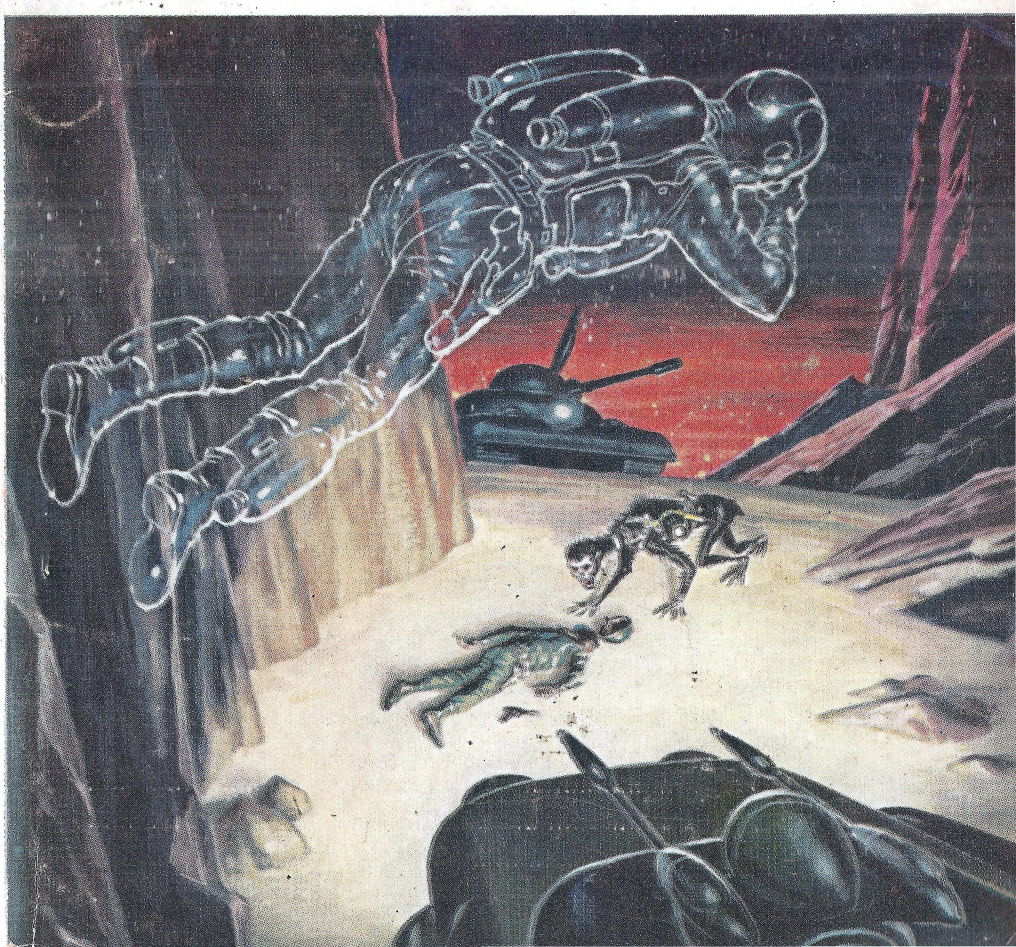
FATHER OF THE STARS • Interstellar Novelette by FREDERIK POHL

WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

November 1964
40c

All EMSH Issue

Beginning This Issue — **THE HOUNDS OF HELL**
A Thrilling Novel of Star-born Creatures Who Lived on Men!
by **KEITH LAUMER**



WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

NOVEMBER, 1964
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ALL NEW STORIES

Frederik Pohl, Editor
Diane Sullivan, Associate Editor

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Cover by EMSH for THE HOUNDS OF HELL

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Seconds on Firsts

Gary Wright's *The Ultimate Racer,* which starts on page 64 of this issue, is the first case of a "first" turning up with a second story in print in our magazines . . . but mostly because of the accidents of timing. We have a notion you'll be hearing a lot from a good many of them.

As most regular readers know, in each issue we bring you a story by someone who has never appeared in a professional science-fiction magazine before (usually they haven't appeared anywhere at all, professional or otherwise). This issue's, for example, is Simon Tully's *The Perfect People* — and we think you will agree that the author, an Australian anthropologist now resident in London, is the right person to tell us what "perfection" may mean.

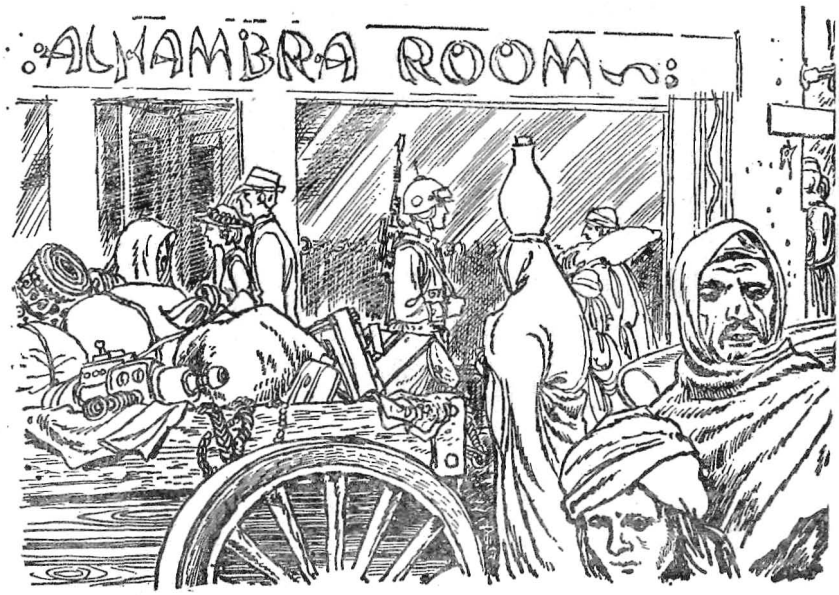
Gary Wright gave us a fine, adventurous novelette called *Captain of the Kali* in January 1963. Readers liked it and asked for more — and, at last, we've been able to deliver. Jonathan Brand, whose *Long Day in Court* was one of the most popular of our firsts, has a story called *Vanishing Point* in our inventory and coming up soon. Bruce McAllister, who was fourteen years old when he sold us his "first" and thus became the youngest of our contributors, has just produced another which we expect to bring you in short order. Larry Niven, whose first hasn't even appeared yet — it's called *The Coldest Place,* and will turn up next month — has already sold us a second which will be appearing shortly in *Galaxy,* called *Wrong-Way Street.* And another "first" who will shortly be coming up in *Galaxy* is Joseph Green, our first "first" of all, who inaugurated the idea three years ago and has since carved out an audience for himself with a number of short stories and a forthcoming Ballantine book.

The whole "first" idea started at the Seattle Science Fiction Convention of 1961, when the convention committee auctioned off the time of a number of guests, including your editor. (The price we fetched for 30 minutes was fifteen dollars. Shows what inflation will do.) The high bidder was Joe Green, who used the time to find out all he could about what it took to sell science-fiction stories . . . and, as you see, got his money's worth at that.

To our way of thinking, the "first" series has been about the most satisfactory venture we've engaged in with *If.* There are others in which we take pride — bringing back writers like Van Vogt and Doc Smith, developing the Retief series, etc. — but this is the one that we think is going to have the greatest long-range effect.

These new writers — they're the Doc Smiths and Van Vogts of tomorrow. We're proud to say that they've got their start in *If*!

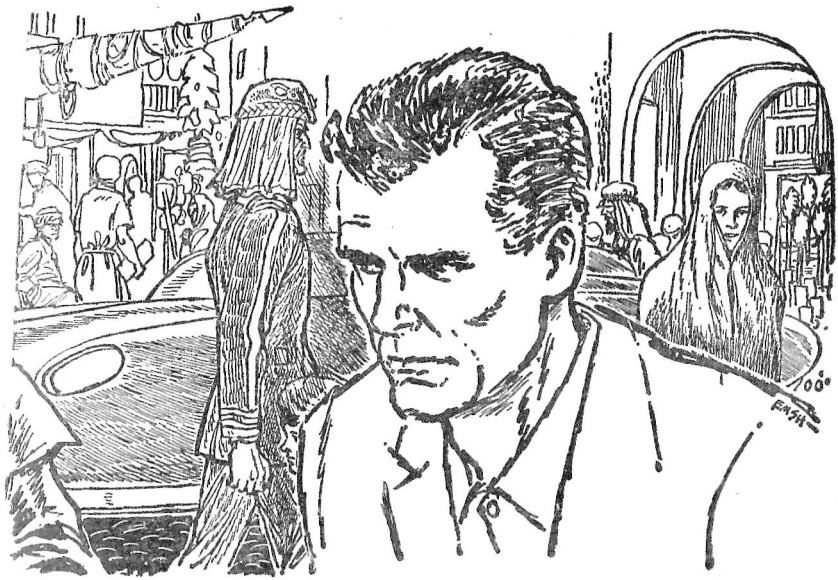
— Frederik Pohl



THE HOUNDS OF HELL

BY KEITH LAUMER

FIRST OF TWO PARTS



Illustrated by EMSH

They came not to destroy the human race but to preserve it, protect it — and then crop it!

It was ten minutes past high noon when I paid off my helicab, ducked under the air blast from the caged high-speed rotors as they whined back to speed, and looked around at the sun-scalded, dust-white, mob-noisy bazaar of the trucial camp-city of Tamboula, Republic of Free Algeria.

Merchants' stalls were a clash of

garish fabrics, the pastels of heaped fruit, the glitter of oriental gold thread and beadwork, the glint of polished Japanese lenses and finely machined Swedish chromalloy, the subtle gleam of hand-rubbed wood, the brittle complexity of Hong Kong plastic — islands in the tide of humanity that elbowed, sauntered, bargained with shrill voices and waving hands or stood idly in patches of black shadow under rigged awnings all across the wide square. I made my way through the press, shouted at by hucksters, solicited by whining beggars and tattooed drabs, jostled by UN Security Police escorting officials of a dozen nations, emerged on a badly paved street of starved royal palms across from a row of fast-decaying buildings as cosmopolitan in style as the costumes around me. Above the cacophony of the mob, keening Arab music shrilled from cave-like openings redolent of goat and curry, vying with the PA-borne blare of Jump and Jitter, reflecting hectic lunch-hours behind the sweat-dewed glass fronts of the Cafe Parisien, Die Valkyrie, the Samovar and the Chicago Snackery.

I crossed the street, dodging the iron-shod wheels of ox-carts, the scorching exhaust of jet-peds, the stinging dust-barrage of cushion cars, snorting one almost palpable stench from my nostrils just in time to catch a new and even riper one. Under a ten-foot glare sign lettered ALHAMBRA ROOM in phony Arabic script, a revolving door thumped monotonously. I caught it, went through into a sudden gloom and silence. I crossed an unswept mosaic floor, went down three steps into an even darker room with a scatter of gaudy cushions and a gleam of gold filligree. I waved away a yard-square red and gold menu proffered by a nicely rounded harem slave in a brief vest and transparent trousers and took a stool at the long bar. A bare-chested three hundred pound eunuch in a sash, cutlass and turban took my order, slid a frosty glass across the polished black marble. Behind a screen of gilded palm fronds, a small combo made reedy music.

I took a long, thirsty draught.

From the corner of my eye I saw a man slide onto the next stool. Casually I angled the ring on my left forefinger. Its specular surface reflected a narrow, tanned face with a bald forehead, peaked white eyebrows, a Kaiser Wilhelm mustache, and a Satanic Van Dyck. A pair of frosty blue eyes met mine for an instant in the tiny mirror.

"What's the get-up for, Felix?" I said softly. "You traveling in hair goods now?"

His eyelids flickered. For Felix Severance, that was equivalent to a yelp of astonishment. Then he gave me the trick wink that was service code for 'The Enemy May Be Listening'.

"Well, well, John Bravais, as I live and breathe," he said in his high-pitched voice. "Fancy meeting you here!"

We went through a ritual of hand pumping and when-did-I-see-you-last's, ordered second drinks, then moved over to a low table. He

slipped a small gadget from a pocket, glanced around to see who was watching, ran it over the light fixture, the salt and pepper shakers, the ashtray, babbling on:

"Martha's fine. Little Herbie had a touch of Chinese Virus, and Charlotte broke a clavicle . . ." He went on point like a hunting dog, picked up a small *tabukuk* in the form of a frog-goddess, dropped it inconspicuously into his heavy briefcase.

"I heard you were going into mink farming," I carried on the charade.

"Decided against it, Johnny," he said, checking the spice tray. "Too damned vicious. Lousy example for little Lennie and Bertha and the others." He finished the check, switched off the patter in midsentence, pocketed the spy-eye detector.

"Okay, Johnny," he said softly. "My little gem-dandy patented nose-counter says we're clean now." He was looking me over with that quick glance of his that could count the pearls on a dowager's neck while he was bowing over her wrist. "Thanks for coming."

"I haven't run to fat yet, if that's what's bothering you," I said. "Now stop sizing me up and tell me what the false beard is all about. I heard you were here under an open cover as a UN medic."

"I'm afraid *Medecine-Major* de Salle attracted some unwelcome attention." He grinned. "It seems I broached Security. I was advised to consider myself under house arrest; a six-footer with a side-arm was assigned to make the point clear. I ditched him in the first dark alley we passed and faded from the scene. A school teacher named Brown rented the de Salle villa after the disappearance — but as Brown, I'm not free to move. That's where you enter the picture."

"Come to the point, Felix. What was so important that I had to come nine thousand miles in thirteen hours to hear? Do you know where I was —"

He held up a hand. "I know; Barnett told me you'd spent seven months in Bolivia building a cover as a disgruntled veteran of Colonna's Irregulars. Sorry and all that."

"Another week and I'd have landed an assignment running a shipment of bootleg surgical spares."

"The frozen kidneys will have to wait for another time." He showed me a Mephistophelean smile. "What I have is far more fun."

"The suspense is unnerving me. Go ahead and spill it."

"All right. Let's begin with the world situation."

"I'd prefer a more cheerful subject — like cancer."

"We may get to that, too, before this one's over." He hitched himself forward, getting down to business now. "For most of the last century, John, the world has been at war. We haven't called it that, of course — nobody's actually used nuclear warheads. These are nothing but 'police action', or 'internal power realignments', like the current rumble here in Algeria: maneuvers with live ammunition. But while the powers are whetting their claws on these tupp'y-ap'ny shooting matches,

they're looking hard for a weapon that would give one state a decisive advantage. In the meantime — stalemate."

"Well," I said, pushing back my chair, "that was mighty interesting, Felix. Thanks for letting me know."

He leaned across the table. There was a merry glint in his eye — like a devil planning a barbecue.

"We've found that weapon, John."

I settled back into my chair. "All right, I'm listening."

"Very well: Super Hellbombs are out. The answer lies in the other direction, of course. A crowd of infantrymen killing each other isn't war. It's good, healthy sport — just the ticket for working off those perfectly natural aggressions that might otherwise cause trouble. But what if a division or two of foot soldiers suddenly became irresistible? Impervious to attack, deadly on the offensive? Your cosy little brushfire war would turn into a rout for the unlucky side. And there would go your power-balance, shot all to Hell."

"How much better can handweapons get? The Norge Combat Imperial weighs six pounds and fires a hundred armor-piercing rounds per second. It's radar-aimed and dead-accurate —"

"I'm talking about something new, John. We call it PAPA. Power Assisted Personal Armament. What it means is — the Invulnerable Man."

I watched Felix swallow half his drink, put the glass down, and sit back with his fingertips together, waiting for my reaction. I nodded casually.

"That's an old idea," I said carelessly. "I used to follow Batman and Robin myself."

"This isn't a Tri-D drama. It's a coordinated development in bioprosthetics, neurosurgery, and myoelectronics. Picture it, John! Microtronics - engineered sense - boosters, wide-spectrum vision, artificially accelerated reflexes, nerve-energy laser-type weapons, all surgically implanted — plus woven-chromalloy body-mail, aligned-crystal metal caps for fingerbones, shins, ribs, and skull, servo-boosted helical titanium fibre reinforced musculature —"

"You left out the fast-change long-johns with the big red S on them. You know, I always wondered why Clark Kent never got himself arrested in an alley for indecent exposure."

"I had a hand in its development myself," Felix went on imperturbably. "And I can tell you it's big. You have no idea."

"But I'd like to have," I cut in. "Especially an idea of what it is I blew a year's work to hear."

He nodded. "I'm just coming to that. For the past six months I've been here in Tamboula, carrying out a study of battle wounds — data we require in the further development of PAPA. And I've turned up a disquieting fact." He poked a finger at me for emphasis. "The number of men reported 'missing in action' amounts to nearly twenty per cent of the total casualties."

"There are always a few reluctant warriors who go over the hill," I started.

"Not in the desert, John. I went

on then to take a look at civilian missing persons figures. The world total is close to the two million mark annually; naturally, this doesn't include data from China and Red India, where one less mouth to feed is noted with relief, if at all. And the Society of American Morticians and Embalmers reports that not enough people are being buried."

"I can tell you where part of them are going," I said. "The black market in human organs —"

"Yes," Felix nodded. "Doubtless that nefarious trade accounts for some of the discrepancy, particularly in burial figures. But suppose, John, that someone were building up a secret force — and outfitting it with an enemy version of PAPA?"

"You can't hide men in those numbers," I said. "The logistical problems alone —"

"I know; but the men are going somewhere. I need to know where."

"I'm afraid I'm beginning to get the picture; you want me to find them."

"You still hold your reserve Army commission, I take it?"

I nodded.

"Good. I have your recall orders in my briefcase. They're perfectly legal; I made them myself. You're a Defense Department observer. I've arranged for you to occupy one of our rooms at the King Feisal."

"I thought CBI assignments were on a voluntary basis."

Felix raised the white eyebrows. "You *are* volunteering, aren't you?"

"I suppose the fact that I'm here answers that one."

"Of course. Now, there's a battle scheduled soon. I haven't been able to find out just when, but I did procure copies of the Utter Top Secret Battle Plans for both the Free Algerians and the Imperial Moroccans. Death penalty for possession, of course." He took a newspaper from an inner pocket — a much-folded copy of the Belfast *Messenger* — and dropped it on the table.

"What am I supposed to do? Stand around on a hilltop with a pair of binoculars and watch where the men disappear to?"

Felix smiled — an expression halfway between a fox and a wolf.

"I have a few gadgets for you to field-test. Find out when that battle's scheduled, and I think you'll be able to take a look at just about whatever you want to."

I took the newspaper. "So I'm back in uniform. I suppose I'd better check in with the UN Monitor General."

"Send a card over. Perhaps it'll pass unnoticed in the daily mail. I want you to hold your official contacts to the minimum. Stay clear of the Embassy, the police, and the press corps. Your other instructions are with your orders. You'll find a tight-band communicator with the rest of the equipment. Keep in touch with me, John — but don't try to contact me at the villa unless it's absolutely necessary."

"You've made some pretty elaborate arrangements. This sort of thing costs money. Who's footing the bill?"

"Let's just say it comes from a special fund." He finished his drink.

"Go on over to the Feisal, get settled, and take a look around. I'll expect a preliminary report in a day or two." He stood, replaced the *tabukuk* on the table, gave me a quick handshake and was gone.

I picked up the newspaper, leafed through. There were sheets of flimsy paper folded between the pages. I caught a glimpse of tiny print, terrain diagrams, the words Utter Top Secret. I folded it and took the last swallow of my gin. It seemed as mild as spring water suddenly. I dropped a five cee note on the table, tucked the paper under my arm and tried to look casual as I went outside to hail a cab.

II

The King Feisal Hotel was a two-hundred story specimen of government-financed construction out of Hollywood by the Arabian Nights, scarred by five years of North African sun and no maintenance. I paid off my helicab in the shade of thirty yards of cracked glass marquee, managed my own bags through a mixed crowd of shiny-suited officials, Algerian and Moroccan officers mingling quite peaceably outside business hours, beggars in colorful costumes featuring wrist-watches and tennis shoes, Arab guides in traditional white lapel-suits, hot-looking tourists, journalists with coffee hangovers, and stolid-faced UN police in short pants with hardwood billies.

I went up the wide steps and past potted yuccas and a uniformed Berber doorman with a bad eye that bored into me like a hot poker. I crossed the lobby to the registration console, slapped the counter and announced my arrival in tones calculated to dispel any appearance of shyness on my part. A splay-footed Congolese bellhop sidled up to listen as I produced the teleprinted confirmation of my reservation Felix had supplied, asked for and received verbal assurances that the water was potable and was directed to a suite on the forty-fifth level.

It was a pleasant enough apartment: a spacious sitting room with old-fashioned aluminum and teak-veneer furniture, a polished composition floor and framed post-neo-surrealist paintings, adjoining a carpeted bedroom with a four-foot tri-D screen, a wide closet and a window opening onto a view of irregular brickwork across a twelve-foot alley. Behind the flowered wallpaper, there were other facilities, unknown to the present management, installed during construction at the insistence of one of the more secret agencies of the now defunct South African Federation.

According to the long, chatty briefing paper Felix had tucked in the newspaper, the CBI had inherited the installation from a former tenant in return for a set of unregistered fingerprints and a get-away stake.

I looked the room over, spotted a spy-eye in a drawer knob, a microphone among the artificial flowers — standard equipment at the Feisal, no doubt. I would have to make a thorough examination of everything

my first order of business — as soon as I had a cold shower.

I turned to the bedroom — and stopped dead. My right hand made a tentative move toward my gun and from the shadows a soft voice said. "Uh-uh."

He came through the sitting room door with a gun in his hand, a middle-sized, neatly dressed man with wispy hair receding from a freckled forehead, quick eyes, an inch of clean, white cuff showing at his wrist.

"I was supposed to be gone when you got here," he said in a quiet voice. "The boys downstairs slipped up."

"Sure," I said. "They slipped up — and I'm dancing tonight with the *Ballet Russe*." I looked at the gun. "What was I supposed to do, fall down and cry when I saw that?"

He pinkened a little around the ears. "It was merely a precaution in the event you panicked." He pocketed the gun, flipped back a lapel to flash some sort of badge. "UN Police," he stated, as though I had asked. "Regulations require all military observers to report to UN Headquarters on arrival — as I'm sure you're aware. You're to come along with me, Mr. Bravais. General Julius wants to interview you personally."

