. Tom touched the dissolve button and extended his hand. Lasron stepped through the now non-existent window. His handshake was brisk and impersonal.

"I interrupted your drink down there," said Tom. "May I—"

"No, thanks," said the other.

TOM led the way back to his desk and both men seated themselves. Face to face, Lasron was somewhat more impressive than he had been at a distance. There was a hardness to his bunchy features and his eyes seemed to show the light of a constant, buried anger.

"And what can I do for you, Mr. Lasron?"

"You don't know me," stated Lasron. He crossed one thick leg over the knee of the other.

"No."

"I'm the local agent for the Secretarial Code," said Lasron. "I didn't know you, either. You were in Sales before, were you?"

"That's right. Our labor relations were all handled higher up."

"Yes." Lasron shifted in his chair with an abrupt, impatient movement. "Well, you've got a holdover. Christine Nyall."

"I know," said Tom, sobering. "A shame that—"

"I don't think so," interrupted Lasron. "Christine doesn't think so. She intends to remain on the job. Quite happy in it. It's standard procedure in these cases to drop around on the one in Management responsible. Just as a reminder." He paused. "You understand."

"No," answered Tom, sitting straighter. "I don't think I do."

Lasron sighed.

"All right," he said. "Any evidence of prejudice and we'll slap a writ on you for a fine. Deal with an illegal outfit and we'll spend half the money in the treasury, if necessary, to get a felony rap to stick to you."

"Now, wait! Now, look here," said Tom. "Just a minute, Lasron. Just what do you think you're insinuating? My record is perfectly clean and fair. I know some people on Management Level have the popular reputation of pulling dirty tricks in cases like this. But for your private information—"

Lasron waved one hand, wearily.

"I have a code of ethics!" snapped Tom. "No, I don't pretend I wouldn't like to see Christine happily retired. But —" He became suddenly aware that he was talking to a man who was staring out the window, humming a small tune nervously to himself, his fingers beating small, jerky time on the arm of his chair.

"Good," said Lasron, when Tom stopped. He got to his feet. His eyes of buried anger burnt briefly and impersonally on Tom, as if the man across the desk was something mechanical, troublesome and potentially dangerous. "I won't take up any more of your time."

Tom rose also, and punched the dissolve button.

"Drop by any time," he said, defiantly. "You don't have to make an appointment. Just walk in."

Lasron looked at him briefly. He appeared to be about to say something, then turned away. He nodded his head and stepped through the dissolve window onto the disk which wafted him down and out of sight.

Tom was left standing with a feeling of ugly inadequacy. He half-turned to his interoffice with the intention of calling Arm Brewer, to report the agent's threats. But it would be a bad beginning in the new position to go running for help right off the bat. He turned away again.

Then he thought of calling in Christine and challenging her about the agent's behavior. But that was not strictly fair, either. Time, he thought, sitting down at his desk again —time would iron matters out automatically.

TWO days later Josi reminded him of his promise to consider the move to the Preserves. He put her off, saying he had not had the chance to think, pleading the situation at the office.

"Just don't take too long, Tom," she said.

She said it in such an odd, unusual tone that he looked at her startled, and then looked away again before she could catch him staring. He wanted to ask her what she meant; but discovered suddenly he was afraid to.

That night he slept badly, and when he did get to sleep he slept late.

It was later than usual when he stepped through the entrance to his outer office. He could feel immediately that there was something wrong. As she answered his good morning, Christine kept her eyes fixed on the surface of her desk; while Bera, glancing deliberately at him, gave him a look of peculiar outrage, features set and a little pale. Tom shouldered past them both into the security of his own office, hoping to avoid the matter, whatever it was.

He was given no choice. On his appointment screen, Bera's name stood out brilliantly, in the space where his first appointment should have been. Tom hesitated for a moment, to put a small barrier of time between his entrance and Bera's admission; and then pressed her button and summoned her in.

She came and sat down opposite him. It was abundantly clear that a crisis point had been reached, for as she sat on the edge of her chair her body was rigid with the glass-brittle tension of a woman on the verge of explosion.

THEY began calmly enough, but Bera's low voice quickly climbed the scale toward hysteria. She did not want to complain. He knew that she never complained; but — she reminded Tom of all the years she had worked for him. She asked him if he had ever had any reason to complain. She thought that over the years— and so on. Inevitably came the tears.

She sat in the big visitor's chair and cried, a large-boned, not unlovely woman at the end of her thirties; but past the point where tears could look good on her. Tom gave her a drink and waited until the emotion was controlled.

He was shocked to discover the whimpering fear that underlay her outburst.

"Why, Bera," he said, as soon as she was in fit shape to listen, "what makes you think I'd ever get rid of *you?* Why, I could no longer get along without you than—" he hunted for an enormous metaphor and could think of nothing but—"my right arm."

Bera gulped, "But *She* has tenure and I haven't, and you only need one of us."

"Then I'll just have to put up with both of you," he said, in a poor attempt to be jocular. "Anything else is ridiculous." He frowned. "Besides, I think after a while she'll get tired of not having a real job to do around here, and retire."

"No, she won't—the old biddy!" said Bera with sudden viciousness. "She wants to hang on forever."

"Now, you know that's not true," said Tom. "She just liked her job. All of us do."

"Well, I don't care. She doesn't belong in our office. Why doesn't she just go?"

"Where do you want her to go?" asked Tom, reasonably.

"I don't care. It isn't as if she'd starve to death. You make as much money retired nowadays as you do working."

"Well, she's not going to get your job," said Tom. "Now straighten up, Bera, and forget this nonsense. As far as I'm concerned, Christine has already retired."

"Then she shouldn't be allowed to clutter up the office with things like that plant of hers."

"Why, it's not a bad looking plant," said Tom. "I think it's rather a nice idea, having it there. Hardly anyone keeps flowers or plants around nowadays."

"It gets in my way," said Bera, sullenly. Tom felt it was time to put his foot down.

"I'm sure you can work around it," he said. "Try it for a few weeks, anyway. If Christine is still here after then, and the plant still interferes around the office, we'll see about getting rid of it. All right?"

Tom got to his feet, which forced her to rise as well. "Try and get along with Christine, then, Bera. I'm leaving now. I just dropped by today to take a look at things. You can tell anyone who calls that I won't be back before tomorrow. H a n d l e them as you like."

"Yes." She wiped her eyes.

"So long, then." He went out, closing the door on her answering good-by. In the outer office, Christine was sitting at her desk, her face expressionless and a sheet of paper filled with aimless doodlings before her.

"Well, I'm off for the rest of the day, Christine," he said.

"Good morning, Mr. Calloway," she replied, without looking up.

He went out the door.

WHEN the tension in the outer office did not improve, he took a trip to the other side of the building to talk to Arm.

"Tom!" Arm jumped to his feet as Tom entered, and came forward bouncily, his heavy face smiling under its white

hair. "How's our newest member upstairs here? Have a drink?"

"No thanks," said Tom. "How've you been, Arm?"

"How could I be? Eighty-seven and sound as the Company's credit rating!" Arm slapped his wide chest. "Why don't you and Josi step out with me one of these nights and find out for yourselves? See if the old bachelor can't outdo you yet?"

"I wouldn't doubt it. I'll talk to Josi about it," said Tom, smiling. "Arm, I hate to come running to you with troubles right away, but I've got stuck in a situation."

"That the straight sheet?" Arm punched for a drink and set it on the edge of his desk. "What is it?"

"Christine Nyall. Old Walt's secretary."

"Christine—? Oh, the hold-over!" Arm looked at Tom, pulled a long face and rocked abruptly with hearty laughter. "Now, that is rough. If only she'd been some young bounce, huh, Tom?"

Tom smiled agreeably, if perfunctorily.

"Well, well." Arm sobered. "So you've got old Walt's girl on your hands. You knew about her and Walt? Yes, I see you did. Well, now, what's the problem?"

"Well, since I brought Bera up with me, I've really no need for Christine. But she's trying to stick it out."

"They all do."

"For myself, I don't mind too much—after all, she's bound to retire eventually. But it crowds the office, you know how we are for space. And, worst of all, she's upsetting Bera."

"Well, now, that is serious," said Arm. "A good secretary, broken in over the years. I can see why you wouldn't want her disturbed. Why don't you do something about it?"

"But that's the point. What can I do?" said Tom. "She's got tenure. The representative of the Secretarial Code was around just a week or so ago to remind me of that. What *can* I do?"

Arm looked across the desk at him with a curious expression on his big face.

"You haven't been approached yet, then?" he said, slowly.

"Approached? By who?"

Arm's drink had been sitting unnoticed all this time. He picked it up now and sipped at it.

"There's people," he said, "who make a point of being useful in just such situations."

"There are?" Tom searched his expression for a clue. "In the face of the tenure law? What can they do? Who are they, anyway?"

"They contact you."

"But I mean—oh," said Tom. "Oh, oh I see!"

"I don't know anything about them myself," Arm said, sipping on his drink. "Nothing whatsoever. I've just heard about them."

"Of course," said Tom. There was a fumbling moment of silence.

"Sure you won't have a drink, after all?"

"Thanks," said Tom automatically. Arm had already punched for a full glass without waiting for an answer. Now he handed the drink over. Tom took it, his eyes staring unseeingly through the wall of Arm's office.

"HI!" said Josi, meeting him at the front door, when he arrived at home.

"Hello, honey." He kissed her. They went inside.

"You've been drinking," she said.

"I had a few at the office with Arm," he answered, as they sat down. "He wants us to go out with him one of these nights."

"That's nice," said Josi.

"You don't sound very enthusiastic," he said.

"No, I suppose not."

"Josi!" he burst out. "Josi, will you snap out of it? Can't you understand I've got a crisis brewing in that office of mine? If I don't handle this right, what do you think my chances of promotion will be?"

"I'm just waiting," she said.

"Here I am up to my ears in business troubles—"

"And spending the morning getting drunk with Arm."

It developed into a first class fight.

III

THE outer office had become an armed camp. There was no disguising the atmosphere of antagonism that existed there. Tom dodged through it as quickly as he could, and remained buried in the inner office during the hours of his working day.

But this was no solution. Bera became more and more unreliable until it became obvious, even to Tom, that her work had become clearly secondary to her feud with Christine. On Tuesday, at the beginning of the third week, Tom was disturbed at his desk by what could only be the sounds of a scuffle.

He went swiftly to the door of the outer office and jerked it open. The two women were standing facing each other, breathing hard, and the jar which held the plant was clutched with fierce protectiveness in the arms of Christine. As the door opened, she turned to look at Tom for a single moment, then turned back and put down the plant once more in its accustomed place. She reseated herself, silently. Bera turned and walked jerkily back to her

own desk and also sat down. Neither one said a word.

He waited until they were ostensibly busy again, then walked through the office and out of the front door. He did not say a word to Bera; and the back of his neck was aware that she stared after him with bitter, fearful eyes, while the woman across from her sat silent and depressed, her head down and her eyes hopelessly fixed on her desk.

Feeling as if he was choking, Tom made his way out of the building. He avoided the lobby lounge below and took an aircab to a rooftop bar nearby—the Parisien, it was called. Its small round tables and wire chairs were imitative of an old-fashioned sidewalk cafe. He ordered a tall scotch and tried to relax.

Things, he thought, could not go on like this. Twenty-four hours had been the limit on family quarrels between Josi and himself for years now. But the present one about the move to the Preserves seemed to renew itself daily. Softly, he pounded on the white, slick surface of the table with his fist. Trouble at the office. Trouble at home. And the two things feeding on each other to keep themselves alive. The tension between Josi and himself was blurring his usual decisiveness so that he was fumbling the office problem. And the office problem wore his nerves thin so that one word from Josi was enough to set him off. Why couldn't Josi be a help instead of a hindrance at a time like this? And why couldn't Christine be sensible and retire?

THE scotch came. He accepted it automatically, indifferent to the anachronism of a live waiter instead of the usual delivery panel set in the table. The truth was, he had started out with a sneaking sympathy for Christine. It was not impossible for him to put himself in her shoes, to feel an empathy with her. He had, therefore, been half-inclined to let things drift, to let her sit out her remaining days in his office—perhaps even in time to give her small bits and pieces of work to make her feel necessary. He had never imagined such a violent reaction, however, from Bera. Who would have supposed. . .

A shadow fell abruptly across his table.

He looked up and saw gazing down at him a distinguished looking man of his own age. A handsome fellow, slim, with a touch of easy amusement at the corners of his thin mouth.

"Well, Mr. Calloway," said the man, "you're a hard person to get in touch with."

He sat down. Tom stared at him in astonishment.

"Hard?" He looked more

closely at the man. "Do I know you?"

"May I introduce myself?"

He put the question with such unnatural stilted formality that for a second Tom did not realize that it was an actual question, and not a rhetorical one.

"Is there any reason why you shouldn't?" asked Tom.

"Joe Smith," said the other, taking this as permission and offering his hand. "Utility Services."

Tom shook hands automatically.

"Utility Services?"

"Of course you don't know us. We aren't listed. In fact," Joe Smith turned to signal the anachronistic waiter, "legally we don't exist."

A bell rang in Tom's mind. He sat up straight behind his scotch and looked penetratingly at his visitor.

"And illegally?" he asked.

The man laughed.

"We understand you have a p r o b l e m, Mr. Calloway—thanks—" he accepted his glass from the waiter. "A holdover."

"Who told you?"

"Why," said Smith, "it's a matter of public record, isn't it?" He looked at Tom. "We're prepared to help you out."

"How?"

Smith waved a hand.

"DEPENDS on the difficulty. Once it was merely a matter of offering a job with some dummy firm. But the Secretarial Code is well up on simple tricks like that, lately. In the case of your Christine—let's see. She was supposed to have been having a long-term affair with her former employer, wasn't she? Perhaps someone who resembled him a great deal could bring about her resignation."

"Now, look here," said Tom.

"Yes, Mr. Calloway?"

"I certainly wouldn't stand for anything like that."

Smith raised his eyebrows.

"What did you expect?" He leaned forward over the table, lowering his voice. "I'll tell you what you expected—a miracle. We don't deal in miracles. Just results."

Tom flushed.

"All right, Smith," he said. "I don't think we've got any business to do together."

"I think we have," said Smith. "Or rather, you have business to do with us. If not now, later. We're a business fact of life in this modern world, Mr. Calloway. Ugly, if you insist on looking at us that way, but just as unavoidable as any other fact of life."

"I don't think so," said Tom grimly.

"Don't you?" queried Smith. "Open your eyes, Mr. Calloway. This isn't the last century. It's the present. There's no way to hide from the facts of life now."

"I'm not sure I know what

you're talking about," said Tom. "But I'll tell you this. I've lived by my own code of ethics all my life. And got along all right. So go peddle your dirty papers someplace else."

"No, no," said Smith, shaking his head. "It's all very fine to have ethics, Mr. Calloway, but they simply don't work in business. They've gotten to be a luxury nobody can afford any more. Save your ethics for home. Tell them to the kids for bedtime stories when you tuck them in for the night. But don't go messing up your career with them. You'll regret it. Indeed you will, Calloway. People like this Christine *expect* to get kicked out. They just hang around creating a fuss until they are."

"IF you think you can say that—" Tom checked himself suddenly, remembering the office as it had been lately. Remembering Josi. "My wife—" he began, without thinking. Then he stopped.

"What about your wife?"

"None of your business!"

"Oh? But I take it," said Smith, looking at him closely, "you weren't about to listen to her, either?"

Tom shuddered suddenly and quite unexpectedly.

"It's all nonsense," he said.

"Someone walk over your grave?" said Smith, not entirely unmaliciously. "You ought to know the truth as well as your wife. As well as me, for that matter." He waved his arm out over the parapet of the rooftops, at the endless buildings surrounding them. "Look at that. Full up. Ripe. Starting to rot, wouldn't you say?" He grinned at Tom.

"What're you talking about?" said Tom. "There's unlimited frontiers. New worlds. . ."

"You want to go? Do I want to go?" Smith sat back, shaking his head and took a drink from his glass. "Easier to stay here and face facts, Calloway. And the *fact you've* got to face—" he tapped with his fingernail on the shiny white tabletop, his nail making a hard clicking sound against it— "is that you must do for this Christine or, indirectly, she's going to do for you. If you don't get her out of that office, the mess'll grow. It'll grow until you find yourself into it too deep to pull yourself out. I've seen this sort of thing before." He got up. "Think about that Calloway. You or her. And the longer you hesitate, the more likely it's going to be both of you."

IT was evening before Tom found Christine Nyall.

After Smith left, Tom had tried to call her at the office. Bera hold him the older woman had gone for the day.

Bera did not have Christine's address, either, so Tom had been forced to go to a public tracing center. It took the center three hours to come up with a list of places where she might be found.

He located her at last, sitting at one of the small tables around the wide expanse of dance floor in one of the mid-age groups recreation centers. She sat alone, a barely touched drink in front of her, the glowingly white translucent dance floor throwing a pale illumination on her overpowdered face. He strode over and sat down opposite h

"Christine," he said.

She turned from her blank contemplation of the dancing couples on the floor and looked at him. As his identity registered, her features slid into the carefully controlled expression he was used to seeing at the office.

"Mr. Calloway," she murmured.

"Hello." He stumbled, suddenly at a loss for words. "Er —another drink?"

She touched the glass before her.

"Thanks, no," she said.

"I see," he said, "Well, I think I'll have one." He pressed buttons and waited for a few short seconds until a filled glass rose from the slot in the center of the table. He took it, swallowed largely and put it back on the table. "I've had a hard time finding you."

The words reminded him immediately of the man named Smith. He put his drink down with a gesture of revulsion. He looked at Christine, almost pleadingly.

"Look, Christine," he said, "do you really think you'd feel happier belonging to my office staff than you would, retired?"

She reached for her glass and turned it.

"Yes," she said, "Yes, I do."

"You know," he said, trying to joke, "sooner or later we all have to quit."

She looked up sharply. He saw her eyes were terrified.

"Not until retirement age!" she said, "I've got tenure!"

"Of course, of course. I know you've got tenure," said Tom. "But you do see—you're just putting off the inevitable, don't you?"

"I only want my rights. That's all!"

TOM took a heavy gulp from his glass. He pushed it away from him.

"Look," he said, "I want us to be friends. I know how I'd feel if I was—well—put in an awkward position with some years yet to go to retirement. I'd like to do what's best for you. And I know Bera. She can be difficult to get along with."

"I don't mind," said Christine carefully.

"Oh come now," said Tom.

"Informally—just between the two of us—I know she's been raising cain ever since we moved into the new office."

"Bera's all right," she answered. "I like Bera."

Tom gaped at her. The statement was too monstrous to refute.

"Christine!" he burst out, finally. "Let's be honest, anyway!" She looked stubbornly down at her drink. "Look, if you really want to stay, you can. I'll talk to Bera. Or the three of us will all get together and thrash this thing out. That is, if you really want to stay."

She glanced up obliquely, almost slyly, at him.

"I can stay anyway," she said. "My tenure guarantees it."

"Of course! Of course you can stay!" cried Tom. "That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about fitting you in, making a useful place for you."

"That's all right." He raised her head to look him squarely in the eye. "You don't have to bother about me."

"Good Lord!" shouted Tom. "Do you like things the way they are?"

"You might as well give up, Mr. Calloway," she said. "I know what my rights are, and I'm not going to give them up. If you've got any questions you can call up the Secretarial Code and talk to Mr. Lasron. Of course, I'll have to report to him you tried to talk to me here, today."