"When did the UN start hiring gun-punks?"

He looked angry. "You can't make me mad, Mr. Bravais."

"I could try," I told him. I took a step toward him. "I could take that iron away for a start."

He stepped back. "Don't do anything foolish! The gun fires real bullets."

"Not today it doesn't. You don't shoot anybody without orders from the boss, do you?" I advanced on him, giving him the kind of grin tri-D villains practice in front of a mirror.

"I could make an exception." His nostrils were white; I'd pushed him about as far as he'd go.

"Oh, to Hell with it," I said in a careless tone, relaxing. "How about a drink?"

He hesitated. "All right, Mr. Bravais. You understand there's nothing personal in this . . ."

"I guess you've got a job to do like the rest of us. You're pretty good with that holding-the-breath bit." I grinned happily, demonstrating that I was the clever guy now, satisfied that I'd shown the opposition I was nobody's dummy. "I planned to see the general this afternoon anyway." I said. We had a short one and left together.

Brigadier General Julius was a vigorous-looking, square-jawed, blond, crew-cut type, with an almost unbelievable smooth complexion which might have earned him the nickname Baby-face, if two fierce, coal-black eyes hadn't dominated the composition. The gray UN uniform he wore had been tailored by an artist. The three rows of service ribbons on his chest indicated that, in spite of his youthful appearance, he had been at the scene of most of the shooting wars of the past twenty years. He was wearing the

old-fashioned Sam Browne belt and engineers' boots that the UN High Command liked to affect, but the hand gun protruding from the holster at his hip wasn't a pearl-handled six-shooter. It was the latest thing in pulse-energy weapons, stark and ugly, meant for murder, not show.

"American Defense Department, eh?" He glanced at the copy of the perfectly legal orders Felix had managed for me, laid them to one side on the bare, highly polished desk top. He looked me over thoughtfully. It was very quiet in the office. Far away, a voice spoke singsong Arabic. A fly buzzed at a window

"I just arrived this afternoon, General," I offered. "I took a room at the King Feisal —"

"Room 4567," Julius said sharply. "You were aboard BWA flight 87. I'm aware of your movements, Mr. Bravais. As UN Monitor General, I make it my business to keep informed of everything that occurs within my command." He had a flat, unpleasant voice, at variance with the wholesome, nationally-advertised look of him. I nodded, looking impressed. I thought about the death penalty attached to the papers in my pocket, and was worried how much more he knew . . .

"By golly, that's remarkable, General," I said cheerfully. He narrowed his eyes at me. I had to be careful not to overdo the act, I reminded myself.

"Makes a man wonder how you can find time for your other duties," I added, letting a small gleam of insolence temper the bland smile I was showing him.

His eyes narrowed even further. I had the feeling that if he squeezed a little harder, they would pop out like watermelon seeds.

"I manage, Mr. Bravais," he said, holding his voice smooth. "Just how long can we expect your visit to last?"

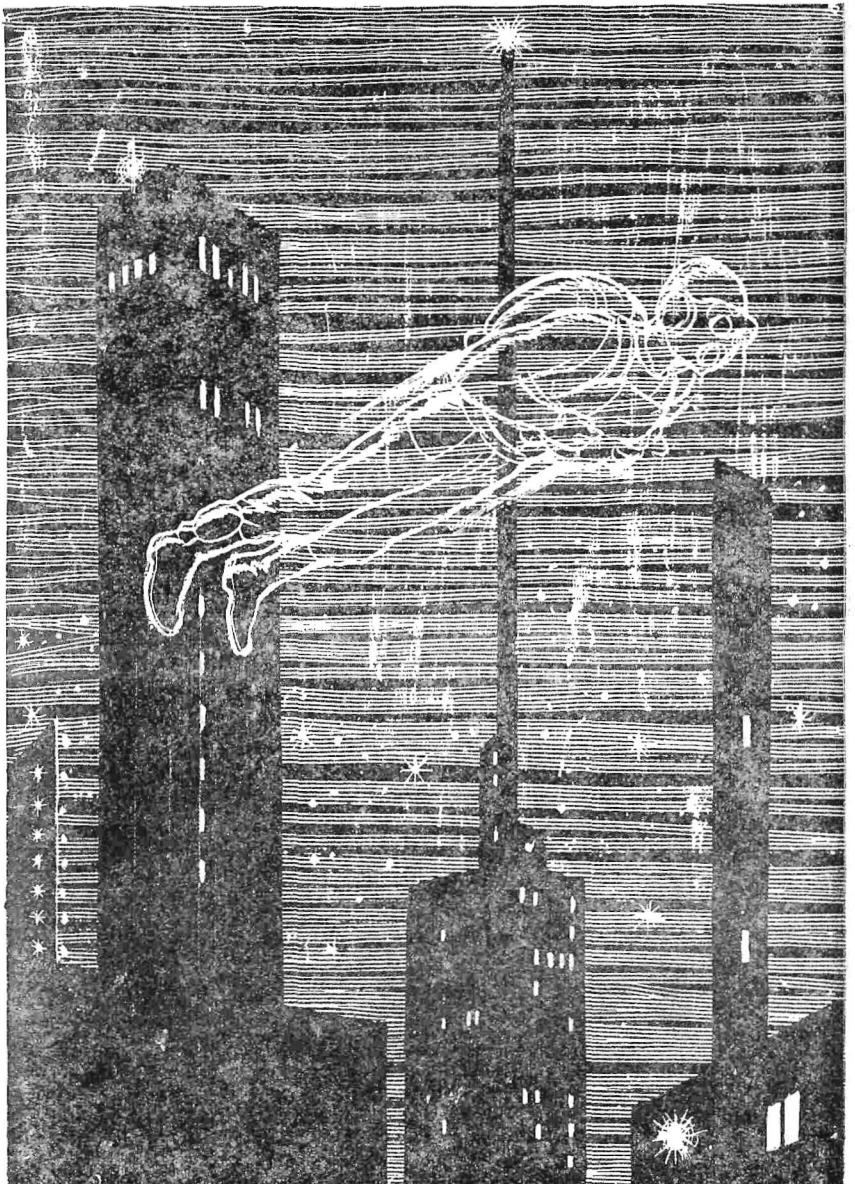
"Oh, I wouldn't call it a visit, General," I said breezily. "I'm here on PCS, an indefinite tour . . ."

"In that case, I hope you find Tamboula to your liking." His tone suggested that he thought it unlikely. "You've come at a fortunate time of the year. The racing is starting next week, and of course our grouse season is in full swing."

"I've heard a great deal about the ecological projects here," I said. "Quite remarkable to see woodlands springing from the desert. But I'm afraid I'll have very little time to devote to sports. My particular interest is close-support infantry tactics."

"Mr. Bravais." Julius raised a hand. "The feeling seems to have gained wide currency in some quarters that conflicts such as the present one are spectacles carried out for the diversion of the curious. Such is far from the case. A political question is being resolved on the battle-field. UN control will, we trust, limit the scope of the hostilities. Undue attention by representatives of major powers is not likely to assist in that effort. I suggest you consult the official history —"

"I believe the principle of the right of observation has been too



well established to require any assertion by me —" I started.

"That is a matter quite outside my cognizance," the general broke in. "My responsibility is to insure that the provisions of the Manhattan Convention are adhered to. You'll understand that the presence of outsiders in the theatre unduly complicates that task." He spoke with a curious, flat intensity, watching me with an unwinking gaze like a gunfighter waiting for the signal to go for his hip.

"General, I'm an accredited offi cial observer; I hope you don't intend to deny me access to my subject?"

"Just what is it you wish to observe?" he snapped.

"Action at close range."

Julius shook his head. "That will not be possible tonight —" he caught himself.

I permitted myself the liberty of a grin.

"Tonight, eh?"

Julius leaned across his desk toward me. He was holding his temper pretty well, but a glint of red fire showed in his eyes now.

"You will not approach closer than five miles to the line of action," he said distinctly. "You will report to my adjutant daily at oh-eight-hundred hours and submit a schedule of your proposed movements. You will observe a nine o'clock curfew."

I got to my feet. "You've made a point of calling me 'mister'; if your intelligence apparatus is as good as you say, you're aware that I handle the rank of Brigadier. I haven't asked for any courtesies, and I damned sure haven't gotten any, but don't bother planning my day for me — and don't send out any more gun-handlers. I'll be on my way now, General. Just consider this a courtesy call; I'll operate on my own from now on."

He came around the desk, strode to the door, wrenched it open, turned to face me.

"General Bravais, I cannot be responsible for your safety if you disregard my orders." His voice had the grate of torn steel now. I had the impression General Julius was used to having his way. I wondered what he'd do if he got just a little madder . . .

"You're not responsible for me in any event, Julius," I snapped. "I suggest you get back to your desk and cook up another chapter of that warmed-over, predigested, salt-free History of yours!"

He was standing rigidly, holding the glass doorknob in a firm clutch. He stiffened as I spoke, then jerked his hand away from the doorknob; his lip was raised, showing a row of even white teeth. We stood, eyes locked.

"I'm not accustomed to insolence in my own headquarters," he grated, letting himself sound mad now.

I glanced down at the doorknob. The clear glass was shot through with a pattern of fractured planes.

"I guess you squeezed it too hard, General," I said. He didn't answer. I went on out along the narrow, gray-painted corridor and out into the hard, white, North African sunshine.

III

I walked half a block at a pace just a trifle faster than the main flow, re-crossed the street, slowed and gave half a dozen grimy windows filled with moth-riddled mats and hammered brass atrocities more attention than they deserved. By the time I reached the end of the long block, I was sure: the little man with the formerly white suit and the pendulous lower lip was following me.

I moved along, doing enough dodging around vegetable carts and portable *Jimii* shrines to make him earn his salary. He was a clumsy technician, and working alone. That meant that it was a routine shadowing job. Julius didn't consider me to be of any special interest.

At an intersection ahead a sidewalk juggler had collected a cluster of spectators. I put on a burst, slid through the fringe of the crowd and around the corner. I stopped, counted to ten slowly, then plunged back the way I had come just in time to collide with my pursuer, coming up fast. We both yelped, staggered, groped for support, disengaged muttering excuses, and separated.

I crossed the street, did an elementary double-back through an arcade and watched him hurry past. Then I hailed a noisy cruising helicab that had probably been condemned and sold by the City of New York Transit Authority a dozen years earlier. I caught a glimpse of him standing on the corner looking around worriedly as we lifted off over the rooftops.

I didn't waste any sympathy on him. He had been carrying a heavy solid-slug pistol under one arm, a light energy gun under the other, and at least three hypo-spray syringes under his left lapel, probably containing assorted poisons to suit any personality he might take dislike to.

I took out his wallet and riffled through it. There were a couple of hundred Algerian Francs, a new two cee American bill, a folded paper containing a white powder, a soiled card imprinted with the name of a firm specializing in unusual photographs, one of the photographs, a week-old horoscope and a scrap of paper with my name scrawled on it.

I didn't know whether it was Julius's handwriting or not, but there was enough of a UN watermark showing to make the question academic.

The cab dropped me in the wide plaza in front of the down-at-heels aluminum and glass Army-Navy-Air Club. I gave the driver the little man's two hundred francs. He accepted it without comment: maybe New York had thrown him in on the deal with the heli.

I had an hour or two to kill now. It would be necessary to stay away from my room long enough to give Julius — or anyone else with an interest in my movements adequate time to look over the evidence planted there and satisfy himself as to my mission in Tamboula. Meanwhile, food was in order.

I dodged the outstretched palm of a legless fellow mounted on an electric wheel board and pushed into the cool, pastel-tinted interior of the

Club, where chattered conversations competed with the background throb of canned music. In the split-level dining room, I found a pleasant table by a sunny window.

I had a surprisingly good lunch, lingered over a *demi-bouteille* of Chateau Lascombe '19, and watched the officers of the opposing armies scheduled to lock themselves in mortal combat an hour after sundown. They shared tables, chatting and laughing over the brandy and cigars, the bright green of the Free Algerian uniform making a handsome contrast with the scarlet of the Imperial Moroccans. It was either a civilized way to wage war, or a hell of an idiotic way for grown men to behave, I wasn't sure which.

I turned my attention from them and devoted the next hour to a careful study of Felix's instructions.

Sunset was beginning to color the sky when I left the club and walked the four blocks to the King Feisal.

Just opposite the marquee, a uniformed chauffeur seemed to be having turbine trouble. He stood, peering under the raised hood with a worried expression. I went past him and a pair of shady businessmen types who started a vigorous conversation as I came up, and fell silent as I went through the door. Inside, a slight, colorless European in a tan suit leaning against the end of the lobby news kiosk gave me a once-over that was as subtle as a left hook.

At the desk, the small, round, Frenchified Arab day manager rolled his eyes toward the far end of the counter. I eased along, made a show of looking through the free tour maps. He sidled over, perspiring heavily.

"M'sieu — I have to tell you — a man was interrupted searching your room this afternoon." His voice was a damp whisper, like something bubbling up through mud. His breath did nothing to lessen the similarity.

"Sure," I said, angling myself so that the nearest operative could catch it without straining. "But how about the Casbah?"

The manager blinked, then got into the spirit of the thing. "I would have held him for the police, but he made a break for it."

"Say, that's fine. I've always wanted to see those dancing girls. Is it true about the raisin in their belly-button?"

"That fellow—" the manager's eyes rolled toward a tall, thin man who was standing nearby leafing through a pictonews that looked as though his lunch had been wrapped in it—"he has been here all the afternoon." His voice dropped to an even more confidential level. "I don't like his looks."

I nodded. "You're right," I said loudly. "And he's not even reading: his lips aren't moving."

The newspaper jerked as though he'd just found his name in the obituary column. I went past him to the elevator, waited until the man in the tan suit had followed me in and gotten settled: then I stepped back off. He hesitated for a moment, then showed me an expression like a man who has just remembered something, hurriedly got off. I promptly got

back on, turned and gave him a nice smile which he failed to return as the doors closed.

Riding up, I did a little rapid thinking.

The clowns in the lobby were a trifle too good to be true. The manager's little contribution was part of the performance, just in case I failed to spot them. Julius wanted to be sure I knew his eye was on me.

I punched a button, got off a floor below my own, went along to the fire-stairs. I pushed through the glass door, went up past a landing littered with used ampoules and the violet-tinted butts of dope-sticks, came out in the shadows at the end of a poorly lighted corridor.

My room was halfway along on the left. I went to it, put the microphone I wore disguised as a finger-ring against the door, placed my ear against the ring. I heard the clack of water dripping in the bathroom, the hollow hum of the ventilator, sounds from beyond the windows, nothing else.

I keyed the door quietly and went in: the room was empty, silent, sad in the early evening light. The key to my briefcase lay where I had left it. I shone my U-V penlight on it and examined the words: the fluorescent film with which I had coated the web was scored. That meant that by now Julius was scanning copies of a number of carefully prepared letters and notes establishing my anti-UN, anti-Julius sentiment. It was a risky secondary cover to use with a man as sensitive of personal status as the general, but Felix had decided on it after a close study of his dossier. Give a man what he expects to find, and he's satisfied. At least that was the theory.

For half an hour I puttered, putting away shirts, arranging papers, mixing another drink. At the end of that time I had completed my inspection and was satisfied nothing new had been installed in the suite since I had seen it a few hours earlier. The IR eye still peered at me from the center knob on the chest of drawers, and the pin head microphone in the plastic flower arrangement was still in place. I hung a soiled undershirt over the former. The audio pick-up didn't bother me. I'd just make it a point to move quietly.

It was almost dark now—time to be going. I made a few final noises in the bathroom with running water and clattering toilet articles; then I flipped off the lights, made the bed creak as I stretched out on it, then rose carefully, went to the closet, slid inside, and soundlessly shut the door.

Following Felix's written instructions, I unscrewed the old-fashioned fluorescent tube from the ceiling fixture, pressed the switch concealed in the socket; the hatch in the end wall rolled smoothly back. I stepped through, closed it behind me, went along a narrow passage that ended in an iron ladder leading up. At the top I cracked my head in the dark, felt for the latch, lifted the panel and pulled myself up into the stifling heat of the dark, cramped room Severance had fitted out as my forward command post. It wasn't much

to look at—a seven by twelve foot space, low-ceilinged, blank walled, with a grimy double hung window at one end giving a view of irregular black roof tops and, far away, tall palms like giant dandelions against a sky of luminous deep blue that was growing deeper.

I closed the shutters and switched on the ceiling light, the sudden brightness hurting my eyes.

A steel locker against the wall opened to the combination Severance had given me. If I had made an error, a magnesium flare would have reduced the contents to white-hot ash. I pulled the door wide, took out a limp, fish-scale textured coverall with heavy fittings moulded into the fabric at the small of the back and at the ankles. I pulled off my jacket, struggled into the garment: it was called an optical-effect suit, and it was one of the CBI's best-kept secrets. It had the unusual property of absorbing some wavelengths of light and re-emitting them in the infrared, reflecting others in controlled patterns. It was auto-tuned over the entire visible spectrum, and was capable of duplicating any background pattern short of a clan Ginsberg tartan. I couldn't walk down a crowded avenue in it without causing a few puzzled stares, but in any less crowded setting, it was as close an approximation of a cloak of invisibility as science had come up with. It was the cover Lab's newest toy, and was worth a hundred thousand cees in small, unmarked bills in any of the secret market-places of the world. Felix had gone all the way in stealing it for me.

The second item I would need for the evening's adventure was a compact apparatus the size and shape of an old-style cavalry canteen, fitted with high-velocity gas jets and heavy clips which locked to matching fittings on the suit. I lifted it—it was surprisingly heavy—and clamped it in place against my chest. Broad woven wire straps stitched into the suit took up the weight. I tried the control—a two-inch knob at the center of the unit.

Immediately I felt the slightly nauseous sensation of free-fall. The surface of the suit cracked softly as static charges built and neutralized themselves against the field-interface. Then my toes were reaching for the floor. My focussed-phase field gravity settled over me again like a lead cape. I checked the deep thigh pockets of the suit; there was a pair of three-ounce, hundred-power binocular-goggles, a spring-steel sheath knife, a command-monitor communicator tuneable to the frequencies of both combatants as well as to the special band available only to Felix. I pressed the send-button, got no reply. Felix was out.

In a buttoned-down pocket, I found a 2 mm needler, smaller and lighter than the standard Navy model I normally carried. Its darts were charged with a newly developed, wide-spectrum venom guaranteed to kill a charging elephant within a microsecond of contact. I tucked it back in its fitted holster with the same respect a snake-handler gives a krait.

I was hot in the suit. Sweat was already beginning to trickle down my back. I switched off the lights, open-

ed the shutters and the window, crawled through and found a precarious foothold on a ledge.

The air was cooler here. I took a couple of deep breaths to steady my nerves, carefully not looking down the sheer five-hundred-foot face of the building. I groped the communicator from my pocket, made another try to raise Felix: still nothing. I would have to move without the reassurance of knowing that someone was available to record my last words.

I twisted the lift control.

At once the close, airless pressure of the field shut away the faint breeze. Tiny blue sparks arced to the wall at my back. I was lifting now, feeling the secure pressure against my feet drifting away. I pushed clear, twisting myself to a semi-horizontal chest-down position, and waved my arms, striving for equilibrium, fighting against the feeling that in another instant I would plummet to the pavement. It was a long way down, and although my intellect told me my flying carpet would support up to a half ton of dead weight, my emotions told me I was a foolish and extremely fragile man, a long way from his native element.

I touched the jet control lever, and at the forward surge, my vertigo left me. Suddenly I was a swift, soundless bird, sweeping through the wide night sky on mighty pinions—

A dark shape loomed in front of me.

I gave the fieldstrength knob a convulsive twist, cleared an unlighted roof antenna by a foot. From now on, I told myself, it would be a good idea to do my pinion-sweeping with a little more caution. I slowed my forward motion and angled steeply up.

The lights were dwindling away below now, the glitter of *l'Avenue des-Nations* the hard shine from the windows of hotels and office buildings. The sounds that floated up to me were dull, muted by the field. At an estimated five hundred feet altitude, I took a bearing on the blue beacon atop the control tower at Hammarskold Field, a mile east of the town, opened my jets to full bore and headed for the battlefield.

IV

I hung three hundred feet above the sparsely wooded hill top where the blue-clad Moroccans had set up their forward field HQ, jiggling my position controls to counter brisk breeze and mentally calculating the odds against my being bagged by a wild shot. With my goggles tuned to low mag and IR filter, I was able to make out a cluster of officers around a chart table, three recon cars, parked behind the crest of the hill with their drivers beside them, and a line of dug-in riflemen on the forward slope. Five miles to the north, the pale blue flashes of the Algerians' opening bombardment winked against the horizon.

The battle's objective was a bombed-out oasis occupying the center of the shallow valley ringed by the low hills over one of which I now hovered.

According to Felix's Utter Top Secret battle plan, the Algerians would

thrust their right forward in a feint to the Moroccan left, while quickly bringing up the bulk of their light armor behind the screen of the hills on the enemy right. The Moroccan strategy was to sit tight in defensive entrenchments until the enemy intention became clear. Then they would launch a drive straight down the valley, with a second column poised to take the Algerians in the flank as soon as they struck from cover at the Moroccan flank. It seemed like a nice, conventional exercise, and I felt sure the boys would enjoy it a lot.

The Algerian ballistic shells were making vivid puffs high above the thumps of sound as the Moroccan anti-ballistic artillery made their interceptions. At each flash the details of the battlefield below blinked into momentary clarity. It was an almost steady flickering, like heat lightning on a summer evening.

I turned up my binocular magnification, scanned the distant Algerian massing area for signs of their main column moving out. They were a minute or two ahead of schedule. The churn of dust was just beginning to rise above the lead element: then anti-dust equipment went into operation and the cloud dissipated. Now I could pick out the tiny pinpricks of running lights, coming swiftly around in the shelter of the distant hills to form the arrowhead of the Algerian attack.