For a moment Tom stared at her in amazement.

"You stupid woman!" he burst out finally. "Can't you see I'm trying to help?"

Christine's face went white and frightened. She jerked as if she had been struck. For a moment she sat as if paralyzed; then she made a small noise in her throat and scrambled up. She was hurrying off, before Tom could stop her, between the tables.

"Christine! Wait!" he called after her. But she was already gone.

IT was late when he at last got home. Josi was waiting for him in the lounge room.

"Had your supper?" she asked a little sharply, as he came in.

"I'm not hungry." He dropped into a chair.

"Would you like a drink? Or—" she stood over him—"have you had too many already?"

"Josi," he said wearily, putting his head in his hands, "don't start in on me now."

She sat down opposite him.

"I'm sorry, Tom," she said. "But we've got something to talk over. I've been waiting for you since this afternoon."

"Can't it wait?"

"No, Tom."

A note he had never before heard in her voice made him look up.

"I'm leaving things up to you, Tom," she said. "I went down to the tourist agency and told them to go ahead with our reservations."

"Josi!"

"You listen to me now. The plans are at a premium. I can't afford to wait. The Preserves may be filled up, or the price increased any day now, to where we can't afford it."

"Josi, listen!"

"No. Now I'm doing the talking, Tom," she said. "I told you I was going through with this. And I meant it. The reservation is in my name. If you won't come along, then I'm getting a divorce. My settlement will pay for the first few years of the plan; and after that we'll work things out any way we can. But whether you like it or not, whether you come or not, the boys and I are leaving for the Preserves. It's up to you, Tom."

She rose to her feet and left him, sitting in the lounge, numb and old and alone.

IV

THE next morning found him having breakfast at a poolside restaurant not far from the office. He had slipped out of the house to avoid Josi, for reasons that were at the moment unclear to him. He sat at his small table under a striped awning, staring out at the early morning swimmers in the pool. The coffee seemed tasteless.

He had spent the whole of a wakeful night trying to believe what Josi had told him. Accepting it was something else again. First he had to believe she would do such a thing. It was all the more wildly improbable for the reason that he believed Josi still loved him. Only there seemed to be some startling and hitherto unsuspected limits to that love.

How, he wondered, staring at the pool, had Josi reached such a point? He tried to think back over their discussions—well, be honest and call them arguments. Had there been some point at which he had driven her to desperation? Thinking back, he could remember no such point. In fact, he had never given a definite "no" to the idea. He had merely been doubting and wanting to put off his decision until he could settle the problem of Christine.

That could only mean—he came back to the point not for the first nor even for the hundredth time since the previous evening—that Josi had simply long ago decided to eliminate him from the family. She had thought not *my*

husband, our family; but simply *my children and I.* She had cut him out.

Or had he ever belonged?

After a while, he got up and went to the office.

When he came in this morning, Bera was absorbed in her work; but Christine looked up at him with a momentary strange, unreadable expression. He brushed past both of them and went on into his own office.

He sat down at his desk. He had never been an early morning drinker; but now he punched for Scotch. After a moment, the tall glass rose to the surface of his desk and he took it. It tasted alien and bitter, like the coffee he had drunk earlier. But he forced himself to swallow it.

After a little while, the hard edges of his world softened somewhat. He straightened up and looked at his appointment screen.

There, waiting for him, was the name of Lasron. He got up from his desk and looked out the window, down into the lounge.

THERE was Lasron waiting. Tom made out the man's thick body seated alone at a table before a glass from which he was not drinking. His fingers seemed to be drumming on the table top. Impatient. Well, he would just have to wait. Tom came back to his desk and pushed the button that summoned Christine.

She came in hesitantly, closing the door behind her instead of letting it suck shut automatically, and approached his desk.

"Sit down," said Tom.

She seated herself carefully on the edge of the big visitor's chair.

"Christine," he said, "I wanted to talk to you."

"I know," she answered. She was watching her own fingers, which she had laced together and was turning, backwards and forwards, in her lap.

"You know?" he said.

"I'm so terribly sorry, Mr. Calloway," she said. "I want to apologize—"

He stared at her in startlement. But she was hurrying on, tripping over her own words in her haste.

"I just couldn't help it after working here so long. I couldn't help thinking it was our office—mine and Mr. Onegh's. And then, when you're older and you've got no one—to be cut loose, to just eat and sleep and die and be forgotten—you go a little crazy, I guess."

"Well, now," said Tom, "Christine—"

"And they make matters worse for us down at the Secretarial Code. They warn us Management will try all sorts of dirty tricks to make us resign, when we've got tenure.

They get us so worked up, Mr. Calloway, that we can't trust anyone. And I didn't trust you. I called Mr. Lasron last night, after you talked to me. It wasn't until after I punched off the phone, that I thought to remember you hadn't been anything but kind. You didn't even complain about the plant."

Tom found his voice a little hoarse, and cleared it. "No point in being unfair."

"I know. I just couldn't believe it." She twisted her hands. "I want to tell you about that plant, Mr. Calloway. It—" She hesitated, and her powdered face twisted into a slight grotesqueness. "It meant a good deal to me. You must know about me and Mr. Onegh."

"Yes," said Tom.

"A lot of people knew." She was stroking one blue-veined hand with the fingers of the other, as if in fascination with the process. "They knew I loved him and they guessed—that was before his wife died—that we were getting away for a weekend, now and then. But nobody here knew we once had nearly a whole year together."

TOM jerked his head back from the window.

"Yes." She nodded a little. "It was before you came to the Company. There was an underground city supply unit to be set up in the Midlands, on Venus. The Company took the bid. Mr. Onegh was sent out as Management Representative when we got the job. I took a leave of absence; and he pulled some strings to get me an appointment on the Government Inspection Crew. So we both went out, and no one here knew about it."

She stopped. Tom was staring at her. She went on.

"It was a year," she said. "We could have stayed on Venus. I wanted to. But Walter —" Her voice trailed off.

"He thought," said Tom, and was jarred at the sound of his own voice, so strange it sounded, "of his wife and his job here."

"Yes," she whispered.

Her index finger made little circles on the arm of the chair. She spoke again.

"He was a coward," she said. Tom started and looked at her with a sort of horror.

"I thought you loved him?"

"I did." She raised her head. "He wasn't a coward when I first met him. It was the years made him that. All the years and the sneaking around corners with me. And the business getting tighter and tighter every year, so that even someone who'd been with the Company as long as he had didn't feel safe."

"Class A Management. With tenure." Tom's throat was dry, suddenly.

She smiled sadly at him.

"Oh, they've got dirty

tricks for Management level, too," she said. "When I was working with Walter—" Her voice trailed off, embarrassedly.

TOM sat still in his chair. He opened his mouth, closed it again and suddenly, almost with violence, shoved himself to his feet. Turning, he stepped to the office window and looked out. Across from him, over the airy depths of the lounge below, he could make out Arm Brewer, his white thatch vigorously in movement beyond the pane of his window on the opposite side of the lounge.

"What about the plant?" Tom said without turning. "You were going to tell me about the rubber plant."

"Well, you know how Venus is," her voice rang in his ears. "The carbon dioxide blanket, the dust storms, nothing green anywhere. It was against the shipping rules, but he took the plant along when he went to Venus—for me. To make me happy. For that one year it grew in our home."

Out and below Tom, the lounge eddied in its steady movement of continual coming and going. Salesmen, jobhunters, caterers, favor-seekers, representatives like Lasron—the flotsam of the commercial sea. All waiting. All hungry.

Yes, thought Tom.

Just then, through the wide-swinging entrance of the lounge came the tall, thin figure of Mr. Smith. For a moment, Tom hung, not even breathing, staring down at the tall man.

Behind him, Christine talked on. But he heard her only as background noise. Smith had just nodded to Lasron, sitting at his table; and Lasron had lifted a hand in acknowledgement.

Mr. Smith paused to speak to the receptionist, his elegant head a little on one side. He turned and went over the opposite wall soaring up from the lounge. A disk came immediately to life on the floor, and he stepped aboard. It bore him upward to the window of Arm's office, opposite. The window dissolved before him as Arm reached out a hand in greeting. They went inside together and—did their heads turn to look for a moment in the direction of Tom's office as they went?

Tom had a sudden dizzying sensation of falling. It was as if the lounge below reached up with clutching fingers to drag him down. He clung to the window drape beside him for a minute, finding the heavy metallic cloth slippery in his damp hands. He took a deep breath, straightened and turned.

"Yes, yes," he said, interrupting Christine. "I appreciate your telling me about

the plant. But I think that in spite of the sentimental attachment you have for it, we'll have to get rid of it."

HER mouth open, she stared at him. In her astonishment she looked almost imbecilic.

"You understand," he went on, the words coming automatically, "I'm a liberal-minded man myself. But I can hardly be expected to put up with a souvenir of this type. After all, this is a business office, not a bedroom. I was a young man once myself—fairly recently, too. And I had my—er—fun. And I recognize that a single woman and a man with a perpetually ailing wife might have their problems on a physical plane. But to flaunt mementos of—well, it seems to me to be a little too much."

She looked up at him with a rabbit-like fascination, as if he had suddenly revealed scales and a moveless eye. He met her look squarely. It was odd, but he felt no need to avoid her. His eyes were heavy as pebbles in his face, and as insensitive to what he gazed at.

"So I'll just ask you to put it away somewhere right now," he said. He paused. "Naturally, I'm going to have to submit a memo on this to the Company psychiatrist. I believe you need help, Christine. Women often do at your age. I'll do what I can by attaching a complete account of what you told me about you and Walter—"

With one quick, gasping intake of breath, she was on her feet. She turned and ran from his office. The impersonal machinery of the door closed it politely behind her.

Tom sat down at his desk. He felt as if he should be shaking, but he was not. He laid his hands on the desktop but felt nothing.

After a while he became aware of the sound of Bera's buzzer, calling for his attention. But he ignored it. It was not until some little time after that, that the door to his office opened and she came in. Her eyes were wide, showing too much white; and her lips trembled.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Mr. Calloway—Mr. Calloway, it's Christine!"

HE looked carefully at her. "What about Christine?"

"I'm worried. Perhaps I've been— I didn't think."

"Will you tell me," he said, "what it is? If you don't mind, Bera!"

"She locked herself in the supply closet in our outer office. She won't come out, and she doesn't—doesn't answer."

"Oh?" said Tom. "I see." He took a slow breath and leaned back in his chair.

"I'm scared. She took the plant. Oh, Mr. Calloway, I

didn't mean to be so nasty to her! If she's—"

"Control yourself, Bera." Tom got up from his chair. "I'm sure it's quite all right. Perhaps the door locked accidentally. Perhaps she had a little fainting fit in there. After all, she's not as young as she once was. Why don't you run down and get the janitor up here to unlock the door? Don't make a fuss about it. Just say the door's locked and we can't find the key."

"Oh, yes! I'll run!" said Bera. "I'll run right away!" She dashed out of the room.

After she had gone, Tom sat still for a second. Then he reached out and punched for a private connection to Arm Brewer on the interoffice phone.

Arm's face sprang into view on its screen.

"Who? Oh, Tom. What can I do for you?"

"Just give me a few pointers about something when you've got time, Arm," said Tom. "Josi and I are thinking of taking one of those perpetual tours around the Preserves—"

"Preserves? Sure!" boomed Arm. "I've been on them. Tell you all about it, if you want. How's things down at your end there?"

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to let Bera go after all," said Tom, steadily. "And keep Christine. Bera's gone all to

pieces lately. Lets her work go, and spends all her time picking on Christine. Of course, there's no tenure problem with Bera."

"Ah? I hadn't realized that," said Arm, raising white eyebrows. "Well, that settles your little problem."

"Yes. I'm afraid so." Tom sighed. "Too bad. I'd never have considered this if she'd —but, well, this is easier all around. She's been making life hell for Christine."

"Yeah. I heard something about that. Look, talk to you later, okay, Tom? I've got a little deal on right now."

"Fine. Thanks, Arm."

"Not at all. Any time."

Tom broke the connection and sat back, waiting for Bera to return. For a while he heard nothing but silence. But then, at last, there was the muffled sound of voices reentering his outer office. For a moment they murmured busily together; then there was the sound of a lock turning. Then silence.

—When the scream came, he was expecting it.

High and clear in Bera's voice, he had been expecting it all along. Sitting still at his desk, he did not move. Only the muscles of his body froze all together as if the blood in them had congealed at the sound; and the sweat stood suddenly out on his forehead like living water from the rock. —END

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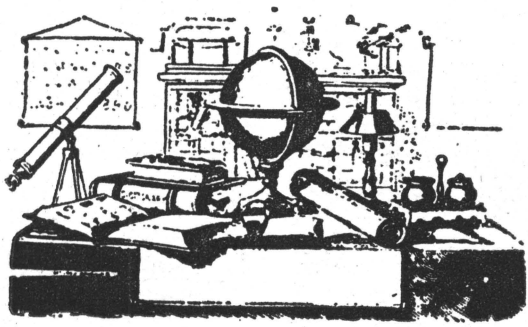


science briefs

WHEN you come right down to it, there are only two things to be done about the deadly unwanted by-products of the atomic age—seal them off somehow, or learn to live with them. The Atomic Energy Commission likes the policy of burying atomic wastes underground, in carefully selected sites where it can be ascertained that there will be no low-level water tables or other opportunity for "leakage". In spite of the fact that any atomic facility produces vast amounts of "hot" waste, a surprisingly large amount of it can be disposed of in a small space. For example, all the low-intensity wastes of Oak Ridge have been buried in a 60-acre area. Commission experts calculate that one 2- to 300 acre site would be enough to bury all the wastes produced in the northwest for the next 20 years. As to airborne radioactivity—well, ways have to be found to live with it. One way is indicated by experiments at Georgia Tech, who have been able to cut the radioactive cesium content of milk by feeding cows on grass grown indoors, not in soil but in hydroponic tanks. The cut, measured against a control group of outdoor-pastured cows, was dramatic — about 38%.

Next time you hear anyone talking about modern miracle fabrics, spring this one on them: a new material is woven from small-diameter wire made of cobalt-chromium and nickel-chromium alloys. It is then run up — but *not* on Grandma's sewing machine — into re-entry parachutes for use, ultimately, in the recovery of manned satellites.

Thirsty? Well, stick around. You may be a good deal thirstier before too long. Freshwater demand will exceed natural supply by 85 billion gallons a day within the next 20 years.

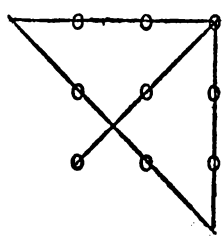
The real weird-o of the elemental table, helium, is about as snobbish as an element can get. It can't explode or burn or react with anything or combine with anything. This makes it handy if you have an original copy of the Declaration of Independence around and would like to keep it a while. Or if you are a welder and would like your arc to work in an atmosphere wherein nothing will dirty up the metal with oxides. **END**

Kangaroo Quiz

Here's the solution to the problem on page 66. Bar bettors and bubblebrains may drop out at this point; others may want to know what the act of solving this one means.

If you solved the nine-dot puzzle, you are almost certainly a highly creative person. Most people are not, and if you couldn't, you may comfort yourself with this further proof of your membership in the vast majority.

This test was used as a demonstration in a recent seminar at the East Pittsburgh plant of Westinghouse: subject, creative engineering, or, what makes the bright ideas come, and to whom? One thing common to most highly



creative minds, according to the Westinghouse scientists, is the refusal to accept any limitations except those exactly stated.

Most people, when presented with the nine-dot puzzle, fail to solve it because they assume that they must stay within the pattern of dots, or that they must not cross any lines.

What's your excuse?

THE JUNKMAKERS

BY ALBERT TEICHNER

ERIC WAS THE BEST ROBOT THEY'D EVER HAD —PERFECTLY TRAINED, EVER THOUGHTFUL, A JOY TO OWN. NATURALLY THEY HAD TO DESTROY HIM!

1

WENDELL HART had drifted, rather than plunged, into the underground movement. Later, discussing it with other members of the Savers' Conspiracy, he found they had experienced the same slow, almost casual awakening. His own, though, had come at a more appropriate time, just a few weeks before the Great Ritual Sacrifice.

The Sacrifice took place only once a decade, on High Holy Day at dawn of the spring equinox. For days prior to it joyous throngs of workers helped assemble old vehicles, machine tools and computers in the public squares, crowning each pile with used, disconnected robots. In the evening of the Day they proudly made their private heaps on the neat green lawns of their homes. These traditionally consisted of household utensils, electric heaters, air conditioners and the family servant.

The wealthiest—considered particularly blessed—even had two or three automatic servants beyond the public contribution, which they destroyed in private. Their more average neighbors crowded into their gardens for the awesome festivities. The next morning everyone could return to work, renewed by the knowledge that the Festival of Acute Shortages would be with them for months.

Like everyone else, Wendell had felt his sluggish pulse gaining new life as the time drew nearer.

A cybernetics engineer and machine tender, he was down to ten hours a week of work. Many others in the luxury-gorged economy had even smaller shares of the purposeful activities that remained. At night he dreamed of the slagger moving from house to house as it burned, melted and then evaporated each group of junked labor-blocking devices. He even had glorious daydreams about it. Walking down the park side of his home block, he was liable to lose all contact with the outside world and peer through the mind's eye alone at the climactic destruction.

Why, he sometimes wondered, are all these things so necessary to our resurrection?

Marie had the right answer for him, the one she had learned by rote in early childhood: "All life moves in cycles. Creation and progress must be preceded by destruction. In ancient times that meant we had to destroy each other; but for the past century our inherent need for negative moments has been sublimated—that's the word the news broadcasts use — into proper destruction." His wife smiled. "I'm only giving the moral reason, of course. The practical one's obvious."

Obvious it was, he had to concede. Men needed to work, not out of economic necessity any more but for the sake of work itself. Still a man had to wonder . . .

HE had begun to visit the Public Library Archives, poring over musty references that always led to maddeningly frustrating dead ends. For the past century nothing really informative seemed to have been written on the subject.

"You must have government authorization," the librarian explained when he asked for older references. Which, naturally, made him add a little suspicion to his already large dose of wonder.

"You're tampering with something dangerous," Marie warned. "It would make more sense for you to take long-sleep pills until the work cycle picks up."

"I *will* get to see those early references," he said through clenched teeth.

He did.

All he had needed to say at the library was that his work in sociology required investigation of some twentieth century files. The librarian, a tall, gaunt man, had given him a speculative glance. "Of course, you don't have government clearance . . . But we get so few inquiries in sociology that I'm willing to offer a little encouragement." He sighed. "Don't get many inquiries altogether. Most people just can't stand reading. You might be interested to know this—one of the best headings to research in sociology is *Conspicuous consumption.*"

Then it was Wendell's turn to glance speculatively. The older man, around a healthy hundred and twenty-five, had a look of earnest dedication about him that commanded respect as well as confidence.

"Conspicuous consumption? An odd combination of words. Never heard of that before. I will look it up."

The librarian was nervous as he led his visitor into a reference booth. "That's about all the help I can offer. If anything comes up, just ring for me. Burnett's the name. Uh—you won't mention I put you on the file without authorization, I hope."

"Certainly not."

As soon as he was alone he typed *Conspicuous consumption* into the query machine.

It started grinding out long bibliographical sheets as well as cross-references to *Obsolescence, Natural; Obsolescence, Technological; Obsolescence, Planned,* plus even odder items such as *Waste-making, Art of* and *Production, Stimulated velocity of.* How did such disparate subjects tie in with each other?