I lifted myself another hundred feet, jetted toward their route of advance. They were coming up fast, risking accidents in the dark to beat the best time the Moroccans would have estimated was possible. I arrived over the cut through which they would turn to make their dash for the oasis just as the lead tank rounded into it, a massive Bolo Mark II, running without lights. The Moroccans, caught in the trap of overconfidence in their intelligence analysis, still showed no signs of recognizing the danger. The first squad of four Algerian combat units was through the pass now, gunning out into the open. The bombardment went on, building to a climax, lulling the Moroccans into keeping their heads down, secure in the assumption that the enemy would hold his armor well back from the rain of devastation showering down from above.

Belatedly now, a volley of flares went up from the Moroccan side: the tanks had been spotted.

Abruptly the valley burned dead white under a glare like six small suns. Each racing tank was the base of a cluster of long, bounding shadows of absolute black. I dropped lower, watched the second and third elements follow the lead units through the pass. The fourth unit of the last squad, lagging far behind, slowed and came to a stop. A minute passed. Then he started up and moved slowly ahead by passing the designated route of march.

Out on the plain, Moroccan tanks were roaring out from their positions two miles to my left, guns stabbing across the plain, both columns together in a hammer-blow at the Algerian surprise thrust. Below me, the tank trundled heavily away from the

scene of action, veering to the left now, moving into broken ground.

The approved Battle Plan had included no detachment operating independently on the Algerian left. If the wandering Bolo were detected by the monitors — as it must inevitably be within minutes — the battle was forfeit, the fury and destruction all for nothing. Something was up . . .

I ignored the battle shaping up on the plain, dropped to a hundred feet, followed the tank as it lumbered down a shale-littered slope into deep shadow.

I moved carefully between towering walls of shattered rock, fifty feet above the floor of the dry wadi along which the Bolo moved in a sluggish crawl, a finger of light from its turret probing uncertainly ahead as though exploring new and dangerous territory. It negotiated an awkward turn, halted. I saw a faint gleam as its hatch cycled: then a silhouetted man clambered out, dropped to the ground: the tank sat with turbines idling, its searchlight fixed aimlessly on a patch of bare rock, like the gaze of a dead man. I turned up the sensitivity of my goggles, tried to penetrate the darkness. I couldn't see the driver. I moved closer.

Something massive and dark was coming up the ravine toward me, hovering about two yards above the ground.

It was a flattish shape, roughly oval, dull-colored, casting a faint blue-green glow against the rocky walls as it maneuvered gently around a projecting buttress, settled in close to the Bolo. For a moment nothing happened. The idling engine of the tank was a soft growl against utter stillness, punctuated by the sounds of distant battle.

Then there was a heavy thud. The sound reminded me of a steer I had seen poleaxed once in a marketplace in Havana.

I worked my binocular controls, tuning well over into the IR. The scene before me took on a faint, eerie glow. I maneuvered to the right, made out an oblong patch of lesser blackness against the dark ground.

Abruptly shadows were sliding up the rock wall. The angry snarl of an engine sounded from behind me.

I lifted myself quickly, moved back against the ravine face. The armored shape of a late model command car careened into view, an opaque caterpillar of dust boiling up behind it, the blue-white lance of its canyon floor, picking up the dusty flank of the squatting giant, reflecting from the polished rim of its open hatch. The car slowed and stopped directly below me, hovering on its air-cushion, the blue-black muzzles of its twin infinite repeaters poking through the armorglass canopy, centered on the tank.

A minute passed. Faint, flickering light stuttered against the sky in the direction of the battle. The car below sank and came to rest slightly canted on the boulder-strewn ground. Its engines died. Metal clanked as its door slid open.

A man in the dull green of the Algerian field uniform stepped out, a pistol in his hand. He shouted in

Arabic. There was no reply. He walked forward into the settling dust in the alley of light from the car's headlamp, his shadow stalking ahead. I saw the glint of the palm-leaf insignia on his shoulder. A major, probably the squadron commander.

He stopped, seemed to totter for a moment, then fell stiffly forward, hit hard on his face, lay without moving.

I hung where I was, absolutely still, waiting.

From the darkness between the stalled tanks, a creature came into view, padding silently on broad, dead white paws like ghastly caricatures of human hands. Stiff, coarse hair bristled on the lean, six-foot body, growing low on the forehead of a naked face like a fanged and snouted skull. A pattern of straps crisscrossed the razor back. Light winked from metal fittings on the harness.

It came up to the man who lay face down with his feet toward me, fifty feet below, settled itself on its haunches, fumbled with its obscenely human hands in a pouch at its side. I caught a glint of light from polished instruments: then it crouched over the man, set to work.

I heard a grating sound, realized that I had been grinding my teeth together in a rictus to shock. Cold sweat trickled down the side of my neck under the suit.

Down below, the creature worked busily, its gaunt, narrow-shouldered body screening its task. It shifted position, presenting its back now, the long curve of its horselike neck.

I had to force my hand to move. I slipped the dart gun from its fitted pocket, flipped off the safety. The beast labored on, absorbed in its victim: quick motions of its elbows reflected its deft manipulations. A feeling of nightmarish unreality seemed to hang over the scene: the wink and rumble of artillery beyond the hills, the knifelike sharpness of the shadows thrown by the light of the command car, the patient whine of the idling engine, the intent, demonic figure. I took careful aim just below a triangular clasp securing two straps that crossed the arched back, and fired.

The creature twitched a patch of hide impatiently, went on with its work. I aimed again, then lowered the gun without firing a second time. If one jolt of Felix's wide-spectrum venom had no effect, two wouldn't help.

I flattened myself in the pocket of shadow against the cliff-face, watched as the alien rose to a grotesque two-legged stance, pranced away on its rear hands toward the body of a driver, lying crumpled by the nearest Bolo. The major lay on his back now: his cap nearby, his gun a yard beyond it. There was blood on his face and on the dusty stone under him. I estimated the distance to the command car, gauging the possibility of reaching it and training the forward battery on the monstrosity was now leaning over the second man.

There was a sudden, sharp yelp.

The alien darted a few steps, collided glancingly with the massive skirt of the Bolo, veered toward me.

I caught a glimpse of a gaping mouth, a ragged, black tongue, teeth like needles of yellow bone. The stricken demon bit at its rear quarters, running a tight circle like a dog chasing its tail, yelping sharply: then it was down, kicking, scrabbling with its pale, flat hands, raising a roil of dust. Then it stiffened and lay still.

I dropped quickly to the ground and switched off the lift-field. I caught the reek of exhaust fumes, the hot-stone odor of the desert, a sharp, sour smell that I knew emanated from the dead creature. Sounds were louder now: the distant firing took on a sharp and immediate quality. The keening turbine was like a wail of abandoned hope.

I went to the body of the major, bent over it. The face was slack, the eyelids unnaturally sunken. There was a clean wound across the forehead at the hairline: the hair was matted with glistening blood. I turned him on his face and felt the blood drain from my own.

The top of his skull had been cut free. It hung in place on a hinge of scalp. Inside the glistening red-black cavity was nothing.

I leaned closer. A deep incision gaped from the base of the skull down under the collar. Very little blood had leaked from it: the heart had stopped before the wound was made.

The alien lay fifteen feet away. I looked across at it, my breathing coming fast and shallow now, hissing between teeth that were bared in a snarl. Every instinct I owned was telling me to put space between myself and the demonic creature that had walked like a beast but had used its hands like a man. I heard of hackles rising: now I felt them. I gripped the gun tighter as I crossed the last few feet, stood lookng down at the sparse, rumpled coat through which dull gray-pink skin showed. I prodded the body with a boot: it was stiff, inert, abnormally heavy. I pushed harder, rolled it over. At close range, the face was yellowish white, dry, porous-textured. The hands were outflung, palms up, bloody from the trepanning of the major: near one lay a bulging, gallon-sized sack, opaque with dust. I stepped around to it, knelt and wiped a finger across the bulge on the surface.

It was yielding and warm to the touch. Pinkish fluid wobbled under the taut membrane. I brushed away more dust. Now I could see a pink, jellylike mass suspended in the liquid. It had a furrowed surface, like sun-baked mud, and from its underside a thick, curled stem hung down, neatly snipped off at the three-inch mark. I prodded the bag: the mass stirred: a snow-white sphere just smaller than a golf ball wavered into view, turning to show me a ring of amber brown with a black center dot.

The beast had been a skilled surgeon. In just under five minutes it had removed the major's brain, complete with eyeballs.

V

The battle sounds were slackening now. It wouldn't be long before another vehicle came along the

ravine in search of the missing Bolo and the officer who had followed it. I stood, feeling my heart pound as though I had run a mile, fighting down the sickish feeling that knotted my stomach. I didn't have much time and there were things to be done—now. I could have a nervous collapse later — after I had played this nightmare scene out to its end.

The tankman, lying awkwardly beside his machine, was dead, already cooling to the touch. I went back to the fallen demon, went through the pouches attached to the creature's harness, found a case fitted with scalpels, forceps, a tiny saber saw. There was a supply of plastic containers and a miniature apparatus with attached tubing — probably a pump-and-filter combination for drawing off plasma. There was another container, packed with ampoules of a design I had seen recently — on the landing in my hotel.

The thought was like a cold finger on my spine.

The last pouch yielded a scrap of smooth, tough paper, imprinted with lines of pot-hooks of a sort I had never seen before. I tucked it away in my knee-pocket, got to my feet. The paper was better than nothing as evidence that I hadn't been the dreamer of a particularly horrible nightmare. But I needed something that would communicate some of the shock that had turned my heart to ice. Felix need to see that skull-white face . . .

The ravine was still quiet: maybe I had time.

I ran to the car, started it up, brought it forward, halted it beside the dead man. I jumped down lifted the limp, still warm body into the cockpit. I remounted, maneuvered up beside the dead alien. I opened the cargo compartment at the rear of the car, then gritted my teeth and grasped the creature's hind wrists. Through the gloved hands of the suit, the bristles were as stiff as scrub-brushes. I dragged the corpse to the car, used the power of the suit to lift the three-hundred-pound weight, tumbled it inside.

I went back for the sack containing the brain, put it on the seat beside the dead major, then climbed in and headed back up the ravine.

As I reached the first turn, a glare of light projected the car's moving shadow on the rock wall ahead. I turned, saw a brilliant flare fountain from the open hatch of the Bolo.

I gunned the car, felt a tremor run through the rock an instant before I heard the blast. Small stones rained down, bounded off the canopy and hood. Either the tank had been mined for automatic destruction if abandoned, or the creature I had killed had set a time-charge to eliminate the traces of his clandestine visit. I tramped on the throttle, holding my thoughts rigidly on my driving. I wasn't ready yet to think about the implications of what I had seen. I could feel the full shock of it, lurking in the wings, waiting to jump out and send me screaming for a policeman—but that would have to wait. Now, like a thief fleeing a broached vault with an unexpectedly rich haul, I was concerned only with

getting clear with my prize while there was still time.

Because there was no doubt that in a little while — when whoever, or whatever was awaiting the return of the brain-thief realized that something was awry — a variety of hell would break loose that would make ordinary death and destruction seem by comparison as mild and wholesome as a Spring formal.

I skirted the hills where flood lights were glaring now in the Moroccan camp: the cease-fire had apparently been sounded: UN monitors would be moving out on the field, tallying casualties, looking for evidence of illegal weapons, checking out complaints by both sides of Battle Plan violations. I hoped that in the general excitement the absence of the command car would go unnoticed for now. The road into Tamboula was a wide, well-patrolled highway: I avoided it, took a route across a wasteland of stunted mesquite, skirted a trenched and irrigated field, orderly in the light of the new-risen moon, stopped by a clump of trees fifty yards from Felix's villa, a former farmhouse, converted by the CBI into an armored fortress capable of withstanding a siege that would have leveled Stalingrad. The windows were dark. I took out my communicator, pressed the red button which turned it to Felix's special equipment.

"Wolfhound here, Talisman. Anybody home?"

There was no reply. I tried again: nothing. It was too early to start worrying, but I started anyway.

There were sounds on the road behind me now. The troops—those who had survived—tired and happy after their evening's fun, were starting back to their billets in town. Even if my borrowed car hadn't been missed yet, the sight of it would inspire laggard memories. I couldn't stay here.

General Julius had been less than enthusiastic about my presence in Tamboula: my arrival at his headquarters in a stolen Algerian command car would hardly be calculated to soothe his irritation. But even a stuffed shirt of a political appointee would have a difficult time shrugging off what I had to show him. And I had to share the knowledge of my cargo with someone—now. I gunned the car around the side of the house, out across a field of cabbages, mounted the raised highway and barreled for the city at flank speed.

I parked the car beside a gleaming Monojag in the well-lighted but deserted ten-car garage under UN headquarters, pulled off the suit and harness, took the lift to the third floor, walked through deserted offices to General Julius' door, went in without knocking. He was there, sitting at his desk, square-shouldered and grim-jawed, like a cornered police chief promising the press an arrest at any moment. He didn't move as I came up to his desk.

"I'm glad I caught you, General," I said. "Something's happened that you should know about."

He was a long time reacting to my presence—as though he were wool-gathering a long way off. His

eyes seemed to focus on me slowly. His mouth opened, then closed hard.

"Yes?" he snapped. "What do you want?"

"Have you had a report of a missing Bolo and a command car?"

His dead-black eyes narrowed. I had his attention now. The room seemed very still: there was tension in the air, as though many ears were listening for what I might say next. "Missing combat units?" Julius said expressionlessly. "Go on."

"An Algerian Mark II wandered off the beaten path. It wound up in a ravine about three miles south of the action."

Julius stared at me. "You observed this?" His fingers squeaked on the desk top.

"That's right. The car followed the Bolo in. A major was driving it."

"You imply that this vehicle maneuvered in violation of the Battle Plan?" His tone was smooth now — like the edge of an axe.

"They left the field of action and went south. Let's not play footsie about the Battle Plan. Sure I had a copy. Grow up, General. I'm not a reporter for a family magazine. I'm here on business. Part of my business is to know what's going on."

"My order to you—"

"Don't ride a busted bluff down in flames, General. How about that Bolo?"

Julius leaned forward. "A ravine, south of the battle ground?"

"That's right. There's not much left of it. It blew."

"How close were you?"

"Close enough."

"And the car?"

"It's downstairs, in your garage."

I let that one ride. Julius cocked his head, as though listening to advice from unhear voices.

"Where did you find the vehicle?"

"Where the driver left it."

"And you took it?"

"Look, General, I didn't come here to talk about traffic violations. I saw something out there—"

"You dared to defy me?" Julius' classically chiseled upper lip was writhing back in a snarl: behind his eyes red fires burned. It seemed to be taking all his will power not to bite me. "You entered the battle zone—"

"Forget that!" I cut him off. "There's some kind of vehicle sitting out there near what's left of the Bolo. The blast probably caught it, but there should be enough left to work on. I saw what got out of it. It wasn't human. It killed the driver and the major." I stopped then, belatedly. What I was saying sounded wild, even to me. "Come with me, General," I said. "I'll show you."

Abruptly, he laughed—a harsh, tinny sound.

"I see. It's a joke," he stated. He got to his feet. "Just one moment. I have an important call to make." I stared after him as he strode across the room, disappeared into an inner room.

There was a call-screen beside his desk. I went to it, cautiously eased the conference switch to the 'on' position. There was a soft hum, nothing more. A pad lay on top of the cabinet, marks scribbled on it. I half turned away—

I stood looking down at the paper,

my heart starting to thump again under my ribs like a caged bird. The lines on the paper were not mere random jottings. They were letters, words: words in an alien script.

I had seen similar pot hooks less than an hour before—on the paper I had taken from the pocket of the demon.

At that moment Julius strode back into the room, his face fixed in a smile as authentic as the gold medals on a bottle of vermouth.

"Now, General Bravais," he said in a tone of forced geniality, "why don't you and I sit down and have a quiet drink together?"

I shook my head. It was time for me to stop talking and start thinking — something I hadn't done much of since the four-handed horror had stalked out of the shadows and into my world-picture. I had come here, babbling out my story, wanting someone to share the shattering thing I had seen. But my choice of confidants had been as poor as the judgment I had been showing ever since I had left the ravine. I had channeled my panic into the outward semblance of sober, reasonable action—but it had been panic nonetheless.

Julius had his office booze cabinet open now. Shelves with ice-buckets, tongs, bottles, glasses deployed themselves at the touch of a button.

"What about a Scotch, General?" He suggested. "Bourbon? Soy?"

"I'd better be on my way, General," I said. I moved toward the door. "Perhaps I got a little too excited. Maybe I was seeing things." My hand was feeling for the dart gun—until I realized, with a pang of unpleasant excitement, that I had left it in the car with the lift-suit.

"Of course! You're probably famished. I'll just order up a bite. I haven't eaten myself."

"No, thanks, General. I'm pretty tired. I'll check in at my hotel and . . ." My voice trailed off foolishly. I — and Felix — had gone to considerable trouble to leave the public with the impression that I was tucked safely away in my room. Now I was here, putting Julius on notice that while his watchdogs curled happily on my doorstep, I had been out on the town — and the super-secret equipment Felix had lent me was lying unattended in the car.

"I have quarters right here in the building, General Bravais," Julius bored on. "No need to go back to your rooms. Just make yourself comfortable here."

I held up a hand and fixed a silly smile in place. It came naturally. I felt as phony as a man who reaches for his wallet after a big dinner and feels nothing but his hipbone.

"I have a couple of appointments this evening," I gushed, "and some papers I want to go over. And I need to get my notes in shape." I had the door open now. "What about first thing in the morning?"

Julius was coming toward me, with an expression on his face that human features had never been shaped for. A good soldier knows when he's up against something too big to handle—when it's time to run.

I slammed the door on the square tight-lipped face, sprinted for the lift, then bypassed it, plunged for the stairs.

Behind me there was a heavy crash and the pound of feet. I skidded through the scattered butts on the landing, leaped down five steps at a time. I could hear Julius above, not getting any closer, but not losing any ground either. As I ran, I tried to picture the layout of the garage. The lift door had been in the center of the wall, with another door to its left. The car was parked fifteen feet from it. It would be to my left as I emerged.

I needed more time. There was a trick for getting down stairs quickly —if my ankles could take it.

I whirled around the second landing, half-turned to the left, braced my feet, the left higher than the right, and jumped. My feet struck at an angle, skidded: I shot down as though I were on a ski slope, slammed the next landing, took a quick step, leaped again.

The door to the garage was in front of me now. I wrenched it open, skidded through, slammed it. There was a heavy thumb latch. I flipped it, heard the solid *snick* as it seated.

I dashed for the car, leaped the side.

A thunderous blow struck the heavy metal-clad fire door behind me.

I scrambled into the seat, kicked the starter, saw dust whirl from beneath the car. There was a second clangorous shock against the armored door. I twisted, saw it jump — then, unbelievingly, bulge —

The metal tore with a screech. A hand groped through the jagged opening, found the latch, plucked it from the door as though it were made of wet paper.

The car was up on its air cushion now; I backed it as the door swung wide. Julius came through, ran straight for me.

I wrenched the wheel over, gunned the twin turbines; the car leaped forward, caught Julius square across the chest with a shock as though I had hit a hundred-year oak, carried him backward. I saw furrows appear in the chromalloy hood as his fingers clawed—

Then the car thundered against the masonry wall and rebounded in a rain of falling bricks.

Through the dust, I saw Julius's arm come up, strike down at the crumpled metal before him with a shock that I felt through the frame. There was a howl of metal in agony—then a deafening rattle as the turbines chattered to a halt. The car dropped with a bone-bending jar. I stumbled out, half-dazed, stood staring at General Julius' dust-covered head and shoulders pinned between the ruined car and the wall, one arm outflung, the other plunged through metal into the heart of the engine.

I became aware of voices. I turned and saw a huddle of locals, one or two pale, wide-eyed European faces at the open garage doors.

Like a man in a daze I walked around the rear of the wrecked car, pulled open the door of the Monojag

parked beside it, transferred the suit and life-harness to the other car. I took the sheath knife from the suit pocket, went to the cargo compartment of the Turbocad, threw open the lid. A wave of an unbelievable stench come from the body of the dead thing inside. I gritted my teeth, sawed at the skin of the long, lean neck. It was like hacking at an oak root. I saw a pointed ear, almost grasped it, worked at it with the keen blade. Brownish fluid seeped out as I worried through it. Behind me, the curious spectators were shouting questions back and forth now. With a savage slash, I freed the ear, jammed it in a pocket, then whirled to the Monojag, jumped in, started up. I backed, wheeled out, and away down the street.

In the mirror, I saw the crowd start cautiously forward.

Driving aimlessly along dark streets, I tried again and failed again to raise Felix on my communicator. I switched on the radio, caught a throaty male contralto muttering a song of strange perversions. On another channel, wild brass instruments squealed a hybrid syncopated *alhaza*. On a third a voice gushing with synthetic excitement reported the latest evidence of an imminent cold-war thaw in the form of a remark made at a reception by the wife of an Albanian diplomat in the hearing of the Chinese Charge to the effect that only French wine would be served at a coming dinner in honor of the birthday of the Cuban President.

The next item was about a madman who had murdered an Algerian officer. The victim's headless body had been found in a stolen military vehicle which had been wrecked and abandoned near UN headquarters.

I looked at my watch, Julius's heirs were fast workers. It had been exactly sixteen minutes since I had left his body pinned under the wreckage of the command car.

VI

I parked the Turbocad three blocks from the King Feisal, took five minutes to don the OE suit, complete with lift-harness, then drove slowly along toward the hotel. The news bulletin had said nothing about the car I was now in; it had also failed to mention the dead general, the body of the alien or the bagged brain. It wasn't mere sloppy reporting. The version of the story that was being released had been concocted hurriedly, but carefully. I could expect that other measures would have been taken, with equal care. It was not time for me to allow myself the luxury of errors in strategy—but there were things I needed in my secret hideaway.

The hotel was just ahead now. I slowly edged toward the curb.

To an observer, the car would appear to be empty, a remoted pickup of the type assigned to VIP's who objected to sharing transportation with anything as unreliable as a human driver. A doorman in an ornate Zouave uniform came forward, glanced in the car as it came to a stop; he looked around sharply, turned and took three steps to a

call-screen, talked tersely into it. Moments later, two hard-eyed men in unornamented dark coveralls strode from the hotel entry, fanned out to approach the car from two sides.

I had seen enough to get the general idea.