BY the end of the afternoon he began to see, if only dimly, to what the unending stream of words on the viewer pointed.

For centuries ruling classes had made a habit of conspicuously wasting goods and services that were necessities for the mass of men. It was the final and highest symbol of social power. By the time of Louis XIV the phenomenon had reached its first peak. The second came in the twentieth century when mass production permitted millions to devote their lives to the acquisition and waste of non-essentials. Hart's twenty-second century sensibliities were repelled by the examples given. He shuddered at the thought of such anti-social behavior.

But a parallel development was more appealingly positive in its implications. As the technological revolution speeded up, devices were superseded as soon as produced. The whole last half of the 1900's was filled with instances where the drawing board kept outstripping the assembly line.

Hart remembered this last change from early school days but the later, final development was completely new and shocking to him. Advertising had pressured more and more people to replace goods *before* they wore out with other goods that were, essentially, no improvement on their predecessors! Eventually just the word "NEW" was enough to trigger buying panics.

There had been growing awareness of what was happening, even sporadic resistance to it by such varied ideologies as Conservative Thrift, Asocial Beatnikism and Radical Inquiry. But, strangely enough, very few people had cared. Indeed, anything that diminished consumption was viewed as dangerously subversive.

"And rightly so!" was his first, instinctive reaction. His second, reasoned one, though, was less certain.

The contradiction started to give him a headache. He hurried from the scanning room, overtaxed eyes blinking at the rediscovery of daylight.

Burnett walked him to the door. "Not feeling well?" he inquired.

"I'll be all right. I just need a few days real work." He stopped. "No, that's not why. I'm confused. I've been reading crazy things about obsolescence. They used to have strange reasons for it. Why, some people even said replacements were not always improvements and were unnecessary!"

Burnett could not completely hide his pleasure. "You've been getting into rather deep stuff."

"Deep — or nonsensical!"

"True. True. Come back tomorrow and read some more."

"Maybe I will." But he was happy to get away from the library building.

Marie was horrified when he told her that evening about his studies. "Don't go back there," she pleaded. "It's dangerous. It's subversive! How could people say such awful things? You remember that Mr. Johnson around the corner? He seemed such a nice man, too, until they arrested him without giving a reason . . . and how messed up he was when he got out last year. I'll bet that kind of talk explains the whole thing. It's crazy. Everyone knows items start wearing out and they have to be replaced."

"I realise that, honey, but it's interesting to speculate. Don't we have guaranteed freedom of thought?"

She threw up her hands as if dealing with a child. "Naturally we have freedom of thought. But you should have the right thoughts, shouldn't you? Wendell, promise me you won't go back to that library."

"Well —"

"Reading's a very risky thing anyway." Her eyes were

saucer-round with fright. "Please, darling. Promise."

"Sure, you're right, honey. I promise."

HE meant it when he said it. But that night, tossing from side to side, he felt less certain. In the morning, as he went out, Marie asked him where he was going.

"I want to observe the preparations for the Preliminary Rites."

"Now that," she grinned, "is what I call *healthy* thinking."

For a while he did stand around the Central Plaza along with thousands of other idlers, watching the robot dump trucks assemble the piles of discarded equipment. The crowd cheered loudly as an enormous crane was knocked over on its side.

"There's fifty millions worth out there!" a bystander exulted. "It's going to be the biggest Preliminary I've ever seen."

"It certainly will be!" he said, catching a little of the other man's enthusiasm despite his previous doubts.

Preliminary Rites were part of the emotion-stoking that preceded the Highest Holy Day. Each Rite was greater and more destructive than those that had gone before. As tokens of happy loyalty, viewers threw hats and watches and stickpins onto the pile just prior to the entry of the slaggers. What better way could be found for each man to manifest his common humanity?

After a while doubt started assailing him again, and Hart found himself returning almost against his will to the Library Building. Burnett greeted him cordially. "Today's visit is completely legal," he said. "Anyone doing olden time research is automatically authorized if he has been here before."

"I hope my thought can be as legal," Hart blurted out. "Well—that was just a joke."

"Oh, I can recognize a joke when I hear one, my friend."

Hart went to his booth, feeling the man's eyes measuring him more intently than ever. It was almost a welcome relief to start reading the reference scanner once more.

But not for long. As the wider pattern unfolded, his anxiety state intensified.

It was becoming perfectly obvious that many, many replacements used to be made long before they were needed. And it was still true. *I should not be thinking such thoughts,* he told himself, *I should be outside in the Plaza, being normal and human.*

But he could see how it had come about, step by step. First there had been pressure from the ruling echelons, many of whose members only maintained their status through excessive production. Then,

much more important, there had been the willful blindness of the masses who wanted to keep their cozy, familiar treadmills going.

He slammed down the *off* button and went out to the librarian's desk. "Do people want to work all the time," he said, "for the sake of work alone?"

He immediately regretted the question. But Burnett did not seem to mind. "You've only stated the positive reason, Mr. Hart. The negative one could be stronger — the fear of what they would have to do if they did not have to work much over a long period."

"What would it mean?"

"Why, they would have to start thinking! Most people don't mind thought if it's concentrated in a narrow range. But if they have to think in a broad range to keep boredom away — no, that's too high a price for most of them! They avoid it when they can. And under present circumstances they can." He stopped. "Of course that's a purely hypothetical fiction I'm constructing."

Hart shook his head. "It sounds awfully real to be purely—" He, too caught himself up. "Of course, you're only positing a fiction."

Burnett started putting his desk papers away. "I'm leaving now. The Preliminary begins soon. Want to come?"

The man's face was stolidly blank except for his brown eyes which burned like a zealot's. Fascinated by them, Hart agreed. It would be best to return anyway. Some of the bystanders had looked too curiously at him when he had left. Who would willingly leave a Rite when it was approaching its climax?

II

THE Plaza was now thronged and the sacrificial pile towered over a hundred feet in the cleared center area. Then, as the first collective *Ah!* arose, a giant slagger lumbered in from the east, the direction prescribed for such commencements. Long polarity arms glided smoothly out of the central mechanism and reached the length for Total Destruction.

"That's the automatic setting," parents explained to their children.

"When?" the children demanded eagerly.

"Any moment now."

Then the unforeseen occurred.

There was a rumbling from inside the pile and a huge jagged patchwork of metal shot out, smashing both arms. The slagger teetered, swaying more and more violently from side to side until it collapsed on its side. The rumbling grew. And then the pile, like a mechanical cancer, ripped

the slagger apart and then absorbed it.

The panicking crowd fell back. Somewhere a child began crying, provoking more hubbub. "Sabotage!" people were crying. "Let's get away!"

Nothing like this had ever happened before. But Hart knew instantly what had caused it. Some high-level servo mechanisms had not been thoroughly disconnected. They had repaired their damages, then imposed their patterns on the material at hand.

A second slagger came rushing into the square. It discharged immediately; and the pile finally collapsed and disintegrated as it was supposed to.

The crowd was too shocked to feel the triumph it had come for, but Hart could not share their horror. Burnett eyed him. "Better look indignant," he said. "They'll be out for blood. Somebody must have sabotaged the setup."

"Catch the culprits!" he shouted, joining the crowd around him. "Stop anti-social acts!"

"Stop anti-social acts!" roared Burnett; and, in a whisper: "Hart, let's get out of here."

As they pushed their way through the milling crowd, a loudspeaker boomed out: "Return home in peace. The instincts of the people are good. Healthy destruction forever! The criminals will be tracked down . . . if they exist."

"A terrible thing, friend," a woman said to them.

"Terrible, friend," Burnett agreed. "Smash the anti-social elements without mercy!"

Three children were clustered together, crying. "I wanted to set the right example for them," said the father to anyone who would listen. "They'll *never* get over this!"

Hart tried to console them. "Next week is High Holy Day," he said, but the bawling only increased.

The two men finally reached a side avenue where the crowd was thinner. "Come with me," Burnett ordered, "I want you to meet some people."

HE sounded as if he were instituting military discipline but Hart, still dazed, willingly followed. "It wasn't such a terrible thing," he said, listening to the distant uproar. "Why don't they shut up!"

"They will — eventually." Burnett marched straight ahead and looked fixedly in the same direction.

"The thing could have gobbled up the city if there hadn't been a second slagger!" said a lone passerby.

"Nonsense," Burnett muttered under his breath. "You know that, Hart. Any self-regulating mechanism reaches a check limit sooner than that."

"It has to."

They turned into a large building and went up to the fiftieth floor. "My apartment," said Burnett as he opened the door.

There were about fifteen people in the large living room. They rose, smiling, to greet their host. "Let's save the self-congratulations for later," snapped Burnett. "These were merely our own preliminaries. We're not out of the woods yet. This, ladies and gentlemen, is our newest recruit. He has seen the light. I have fed him basic data and I'm sure we're not making a mistake with him."

Hart was about to demand what was going on when a short man with eyes as intense as Burnett's proposed a toast to "the fiasco in the Plaza." Everyone joined in and he did not have to ask.

"Burnett, I don't quite understand why I am here but aren't you taking a chance with me?"

"Not at all. I've followed your reactions since your first visit to the library. Others here have also — when you were completely unaware of being observed. The gradual shift in viewpoint is familiar to us. We've all been through it. The really important point is that you no longer like the kind of world into which you were born."

"That's true, but no one can change it."

"We *are* changing it, said a thin-faced young woman. "I work in a servo lab and—."

"Miss Wright, time enough for that later," interrupted Burnett. "What we must know now, Mr. Hart, is how much you're willing to do for your new-found convictions? It will be more work than you've ever dreamed possible."

He felt as exhilarated as he did in the months after High Holy Day. "I'm down to under ten hours labor a week. I'd do anything for your group if I could get more work."

Burnett gave him a hearty handshake of congratulation . . . but was frowning as he did so. "You're doing the right thing — for the wrong reason. Every member of this group could tell you why. Miss Wright, since you feel like talking, explain the matter."

"Certainly. Mr. Hart, we are engaged in an activity of so-called subversion for a positive reason, not merely to avoid insufficient work load. Your reason shows you are still being moved by the values that you despise. We *want* to cut the work-production load on people. We want them to *face* the problem of leisure, not flee it."

"There's a heart-warming paradox here," Burnett explained. "Every excess eventually undermines itself. Everybody in the movement starts by wanting to act for their beliefs because work appears so attractive for its own

sake. I was that way, too, until I studied the dead art of philosophy."

"Well —" Hart sat down, deeply troubled. "Look, I deplore destroying equipment that is still perfectly useful as much as any of you do. But there *is* a problem. If the destruction were stopped there would be so much leisure people would rot from boredom."

BURNETT pounced eagerly on the argument. "Instead they're rotting from artificial work. Boredom is a temporary, if recurring phenomenon of living, not a permanent one. If most men face the difficulty of empty time long enough they find new problems with which to fill that time. That's where philosophy showed me the way. None of its fundamental mysteries can ever be solved but, as you pit yourself against them, your experience and capacity for being alive grows."

"Very nice," Hart grinned, "wanting all men to be philosophers. They never have been."

"'You shouldn't have brought him here,' growled the short man. "He's not one of us. Now we have a real mess."

"Johnson, I'm leader of this group!" Burnett exploded. "Credit me with a little understanding. All right, Hart, what you say is true. But why? Because most men have always worked too hard to achieve the fruits of curiosity."

"I hate to keep being a spoil-sport, but what does that prove? *Some* men who had to work as hard as the rest have been interested in things beyond the end of their nose."

They all groaned their disapproval.

"A good point, Hart, but it doesn't prove what you think. It just shows that a minority enjoy innate capacities and environmental variations that make the transition to philosopher easier."

"And *you* haven't proven anything about the incurious majority."

"This does, though: whenever there was a favorable period the majority who could, as you put it, see beyond the ends of their noses increased. Our era is just the opposite. We are trapped in a vicious circle. Those noses are usually so close to the grindstone that men are afraid to raise their heads. We are breaking that circle!"

"It's a terribly important thing to aim for, Burnett, but —" He brought up another doubt and somebody else answered it immediately.

For the next half hour, as one uncertainty was expressed after another, everybody joined in the answers until inexorable logic forced his surrender.

"All right," he conceded, "I

will do anything I can — not to make work for myself, but to help mankind rise above it."

EXCEPT for a brief, triumphant glance in Johnson's direction, Burnett gave no further attention to what had happened and plunged immediately into practical matters.

To halt the blind worship of work, the Rites had first to be discredited. And to discredit the Rites, the awe inspired by their infallible performance had to be weakened. The sabotage of the Preliminary had been the first local step in that direction. There had been a few similar, if smaller, episodes, executed by other groups, but they had received as little publicity as possible.

"Johnson, you pulled one so big this time that they can't hide it. Twenty thousand witnesses! When it comes to getting things done you're the best we have!"

The little man grinned. "But you're the one who knows how to pick recruits and organize our concepts. This is how it worked. I re-fed the emptied cryotron memory box of a robot discard with patterns to deal with anything it was likely to encounter in a destruction pile. I kept the absolute-freeze mechanism in working order, but developed a shield that would hide its activity from the best pile detector." He spread a large tissue schematic out on the floor and they all gathered around it to study the details. "Now, the important thing was to have an external element that could resume contact with a wider circuit, which could in turn start meshing with the whole robot mechanism and then through that mechanism into the pile. This little lever made the contact at a pre-fed time."

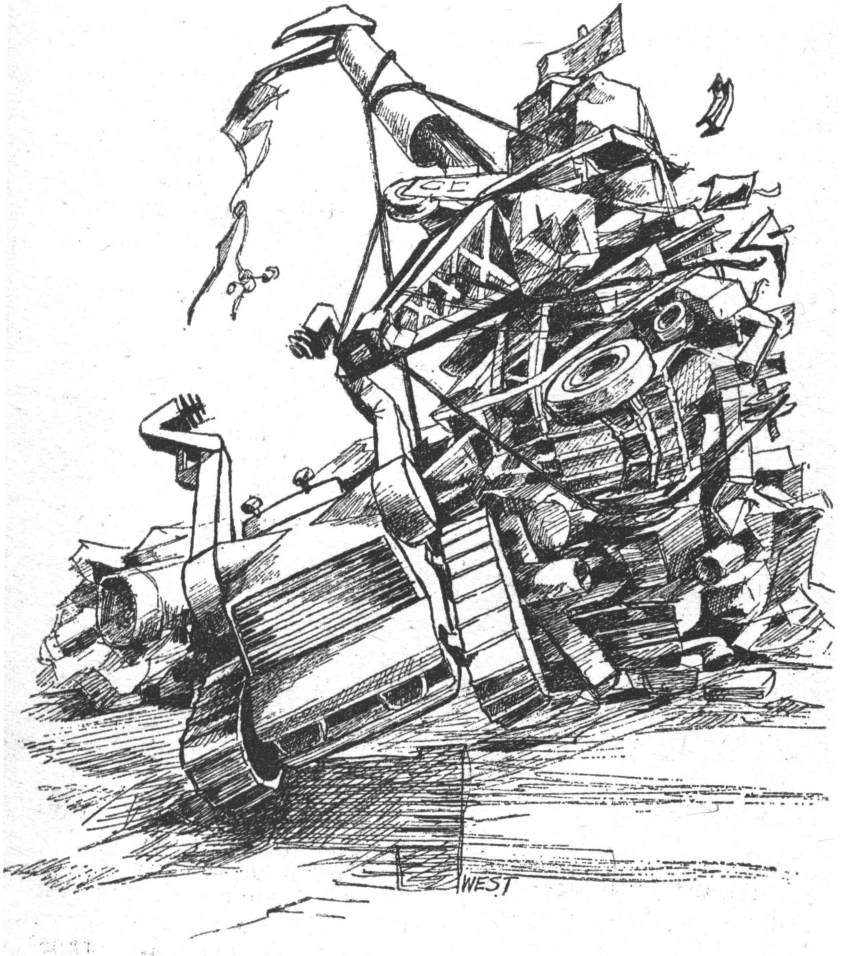
Miss Wright was enthusiastic. "That contact is half the size of any I've been able to make. It's crucially important," she added to Hart. "A large contact can look suspicious."

While others took miniphotos of the schematic, Hart studied the contact carefully. "I think I can reduce its size by another fifty per cent. Alloys are one of my specialties — when I get a chance to work at them."

"That would be ideal," said Burnett. "Then we could set up many more discarded robots without risk. How long will it take?"

"I can rough it out right now." He scribbled down the necessary formulas and everyone photographed that too.

"Maximum security is now in effect," announced Burnett. "You will destroy your copies as soon as you have transferred them to edible base copies. At the first hint of danger you will consume them. Use home enlargers for study. In no case are you to


WEST

make permanent blowups that would be difficult to destroy quickly." He considered them sternly. "Remember, you are running a great risk. You're not only opposing the will of the state but the present will of the vast majority of citizens."

"If there are as many other underground groups as you indicate," said Hart, "they should have this information."

"We get it to them," answered Burnett. "I'm going on health leave from my job."

"And what will be your excuse?" Wright demanded anxiously.

"Nervous shock," smiled their leader. "After all, I did see today's events in the Plaza."

WHEN Hart reached home his wife was waiting for him. "Why did you take so long, Wendell. I was worried sick. The radio says anti-socials are turning wild servos loose. How could human beings do such a thing?"

"I was there. I saw it all happen." He frowned. "The crowd was so dense I couldn't get away."

"But what happened? The ways the news was broadcast I couldn't understand anything."

He described the situation in great detail and awaited Marie's reaction. It was even more encouraging than he had hoped for. "I understand less than before! How could anything reactivate that rubble? They put everything over five years old into the piles, and the stuff's supposed to be decrepit already. You'd almost think we were destroying wealth before its time, because if those disabled mechanisms reactivate —" She came to a dead halt. "That's madness! Oh, I wish High Holy Day were here already so I could get back to work and stop this empty *thinking!*"

Her honest face was more painfully distorted than he had ever seen it before, even during the universal pre-Rite doldrums. "Only a few more days to go," he consoled. "Don't worry, honey. Everything's going to be all right. Now I'd like to be alone in the study for a while. I've been through an exhausting time."

"Aren't you going to eat?"

The last word triggered the entry of Eric, the domestic robot, pushing the dinner cart ahead of him. "No food tonight," Hart insisted. The shining metal head nodded its assent and the cart was wheeled out.

"That's not a very humane thing to do," she scolded. "Eric's not going to be serving many more meals —"

"Good grief, Marie, just leave me alone for a while, will you?" He slammed the study door shut, warning himself to display less nervous-

ness in the future as he listened to her pacing outside. Then she went away.

The projector gave him a good-sized wall image to consider. He spent most of the night calculating where he could place tiny self-activators in the "obsolescent" robots that were to be donated by his plant. Then he set up the instruction tapes to make the miniature contacts. Production then would be a simple job, only taking a few minutes, and during a working day there were always many periods longer than that when he was alone on the production floor.

But thinking the matter out without computers was much more difficult. Human beings ordinarily filled their time on a lower abstracting level.

When he unlocked the study door in the morning he was startled to see Marie bustling down the corridor, pushing the food service cart herself. That did not make sense, especially considering last night's statement about Eric.

"I thought you'd want breakfast early," she coughed.

"You didn't have to bother, honey. Eric could have done it."

If she had been prying, the cart might have been a prop to take up as soon as he came out. On the other hand, what could she in her technical ignorance make of such matters anyway?

It was best not to rouse any deeper suspicions by openly noticing her wifely nosiness. At breakfast they pretended nothing had happened, devoting the time to mutually disapproved cousins, but all day long he kept wondering wheth long he kept wondering whether ignorant knowledge couldn't be as dangerous as the knowing kind.