I nudged the car into motion, steering between the two wide-shouldered, lean-hipped trouble boys. One whipped out a three-inch black disk —a police control-override. A red light blinked on the dash. The car faltered as the external command came to brake.

I gunned it hard, felt the accelerator jam. The nearer man was swinging alongside now, reaching for the door. An unfamiliar lever caught my eye, mounted to the left of the cruise control knob; I hit it, felt the accelerator go to the floor. There was a sharp tug, a rending of metal, and the car leaped ahead. In the mirror I saw one of the two men down, skidding to the curb. The other stood, feet apart, bringing a hand gun to bear—

I cut the wheel and howled into a cross street as solid slugs sang off the armored bubble next to my ear. Ahead, a startled man in a white turban leaped from my path. Late drinkers at a lone lighted sidewalk cafe stared as I shot past. I got the needler out, put it on the seat beside me. I half-expected to see a roadblock pop up ahead. If it did, I would hit it wide-open.

I had no intention of stopping until I had put a healthy distance between myself and the man I had seen in the mirror, scrambling to his feet, still holding in his hand the door handle he had torn from the car.

I parked the all-too-identifiable car a block farther along, on a dark side street; I palmed the gun, slid out, stood in the darkness under a royal palm with a trunk like gray cement, giving my instincts a chance to softly whisper warnings in my ears.

It was very still here. Far away, I heard a worn turbine coming closer, then going away. The moon was up now, an icy blue-white disk glaring in a pale night sky, casting shadows like the memory of a noonday, long ago.

My instincts were as silent as everything else. Maybe the beating I'd been giving them all evening had given them the impression I didn't need them any more. Maybe they were right.

I hadn't slowed down yet long enough to let what I had seen filter through the fine sieve of my intellect: I had been playing it by ear from moment to moment. Maybe that was the best technique, when half of what you saw was unbelievable and the other half was impossible.

I tried to raise Felix again; no answer.

He had warned me to stay clear of police stations. After my reception at UN HQ it was easy advice to take. He had also told me to stay clear of his villa—except in emergencies.

That meant now. I activated the left belt, rose quickly and headed west.

No light showed in the villa as I came in on it from the east. I used my nearly depleted jets to brake to a stop against the flow of the river of dark night air and hovered, looking down on the moonlit rooftop of Algerian tile, the neat garden, the silvery fields stretching away to the desert. I took the communicator from the suit pocket, tried again to raise Felix.

A sharp vibration answered my signal. I brought the device up close to my face.

"Felix!" I almost shouted, my words loud in my ears inside the muffling field. "Where the hell have you been? —" I broke off, suddenly wary.

"John, old boy. Where are you? There's been the devil to pay!" It was Felix's familiar voice—but I had had a number of expensive lessons in caution since sundown.

"Where are you, Felix?"

"I'm at the house: just got in. I tried to check with you at the hotel, but little men with beady eyes seemed to be peering at me from every keyhole. I gave it up and came here.

"Where've you been these last hours? Something's going on in the town. Nothing to do with you, I hope!"

"I tried to call you," I countered. "Where were you?"

"Yes—I felt the damned thing buzzing in my pocket. As it happened, it wasn't practical for me to speak just then. When I tried you, I got no reply."

"I've been busy. I guess I missed your buzz."

There was a moment's silence. "So you *were* mixed up in whatever it is that's got them running about like ants in a stirred hill?"

"Maybe. I want to see you. Meet me in town—at the Club."

"Is that safe, John?"

"Never mind. Get started; half an hour." I broke off.

Down below, the house was a silent block of moonwhite masonry. A low-slung sports car squatted by the front door. Foreshortened trees cast ink-black shadows on the gravel drive.

The front door opened, closed quickly. Felix's tall, lean figure came down the steps, reached the car in three strides. He slid into the seat, started up, backed quickly, headed off along the curving way. His lights came on, dimmed.

"All right, that's far enough," I transmitted. "I just wanted to be sure you were there, and alone." Below, the car slowed, pulled to the side of the road. I saw Felix craning his neck, his face a white blob in the pale light.

"It's that serious, eh, John? Right. Shall I go back to the house?"

"Put the car in the drive and get out."

I dropped lower, watching him comply. I gained fifty feet upwind, curved in so that the wind would bring me across the drive. Felix stopped the car by the front door, stepped out, stood hands in pockets, looking around as though deciding whether it was a nice enough night for a stroll.

I corrected my course and dropped lower. I was ten feet above the dry

THE HOUNDS OF HELL

lawn now, sweeping toward him silently at fifteen miles per hour. His back was toward me. At the last instant, he started to turn just as my toe caught him behind the ear in a neatly placed kick.

He leaped forward, fell headlong, lay face down, arms outflung. I dropped to the drive, shut down the field, stood with the gun ready in my hand, watching him.

The impact had been about right —not the massive shock of slamming against whatever it was that had masqueraded as General Julius, or the metal-shearing wrench that had torn the door handle from the car. I walked toward him, knelt cautiously, rolled him over. His mouth was half open, his eyes shut. I took the sheath knife from my knee pouch, jabbed him lightly in the side. The flesh seemed reassuringly tender. I took his limp hand, pricked it. The skin broke: a bead of blood appeared, black in the dim light.

I sheathed the knife with a hand that shook. "Sorry, Felix," I muttered. "I had to be sure you weren't machined out of spring steel like a couple of other people I've met this evening."

Inside, I laid Felix on a low divan in the dark room, put a cold damp cloth on his forehead and waved a glass of plum brandy under his nose.

There was a bluish swelling behind his ear, but his pulse and respiration were all right. Within a minute he was stirring, making vague swimming motions and then, suddenly, sitting up, eyes open, his hand groping toward his underarm holster.

"It's all right, Felix," I said. "You had a bump on the head, but you're among friends."

"Some friends." He put a hand up, touched the bruise, pronounced a couple of Arabic curses in a soft voice. "What the devil's up, John? I let you out of my sight for an hour or two, and the whole damned official apparatus goes into a Condition Red flap."

"I used the gear, Felix. I tracked a Bolo down a side trail, about three miles off the battle map. I saw things — things I'm going to have trouble telling you about."

Felix was looking at me keenly. "Take it easy, old man. You look as though you'd had a bit of a shaking." He got to his feet, wavered for a moment, went across to the bar.

"No lights," I said.

"Who're we hiding out from?" He got out glasses and a bottle, poured, came back and sat down. He raised his glass.

"Confusion to the enemy," he said. I took a sip, then a gulp. The Scotch felt as smooth as cup grease.

"I'll try to take it in order," I said. "I watched the tank stop. The driver got out — and fell on his face."

"No shot, signs of gas, anything of that sort?"

"Nothing. I was fifty feet away, and felt nothing, smelled nothing, saw nothing. Of course the field —"

"Wouldn't stop a gas, or a vibratory effect. Was there any fluorescing of the field interface?"

I shook my head, went on with my story. Felix listened quietly until I mentioned the poisoned dart I had fired.

His face fell like a bride's cake. "You must have missed!"

"After about two minutes, it got the message: yelped a few times, chased its tail, had a modest fit and died."

"My God! The thing must have the metabolism of a rock crusher. Two minutes, you say?"

"Yep." I went on. When I finished, he frowned thoughtfully.

"John, are you sure?"

"Hell, I'm not sure of anything! The easiest hypothesis is that I'm out of my mind. In a way, I'd prefer that." I fumbled, brought out the severed ear I had cut from the dead alien.

"Here, take a look at this and then tell me I sawed it off poor old Bowser, who just wanted me to play with his rubber rat."

Felix took the two-inch triangle of course-haired gristle, peered at it in the near-dark. "This is from the thing in the canyon?"

"That's right." I tried another pocket, found the printed hieroglyphics I had taken from the creature's pouch. "And this. Maybe it's a simple Chinese laundry list — or a Turkish recipe for goulash. Maybe I'm having delusions on a grand scale."

Felix stood. "John . . ." He eyed me sharply. "What you've turned up calls for special measures. We can't take chances now — not until we know what it is we're up against. I'm going to let you in on a secret I've sworn to protect with my life." He led me to a back room, moved a picture, pressed unmarked spots on the wall. A panel slid back in the floor.

"This is the Hole," he said. "Even the CBI doesn't know about it. We'll be sure of avoiding interruption there."

"Felix — who *do* you work for?"

He held up the severed ear. "Suffice it to say — I'm against the owner of this."

I nodded. "I'll settle for that."

VII

Three hours later, Felix switched off the lights in the laboratory and led me into a comfortable lounge room with teak paneling, deep chairs, a business-like bar, and wide pseudo-windows with a view of a moonlit garden with fountains, which helped to dispel the oppressive feeling of being two hundred feet underground. I sat in one of the chairs and looked around.

"Felix, who built this place? Somehow, this doesn't look like a government-furnished installation to me. You've got equipment in that lab that's ahead of anything I've seen. And you're not as surprised at what I've told you as you ought to be."

He leaned over and slapped me on the knee, grinning his Mephistophelean grin. "Buck up, Johnny. I sent you out to find an explanation of something. You've found it — with bells on. If it takes a few devil-dogs from Mars to tie it all together, that's not your fault."

"What the hell *did* I stumble into last night?"

He finished mixing drinks, sat down across from me, rubbing the side of his jaw. The air conditioners made a faint hum in the background.

"It's the damnedest tissue I've ever examined," he said. "Almost a crystalline structure. And the hairs! There are metallic fibers in them. Incredibly tough. The fluid was a regular witches' brew; plenty of cyanoglobin present."

He shook his head. "Something out of this world, to coin a phrase."

"In other words, we've been invaded?"

"That's one way to put it — unless someone's invited them." He put his glass on the table at his elbow, leaned forward.

"We know now that whatever it was that was attached to the ear is responsible for the disappearance of men from battlefields and other places. From the number of such incidents, we can surmise that there are hundreds — perhaps thousands of these creatures among us."

"Why hasn't someone seen them?"

"That's something we have to find out. Obviously they employ some method of camouflage as they go about their work.

"Secondly, they've been busy among us for some time. Missing-persons figures were anomalously high as far back as World War One. That data for earlier conflicts are unreliable, but such as they are, they don't rule out the possibility."

"Apparently these creatures have a use for human brain tissue. From the description you gave me, I surmise that the organ was in a nutrient solution of some sort — alive."

"My God."

"Yes. Now, we're faced with not one, but two varieties of adversary. It's plain that our former associate, General Julius, was something other than human. The same may be said of the individual who attempted to stop your car."

"They looked as human as I do. Maybe more so."

"Perhaps they are. Modified, of course, to serve alien purposes. Some such arrangement would be necessary in order to carry on the day-to-day business."

"What business — other than brain-stealing?"

"Consider for a moment. They've infiltrated the UN. From the speed with which they worked, it's obvious that they have a large and well-integrated operation — and methods of communication far more subtle than the clumsy apparatus we employ. As for your 'accidentally' meeting agents of the invader at every official contact, I'd say it's likely that they control every official agency in Tamboula. In effect, the city is in their hands.

"There are five million people here, Felix! Fifty governments are represented. I've only seen a couple of these Supermen."

"True. But they say for every rat you see in the barnyard, there are probably a hundred hiding somewhere." He looked almost pleased. "We're on our own, John. We can't shout for a policeman."

"What *can* we do? We're holed up under a hundred feet of shielded concrete, with plenty of food, liquor, and taped tri-D shows — but we might as well be locked in a cell —"

Felix held up a hand. "We're not without resources, John. This hideaway was designed to provide the most complete and modern facilities for certain lines of research and testing. We know a few things about our aliens now — things they don't know we know. And I'm sure they're puzzling over your dramatic appearances and disappearances much as we're pondering their capabilities. They're not super-beings. My little stinger killed one. You eluded others. Now that we know something of the nature of the enemy, we can begin to design counter-measures."

"Just two of us?"

"I didn't mean to imply that the enemy controls *everything*, John. It wouldn't be necessary. One or two cowboys can control quite a large herd of cattle."

"Why herd us at all? Why not just round us up, chop out our brains and let it go at that?"

"Oh, many reasons. Conservation of natural resources. Ease of harvesting. And then, perhaps, we might not be quite safe, if we were once alerted to what was going on. Cattle have been known to stampede . . ."

"So — what do we do?"

"We leave Tamboula. Back in America, we make contact with a few individuals known to us personally. I'd steer clear of Barnett, for example, but there are a number of reliable men. Then we construct a counter-alien organization, armed and equipped. And then — well, we'll see."

"And how do we go about leaving Tamboula? I have an idea the whole scheme breaks down right there."

Felix looked sober. "I'm afraid our old friend Bravais will never be seen departing from these shores."

I waited. A small grin was tugging at the corners of his mouth. "I think he'll have to disappear in much the same manner that Major deSalle of the UN Medical Staff dropped from sight — and as one H. D. Brown, who leased the same house, will vanish one day soon."

"Behind a false beard and a set of brown contact lenses?"

"Nothing so crude, my dear fellow." Felix was positively rubbing his hands together in anticipation now. "I'm going to give you the full treatment — use some of those ideas they haven't been willing to give me guinea pigs for up till now. You'll have a new hair color. Self-regenerating, too. New eye color and retinal patterns, an inch or two difference in height, new finger and dental prints —"

"None of that will do me much good if some curious customs man digs under the dirty socks and finds that piece of ear. That's all the evidence we've got."

"Never fear, John. You won't be unprotected." There was a merry glint in his eye now. "You won't merely have a new identity. I'm going to fit you out with full PAPA gear. If a General Julius jumps out at you then, just break him in two and keep going."

VIII

I was sitting on the edge of a wooden chair, listening to a thin humming in my head.

"Tell me when the sound stops," Felix said. His voice seemed to be coming from a remote distance, even though I could see him, standing a few feet away, looking hazy, like a picture shot through cheese cloth and faded.

I pressed the switch in my hand. Felix's blurred features nodded.

"Good enough, John. Now come around and let's check those ligament attachment."

I relaxed the muscles that had once been used to prick up the ears, thus switching my hearing range back to the normal. I made a move to rise and bounded three feet in the air.

"Easy, John!" Felix had emerged from inch-thick arrear plastic walls. "We can't have you springing about the room like a dervish. Remember your lessons."

I balanced carefully, like a man with springs tied to his shoes. "I remember my lessons," I said. "Pain has a way of sticking in my mind."

"It's the best method when you're in a hurry, John."

"How did the test go?"

"Not badly at all. You held it to .07 microbel at 30,000 cycles. How was the vision?"

"About like shaving with a steamed mirror. I still get only blacks and whites."

"You'll develop a color discretion after a while. Your optic center has been accustomed to just the usual six hues for thirty-odd years It can't learn to differentiate in the ultra violet range overnight."

"And I can't adjust to the feeling that I weigh half an ounce, either, dammit! I dance around on my toes like a barefooted hair-dresser on a hot pavement."

Felix grinned as though I'd paid him a compliment. "In point of fact, you now weight three hundred and twenty-eight pounds. I've plated another five mills of chromalloy onto the skeletal grid. Your system's shown a nice tolerance for it. I'm pulling one more net of the number nine web over the trapezius, deltoids and latissimi dorsi —"

"The tolerances of my metabolism are not to be taken as those of the management," I cut in. "These past six weeks have been a vivisectionist's nightmare. I've got more scars than a Shendy Tribesman, and my nerves are standing on end and waving around like charmed snakes. I'm ready to call it a day and try it as is."

Felix nodded soberly. "We're about finished with you, John. I know it's been difficult, but there's no point in taking anything less than our best to the fray, is there?"

"I don't know why I don't ache all over," I grumbled. "I've been sliced, chiseled and sawed at like a side of beef in a butcher's college. I suppose you've got me doped to the eyebrows. Along with all the other strange sensations, a little thing like a neocaine jag would pass unnoticed."

"No — no dope. Hypnotics, old boy."

"Swell. Every day in every way I'm hurting less and less, eh?"

I took a breath, more from habit than need. The oxygen storage units installed under the lower edge of my rib cage were more than half charged; I could go for another two hours if I had to. "I know we're in a hell of a spot — and it's better to sail in with grins in place and all flags flying than sit around telling each other the crisis has arrived. But I'm ready for action."

Felix was looking at papers, paying no attention at all.

"Surely, old man. Gripe all you like," he said absently. "Just don't get friendly and slap me on the back. I'm still made of old-fashioned flesh and blood. Now, I'd like another check on the strain gauges."

I closed my mouth and went across to the Iron Man — a collection of cables and bars that looked like an explosion in a bicycle factory.

"The grip, first."

I took the padded handle, settled my hand comfortably, squeezed lightly to get the feel of it, then put on the pressure. I heard a creak among the levers; then the metal collapsed like a cardboard under my hand.

I let go. "Sorry, Felix. But what the hell, thin-guage aluminum . . ."

"That's a special steel tubing, cold-extruded, two tenths of an inch thick," Felix said, fingering the wreckage. "Try a lift now."

I went over to a rig with a heavy horizontal beam, bent my knees, settled my shoulders under it with a metal-to-wood clatter. I set myself, slowly straightened my legs. The pressure on my shoulders seemed modest — about like hefting a heavy suitcase. I came fully erect, then went up on my toes, pushing now against an almost immovable resistance.

"Slack off, John," Felix called. "I believe I'll consider you've passed your brute-strength test. Over twenty-nine hundred pounds. About what a Chevette runabout weighs — and I don't think you were flat out at that."

"I could have edged a few ounces more." I flexed my shoulders. "The padding helped, but it wasn't quite thick enough."

"The padding was two inches of oak." He looked at me, pulling at his lower lip. "Damned pity I can't take you along to the next Myoelectronics Congress. I could make a couple of blighters eat two-hour speeches saying it wasn't possible."

I took a turn up and down the room, trying not to bounce at each step.

"Felix, you said another week to let the incisions heal. Let's skip that. I'm ready to go now. You've been in town every day, and haven't seen any signs of abnormal activity. The alarm's died down."

"Died down too damned quickly to suit me," he cut in. "It's too quiet. At the least, I'd have expected someone out to check over the house. You'll recall that the former tenant, my alter-ego, turned in a report on missing men and head wounds; but they haven't been near the place. There's been nothing in

the papers since the first day or two — and I daresay that it wouldn't have been mentioned then, except that a crowd of idlers saw you kill Julius."

"Look, Felix. I've got so damned much microtronics gear buried in my teeth I'm afraid to eat anything tougher than spaghetti. I've got a laser wired into my left ring-finger, and enough servo-motors bolted to my insides to power an automatic kitchen. Let's skip the rest of the program and get going. I may have new stainless-steel knuckles, but it's the same old me inside. I'm getting the willies. I want to know what those hell-hounds are doing up there."

"What time is it, John?" Felix asked suddenly.

I glanced at the black-and-chromium wallclock. "Twenty-four minutes after nine," I said.

Felix raised his hand and snapped his fingers —

I felt a slight twitch — as though everything in the room had jumped half an inch. Felix was looking at me with a quizzical smile.

"What time did you say it was?"

"Nine twenty-four."

"Look at the clock."

I glanced at it again. "Why, is it —" I stopped. The hands stood at ten o'clock sharp.

"Clock manipulation at a distance," I said. "How do you do it — and why?"

Felix shook his head, smiling. "You've just had another half-hour session in deep hypnosis, John. I want another couple of days to reinforce that primary personality fraction I've split off before I tie it in with a mnemonic cross-connection. We want your alter-ego to be sure to swing into action at the first hint of outside mental influence."

"Speaking of psychodynamics, how are you coming along with your own conditioning?"

"Pretty well, I think. I've been attempting to split off a personality fraction for myself. I'm not sure how effective my efforts have been. Frankly, autohypnotics were never my strong suit. Still, there are a few facts that I can't afford to expunge from my mind completely — but on the other hand, I can't afford to let the enemy have them. I've buried them in the alternate ego, and keyed them to a trigger word. The same word is tied to my heart action."

"In other words — if anyone cues this information, it's suicide for you."

"Correct," Felix said cheerfully. "I need the basic power of the survival instinct to cover this information. I've given you the key word under hypnosis. Your subconscious will know when to use it."

"Pretty drastic, isn't it?"

"It's tricky business, trying to outguess a virtually unknown enemy. But from their interest in brains, it's a fair guess that they know a bit about the mechanics of the human mind. We can't rule out the possibility that they possess a technique for controlling human mental processes. I can't let them control mine. I've too many secrets."

I chewed that one over. "You

may be right. That tank driver didn't behave like a man who was running his own affairs. And whatever it was that hit him and the major —"

"It could have been an amplified telepathic command — to stop breathing, perhaps — or shutting off the flow of blood through the carotid arteries. From the fact that it didn't affect you, we can assume that their technique is selective. It probably requires at least a visual fix on the object, for a start."

"We're assuming a hell of a lot, Felix. We'd better do some more field work before we reason ourselves right out onto the end of a long limb."

Felix was looking thoughtful. "It shouldn't be too difficult to arrange shielding around the personality center area. A platinum-gauge micro-grid with a filament spacing of about —"

"Oh-oh. This sounds like another expedition into the seat of what I once thought of as my intelligence."

Felix clucked. "I can handle it with a number 27 probe, like building a ship in a bottle. It could make a great difference — if it works."

"There's too much guesswork here, Felix."

"I know," he nodded. "But we've got to extract every possible ounce of intelligence on the enemy from the few fragments of data we have. I don't think we're going to have much in the way of a second chance."

"We'll be doing well if we have a first one."

"You *are* getting nervy."

"You're damned right! If I don't get going soon, I may funk the whole act and retire to a small farm near Nairobi to write my memoirs."

Felix cackled. "Let's dial ourselves a nice little *entrecote avec champignon* and a liter or two of good Burgundy and forget business for an hour or two. Give me three more days, John. Then we'll make our play — ready or not!"

IX

The night air was cold and clean. Gravel crunched under my feet with a crisp, live sound. Felix tossed our two small bags in the boot of the car, paused to sniff the breeze.

"A fine night for trouble," he said briskly.

I looked up at the spread of fat, multi-colored stars. "It's good to be out, after fifty days of stale air and scalpels," I said. "Trouble or no trouble." I slid into my seat, taking care not to bend any metal.

"We'll have to register you as a lethal weapon when this caper is over," Felix said, watching me gingerly fasten my seat belt. "Meantime, watch what you grab if I take a corner a trifle too fast." He started up, pulled off down the drive turned into the highway.

"It's not too late to change plans and take the Subsea Tube to Naples," I said. "I have a negative vibration when it comes to rocket flights. Why not go underground, the way the Lord intended us to travel?"

"I won the deck-cut, old boy," Felix said. "For myself, I've had

enough of the underground life for now. I want a fast transit to New York."

"I feel a little exposed right now," I said. "Too damn bad we don't have two OE suits."

"Wouldn't help if we did. You couldn't get aboard an aircraft, tube or anything else without showing up on a dozen different monkey-business detectors. But we'll be all right. They aren't looking for me — and your own mistress wouldn't know you now. You're good-looking, boy!"

"I know. I'm just talking to keep myself occupied."

"You have our prize exhibit all cozy in your trick belt?"

"Yep."

We drove in silence for the next mile. The city lights glowed on our right as we swung off on the part road. We pulled into a mile-wide lot under banked polyarcs, rode a slipway to the rotunda, a glass-walled arena under a paper-thin airfoil cantilevered out in hundred yard wings from supporting columns of ferroconcrete twelve feet in diameter at the base. I concentrated on walking without hopping while Felix led the way across to an island of brighter lights and polished corners where showgirls in trim uniforms stamped tickets and gave discouraging answers to male passengers with three-hour layovers to kill.

I watched the crowd while he went through the formalities.

There were the usual fat ladies in paint and finger rings, slim haughty women with strange-looking hats, bald businessmen with wilting linen and a mild glow expensively acquired at the airport bar, damp-looking recruits in rumpled uniforms, thin official travelers with dark suits, narrow shoulders and faces as expressive as filing cabinets.

Once I spotted a big black and tan German shepherd on a leash, and twitched: my foot hit a parked suitcase, sent it cannonballing against the counter. Felix stepped in quickly, soothed the fat man who owned the mishandled luggage, guided me toward a glass stairway that swept up to a gallery lined with live-looking palms. We headed for a pair of frosted glass doors under three-foot glare letters reading ALOHA ROOM in flowing script.

"We have nearly an hour before take off Time for a light snack and a stirrup cup." Felix seemed to be in the best of spirits now. The fresh air had revived me, too. The sight of the normally milling crowds, the air of businesslike bustle, the bright lights made the memories of stealthy horrors seem remote.

We took a table near the far side of the wide, mosaic-floored, softly lit room. A smiling waitress in leis and a grass skirt took orders for martinis. Across the room, a group of bow-legged men with flamboyant shirts strummed guitars.

Felix glanced around contentedly. "I think perhaps we've overestimated the opposition, John." He lit up a dope-stick, blew violet smoke toward an ice bucket by the next table. "Another advantage of rocket travel is the champagne," he remarked. "We can be nicely oiled by the time we fire retros over Kennedy."

"While we're overestimating the enemy, let's not forget that he has a number of clever tricks we haven't quite mastered yet," I put in. "Getting out of Tamboula is a start; but we still have the problem of contact when we reach the States. We won't accomplish much hiding out in back rooms over tamale joints, sneaking out at night for a pictonews to find out what's going on."

Felix nodded. "I have some ideas on that score, John. We'll also need a quick and inconspicious method of identifying 'human' aliens. I think I know how that can be done. We can work with the radar albedo of the alien skin, for example: it must be a rather unusual material to withstand puncturing steel doors."

He was smiling again, looking happy. He leaned toward me, talking against a strident voice from the next table.

"I've been working for twenty years, preparing for what I've termed a 'surreptitious war', based on the premise that when the next conflict took place, it would be fought not on battlefields, or in space, but in the streets and offices of apparently peaceful cities: a war of brainwashing techniques, infiltration, subversion, betrayal. It's been in the air for a hundred years now: a vast insanity that's kept us flogging away, nation against nation, race against race—with the planets at our fingertips, beckoning . . ."

Something was happening. The music was changing to a sour whine in my ears. The chatter at the tables around me was like the petulant cries of trapped monkeys in vast, bleak cages.

Felix was still talking, jabbing with a silver spoon to emphasize his points. My eyes went to the double doors fifty yards distant across the brittle-patterned floor. Beyond the obscure glass, dark shapes moved restlessly, like dim shadows of crawling men.

I pushed my chair back. "Felix!" I croaked.

"—could have established a permanent colony of perhaps five thousand. Carefully picked personnel, of course — "

"The door!" My voice was choking off in my throat as though a hand were crushing it. The air in the room seemed to darken; tiny points of light danced before me.

"Something wrong, old boy!" Felix was leaning toward me, a concerned expression on his face. He looked as unreal now as a paper cutout — a cardboard man in a cardboard scene. Far across the room the door swung silently open. A staring corpse-pale face appeared at the level of a man's belt. It pushed into the room, the long, lean, bristled body pacing on legs like the arms of apes, the fingered feet slapping the floor in a deliberate rhythm. A second beast followed, smaller, with a blacker coat and a grayish ruff edging the long-toothed face. A third and fourth passed through the door, both rangy, heavy, their long bodies sagging between humped shoulders and lean flanks. The leader raised his head, seeming to sniff the air.

"Felix!" I pointed.

He turned casually, let his gaze linger a moment, then glanced at me with a slight smile.

"Very attractive," he said. "You must be recovering, John, for a pretty face to excite you —"

"Good God, Felix! Can't you see them!"

He frowned. "You're shouting, John. Yes, I saw them." I was aware of faces turning toward me at the surrounding tables, eyebrows raised, frowns settling into place. I reached out, caught Felix's arm. His face contorted in a spasm of agony.

"Felix! They've come! Four of them!"

He smoothed his features with an effort, tugged against my grip. His eyes were stricken.

"Johnny — the strain has been too much for you — " he started.

"Felix, you've got to listen. What do you see coming through that door!"

"Four young women," he said in a choked voice, "Very gay, very sweet. Would that I had time . . ." His face was paling. "John, you're breaking my arm!"

I jerked my hand back. "They're aliens, Felix! The dog things I saw in the ravine! Look again! Try to see them!"

The leading demon had turned toward us now. The white face was fixed on me as it came on, steadily, relentlessly, stalking unnoticed along the aisle between the tables where diners laughed and talked, forking food into over-fed mouths.

Felix turned, stared. "They're coming toward us," he said in a voice thin with strain. "The first young lady is dressed in yellow —"

"It's a thing like a tailless dog: a skull-face, stiff black hair. Remember the ear!"

Felix tensed: an uncertain expression crept over his face. He turned toward me.

"I — " he started.

His features went slack: his head lolled, eyes half open. The music died with a squawk. Conversation drained into silence.

The first of the montrosities quickened its pace: its head came up as it headed straight for me. I leaned toward Felix, shouted his name. He muttered something, slumped back, stared vacantly past me.

"Felix, for God's sake, use your gun!" I jumped up. My knee caught the table. It went flying against the next one: Felix tumbled back, slammed to the floor. I caught a momentary impression of dull-faced patrons, sitting slackly at tables all around. There was a quickening slap of beast-hands now as the leading thing broke into a clumsy gallop, closing now, red eyes glinting, the black tongue lolling from the side of the wide jaws as it clearing the last few yards, sprang —

With a roar of horror, I swung my right fist in a roundhouse blow that caught the monster squarely on the neck.

It went crashing across a table in an explosion of silver, glasses and laden plates, to go down between tables in a tangle of snowy linen; then the second demonic thing was on me. I saw dagger-teeth flash, ducked aside, caught a thick fore-

arm, feeling the flesh tear under my hand as I hurled it aside. The beast whirled, squealing thinly, reared up seven feet tall —

I struck at it, saw its face collapse into pulped ruin. It fell past me, kicking frantically. The last two attackers split, rushed me from both sides. I ran toward the one on the left, missed a swing at its head, felt the clamp of teeth on my arm, the impact of its weight like a feather mattress, I staggered, caught myself, slammed blows at the bristled side. It was like pounding a saddle. I struck for the head then, saw skin and flesh shear under the impact, struck again, knocked an eye from its socket —

And still the thing clung, raking at me with its pale hands like minstrel's gloves.

I reached for its throat with my free hand, whirled to interpose its body between me and the last of the four creatures as it sprang: the impact knocked me back a step, sent the attacker sprawling. It leaped up, slunk around to the left of a fallen table to take me from the side.

At that moment, to my horror, the music resumed. I heard a tinkle of laughter, an impatient call for a waiter. Beyond the crushed head at my arm, with its single hate-filled eye, I caught a glimpse of the animated faces of diners, busy forks, a raised wine-glass —

"Help me, for the love of God!" I roared. No one so much as glanced in my direction.

I ripped at the locked jaws on my arm, feeling bone and leather shred and crumble. With a sound like nails tearing from wood, the fangs scraped clear, shredding my sleeve. The long body fell back, slack. I threw it aside, turned to face the last of the monsters. Baleful red eyes in a white mask of horror stared at me across a table ten feet away where a man with a red-veined nose sniffed a glass thoughtfully. On the floor at my feet, Felix lay half under the body of a dead demon.

Now the last of the four creatures moved in. Beyond it, I saw a movement at the entrance: the door swung wide. Two demons came through it at a run, then another —

The thing nearest me crouched, wide mouth gaping. It had learned a measure of caution now: I took a step back, looked around for a route of escape —

"Now!" a silent voice seemed to shout in my mind. "Now!"

I took my eyes from the death's head snarling three yards away, fixed my eyes on Felix's face.

"Ashurbanipal!" I shouted.

Felix's eyes opened — dead eyes in a slack face.

"The Franklin Street Postal Station in Coffeyville, Kansas," he said in a lifeless monotone. "Box 1742. Code."

There was a rasp of horny fingers on the floor, a blur of movement as the demon sprang. It landed full on Felix's chest, and I saw its boned snout go down.

I threw myself at it, grappled the bristled torso to me, felt bones collapse as we smashed against a

table, sent it crashng down. I kicked the dead thing aside, scrambled up to see a pack of its fellows leaping to the attack, more boiling through the open doors. I caught a glimpse of Felix, blood covering his chest — then I leaped clear and ran.

Far across the wide room, tall glass slabs reared up thirty feet to the arched ceiling. Tables bounded to left and right as I cut a swathe across the crowded floor. Ten feet from the wall, I crossed my arms over my face, lowered my head and dived.

There was a shattering crash as the glass exploded from its frame. I felt a passing sting as huge shards tumbled aside. There was a moment of whipping wind; then I slammed against the concrete terrace as lightly as a straw man, rolled, came to my feet, sprinted for the darkness which lay beyond the lighted plaza.

Behind me glass smashed. I heard the thud of heavy bodies spilling through the opening, the scrabble of feet. People whirled from my path with little screams; then I was past them, dashing across a spread of lawn, then crashing through underbrush like spiderwebs and into the clear. In the bright moonlight the stony desert stretched to the seacliffs a mile distant.

Behind me, I heard the relentless gallop of demonic pursuers. In my mind was the image of the comrade I had left behind — the incomparable Felix, dead, beneath a tidal wave of horrors.

I ran — and the Hounds of Hell bayed behind me.

X

I huddled in a sea-carved hollow at the base of a crumbling twenty-foot cliff of sandy clay, breathing in vast gulps of cold, damp air, hearing the slap and hiss of the surf which curled in phosphorescent sheets almost to my feet. Far out on the black, Mediterranean, gleaming points of light winked on the horizon: ships lying to anchor in the roadstead off Tamboula.

I pulled my coat off, peeled my blood-stiffened shirt from my back. By the light of the moon I examined the gouges across my left forearm, made by the demon's teeth. Tiny gleaming filaments of metal showed in the cuts. The thing's fangs had been as hard as diamond.

Cold night wind whipped at me. Felix hadn't thought to install any insulation in the course of the remodeling.

I tore a sleeve from my shirt, bound up my arm. There were cuts on my face and shoulders from the glass. Not deep and, thanks to Felix's hypnotic commands, not painful — but blood was flowing freely. I got to my feet and waded out ankle-deep, scooped cold salt water in my wounds, then pulled my shirt and coat back on. It was all I could do in the way of first aid. Now it was time to give my attention to survival.

I didn't know how many miles I had run — or how far behind the dog-things trailed me. Perhaps I had escaped them. I keened my hearing, not breathing, hoping there would be nothing but the deep sigh of the wind . . .

From far across the plain, I heard the slap of galloping beast-hands, how many I couldn't tell.

There was a chance that if I stayed where I was in the shelter of the cliff they might pass me by. But they had come unerringly to me as I sat in the bright-lit restaurant with Felix —

The thought of my dead companion was like a ghostly knife-wound in my chest. Felix, the urbane, the elegant! I remembered his jaunty smile, the irrepressible high spirits that had met every challenge with a counter-attack. And now, he was alone back there, dead, under a tidal wave of demons.

I wouldn't wait here, to be cornered in the dark. Better to meet them in the open, kill as many as I possibly could before they bore me down.

There was a narrow strip of wet, boulder-dotted beach running along the base of the sheer wall behind me. I went a few yards along it, splashing through shallow pools. An earth-fall had made a shelving slope to the level ground above.

At the top, I lay flat and looked out across the pebbled plain. I saw that I was at the tip of a tongue of desert thrusting out into the sea, a narrow peninsula no more than a hundred yards wide at its base, narrowing to the point where I lay. Far away, the city was a pink glow against the sky. Near at hand, I saw dark shapes that could very well have been rocks — or crouching enemies.

I squinted down hard to trigger my visual boaster complex. The desert sprang into instant, vivid clarity. Every stone fragment, mesquite bush, darting ground rat, stood out as under a full moon.

A hundred yards away, a long, dark-glistening creature bounded from the shelter of a rock slab, swinging its pale, snouted face from right to left, then back, as it ran.

Over the roar of surf, the distant whirr and clatter of night-locusts, the pad of its feet was loud now. Its breathing was a vile intimacy in my ears.

When the thing was fifty feet away, it stopped abruptly, one white hand raised. Its gleaming eyes turned toward my hiding place. Then it leaped straight toward me. I came to my feet, caught up a head-sized rock that seemed as light as cork, threw it; it slammed off the creature's flank with a sound like a brick hitting a board fence, knocked it off its feet — but the thing was up in an instant, leaping across the last few yards —

I leaned aside, swung a kick that went home with a thud, then chopped a bone-smashing blow behind the shoulder ruff, felt the spine shatter. The thing struck heavily, rolled lay for a moment, stunned. Then the head came up. It moved feebly, scrabbling with its front legs — toward me. I felt the skin prickle along the back of my neck.

"What are you?" I called hoarsely. "Where do you come from? What do you want?"

The ruby eyes held on my face; the broken body lunged forward another foot.

"You understand me! Can't you speak?"

Still it dragged itself on, its jaws smiling their skull-smile. The smell of its blood was a poison chemical reek. I looked back toward the city. Far away, I saw movement — low shapes that galloped silently. From all across the barren plain they streamed toward the point of land where I stood, summoned by the dying creature at my feet.

I stood at the edge of the cliff above the breaking surf, watching them come.

It was useless for me to run any any farther.

Even if I escaped the trap I had entered, there was no refuge along the coast. Algiers was sixty miles to the east. To the west there was nothing between me and Oran, over a hundred miles away. I could run for half an hour before oxygen exhaustion forced me to stop, cover perhaps twenty miles, but the aliens would follow with the patience of death. I was cornered, brought to bay.

Out across the dark water, the nearest ship lay no more than two miles offshore.

The dog-things were close now. I could see them silhouetted against the lesser skyglow, like some evil swarm of giant rats, piped from their lair by the music of Hell. A plague of demons. The leaders slowed, coming on cautiously, dozens of them, almost shoulder to shoulder —

I turned, leaped far out toward the black surf below; felt the icy waters closing over me. Swimming just above the muddy bottom, I struck out for deep water, heading out to sea.

The ocean floor by night was a magic land of broken terrain, darting schools of many-colored fishes, waving screens of green, translucent weed. A hundred feet from shore the bottom fell away and I swept out over a dark chasm, feeling the chill currents of deep water as I angled downward. The small fish disappeared now. A great, dark, lazy shape sailed toward me out of blackness, was swallowed up in gloom. There was noises, grunts, shrill whistles, the grind and thud of tide-stirred rocks on the bottom, the distant, mechanical whirring of a propellor-driven boat.

After twenty minutes, my vision began to blur. I was feeling the strain in my arms and the first stifling sensations of oxygen starvation. I angled upward, broke the surface, saw the low silhouette of a half-submerged vessel a quarter of a mile away across rippled ink-and-silver water, streaked with the winking reflections of her deck lights.

I trod water, looking around. A bell-buoy clanged a hundred yards distant. Farther away, a small boat buzzed toward shore from a ship farther out. There was a smell of sea-things, salt, a metallic odor of ship's engines and a vagrant reek of oil.

There was no indication of pursuit from the shore.

I swam on toward the ship, came up on her from the starboard quarter, made out the words *EXCALIBUR—New Hartford* in raised let-

ters across her stern. There was a deckhouse beyond a low guard rail, a retractable antenna array perched atop it with crimson and white lights sparkling at the peak. Farther forward, small deck cranes poised over an open hatch like ungainly herons waiting for a minnow. I caught a faint sound of raucous music, a momentarily raised voice. The odor of petroleum was strong here, and there was a glistening, filmy scum on the water.

She was a tanker, loaded and ready to sail, to judge from the waterline, a foot above her anachronistic plimsoll.

I pulled myself up on the corroding hull-plates, inched my way to the rail, crossed to the deckhouse. The door opened into warmth, light, the odors of beer, tobacco smoke, unlaundered humans. I took a great, grateful lungful. This was familiar, reassuring; the odor of my kind of animal.

Steep stairs led down. I followed them, came into a narrow corridor with a three-inch glare-strip along the center line of the low ceiling. There were doors set at ten-foot intervals along the smooth, buff-colored walls.

Voices muttered at the far end of the corridor.

I stepped to the nearest door, listened with my hearing keened, then turned the handle and stepped inside.

It was an eight-by-ten cell papered with photo-murals of Central Park, chipped and grease-stained at hand level. There was a table, a metal locker, a hooked rug on the floor, a tidy bunk, a single-tube lamp clamped to the wall above it beside a hand-painted plaster plaque reprsenting a haloed saint with a dazed expression.

Footsteps were coming along the corridor. I turned to the door as it opened and nearly collided with a vast, tall man in a solid undershirt bulging with biceps, blue trousers worn low to ease a paunch that looked slight against his massive bulk.

He stared down at me, frowning. He had curly, uncut hair, large, dull-brown eyes, a loose mouth. There was a deeply depressed scar the size of an egg on the side of his forehead above his left eye. He raised a hand, pointed a thick finger at me.

"Hey!" he said, in a startlingly mellow tenor. He blinked past me at the room. "This here it *my* flop."

"Sorry" I said. "I guess I kind of stumbled into the wrong place." I started past him. He moved, blocking the door.

"How come you're in my flop?" he demanded. He didn't sound mad — just mildly curious.

"I was looking for the mate," I said. "He must be down the hall, eh?"

"Heck no. The mate got a fancy place aft." He was looking me over now. "How come you're all wet?"

"I fell in the water," I said. "Look, how are you fixed for crew aboard this ship?"

The giant reached up, rasped at his scalp with a fingernail like a banjo pick.

"You want to sign on?"

"Right. Now — " I started.

"Who you want to see, you want to see Carboni. Oh, boy." The loose mouth curved in a vast grin. "He'll be surprised, all right. Nobody don't want to sign on aboard the *Scabbler.*"

"Well, I do. Where do I find him?"

The grin dropped. "Huh!"

"Where can I find Mr. Carboni — so I can sign on, you know."

The grin was back. He nodded vigorously. "He's prob'ly down in the ward room. He's prob'ly pretty drunk."

"Maybe you could show me the way."

He looked blank for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah. Hey." He was frowning again, looking at my shoulder. "You got a cut on ya. You got a couple of cuts. You been in a fight?"

"Nothing serious. How about Mr. Carboni . . ."

The finger was aimed at me like a revolver. "That's how come you want to sign on the *Scabbler.* I betcha. You croaked some guy, and the cops is after ya."

"Not as for as I know, big boy. Now — "

"My name ain't Big Boy. It's Joel."

"Okay, Joel. Let's go see the man, all right?"

"Come on." He moved out of the doorway, started off along the corridor, watching to be sure I was following.

"Carboni, he drinks a couple of bottles and he gets drunk. I tried that but with me it don't work. One time I drank two bottles of booze but all it done, it made me like burp."

"When does the ship sail?"

"Huh? I dunno."

"What's your destination?"

"What's that?"

"Skip it Joel. Just take me to your leader."

After a five-minute walk along criss-crossing passageways, we ducked our heads, stepped into a long, narrow room where three men sat at an oilcloth-covered table decorated with a capless ketchup bottle and a mustard pot with a wooden stick.

There were four empty liquor bottles, on the table and another, nearly full one. The drinker on the opposite side of the table looked up as we came in. He was a thick-necked fellow with a bald head, heavy features, bushy eyebrows, a blotchy complexion. He sat slumped with both arms on the table encircling his glass. One of his eyes looked at the ceiling with a mild expression; the other fixed itself on me. A frown made a deep crease between the eyes.

"Who the hell are you?" His voice was a husky whisper. Someone had hit him in the windpipe once. It hadn't improved his manners.

I stepped up past Joel. "I want to sign on for the cruise."

He swallowed a healthy slug of what was in the glass, glanced at his companions, who were hitching around to get a look at me.

"He says it's a cruise," he rasped. "He wants to sign on, he says." The eye went to Joel. "Where'd you pick this bird up?"

Joel turning, said, "Huh?"

"Where'd you come from, punk?" The eye was back on me again. "How'd you get aboard?"

"The name's Jones," I said. "I swam. What about that job?"

"A job, he says." The eye ran over me. "You're a seaman, eh?"

"I can learn."

"He can learn, he says."

"Not many guys want to sign on this tub, do they, Carboni," Joel asked brightly.

"Shut up," Carboni growled without looking at him. "You got blood on your face," he said to me.

I put my hand up, felt a gash across my jaw.