THE next morning, after a long sleep, he went to the factory for the first of his semi-weekly work periods.

He sat before a huge console, surveying scores of dials, at the end of a machine that was over five hundred yards long. Today it was turning out glass paper the color of watered blood, made only for Ritual publications, packing it in sheets and dispatching them in automatic trucks; but the machine could be adjusted to everything from metal sheeting to plastic felts. At the far end sat another man, diminished by distance, busily tending more dials that could really take care of themselves.

After a while the man went out for a break. Hart ran a hundred yards to a section that was not working. He snapped it into the alloy supply and fed in the tape. In a minute, several dozen tiny contacts came down a chute. He pocketed them and disconnected the section just before his fellow worker reappeared.

The man walked down the floor to him, looking curious.

"Anything the matter?" he asked, hopeful for some break in routine.

"No, just felt like a walk."

"Know what you mean — I feel restless too. Too bad this plant's only two years old. Boy, wouldn't she make a great disintegration!" He grinned, slapping a fender affectionately.

Hart joined in the joke. "Gives us something to look forward to in ten years."

"A good way to look at things," said the other man.

At home he locked the contacts in a desk drawer. Tomorrow he would deliver most of them to Burnett's apartment.

But the next morning an emergency letter came from his group leader, warning him not to appear there. *I am going completely underground. I think they may suspect my activities. The dispersion plan must go into effect. You know how to reach Johnson and Wright and they each in turn can get to two others. Good luck!*

He had just put the letter in his pocket when Eric announced the arrival of a Rituals Inspector.

The man had nervous close-set eyes and seemed embarrassed by his need to make such a visit. Hart took the offensive as his best defense. "I don't understand this, Inspector," he protested. "You people should be busy with High Holy preparations. Are you losing your taste for work?"

"Now, now, Mr. Hart, that's a very unkind remark. I dislike this nonsense as much as anyone." His square jaw chewed into each word as he opened his scanning box. "It's the anti-social sabotage."

"Do you mean to say I am under suspicion?" Marie was now loitering in the doorway, worse luck.

"Oh, no. Nothing so insulting. This is strictly impersonal. The Scanning Center has picked apartments at complete random and we're to make spot checks."

The eye at one end of the box blinked wickedly, waiting for an information feed. "Now, sir, if you'll pardon me, I'll just take the records from one of those desk drawers — any drawer — and put them in the box." Hart slid open a drawer. "No, sir, I think I'll try the next one. It's regulation not to accept suggestions."

With a hand made deft by practise he scooped out all the sheets and tapes and put them in the box. The scanner's fingers rapidly sorted them past the eye. Hart exhaled, relieved that an innocuous drawer had been selected, and the inspector handed back the material to him. "Well, Inspector, that's that."

"Not quite." The Inspector selected another drawer at the other end of the desk and dumped everything before the scanner. His examination was speeding up and that was not good; he would have time to take more sample readings.

"Now if you'll empty your left pocket —"

"OH, this is too much!" Marie exploded. "My husband struggles all night on secret work, studying to find ways to stop the anti-socials, and you treat him like one of them!"

"You're working on the problem?" the Inspector said respectfully. "What are you doing?"

Frying pan to fire. Hart preferred the pan and pulled open a drawer. "It's too complicated, too much time needed to explain!"

The Inspector glanced at his watch. "I'm falling behind schedule." He closed up his box. "Sorry, but I have to leave. Heavy time sheet today."

As soon as he was gone, Hart breathed easier. Nothing incriminating would be fed into the Central Scanner.

Marie became apologetic. "I'm sorry I said it, Wendell, but I couldn't keep quiet. All I did last night was peek in once or twice."

He shrugged. "I'm just on a minor project."

"Every bit counts." She shook her head. "Only you have to wonder — I mean, don't think I'm treasoning, but while I was shopping an hour ago a lot of women said you have to think — how come all that obsolescent junk could work so well, after being thoroughly wrecked, too? You almost wonder whether some of it was too good for disintegration."

Wendell pretended to be shocked. "Just a fluke of circumstance. If something like that happened again you'd be right to wonder. But it could not ever happen again."

"Don't get me wrong, Wendell. None of the women attacked anything. It was more like what you just said. They said if it happened again, then you'd have to wonder. But of course it couldn't happen again."

How well the tables had turned! Not only had Marie's ignorant knowledge proven helpful but she had now given him a positive idea also.

When he met Wright and Johnson at the latter's apartment that evening he explained it to them. "We can propagate 'dangerous' thoughts and yet appear completely loyal. We can set up the reaction to next High Holy Day."

"How?" demanded Johnson. "That's having your cake and eating it."

"Nothing's impossible in the human mind," Wright said. "Let's listen."

"Here's the point. Wherever you go there will be people tsk-tsking about the Preliminary fiasco. Just reassure them, say it meant nothing at all by itself. If it ever happened again, then there would be room for doubt but, of course, *it could not happen again!*"

Wright smiled. "That's almost feminine in its subtlety."

He smiled back. "My wife inspired it. Don't get nervous — it was unconscious, sheerly by acident."

"Whatever the cause, it's the perfect result," Johnson conceded. "We'll spread it through the net."

"Along with this, I hope." Wendell dumped the contacts on a table top. "It's the smallest size possible. A lot should get by unnoticed. Find cell members who can set up cryotrons with a wide range of instructions to cope with anything in the piles. Some weirdly alive concoctions of 'obsolescent' parts ought to result."

"Some day the world's going to know what you've done for it," said Johnson solemnly.

"That could happen too soon!" Miss Wright's face, honest and open in its horselike length, broke into a wide grin.

"Amen," said Hart, adding the private hope that Marie, blessed with superior looks, might be able to show as much superior wisdom some day.

THE hope was not immediately fulfilled. When he reached home Marie was in a tizzy of excitement. "You're just in time, darling. They just caught three subversives. One of them was a woman," she added as this were compounding an improbability with an impossibility. "They're going to show them."

He gripped his belt tightly. "A woman?"

"That's right. There she is now."

A uniformed officer was gently helping a pale little old woman sit down before the camera, as if she were more an object of pity than of fear. Hart relaxed.

"— caught red-handed with the incriminating papers," shouted an offstage announcer. "Handbills asserting objects declared obsolescent could actually last indefinitely!"

"What do you have to say for yourself?" the officer asked gently. "You must realize, of course, that such irreligious behavior precludes your moving in general society for a long time to come."

"I don't know what came over me," she sobbed in a tired voice. "Curiosity. Yes, curiosity, that's what it was. I saw these sheets of paper in the street and they said we should stop working so hard at compulsory tasks and start working to expand our own interests and personalities."

"Self - contradictory nonsense!" said the voice.

"Yes, I know that. But it made me curious and I took it home to read, and it said our compulsory tasks were artificially manufactured and, if you didn't believe that, look at the pile that reactivated itself the other day." She stopped, reorganizing her thoughts. "Of course, though, that thing in the Plaza was unique, you know. I don't think it could mean a thing . . . unless it happened a few times. And the fact is it won't ever happen again."

"Well, that much makes very good sense," said Marie. "You said the same thing, Wendell. I don't think that poor woman knew what she was doing — just a dupe for subversive propaganda."

"— a dupe for subversive propaganda," the announcer was saying.

"See, exactly what I said."

"Yes, dear."

How swiftly the decentralized underground was working! Hart could not tell whether the old woman was an active member or just a passive responder, but it did not matter. She was now spreading the seeds for future doubt across the land.

Two old men were brought in and they mumbled the same disconnected story as their sister.

"We have intensively interrogated these prisoners," boomed the announcer, "and know there is nothing more to the rumored anti-social plot than this stupid chatter. Remain vigilant and you have nothing to fear!"

"You are sentenced to five years isolation from general society," said the officer, in a voice dulcet enough to sell advance orders for replacement products that had not yet been made. "Our intention is to protect you from bad influences. Our hope is that others will take your lesson to heart."

"God bless you," said the woman and her brothers joined in effusive thanks.

"Makes you proud to be a human being," Marie said. "I was getting some stupid doubts myself, dear. I must admit it. But that's all past. I can hardly wait for the Highest Holy Day."

"Neither can I," sighed her husband.

IV

THE next day at noon Eric came to him, functioning on the final set of servo instructions that had been installed in him at the factory of his birth eight years before. He shook hands with the two of them and said: "Now I am prepared for death."

Marie was tearful. "I will miss you, Eric. If you were only under five years old your span could be extended."

"Everything that happens

is right," Eric said impassively.

He clambered on to the operation table, instinctively knowing which flat surface was for him, and, breaking all his major circuits, gave up the ghost that only man could restore to him.

Hart found his wife's grief easy to bear. The day after tomorrow she would join in the general exultation of High Holy Day, with Eric well forgotten. He methodically began smashing the surface of the limbs and torso; the greater the visible damage, the greater the honor redounding to the sacrifice donor. "This will be our gift to the general pile," he said.

"I thought we could keep him for our garden sacrifice," Marie protested meekly. "Most people do."

"But the other way is the greater sacrifice."

There was no reply, because she knew he spoke for the deeper, more moving custom. But suddenly he began to act depressed himself. "I know we say it every ten years, but Eric was really the best companion we ever had." He gestured toward the table. "I want to sit here with him for a while — alone."

"That's carrying things too far, Wendell. A little grief is proper — but this much is actually morbid."

"It's all within my rights." She tossed her head petulantly. "Well, I've done my share. I can't stand any more. It makes a person think and get depressed. I don't care what you're going to do. I'm going out to enjoy a Preliminary."

"Can't blame you for that," he nodded.