"I don't like this mug's looks," one of the drinking buddies said in a voice like fingernails on a blackboard. "A chain-climber. I got a good mind to throw him to hell off back into the drink where he came from. He looks like some kind of a cop to me." He was a long-faced, lanky, big-handed fellow in grimy whites. He had a large nose, coarse receding gums.

"Do I get the job or not?" I said, looking at Carboni.

"I'm talking to you, mug," the long man said. "I asked you if you are a cop."

"Who runs this show?" I said, still watching Carboni. "You or this talking horse?" I jerked a thumb at the latter. He made an explosive noise, started getting up from the bench.

"Sit down, Pogey," Carboni snarled.

The lanky man sank back, talking to himself.

"That's a pretty good swim out from shore," Carboni said. "You musta been in a pretty big hurry to leave town."

I didn't say anything.

"Cops after you?"

"Not that I know of."

"Not that he knows of, he says." Carboni grinned. He had even white teeth; they looked as though they had cost a lot of money.

"Any papers?"

I shook my head.

"No papers, he says," Carboni relayed.

"You want me I should pitch him over the side, Carboni?" the third man spoke up. He was a swarthy man with stubby arms and a crooked jay, like a dwarfed giant.

"Cap'n wouldn't like that," Joel said. "Cap'n said we needed crew."

"Up the captain," the horsey man with stubby arms and a crooked jaw, said. "We don't need no —"

"Pogey," Carboni cut in. He rolled the eye over to bear on him. "You talk too much. Shut up." He jolted his chair back, turned, lifted a phone off a wall bracket, thumbed a call button. The glass eye was rolled over my way now, as though watching for a false move.

"Skipper, I got a bird here says he's a seaman," Carboni said into the instrument. "Claims he lost his papers." There was a pause. "Yeah," Carboni said. "Yeah." He listened again, then hitched himself up in the chair, frowning. He glanced toward me.

"Yeah?" he said.

I let my gaze wander idly across the room—and switched my hearing

into high gear. Background noises leaped into cracking presence. The hum of the phone was a sharp whine; I heard wood and metal creak, the thump of beating hearts, the glutinous wheeze of lungs expanding, the heavy, grate of feet shifting on the floor — and faintly, in an excited voice:

"....UN *radio.....a gun.....bumped off somebody.....maybe a couple.... try for a ship they said. Cripes, looks like.*"

Felix had said that with a little concentration, I could develop selectivity. I needed it now. I strained to filter the static, catch the words:

"*. . . handle him?*"

Carbone looked my way again. "Can a kid handle a lollipop?"

"*Okay. Look.*" The voice was clearer now. "*. . . lousy local cops . . . we turn this guy in . . reward peanuts . . . their problem. We need hands, we work this boy . . . get there . . . Stateside cops . . a nice piece of change . . .*"

"I see what you mean, Skipper," Carboni said. He had a corner of his mouth lifted to show me a smile that I might have found reassuring if I'd been a female crocodile.

"*Get him down below. Anchors up in an hour and a half. Shake it up.*"

"Leave it to me, Skipper." Carboni hung up, swung around to give me the full face smile. The bridgework wasn't so expensive after all, just old style removable plates.

"Well, I decided to give you a chance, Jones," he croaked. "You're on. You'll sign papers in the morning."

"Hey, okay if he helps me out in the hot-room and stuff?" Joel enquired. He sounded like a ten-year-old asking for a puppy.

Carboni thrust out his lips, nodded. "All right, Jones; for now, you help the dummy. Take the flop next to his."

"By the way, where's this tub headed?" I asked.

"Jacksonville. Why? You choosy or something?"

"If I was, would I be here?"

Carboni snorted. "Anchors in in an hour." He leveled the eye on Joel. "Get moving," he barked. "What do you think this is, a rest home for morons?"

"Come on." Joel tugged at my arm. I followed him out, along corridors to a door. He opened it, flipped on a light, showed me a room identical with his own except that it lacked the plaster saint and the hooked rug. He opened the locker, tossed sheets and a blanket on the bed. I pulled off my wet jacket. Joel puckered his mouth, looking at me.

"Hey, Jones, you better get Doc to fix them cuts you got."

I sat on the bunk. I felt weak suddenly, sucked as dry as a spider's dinner. There was a humming in the back of my head, and my face felt hot. I pulled the sodden makeshift bandage from the arm the dogthing had chewed. There were four deep gouges, half a dozen shallower ones — all inflamed, swelling. The arm was hot and painful.

"Can you get me some antiseptic and tape?" I asked.

"Huh?" Joel grunted.

"Is there a first-aid kit around?"

Joel pondered, then went into the corridor, came back with a blue-painted metal box.

In it I found a purple fluid which bubbled when I daubed it on my wounds. Joel watched, fascinated. At my request he applied some to the cuts on my back, working with total concentration, his mouth hanging open. If he saw the glint of metal filaments in the torn skin he made no comment.

I folded gauze; Joel helped me tape it in place. When we finished, he stood back, smiling. Then he frowned.

Hey, Jones. How come you didn't get Doc to fix you up?"

"I'll be okay," I said.

Joel nodded as though I had clarified a difficult point. He looked at me, frowning. He was thinking again.

"How's come Carboni's scared of you?" he asked.

"He's not scared of me, Joel," I said. "He took a shine to me on sight."

Joel thought that one over. "Yeah," he said. "But look; we got stuff we got to do. We got to get a move on."

I stood up, acutely aware of fatigue, and wounds, and a sensation similar to a ticking bomb behind my eyes. Felix's post-hypnotic anesthetic had been a big help while it lasted, but the withdrawal symptoms evened the score.

"I want to go up on deck a minute," I said. Joel blinked, followed me as I retraced the path along which I had come half an hour earlier. I stepped out onto the deck, shivered in the wet clothes as the freshening wind hit me. There were no lights on the shore opposite. Half a mile to the left, there was a faint gleam from the windows of beach shacks; farther along, the great arc of the dredged harbor was a line of jewels against the dark night.

I tensed the eye squint mucsles, saw the black water snap into gray misty clarity. On its surface, nothing stirred. I attuned my hearing to pick up the softest of night sounds. There were the thousand pings and thumps from the ship, the creak of the anchor cables, and the *crump* and hiss of the distant surf.

If the demons were close, they were well hidden. For the moment, it seemed, I was safe. I was. I wasn't so sure about the world.

TO BE CONCLUDED

THE PERFECT PEOPLE

BY SIMON TULLY

He searched the stars for a perfect race — and found what perfection really is!

The largest of the symmetroids sat down. And, in an order that was just far enough off simultaneity for a very attentive observer to notice the sequence, the others followed him.

To call it "sitting down" involved giving the phrase a much wider than usual meaning. But Streeve was by now quite used to employing the patterns of his native language in novel ways, in order to guide his thought along the behavior types of the symmetroids.

"Sitting down" usually involves bending of certain limbs, jerky movements of the rest of the body and a sudden halt as the sitting down member hits the sitting down surface. But the symmetroids seemed to compress themselves, rather like a large balloon letting out half its air. Or else it was as if gravity had suddenly doubled, so that each part of their bodies — twice as heavy as it had been before — concertinaed against the part below it. The general impression, however, wasn't really one of air escaping, or of weight increasing. It was simply of their taking up a resting, non-mobile position: and that was why Streeve called it "sitting down".

He checked the time and made

an entry in his notebook. Then whilst the people were eating, he went over the day's route and compared it with the corresponding day of the last cycle.

That was quite unnecessary, since he remembered the landmarks and resting places in great detail — he had been past them so many times that it would be impossible not to. But Streeve was well trained. He had been taught that efficient observing is wasted without detailed recording. A note book and sharp pencil were always in his hand.

For the first time in thirty years of field work, Streeve was restless. He had only ten notebooks left, out of an original five hundred. Yet he had nowhere near enough data to return home and write his thesis. It was painful to review the changing moods of his time on the symmetroids' planet, and he indulged in this pain too often for his own liking. When he and the nineteen other young anthropologists of his class had been given a final briefing they were warned that it was unusual to discover a suitable race in under three years. Even after finding one, seven years was thought a reasonable time for a complete survey of their habits and tastes, and a description of the language.

But Streeve ran across the symmetroids in the first week on his assigned continent. As he began preparations for establishing communication his mood had been one of exultation.

It had been made plain to Streeve's class that the first suitable people they came across were to be their object of study. No one was allowed to search for a second group if, for example, the one first encountered presented difficulties of communication. So that it was particularly unfortunate, in view of Streeve's lack of results, that the symmetroids were plainly quite suitable for field study.

They certainly had some sort of social organization. A different symmetroid was likely to sit down first each night. But several years of observation had established that this was by random choice out of probabilities strictly assigned to every member of the race. Streeve had arranged the symmetroids along a hierarchy of importance, according to the size of each one's probability rating. This correlated with the part different symmetroids played in various ceremonies and rites. For instance, each symmetroid mated with a frequency that was determined by its importance.

Or at least he assumed they were mating when two of the people juxtaposed their symmetrical bodies and began rotating them in opposite directions, always touching each other, so that the larger of the pair moved around the smaller one. (There could be no strict division of the sexes since the smaller in one instance of mating was often the larger in another.) They moved faster and faster until eventually all Streeve could see was a rotating elliptical blur. Then, as they slowed down again, he would gradually be able to make out three revolving bodies: a larger going around a smal-

ler as before, but now a third, infant symmetroid moving in figure-of-eight fashion around and between the two original bodies.

And they seemed to have some means of communicating with each other. If a symmetroid in the rear suddenly stopped — Streeve still had no idea what the reason for this could be — the leaders would immediately return and, by grouping around the ailing member, presumably do what was needed to cure him. It had taken some time for Streeve to notice that they never "turned around" when they went back to help a colleague (it was the only time they ever did go back for anything). Or rather, they never "rotated": Streeve decided that "turn round" was inapplicable to a people who had no front or back or sides, but whose bodies were made up of a number of circular rings, varying inches in diameter and piled to a height of up to ten feet.

Streeve was still as far away as he had ever been from finding out how they communicated. But the more he thought about it the more he accepted this, and was surprised that no anthropologist had ever experienced difficulty of this kind before. They might use sounds that were outside his threshhold of hearing: or light signals in the ultra-violet or infra-red ranges: or else some form of telepathy. He inclined towards the last alternative, once his hypothesis about their direction of movement had been checked and verified.

The symmetroids always moved along together, in a straggly line which would certainly have some definitive criterion determining each one's position in it — but whatever this was, Streeve had yet to work out. The leading symmetroid seemed to move toward the direction in which there were the least number of trees; the direction in which movement would be easiest.

There was only one kind of plant on the continent, and Streeve was aware that he was extending the usual meaning of the word "tree" by applying it in this context. But the term seemed less unsuitable than any other for the flat-topped, telegraph-pole-like growths, with rings that looked like long-play records of different sizes growing symmetrically out of their stems. The "trees" occurred in any sort of pattern: in round clumps, in straight lines, in six-pointed star designs, or just individually, with no obvious shape to their distribution.

By exercising what Streeve liked to think was a "radar sense," the symmetroids always moved towards the most open ground, the direction in which they would have most freedom of movement. Their course was continually changing, as the possibilities in front of them altered, so that they appeared at first sight to be moving in a random, drunken wind.

If necessary, they would presumably be able to return the way they had come in the event of encountering an impenetrable cul-de-sac; so that they never need stop or bump into anything. But the trees were never very thick, and during Streeve's

thirty years of study a complete turn-about with the interesting question of instantaneous change of leader — had never occurred.

When he first hit upon the "moving in most open direction" hypothesis, after seven-and-a-half years, Josei Streeve had made the first of a series of widely scattered and quite unscientific comments in his notebook: *This race is surely more perfect than any other known to us. Their life is quite systematic, completely determined and yet, at a guess, entirely satisfying.*

Now they were eating. Or at least Streeve called it eating.

The biggest circle of a symmetroid body was about halfway up and every evening, after they had been sitting for a few minutes, each would spurt a fountain of some liquid from the whole circumference of the largest ring into a gap which opened around the third-to-topmost ring. It was easy to see that the same two rings were involved in each case — although each symmetroid had a total of seventy-nine rings — because of their coloring. The large feeder circle was a dirty yellow, the same color as the trees, and the fed ring was pure blue, in contrast to the mingled shades of red and brown that covered the rest of their bodies.

Mainly, Streeve called it "eating" because of the other function of the yellow ring. Every morning the symmetroids would rise in a body, and each approach a different tree. Two of them would never choose the same tree: Streeve recognised the basis of allocation to be such that the total distances moved by the symmetroids to their individual trees should be minimum. Once each was under its tree (getting there was no difficulty, since the lowest branch on any tree was at about twelve feet) it rotated quickly around it, so that the symmetroid's widest ring always extended for about two inches under the tree's lowest branch. Between the sixth and nineteenth revolutions a liquid sprayed down from the tree into a cavity around the top edge of the yellow circle.

The time that elapsed between their sitting down and eating (which they did from a sitting-down position) varied from one minute to over two hours. Streeve had yet to find a formula to explain the interval although he felt sure he should be able to. Although they did not sit down quite simultaneously, he had never been able to detect the minutest difference in their feeding times. Similarly, although one of them would get up a fraction of a second before the others in the morning (and it was never the one that had sat down first the previous evening) they would gather their food at precisely the same moment.

Sometimes they slept — or at least remained motionless — for three hours, sometimes for sixteen. The only sure feature was that they stopped before sundown and rose after dawn — once only three seconds after, but the following day five hours later. At first Streeve tended to oversleep, and had once or twice

spent days looking for them. But with practice he woke after three hours, and every half-hour after that, even though it was now unnecessary.

He still could not predict to the slightest extent what time they would stand up and begin moving: but he knew exactly the course they would take.

In Streeve's fourteenth year he had the glimmering of another hypothesis.

His excitement compelled another unscheduled entry: *If I am right, the ultimate link is in place. This race must be considered the most perfect people known to man.*

It took five more years to be certain, and six more after that before he wrote: *They are, I am convinced, THE perfect people.* He found that the symmetroids moved along a closed path, so that they completed a circuit, and passed the same landmarks, every two hundred and seven days.

As far as he could remember, and from the notes he had made, this had been the case since his ninth year. He was almost certain that before then they had *not* been on this circuit. He could remember a desert that took fifteen days to cross (he called it a "desert" for want of a better term, since there were only a quarter as many trees as usual), several clumps of plants shaped like swastikas, and a large hole in the ground which, fortuitously, had lain just off the symmetroids' course. He could not be quite sure of all this, for he had still been puzzled by their seemingly inexplicable wandering course for most of the initial nine years, and the written record sometimes made little sense now. But if he was right, *if* . . .

If I am right, then these people have attained complete perfection only during my time here. For just twenty-one years their lives have been absolutely predestined the predestination being determined by their own past behavior!

For although an open course can lead into a closed one, a closed one can only be followed — forever.

However, after thirty years, Streeve was restless. He had been totally unable to communicate with the symmetroids. If he approached them he seemed merely to be regarded as another plant, and their course altered accordingly. They could, if they wished, move faster than him, so that he had yet to touch one. By a carefully planned maneuver he had once forced them to change their leader and almost reverse direction for a few yards.

But that was very little to show for half a lifetime of attempted contact. Should be return home?

Certain failure in his Ph. D. would mean permanent drafting to the underwater army. Or was it better to stay on here, to fill the last ten notebooks as slowly as he could, and hope for an earthquake — although he had been told they were non-existent on this planet — or a forest fire — although it rained every night and the trees never dried out — to alter the status quo, and give him a new opportunity for communicating with the symmetroids.

Streeve's speculations were inter-

rupted. The people had risen, led by an eight-foot high symmetroid whose probability of standing up first was held by Streeve — on the basis of ten samples of a thousand days each — to be only one in one-hundred-and-thirty-nine. Their food gathered, they set off along the usual path at a standard three miles per hour. Streeve followed, still half thinking about returning at once — he had not seen his transit craft since landing but was confident he could get back to it in fifty days.

He noticed a star-shaped clump of trees ahead that rather looked as if it had one arm a little shorter than the other, something he couldn't remember having seen around here before. But the trees were thick enough in this area for this not to be surprising. In fact, there was little to choose between several different directions at this stage of the circuit.

And he thought he could feel — or maybe he just imagined — that the leader's pace slowed a little, perhaps as he took longer to select the most open course.

It wasn't until three hours later that Streeve became worried.

The course seemed unfamiliar, and the pace had definitely slowed now, as the leader found each direction almost as completely wooded as every other. He cursed his slow thinking — dimmed by his years on this planet — for not having realized that a tree could fall down. The optimum need not necessarily remain constant from circuit to circuit. Now the circle was broken!

But the symmetroids were as impassive as ever. Had they even realized that they were on a closed course? Streeve had intuitively guessed so, but his knowledge of their intelligence was slight, and he had no real reason for this belief.

And even now, the hoped-for communcation did not materialize.

For the first time in years Streeve's mind was racing. If they were *the* perfect people, how could they have ceased to be perfect? For ceasing to be perfect is an imperfection, which perfect people could never possess. Yet they *had been* perfect, as he understood perfection, and had now patently ceased to be completely perfect. How could this be?

As he pondered the paradox, Streeve followed the people through a crack in the wall of trees.

If this proved a dead end they would for the first time have to turn around But the path continued, and Streeve plodded after.

Until both trees and earth suddenly stopped before a type of terrain that Streeve had never seen on this planet. As he watched, still struggling with the paradox of perfection, the people moved on — moved smoothly into the sea.

Streeve hesitated for a moment. Then, before following them, he had time to scribble a final epigram on the last page of notebook number four-hundred-and-ninety.

You may not believe it, but there are still some people who think it was wrong to award him a posthumous Ph.D. for a single sentence: *The only perfect people are dead people.* END

THE ULTIMATE RACER

BY GARY WRIGHT

Illustrated by EMSH

A man could defeat a soulless machine every time. But what if they were not — soulless?

They found a spot in the paddock area to park the station wagon, and carefully rolled the scarred old racer off its trailer. Ross and Gray eased it to the track gate while Ken took the VW bus around behind the pits. The savage sounds of racing engines raked the day and a fever burned in the air — *engines, cars, competition.*

Speed.

Two grinning marshals joked through their inspection as Ross and Gray stood statuelike. Like two old reprobates and a weathered dowager at a teenage brawl, Ross thought.

They were finally passed onto the course and began pushing the crim-

on car down the long pit lane. Sleeker and shinier cars lashed past, and, between the cries of their passing, came the sideline comments.

What the hell is that?

Maybe a replica of an old accident.

A Ferrari! It's a damned old Ferrari!

Great Ghost! Are they going to race *it?*

It must be on loan from the Italian Museum of Antique Arts.

They did not bother to glance aside. Two battered old men pushing a battered old coupe; they had heard it all before. Many times. Too many times.

They stopped in their pit area and Gray leaned over the roof to catch his breath. Ken had backed the bus in close behind the barrier and already raised the antenna. He swung open the rear door and turned, frowning, rubbing his hands on his hips.

"Can we go? I've got a green-go on all power circuits."

Gray hunched into the engine compartment while Ross checked tires and fuel. Ken leaned over the barrier.

"Okay?"

Gray slammed the lid and buttoned it up.

"Fire it," he grunted. "Nothing's wrong that hasn't always been. You say all your little tubes and trinkets are warm?"

"There aren't any damn tubes and you know it."

Ken slammed into the back of the bus. Gray chuckled.

"Boy's spooky today."

Ross reached into the cockpit and flicked the switch.

"He's lost his practice time," he said. "Can't blame him. He still takes us seriously."

A glance flickered between them and Ross turned toward the bus. Ken was barely visible through the open rear door. Ross nodded, and Ken flicked switches in the bus.

The Ferrari skirred, grumped and fired. Ross made a stirring motion with one hand; the engine raised its pitch, warming and smoothing. Gray opened the bonnet again and leaned over the rumbling engine. He made the barest adjustment to three of the carbs and nodded to himself. Ross raised a fist and twisted it. Thunder rolled and heads turned to stare from the other pits. Gray looked up and grinned. Ross turned to Ken again and made a steering motion with both hands.

In the cockpit, the blank staring manikin copied Ross's action. Ross jabbed a fist in front of him. The manikin dropped a stiff hand and jerked through the gears. They raked slightly. Ross frowned and glanced at Gray, who just shook his head and slammed the bonnet. Ross raised his fist and motioned as if cracking a whip. The car snarled forward and stopped abruptly.

"At least it can stop," Gray frowned.

A scowling marshal edged past the bus and scrambled over the barrier. He glared at them, at the car, and at his clipboard.

"I'm Crandall, pit marshal. Want to see those brakes!"

Ross looked at Ken and whipped his hand again, hard.

The coupe squealed down the strip and slammed to a stop. Tire smoke drifted away. Crandall frowned again at his board.

"You Ross Eliot?"

Ross nodded. Crandall blinked at him for a moment and referred again to his board.

"And your operator is Kennith Manning. His license?"

"Inside the side door of the bus."

"Um. You're late, Eliot. Is Manning familiar with this course?"

"He's raced it before. Anything else on your mind?"

"Well, everything is in order, I suppose. You're cleared. I just can't understand why—"

Ross raised a hand and chopped it down and the Ferrari smothered them in an avalanche of sound. It roared down the pit lane and onto the course like an unleashed banshee, leaving a wake of craning heads and muttering voices. Ross and Gray frowned after it. The gears had raked again. Crandall's mouth was still open. Ross left him with his clipboard and turned to Gray.

"That same damn thing."

Gray shrugged.

"Well, it's not clutch dragging. I promise you that!"

Ross eased over the barrier and in the side door of the bus. Ken was seated at the console. His hands flicked over the board and his eyes never left the wide TV screen.

Ross watched the road reel out of the depths of the screen and blur under the smooth red nose and fender swells. No sound came from the console; only the cry of cars passing the pit area, and that sound did not fit the action on the screen. Ross thought again how much this was like a movie rather than the real thing . . . and not a very good movie at that.

A corner came unwinding under the Ferrari's nose. Ken shifted, and Ross frowned.

"It's still raking."

"I know," Ken nodded. "I'm getting a red light but it's just a flicker. Watch."

His fingers danced on the board and the scene lurched slightly as the car shifted. A tiny light blinked red under *transmission.*

"Can you match you rpm's better?"

"I try." Ken shook his head. "But you know—"

"Yeah, I know. A surge of electricity is different from a hand."

He slapped Ken on the shoulder and helped Gray unload tires and fuel cans.

"Take a look at the clutch servo when it comes in."

Gray threw him a searing look.

"A man wouldn't even *need* a clutch!"

"How much time we got?" Ken yelled.

"About a half hour of practice. Maybe less."

II

He walked, hands in pockets, behind the pits and thought of Ken and Gray. And of himself.

They were quite a group. Two old

fire eaters and a young one. Ken could unleash his flame through the console, and with such a blaze of skill and devotion that the old Ferrari could still sing the high notes and earn her way; not winning — it had been a long time since she'd led the way home — but close enough to finance another race. Barely. And another. Always one more.

And Gray and himself: they were too old for flames; they just seethed along. Two old bastards. No — make that *three*. The growling old Ferrari qualified too. Three old zombies still in there cluttering up the course. The ancient Triumvirate, long fallen and lacking the sense to crawl away.

But that was the way with Old Bastards: too cranky to quit, too mean to die, too angry to know better. That was the way when the fire outlasted its function. You just seethed.

He passed slowly behind the pit areas, crews feverish in the last intense moments of practice: *Lafitte, Apache, Lotus, Volga, Porsche, IBM-GM, Abarth, Honda, Coventry, GE-Ford.* There were a few independents — as themselves — but with cars that showed no aging, in appearance or in name. And so many new names since the 1982 "man ban." But few of the old racing companies had stayed. Some had faded quietly; some not. Enzo Ferrari had not. He had gathered all his cars he could and sent them and the factory into the sky over Modena.

"No car of mine shall be subject to this shame," he said then. But one car was — Ross's, because Ross had been a Ferrari team driver, and had hidden his car that thundering day. And now was beginning to feel the edge of regret. And shame.

He shouldered through the crowd to the fence beyond the pits. A Honda shrieked past with rpm's to cower dogs for miles around. It shut off for Corner One, squealed its downshift and sang around and away. The crowd chattered in its echo. Like a gleaming green projectile, a Lotus arced into the corner. It was chased by two Fords and a Volga, servo-manikins jerking their downshifts. Another Lotus slipstreamed a Coventry past the pits. The Coven went wide and the Lotus leaped smoothly inside the corner and came out first. Voices laughed and elbows nudged. Lotus was the Big Name now. Lotus was the car to catch. He smiled to himself. That hadn't always been true. There had been another name — once.

The crowd ruffled and heads turned, a silence came and eyes squinted up the long straight past the pits where the South Turn opened. Ah yes. The new challenger for the Lotus crown.

They moaned down the straight in close V formation, less than an inch apart at 150 mph; three dazzling streaks of white that snapped crisp, simultaneous shifts, curved through Corner One and left tire smoke and six black scars on the pavement behind them. Grandstanding, Ross thought. They even have a showoff circuit. But there were cheers and cries of excitement around him, and, suddenly, he felt

very old. Old and empty. No, not empty. Old and angry. Old because he was; angry because this sleek beast, this IBM-GM could catch people's imagination and enthusiasm.

The IBM was more than a car with a puppet in it, more than a machine on the end of a transmitter. In the IBM pits, the consoles were nothing but monitors. The car was in command of itself. Machinery and electricity combined to drive itself, judge itself, race itself. The IBM-GM.

The ultimate racer, they called it; machinery beyond man's mistakes. Gray had another name for it.

A familiar old wail rode up the sky, a commanding bellow that brought a smile to his craggy face and peering faces from the crowd. There! How many men and machines had paid tribute to *that* voice?

It lanced past the pits in a touch of thunder and curved for the corner. Gears crashed in the downshift and it slithered for a second, then pulled through and away. Ross's smile faded. A bad shift and too much brakes. Ken was getting jarred by the gear rake. Voices hummed behind him.

Holy Robe! Was that a Ferrari?

Yeah. It's in the program. Ross Eliot!.

You're kidding.

No! Look! Ross Eliot: owner.

I'll be damned! Old Angry Man Eliot. I thought he was dead.

Might as well be if that *antique is the best he can do.*

Ross edged his way to the rear, one thought boring through him: go home, Eliot. Get out. They don't race your way any more. You've provided comedy relief long enough. You're dead.

He walked back slowly, listening to the snarling cars and his snarling mind. It was going to rain. Naturally. Who ever heard of a race without rain? But it would give them an edge. A slight edge. Their servo sat in a closed coupe and its lenses stayed dry and clean, while most of the modern cars were open and the servo lenses subject to everything the course had to offer. And in the rain it would cost them.

Pit stops for wiping lenses!

A slender figure stepped from the vehicles behind the Lotus pit and Ross put his head down, pretending not to notice. But the clipped, mocking voice halted him.

"Hello there, Eliot."

He looked up. Finely cut face, crinkled eyes, neat mustache, careless hair: "dashing" the press called him, and managed to overlook the arrogant curl in the corner of his mouth.

"Hello, Stewart. How fly the Loti?"

It was an old joke — but then so was he.

"Rather well, as usual. I see you're still coaxing mileage from the Rampant Black Horse. Not sounding awfully well in the gears, is it?"

"We're cracking walnuts for lunch. Join us. I'll save you the shells."

He shouldered past. God, what he would give for a Ferrari in his hands and a fast course and a field of

Lotus to pass. What he wouldn't give for — for anything right now.

Ken sprinted from their pit area as he approached, Gray following as fast as he could. Ken saw him and wheeled.

"I baled it. Ross. Missed third and Warren Corners."

"Okay. Get back on the board to drive it in. Gray and I'll go out and have a look. It'll run, won't it?"

The look on Ken's face was like a bullet in his chest.

"It'll start — but I've got a full red light on the transmission."

"We'll take the trailer then." He paused, frowning at the gray sky. Today? The last broken leg for the Black Horse? He looked back to Ken. "Hell, boy! Quit looking like you just shot your father. We've been through the tules before."

"Yeah, but not with a bunged box. Hadn't I better come in case we have to — have to haul it in?"

Like pronouncing a death in the family, Ross thought. He unleashed a long breath and nodded, and felt something shudder loose inside. God, it was a helpless feeling to be out of luck, out of time, out of place.

III

It wasn't really hurt. Another scarred fender would hardly be noticed. Another dent in the air scoop made little difference. The wheels were still true. The front end was straight. The sump was sand polished but whole. It was still a fighting machine.

But today was the day. No more "one more race."

Rain rattled on the roof of the VW. Ross finished and sat staring at Ken.

"So that's the last act, boy. I can't even pay what I owe you."

Ken shook his head, gazing at the rain-shiny racer on its trailer behind their pit.

"Just one rotten, stupid, damned solenoid!"

Gray snorted and juggled a screwdriver from hand to hand.

"Just a solenoid they don't even make any more!"

"If we could only replace —"

"Quit dreaming, boy," Gray said. "There isn't a twenty-four volt system left in the business."

A slim figure plunged through the rain and grinned at them through the open side doors.

"Well. Choke up on the walnuts, did it?"

Ross glanced up. Yes, the smile was there.

"Clutch solenoid."

"Oh. Too bad. Not like the old days, is it? Are you dead?"

"We're dead," Ross answered. "But we took a lot of killing, didn't we?"

"A damn shame, that. There's nothing you can do? I mean, a clutch bugger is such a bloody little thing."

"It's enough."

They listened for a moment to the calling of the small classes. Engines growled in the pits. Stewart spoke again.

"Well, that's the bitch of it, isn't it? I don't suppose we could cobble something together. We have servos that —"

"Rack it, Mr. Lotus." But Gray's

voice had lost its edge. "That's a *car* out there, not one of your animated toys. We couldn't convert it in a month and you know it!"

Stewart gave a brittle laugh.

"You're right, of course, but that's the running of it, isn't it? I mean, you've had your day, haven't you?"

Ross stared at Stewart for a long time before he spoke.

"Stewart, I've often wondered why you talk in questions," he said quietly. "And I wonder if it isn't that you need the assurance of agreement. So I'll agree with you this time. Yes, we've had our day. And it was a day you know very little about. It took men to match the machines then, Stewart."

Stewart flushed.

"Times change, Angry Man. Racing is —"

"Racing is a little girl's business now. Playtime. An abortion born of electric trains and 'Father Knows Best.' And you're proud of it, aren't you, Stewart? You were a loud voice in the bringing of the ban. Loud and in a position to bray in the right ears. Why? What made you and the others push that through?"

Stewart paused.

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it? Men were dying! Needlessly! Mangled in the wreckage of their cars. Stupid deaths. What other reasons are necessary?"

Ross gazed away at the drizzling rain and smiled.

"I remember a young man with a new license and a new car. I remember how he managed to blunder every race he entered. Strange. I understand he was a real ace with little electric cars on a little road racing course." He glanced back at Stewart. "I wonder what was lacking in him that he couldn't race a real car. I wonder why he felt he had to protect the lives of his fellow men. Such consideration, Stewart. I am honored. If it hadn't been for you — and the others too, of course — I might be dead. I should thank you."

Stewart stiffened. His voice became even more clipped.

"Yes. I think we have saved some lives."

"Saved, Stewart? Or taken away?"

"I — don't understand what you mean by that."

"I know you don't." A harsh edge came into Ross's voice. "Run off now, Stewart. Go play with your toys. I'm tired of being protected."

One side of Stewart's mouth lifted in a cold smile.

"Too bad you couldn't have kept racing, Eliot. You could have died a hero instead of becoming the pathetic thing you are now."

Ross nodded.

"True. Perhaps I'll drive today."

"Do that! Make a *complete* ass of yourself!"

Stewart spun and strode into the rain, then stopped.

"You were a great driver, Eliot. Too bad that people shan't remember you as one."

He swung away and was gone and no one spoke in the bus. The gray rain drummed on the roof and Ross stared at his cold and lonely racer. What is it? he thought. What

is it that links a man with the pulse and thunder of a car until his whole life is in that machine? That machine there. That low, mean missile with a rearing black horse as its emblem. A car he had lived with and in and around for too many years. A car that was almost legend now.

Ferrari.

And eleven years of laughter and ridicule had never seen it finish last, nor fail to finish. Until today. And today it would not even start. It was over. The last Ferrari was through.

And what now?

The museum at Watkins Glen? The car, waxed and poised on hidden blocks, marked and scarred and beautiful? Himself and Gray, waxed and poised on hidden rods, marked and scarred and ugly. And the neat sign could read:

Last Ferrari. Last driver and mechanic.

1981 Ferrari GTS 400; 5 liter. V-10, 615 bhp, 220 mph.

Ross "Angry Man" Eliot; World Champion, 1980, 1981.

Gray "Even Angrier" Willard; mechanic and Old Bastard.

And there could be more. Much more. Little awe-sparking notes to urge the grunts of wonder from the Sunday families.

Broke course record at Sebring five times in succession without brakes or clutch.

Broke my little finger too in a bad shift.

Won 1980 LeMans after passing through an eight-car tangle without touching a thing.

Touched the brake. Once.

Got nickname at Nurburg Ring after hurling his broken clutch pedal at the pit crew and going on to win German GP of 1979.

Missed them, though

Oh yes, they could tell it. Tell the big and tell the little. Give them all the facts and features. Play the roar and make them shudder. Show the films and have them wonder.

But they could never touch the truth of what is was to be this man and this machine coupled in an act of living, how it was to ride in thunder with the touch of lightning underfoot and the rim of life in both hands. They could never tell.

And the people would never know.

He gazed at the car crouching on its trailer like a great poised cat. His machine. His mistress. And the cold goggling manikin bolted in the cockpit like an alien violator. His anger flamed. He turned to Gray and nodded.

Gray smiled for the first time in years.

"About time, Angry Man."

IV

Ken's voice was low and feverish in the closed bus.

"You're crazy, Ross! You're *crazy!* You'll be blackflagged out of racing for life. *You!*"

"It has happened to better men. Some of them thought it was the only honorable thing to do."

"But you haven't driven in over ten years. No one can just jump into it after that — not even *you.*"

"I remember where the gears are, boy. Yank on that other leg. It's caught on a cable."

They were stripping the manikin of its coveralls.

Ken exploded, "Kee-rist! You call prowling around a few courses in the dawn's early light driving? I mean *racing,* Ross. I mean boring out there and working it!"

Ross looked up, his voice flat.

"Kenny, don't tell me about racing."

They stared a moment longer, and Ken glanced away. They both jumped like cats when the door banged open. Gray crowded in, shaking his head.

"That Crandall," he snorted. "He came snooping by and asked if we were still running. I told him, 'Hell yes. We got a replacement part.' And he acted real disappointed. Watched me clear the pedals and then took off. The man's got eyes like a truck's got wings."

Ken suddenly snapped his fingers.

"The video! How can I fake it without video? What if he peeks in here and I'm diddling in front of a blank screen?"

"Good thought, Ken-boy." Gray reached for the manikin's head with its two sparkling eyes. He pulled a screwdriver from a hip pocket and started taking the skull apart. "I guess we can bale together some kind of a lash-up."

Ross slipped his legs into the coveralls, speaking quietly.

"You don't have to play the game, Ken. You know that."

"Yeah, I know."

"It's a lifetime ban for all concerned. You'll never get so much as a pit pass for the rest of your life."

"I know."

Gray plucked an eye tube from the skull, untangled its leads and started on the other.

"You're foolish, Ken-boy," he said. "It doesn't matter with us. Ross will probably slaughter himself, and I don't know any better. But you've got a good future in this business. You can play that damn TV and piano better than anyone I've seen. Ross could get you a seat in a second."

Ken shook his head.

"We might just pull it off."

"Dream and scheme," Gray chuckled. "Nobody that's ever tried it has pulled it off. It's a last act, boy."

He removed the other tube, rammed them both in a pocket and slipped out. The smaller classes had started and engines screamed through the rain. A Honda squalled by in the lead, followed, it seemed, by every fighting animal in the world. Ross lit a cigarette. His hands were shaking. The door yanked open again. They jumped. Crandall stood scowling from the shelter of a large umbrella.

"Your mechanic says you're still running!"

"You're damn right! And if you slam in here like that when my operator is on the board I'll ram your clipboard right down your bloody throat! This is a private vehicle."

Crandall sniffed, glared at the sprawling servo-manikin and slammed the door.

"Just put up with him the best you can, I guess," Ross said.

Ken leaned forward.

"Have we any chance at all?"

"Chance of what? Pulling it off? Getting into the money?"

"Either. Both."

"Not much, no. Neither. You've seen how the marshals swarm the pits after a race for what they call 'inspection?' Have you ever wondered why a car should be inspected *after* a race? They're still looking for men drivers, boy. And they find them once in a while; old fools like me who think the old days were kind of fun, who don't appreciate being kept from hurting ourselves. As far as dodging that and getting into the money — mouse guano! I always held that a man could beat a servo, but I don't know now. These new outfits are fast! Did you know the IBM was radared at 198.7 at Sebring this spring? It takes a big bale of machinery to do that, boy."

"But the Ferrari did 220.3 --"

"At Bonneville, Ken. Not on a race circuit." He was silent for a moment, turning his old, battered helmet in his hands.

"And pulling it off or placing isn't really the point."

"What is, Ross? You're not doing it just for the hell of it."

Cars snarled past, downshifting, lining for Corner One. Ross raised his head and listened. Two racers passed, one holding a second longer before shifting. He smiled.

"Perhaps that's it. Just for the hell of it. Damned if I do . . ." He paused, squinting through a rain-flecked window at the Ferrari, bright and shiny now from the wet. "And surely damned if I don't."

The door banged open again and Gray leaned in.

"May God damn Crandall to everlasting hell! Try your screen."

Ken spun to the board and snapped a switch. The screen blinked on showing the blunt rear of the station wagon.

"I put them in the air scoop. Told Crandall I was fixing a leak in the oil cooler." Rain followed the lines of a grin down his cheeks. "He wanted to know why the manikin was out. I told him it had to go potty. I swear, the man has never seen a real racer in his life! He asked, 'What's that lever sticking up from the floor?' Judas! I should have said it was the crank that wound the spring."

Ross grinned as he pulled on his helmet.

"You can go to hell for lying too."

"I'll race you there. Let's go before Old Peek and Peck comes back. I want to see if you remember how to start it."

Ross pulled on his gloves and adjusted his goggles.

"Must cover my beady little eye tubes," he grinned.

"Better cover your big mouth too." Gray grabbed his feet. "Grab its head, Ken-boy. We'll plug it in and see if it works."

"Jees!" Ken grunted. "It's gotten a lot heavier."

"And limp too. For godsake, Ross, stiffen up! Who the hell ever heard of a limp servo?"

"You think I'm limp now, you old bastard, wait'll you cut me out of that machine."

He sat stiff behind the wheel, and not simply from imitating a servo. He was like a painting, incredibly old and brittle and not very well done at that.

The car was close around him. The water-smooth hood and fenders curved familiarly in front, the seat was firm and holding, the wheel hard in his hands. But he felt wrong. Alien. Not a part of anything here. And with the rain whispering softly on the top and the cold mist on his face from the open side window — it came to him why.

He was the only man in this long row of quietly waiting cars. The only touch of life among this machinery. And it was a cold lonely feeling. The chill loneness of an intruder in an enemy land.

And that made him angry too.

Why should he be a stranger here? This was his country, wasn't it? A car, a course, a competition!

But the thought stood close behind him and would not leave.

He glared at Gray poised across the track in his circle; a travesty of a Le Mans start in which the mechanics ran to start the cars. The old goat will catch pneumonia, he thought. No hat! No raincoat. Just grizzled old Gray frowning in the rain, coveralls soaked and plastered to his wiry frame.

He swivelled his eyes down the course. Crowds jammed the fences under a mushroom forest of umbrellas and makeshift canopies. A strange breed, he thought, mobbed together in the rain to watch a pack of cars fight. And what would they think if they knew a man was sitting in one of those cars? Would they be on his side? Would they be cheering him?

Yes, he thought so. And that was a warm feeling; to have a crowd on your side. He had a sudden impulse to move, to show he was human, but he didn't. The cold manikins down the line stared straight and statuelike, and he copied them.

Mist curled on Corner One and the pavement gleamed like polished glass. He ran the course again in his mind. He had raced it before the ban, but that had been long ago. Too long. Back when he was —

His blood leaped and his hands tensed. The count had started.

He watched Gray crouch — then spring, running like a boy. The long line of figures dashed across the wet track. Gray slipped and nearly went down, arms waving, then skidded alongside and rammed an arm through the window.

"Go break a leg," he breathed. Ross touched the starter. The big engine growled, roared, and he fired the Ferrari off the line, sliding slightly as he bent it down the track. And he smiled.

Go break a leg!

Go kill yourself. Into the tiger's mouth! Join the dead men! Dares from the days of TCs and Cad-Allards and big white Mercedes, the calls of a clan who ran for the joy of it. Old words. Foolish. But something old and foolish rides this course today

V

He was first away and leaning into third going into Corner One, and his mirrors showed a raging flood of cars behind him. He caught fourth, skidded slightly on Corner Two, and dropped into fifth. His mirrors were crowded with headlights, airscoops, and flashing bodies.

Well, let them come. If nothing more he'd lived the leap off the line again and been first into a race.

A Lotus ripped by him, an IBM nearly in its tailpipes. They seethed under the Pirelli Bridge, spray pluming behind them, and downshifted for the Dogleg. He snapped down to fourth, then raked third and swore. The Lotus went into the corner too fast. It slithered wide and the IBM got by on the inside. He made a try but the Lotus recovered and outpulled him going into the straight. Damn! The IBM hadn't wavered a bit, and was already gone down the mile straight in a boiling steam of spray.

He shifted up to fifth again, squinting into the Lotus's lashing contrail. Another IBM slammed past. Lord, they were fast! Like jets on a strafing run. He glanced in a mirror. The third IBM was working up with no more effort than a hot car in truck traffic. The Ferrari lurched and water roared underneath. There were pools on the pavement, invisible in the rain. A Ford sizzled past with a dark red Apache in its wake. Some old warning made him slow and pull far right without really knowing why, and there it was. Spray exploded under the Ford's nose and it disappeared for a second. The Apache dove into the wall of water then slashed across in front of him, spinning. The Ford plowed end for end into the infield.

An old hack-chant chuckled in his ear: There are cool drivers and fool drivers, but not cool, fool drivers.

The third IBM snarled alongside.

Warren Corners were suddenly there and he was outside and out of position and out of luck. He noviced through the first hard left in a long slide behind the IBM. Too long. No chance for the right unless he backed through it. Damn. He dropped two gears and managed to leave the pavement in a straight line, barely clearing way for a Porsche and two big Hondas.

The Ferrari bucked as it hit the dirt. He coaxed it around, carving long furrows in the grass and mud. He took out two bushes and a young tree, missed a rock and the fence, plowed through a shallow ditch and angled back to the course. Like trying to enter a freeway at five o'clock. He kept it rolling, edged into a clear spot and savagely worked his way up through the gears.

Well, you old fool, he scathed himself, what are you doing out here? Forgot how to play Follow-the-Leader?

Apparently, but then he had always been the leader before. Then he smiled: I wonder how that looked on Ken's screen?

A Lafitte passed, chased by a Coventry and a Lotus. And he was

glad he was in a closed coupe. A game of "no touch tag" in a hurricane at 170 mph. How the devil could they *see?* He was having trouble enough, and their eye tubes were certainly no better than his eyes. The Lafitte pulled over in front of him and the Coventry passed it. Barely. In a crash of water, the Lafitte surged sideways and nudged the Lotus, and all he could see for a moment were headlights — taillights — headlights — taillights — two cars like pinwheels on the road in front, spinning together and parts flying, and he was suddenly through between them. An Abarth behind him didn't make it.

He followed the Coventry's line around the Little Hairpin, let a Volga by, then tailed it down the short straight and around the Big Hairpin. A Honda crowded close behind him going into the Esses. It stayed there, then pulled by on the straight.

No fighting it. The old Ferrari was outclassed. Probably the smallest car here could fan him on the straights.

The Honda swerved ahead of him and he barely missed the Apache that was swung backwards on the pavement, then watched helplessly as the Honda rocketed head-on into a Ford that was re-entering the course. He went under some of that.

He tried to relax, remembering that no one was being killed and mangled. But old habits die hard. To him, cars meant men.