When she had gone he started to work on new instruction tapes for activating the servocryotron. Nothing could be surrendered to chance. Every possible circumstance in the pile had to be anticipated. There had to be instructions for action if Eric was crushed below fifty feet of metal, for assembling any kind of scrambled wiring, for adapting all types of parts in its immediate surroundings, for using these parts to absorb parts further away and for timing the operation to the start of the Highest Rite.

Some tapes had been prepared earlier, so it was possible to put everything in the cryotron box before Marie returned, as well as to attach the tiny contact that would reach out from the box until it reached its first external scrap of wire or metal.

"You poor darling," she pouted. "You missed the most wonderful thing! They demolished a whole thirty-story building!"

His blood, atavistically effected, pulsed faster until his new creed came to grips with his old emotions. "They usu-

ally don't bother with buildings for the Rites."

"I know — that's what was so wonderful! The State has decided to make this one the biggest Day of all time. We'll have enough work to fill the whole ten years! Everybody was so happy."

"I'm sure they were." He caught himself in mid-sarcasm and said, "I'm sorry I missed it."

"And I'm sorry I've been so selfishly self-centered." She frowned. "I forgot about it, but there were people in the crowd boasting they had been assigned to fight anti-social movements. I had to boast back that my husband had been honored too."

He tensed. "Oh? What did they say to that?"

"Frankly, they laughed."

"I should think so. The Central Scanner didn't pick up anything except a lot of ineffective propaganda. The sabotage business was all hysteria."

"That's just what they said — the assignments were an empty honor." She coldly considered Eric. "I want to wreck him too."

"I've smashed the insides," he said. "You'd better just work the surface."

"That's all I want to do," she answered, starting to scratch traditional marks all over the dead robot. It gave her a full afternoon of happy, busy labor.

THE next day a large open truck came around and the street echoed to the appeal for contributions. Festival spirit was running high everywhere and when the neighborhood crowd saw the young robot porters carry Eric out there was a loud cheer of appreciation.

"My husband decided on a major contribution right away," Marie announced to them.

"It's the least we could do," he said modestly.

Many onlookers, swept away by their example, rushed indoors to bring out additional items of sacrifice. But only two others gave up their robots. The rest clung to them for private Holy Night ceremonies. Soon Eric disappeared under the renewed deluge of egg-beaters and washers.

"The best collection I have seen today," said the inspector accompanying the truck. "You people are to be congratulated for your exceptional patriotism."

"Destroy!" they shouted back joyously. "Make work!"

At dawn the Central Plaza was already crowded and new hordes kept pouring in from outlying areas. Wendell and his wife had been among the first to arrive. They waited, impatient in their separate ways, on the borderline five hundred yards from the ten-story pyre.

Martial music roared from

loudspeakers, interrupted by the mellifluous boom of a merchandising announcer: "New product! Better models! One hundred years of High Holy Days! New! New! NEW!"

"Destroy!" came the returning shout. "Make work! Work! Work!"

All the sounds echoed back and forth until baffled away by the open area across the Plaza, where one large structure had already been destroyed. Three others were slated for collapse today.

"The biggest Holy Day ever," a restless old woman said to Marie. "I've seen all nine of them."

"Eric's in there," Marie chatted back, superficially sad, deeply happy.

"Who?"

"Our house robot."

"Imagine that! Did you hear that?" People gathered round them and cheered. The good-natured jostling continued until someone said: "Five minutes to go!"

Wendell checked his watch. Somewhere in the pile at least one element was coming to life, a metal arm reaching out for brother metal to engulf in its cybernetic sweep.

"They're coming!" A line of six shiny new slaggers came rumbling into the open with military precision. They moved along slowly, prolonging the pleasures of anticipation, then broke rank, each seeking its assigned point around the pile of appliances gathered for destruction.

"The latest improved models," said the loudspeakers. "They will first perform fifteen minutes of automatic maneuvers." The military music resumed and each slagger turned, as if circling a coin, in clanking rhythm to it.

"The three hundred and sixty degree turn. Next, making a box on the Plaza floor . . ."

The voice stopped, appalled.

AN avalanche of metal slid down one side of the pile and the crowd gasped. The downward movement viscously slowed; then the metal, suddenly alive with the capacity to defy gravity, circled upward. Jagged limbs started flailing about.

"Disintegrator attack!" screamed the loudspeakers. "Attack!"

The maneuvers stopped. For one brief moment prior to changeover the Plaza was dead still, except for the deafening rumble in the pile. The slaggers broke the spell, rushing full speed toward the pile, evaporator beams working.

One by one they faltered and were sucked into the destructive pyre.

The crowd fell further back. The whole pile came alive like a mineral octupus. Then the squirming thing collapsed, every makeshift circuit irreparably broken and dead. Everything had been happening too

fast for any pronounced reaction to accompany it; but now the world went crazy.

"Stand firm!" pleaded the loudspeakers. "We will get reinforcements as soon as celebrations are finished elsewhere."

A barrage of enormous boos came from the disintegrating mob. "Never again! Fakes! It's finished, done for!"

"Stand firm!"

But the breakup down side avenues continued. "I don't understand," Marie shuddered. "Everything's crazy. We've been deceived, Wendell. Who's been deceiving us?"

"Nobody — unless it's ourselves."

"I don't understand that either." Saucer-eyed she watched a great clump of disgruntled people push past. "I *have* to think!"

Suddenly, as they came around a corner, they were facing Burnett.

Hart tried to disregard him but the group leader would have none of that. He rushed up to Hart. "Good to see a friendly face. Shocking developments!" His face was grim, but tiny wrinkles at the corners of his eyes betrayed an amusement that could only be discovered by those who looked for it.

"Mr. Burnett," he explained to Marie. "A librarian at the main building. Mr. Burnett, my wife Marie."

"I am most happy to meet you, Mrs. Hart. Have you heard the latest?"

"No, Mr. Burnett."

"The same things have been happening *everywhere!* They announced it on the radio and they're saying it's due to antisocial elements. Shocking!"

She shook her head stubbornly. "I don't know what to think. Maybe we shouldn't be shocked, maybe we should be. I just don't know, Mr. Burnett. I came to enjoy myself and look how it's ended." She bravely held back a sob. "Maybe we'd have been better off if we've never heard about High Holy Days!"

Burnett looked about with feigned apprehension. "You have to be careful what you say. The government says there's even talk — subversive handbills — about trying to rehabilitate some of the stuff in the piles."

"The government ought to keep quiet!" she exploded. "They said this couldn't happen. You can't believe anything they say any more. The *people* decide and the government will have to listen, that's what I say! And I'm a pretty typical person, not one of your intellectual kind. No criticism of present company intended."

"None taken, Mrs. Hart. Our human future," said Burnett, exchanging a grin with his aide, "remains, as it always has really been. Interesting— to say the least!"

END

HUE AND CRY

WELL, here we are, month after month trying to do the best we can in the way of producing an IF you'll like, and it's sometimes like dropping words down a well. We know you're out there because *somebody* buys all those magazines! But, specifically, who *are* you?

One of you is Lawrence Crilly of Elizabeth, New Jersey, who writes:

Is is too much to ask for a letter-col? It'd convince the fans that you're actually trying to please them — while capturing the attention of casual readers — and the promise of egoboo if their names appeared in print would compel a large number of readers to comment on the stories, who normally do not — myself included. You ought to give this serious consideration.

We did. Sounds like a good deal . . . so . . . consider this the letter-col; and if it's brief this time, it's because we don't have much more that we can publish.

But you can remedy that! Just get down to your typewriters!

And while you're writing, check us out on a couple of basic assumptions we're making. For instance:

Assumption Number One: There's space in the science fiction field . . . somewhere between the childish adventure and the Prophets of Doom . . . for a magazine that'll give the reader stories to enjoy — as well as something to think about.

We think, in other words, that although science-fiction has come a long way, there is still a lot that the long-time "Great Names" of science fiction have to give us. (For which reason we're proud to welcome back, in near-future issues, the likes of Lester del Rey, E. E. "Skylark" Smith and a dozen more all-time favorites.) What we aim for in IF is all the color of the old days, and all the stimulation of the new.

Assumption Number Two: The readers are entitled to a share in making the decisions. Accordingly, we'll try to do what you want — asking only that you tell us what it is!

Assumption Number Three: That "progress" is sometimes spelled M-I-S-T-A-K-E. We'll try to do what you want — but if we goof, tell us so!

As a starter, next issue will have a slightly different format — a more compact type and therefore, we hope, more story-content. We'll be looking forward to knowing what you think of that—and everything else! **END**

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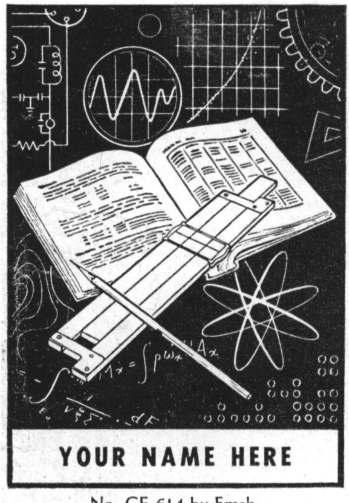

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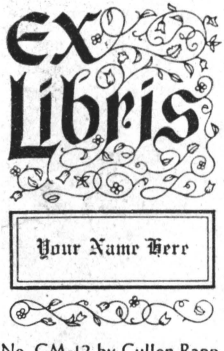

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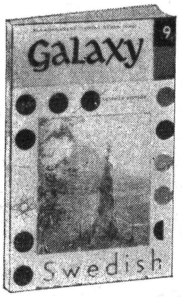

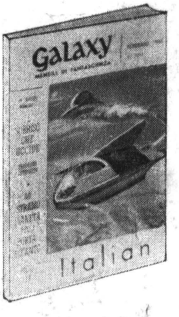

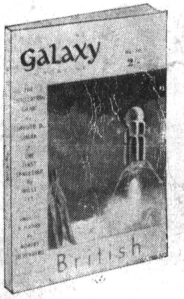

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