South Turn curved underneath and opened into the pit straight. One lap down; ninety-nine to go.

He relaxed a little. Let them traffic each other. He was out here in his car and that was all that mattered. It would be the last time in his life that anything mattered. Let the machines fight it out. Let the servos sweat . . . Too bad they couldn't.

The laps leafed away like pages of an old book. Long-forgotten things returned; the old reactions and techniques, once automatic, found themselves again. Like single instruments finding their place in an orchestral arrangement. He and his car were linking together again, slowly — then stronger, as two people from old passion find themselves again: little by little, gradually responding. Reacting together.

The rain had blown away, but the sky sulked gray and soggy. The course was still wet. It wasn't glassy; the Little Hairpin was the only dodgey spot where water pooled in the apex of the corner. Gray had propped a gas can up behind the barrier so that it could only be seen from the course. He had even found some chalk — God only knew from where. Ross wondered if he hadn't been keeping it for just this moment. And the writing on the can read: *19?*

Well, why not. Nineteenth was a comfortable position. Especially for two Old Bastards running more on anger than anything else.

But he started edging up his lap times.

Traffic had thinned and scattered. The opening bash, like something

from an old, wildcat stock-car circus, had taken care of the rash operators.

It was easy, he thought, to be rash at some quiet console. So you lost a car once in a while. So what? All you had to lose was your job — not your life. There should be a feature of the consoles that when an operator bent a car — two merciless metal hands seized and broke the operator accordingly. Perhaps some flavor would return. But then the international committees would ponder this danger, judge it harmful and rule that servos must operate the boards. Mustn't let anyone be hurt. Naughty. Father knows best, you know. Mustn't do anything dangerous. Ross clamped his jaws and slashed through the Esses using every available inch of pavement. He was beginning to understand why the mountain climbers kept jumping their servos off the highest cliffs.

Our Father, who knows best, you are a doddering old meddler!

Modern racing or not, the old troubles were still there. The price of pushing machinery to its peak. There were nine cars in the pits with mechanics shouldered into engines, gearboxes, front ends, brakes; electricians into servos and consoles; some cars alone and lonely — dead. On the course he had passed a Volga with crumpled nose and a bad problem with left corners. The course itself was sidelined with cars in various stages of disassembly.

And he had the unique pleasure of seeing a servo psych out. A sleek Coventry had headed him into the Dogleg. Something had failed to click, or had clicked too many times, or had clicked at the wrong time, or had been the wrong click altogether, and the machine had bolted from the course like a sudden coward, accelerating, spinning mud roostertails behind it. Fortunately for the spectators there was an old foundation there. Unfortunately for the Coventry.

And he and the old warrior Ferrari had gone around and around, and growled and howled, and remembered what it was to be alive.

Ross Eliot is back, he grinned to himself. As much of him as will ever make it!

Another shower was ghosting in from the west. He noticed it as he moaned down the backstretch, taking Warren Corners in two linked arcs and nearly running over a Lafitte coming out.

It tried hard to repass, but the Little Hairpin came up too soon. He sliced through the edge of the pool and pushed hard for the Big Hairpin. There was a glint of green ahead. He showed a cold smile and slammed through the Big Hairpin, the Esses and the South Turn. The green Lotus was ahead on the pit straight, running behind a Porsche. And the Lafitte was no longer on his tail.

He watched the shower barely touch the north end of the course as he came up the straight and into Corner One. He closed up on the Porsche and the Lotus coming under the Pirelli Bridge, and backed off for the Dogleg. The others didn't.

Too bad, he grinned. The two cars fishtailed on the slick pavement, too fast and too far into the corner. Didn't your brilliant little lenses see that shower?

The Lotus left the corner sideways, blasted mud and destroyed itself around a tree. The Porsche held, but broadside and sliding. He passed it, torque up and a gear over.

He smiled his way around. Not too bad for an old man. Perhaps not too old for a bad man.

He drove harder, deeper into the corners, and felt the old elation of pushing into that dark land of limitations. Riding the edge, they used to call it. It was exploring. Crowding man and machine into that foggy unknown where only skill and judgment kept them alive, where there was no such thing as a small mistake.

Racing!

But I'm slow, he thought, much too slow. In the old days the team manager would have yanked him off the course and given him hell for lugging the engine.

Gray had the pit stop signal up as he came past the pits. He nodded automatically, then laughed at himself. Servos didn't nod! They may short out and smoke; they got jolted around in a fender bending contest; they sometimes whirled aloft in a sprawl of limbs and wires in an accident — but nod?

Never!

Well — hardly ever.

He pulled over for the pit lane on the next lap, braked, geared down and stopped by Gray. And froze.

Stewart and Crandall were standing by the bus just behind the barrier. Stewart was smiling! Crandall was frowning.

Ken slammed from the bus, jarred Stewart with a hard shoulder and vaulted the barrier. He started on a rear wheel while Gray dumped fuel into the five-inch filler. The car lurched on the jack. Ross stared straight ahead, hands clamped on the wheel. He heard Stewart laugh.

"Well, why shouldn't it look like him? I have a servo that looks like me — though I think mine is in better shape."

Crandall said something that was covered by a passing car. Stewart laughed again.

"Oh, *some* antiques are quite astonishing, aren't they? But it's pathetic when they're pressed into something beyond their usefulness."

His voice seemed uncommonly loud, as if he were deliberately trying to reach Ross's ears. Gray blocked off the two men and fumbled inside the cockpit, checking Ross's "connections."

"Looks like we sneaked out on the wife and got caught," he said in a low voice.

"Crandall?"

"Crandall doesn't know his behind from a brake disc. It's Stewart. He lounged in here with his catcurling grin and asked where you were. I told him you were suddenly taken ill. He said, 'He certainly has, hasn't he?' He must have spread it around. The other pits are watching you."

"No black flag yet."

"No one will tattle but Stewart,

I'm sure of that. But I think he's waiting for you to bash it."

"Nice of him."

"He said he always wondered what was the color of your blood."

The car jarred down from the jack and Ken was back over the barrier and into the bus. Gray stepped back, still blocking the two men.

Ross fired the Ferrari into life and slammed it down the pit lane and onto the course. He hurled it through Corner One, down the short straight and through Corner Two. It squalled, held, and he screamed under Pirelli Bridge.

So that was the game now! They had given him the stage for one last laugh, had they?

He slashed through the Dogleg from outside to inside to outside on the bare brink of a wild slide and allowed himself a grim smile. That was a little better! The fire was back in the blaze again; Angry Man Eliot!

That was what made him before: anger. A happy man couldn't be a racer. A happy man was a satisfied man, and a satisfied man had no business out here. He had been satisfied just to be in his car on the course — and that was wrong for him. Out of character. All angry men managed a last, loud word. Perhaps his wouldn't be the last word, but it would damn well be loud.

The old Ferrari voiced its battle cry down the back straight and through Warren Corners. The Little Hairpin with its pool of water, the Big Hairpin, the Esses unwound beneath him. He caught a Coventry in the South Turn, nipped inside and passed it coming out. It repassed on the pit straight and he had to do it all over again in Corner One. It stayed back, waiting, but he got around a Volga in Corner Two and stayed there, adding a little more distance in the Dogleg. The two of them came close on his tail down the long back straight but Warren Corners rushed up and he had a hundred yards lead coming out.

Too bad, he told them. If you had been men I would have waved.

The laps raged by. He was a zombilike thing, a reactor to commands that bypassed thought: one hand on the wheel, the other on the shift lever, watching a corner rush at him at 182 mph; then brakes, downshift, downshift, on the line from one edge of the pavement to the other to the outside again, full pedal, upshift, tach into the red line, upshift, wait for the next corner. I'm a servo, he thought. Little different from the others; just blood instead of electricity. Have you seen the color yet, Stewart?

Faces flashed and followed from the pits. Take a good look, he told them. It's the last act and you may miss the whole damn point of the play.

He caught a Porsche in the Esses, a Lotus on Corner Two, and an Apache in the Dogleg. A Lotus wouldn't let him by in Warren Corners nor in the Little Hairpin.

In the Big Hairpin he planted the Ferrari's nose on its tail and pushed. It pulled over. Clear off the pavement. A Honda was next in the South Turn, then another Porsche on Corner Two.

And that is your failing, fellows, he grinned. Corners.

The bland servos didn't have that one critical sense: that delicate, subliminal thing that heard the whisper in the car and reacted before the mind gave it reason; that intimate thing that linked a man and machine. It was something that couldn't ride a wavelength.

And races are run in the corners, he told them, not on the straights. Any child can fire a missile in a straight line, but a man learns to corner.

And not just on a race course, either.

Cars were passed and fell behind, and fatigue slipped into his arms and shoulders. Blood and muscles, he thought, aren't electricity and solenoids.

Gray was alone again in the pit and his makeshift board showed position and remaining laps. But it made little difference. He had been lapped once by the leaders, the IBM's and two Lotus. It wasn't a matter of winning now; it was a matter of doing what he could. Didn't they used to say that the true drivers were really racing themselves? Something like that. Stirling Moss once put it another way.

One's a racer or one's not.

And one's a man or one's not.

He pushed. And finally glimpsed them flying the Esses like three white rockets: the ultimate racers by GM out of IBM; numbers 1, 2, and 3. And that's the way they planned to finish, with the two green Lotus howling at their heels.

He smiled. Stewart must be questioning himself to death. Not only was Old Angry Man running with the hounds but his trim green streaks were being shown the way home. Poor man. We may as well combine his problems. One's a racer or one's not.

He chased, pushing to the ragged rim, and the flashes of white and green ahead of him came more frequently.

He edged closer lap by lap and was finally last in the trainlike line that screamed out of the South Turn and past the blurred faces in the pits. White, green and red!

Symbolic? he thought. Yes. White is Truth. Green is Jealousy. Red is — what else? — Blood.

It all fit nicely. The IBM's were the next step; logical advancement. Yes, take a good look, people. Ten years of racing in one tricolored flash.

They hauled away from him on the straights; he caught them in the corners. They pulled away, and he caught them again. He studied them and frowned.

The IBM's were good. Too good. Almost manlike. Their reactions in the corners were incredibly fast, faster than any man, but they still had a reservation and he was cornering faster. But the IBM's had an assurance, a confidence — damn it — almost a *sense*. They were cor-

nering better than the two Lotus. And he gave himself a bitter grin. The operator — human or not — belongs in the machine. These two creations were almost racers. Almost. The test was — were they capable of pushing beyond themselves? Did they know their own boundaries?

The five cars lengthened their lead down the back straight, but Warren Corners came zigzagging and he pushed his red nose to within six inches of the last green tail. The Lotus pulled over for him to pass but he did not have the power. He dropped behind it again, then slammed deep into the Little Hairpin. They came out side by side. It outpulled him on the short straight. He did it again on the Big Hairpin, holding his foot down to the last possible instant. He came out in front of the Lotus and with enough speed over to pull alongside its twin. It matched him however and they went into the Esses side by side. Then came the South Turn, and this time down the pit it was white, red, green.

Well, Stewart? Have you seen the color yet?

The two Lotus came after him like cats on a rabbit but he stayed ahead through the north end of the course; the fast half, but with enough corners to hold them back.

He arced through the Dogleg on the crying edge of a slide, trying to carry enough speed through with him to hold down the long back straight. For a moment he held steady behind the three white IBM's, but had to watch them pull away, and frown helplessly at his mirrors as the two Lotus closed the distance behind him. One started by, but Warren Corners were almost always a bit surprising. They hid in ambush over a slight rise, and at 187 mph they sprang suddenly. Too suddenly for the console operator in the Lotus van.

The green car slammed full panic brakes, slithering beside him, then swung broadside as it fell behind. The other Lotus had to leave the course to avoid a crash, but managed to stay on its wheels.

Well, Stewart, that's the bitch of it, isn't it? A car is still only as good as its operator.

He howled through the two Warrens and came up close behind the last IBM; number *three*. It sprinted up beside *two* as if goosed.

So, he nodded. You can go faster, can you? And you're just a bit spooky too.

Well . . .

They backed off for the Little Hairpin, *three* dropping back to find its line. But Ross held. The distance rushed shut until he knew something beyond his own brakes would have to save them from collision. Stampeding, they used to call it; for scaring green drivers. And *three* was green. It spurted up beside *two* again on the inside, and the corner was there and the pool of water and no place for it to go.

Spray crashed white against the sky. The car recovered instantly, but in that slice of time it touched *two*. And *two* left the corner side-

ways into the mud, going over and over and into the air and end for end until there was hardly enough of it left to stop.

Number *three* stayed on the course, but greatly slowed, and he passed it without losing speed. He tried to pick up the slipstream from *one*. but he was not close enough hard into the Big Hairpin, caught the IBM coming out, and hung on through the Esses. He rode close and felt them touch lightly in the South Turn.

The IBM turned full power past the stands and pits, but his slipstreaming held and they entered Corner One less than a foot apart. In the one flashing glance he had, it seemed that he had never seen so many faces bordering around the course.

And he hated them! Hated them with a savage, flaming hatred for their coddled, cowardly world; their progressively protective world that had made him an alien in his own land. For he *was* an alien and he knew it now. An anachronism. A smoldering old savage unable to adapt; unable to take it quietly.

An Old Bastard.

The number *three* IBM was closing on him down the pit straight and through Corner One with the remaining Lotus snarling on its tail. They were closer coming out of Corner Two, snaking slightly in their screaming acceleration. He allowed himself a small smile. So that was the flavor now: full go and to hell with the cars!

Okay.

Men have a full go too.

The IBM seemed about to run over him going under the bridge, finally coming alongside, the Lotus riding its slipstream.

There was no passing room before the Dogleg; it was back off or get off. He knew what was coming. It was an old trick, and he felt disgust that they should think he couldn't handle it. He was on the outside, holding into the corner until they had no room to come over to make their line. Then he gave full brakes, dropped a gear, then another, then full power.

The two cars drifted across his nose, forced too far into the corner. He cleared the tail of the Lotus by four inches, stayed on his line and went through. They left the pavement. The IBM hit a shallow ditch and bounced. The Lotus swerved to miss it and hit a parked Lafitte. Dirt and pieces cluttered up the sky. He had one last glimpse of the IBM fishtailing through the grass, trying to recover, then it fell behind.

He chased hard down the back straight, out of the slipstream now and losing distance. Damned stupid machines! But his mirrors showed *three* back on the course and coming fast, tire smoke streaming behind it. He caught *one* again out of Warren Corners. He held back a short distance, then made a bid in the Little Hairpin. They held side by side for a moment coming out, engines climbing to a siren cry. But power paid again and he had to tuck in behind the white car as it pulled away. Number *three* was pressing closer through the Big

Hairpin. He could see why. It carved out behind him in a brawling, tire-mauling disregard for everything, only its brute power holding it on the course. Its engine couldn't take that for long, he knew that. But apparently that made no difference now. It was after him. By design or by mistake, by will or by short circuit, it was after him.

Couldn't they turn it off? Or didn't they want to?

If you were a man, he thought, if you were a being of choice and knowledge — I would admire you. You would be a racer.

They seethed through the Esses and lined up for the South Turn. *Three* was coming now like a mad beast. He held close inside in the fast left turn. *Three* started around him on the outside. Impossible! Nothing could hold at that speed.

"Why you goddamned machine!" he said. "You're broken!"

The IBM sheered wide and leaned into the wall. Body panels shattered off behind it. A tire blew. It lurched, slammed the wall hard and curved across in front of him. He jabbed brakes and dropped a gear. The Ferrari screamed its protest, sending the tachometer far beyond the red line.

"Sorry, old girl, but I think they've taken us."

He could drop back until the tangle resolved itself. But *one* would be down the straight and out of sight. Or he could hold in and bore through and never quite know how he made it. The decision was made without him really aware of the question. One's a racer or one's not.

The wild *three* barely cleared his nose — and slashed into *two*.

They both spun. He backed off, watching. That was it! The metal men had bashed themselves out. The apple was his now. The whole show! He could stroll home and take it. The two cars separated, ricocheting from the wall. He watched, safely, then rammed his foot down. There would be a hole! A tiny hole and the old Ferrari would lose some more paint. But that's the going of it. He had *never* strolled home!

But something white blurred across in front of him, he met it full on.

The shoulder strap snapped and his head smashed the wheel. Automatically he yanked himself back and pulled hard left, trying to broadslide down the straight. But the slide became a spin, and he was too dazed and too tired and too old to do anything about it.

Go, Ferrari, he said. You've got eleven years of momentum in you. Work it off. You've got the last word.

Another crash. And another.

And one final thundering impact that blasted him to a halt. The engine roared into him through the firewall. Flames exploded in the cockpit that he did not feel and the only thing he heard from the world outside was one voice — almost a scream.

"Let it burn!"

He agreed. The only thing to do.

He groped until he found the wheel, then leaned back in the seat and smiled. END

THE DIOGENES PLANET

BY L. J. STECHER, JR.

Here's why the captain of the Delta Crucis couldn't lie — and what he could do instead!

I can't say that I enjoy dealing with Captain Hannah.

It isn't that he charges too much for the use of that tramp spacer of his — the *Delta Crucis* — although he usually isn't above charging close to the limit of what he figures the traffic will bear. It's just that things seem to happen whenever I deal with him. And then there's the point that I don't trust him.

Still, he sometimes gives me a better price than I can get anywhere else, and on occasion his is the only ship that's available. So I find myself contracting with him oftener than is good for my health.

Captain Hannah usually isn't much given to talking, but on this occasion I was giving him a hard time. The prospective cargo was milna nuts. As you know, they are easy to ship, and can be stored for years. The only thing that bothers them is dampness. If I couldn't get my price, I could afford to wait. The warehouse they were stored in was mine, it was well built and it wasn't full. As for Captain Hannah, I think that an installment on the mortgage on *Delta Crucis* must have been due. He was acting hungry.

At any rate, he had been tell-

ing me about the unusually excellent humidity control system he had in his ship. When I delicately implied that he was shading the truth, he didn't stare at me silently out of those pale spacer's eyes of his and then stalk away, as he usually would have done. Instead, when he had stared at me silently, he beckoned the waiter over and motioned for our glasses to be refilled.

Then the silent Captain Hannah started to talk.

"Clever I may not be," said Captain Hannah. "Lucky I frequently am not. But dishonest — this I will never be."

He paused. "I have never told anyone this before, but would you like to hear about how I came to own *Delta Crucis?* It will prove my statement about my honesty, and that will give you a hold over me in future dealings that I'm not sure I can afford. Still, it will be worth it, if it helps me get this contract with you at this time."

"I told him expansively that I was in no hurry, that my crop and I were very happy where they were, but that if he wanted to tell me a story, I was not adverse to drinking his liquor.

"Well," said Captain Hannah, "not too many years ago I was First Officer of the *Star of Glory*. That's one of the biggest and most profitable combined passenger-freighters of the Glory Line. You've heard of them, I'm sure, even if their ships don't often call at backwater planets like this one. They are a huge outfit, but they aren't particularly famous for their honesty. The courts keep them from getting too far out of line very often, but they shave things as close as they think they can get away with.

"At the time of my story, we were circling Gamma Ophiuchus Four, getting ready to set down and do a little trading. Captain Clark was a big, bold man, with the kind of moral sense, or lack of it, that the Glory Line admires. But when he gathered his crew together to give last minute instructions he looked scared. His big, blotchy face had turned mushroom pale and glistened with a sheen of sweat. His hands trembled as he held them up in his usually brusque signal for silence.

" 'Listen to me, all of you,' he said hoarsely. 'Behave yourselves dirtside this trip. No tricks, no stealing, no lies. Not on the Diogenes Planet. For the sake of all of us, keep your noses entirely clean. If you make one step out of line they'll know it, God help us. And I'll know it. And you'll regret it the rest of your lives — if you're allowed to live.'

"He paused for a minute and ran a hand over his clammy face. When he continued, it seemed almost as if he talked to himself instead of his crew. 'After what the *Empress of Glory* pulled here last year it may be too late for all of us, whatever we do. But the Company says we go down, so we go down. They say it's worth the risk — but what do they *risk?* Still, it may be all right . . . Just remember: don't lie or steal on this planet.'

"Captain Clark visibly pulled

himself back together, and then yelled out, 'That's all — man your landing station'

"Now, I had been friends with a couple of the officers in the old *Empress*. I knew that her entire crew — including officers — had been paid off and replaced after they had got back from their previous cruise. The rumor was that they had been blackballed from space, but no one from *Empress* would talk about it. I hadn't known that they had set down on Gamma Ophiuchus Four. Between the mystery of what happened to the crew of the *Empress* and the mystery of a fearless skipper acting gutless-scared, I decided it wouldn't do me any harm to behave myself and tell the truth for a few days. In fact it might do a lot of good. At that time, however, it was certainly not my intention to make honesty a way of life. For a spacer like himself, it sounded too much like a way of life that didn't go along with eating regularly. And I'm fond of my three squares a day — it's a habit I acquired a long time ago.

"So the captain set the *Star of Glory* down into her berth as smoothly as if he hadn't had his teeth chattering. After the cooling sprays cut off, I rode the ladder down as head of the landing detail. As I told you, *Glory* was a big ship, but she wasn't that big; the skipper, not the first officer, was the usual head of the landing detail. The switch didn't make me feel any better.

"Well, I 'howdied the senior native of the group that rode out to meet us, just as if everything was sweetness and light. He nodded back gravely. He, like the rest of his party, was about seven feet tall, with a bald head about two sizes too big for the rest of him. The boss, whose name I can't pronounce, had pepper and salt body fur, carefully curried wherever it showed on his arms and legs and under his casually slung toga. He strode around with a sort of stately awkwardness, like a stork, and like the others he had sleepy, heavy-lidded eyes. Frankly, they didn't look like much to be worried about. But I was worried about them.

"The headman held out a long arm without saying anything. I laid our port authorization and our pratique and manifests and such in it. He perused them all in a languid and leisurely manner, and then asked, in excellent Trade English, if our ship didn't belong to the same Company as the *Empress of Glory*.

"I told him yes. He sighed and studied the faces of all of the men in the landing detail with great care. Then he nodded slowly and asked to see the rest of the crew. As these men came down the ladder he gave each of them the same slow face-to-face stare, but he seemed satisfied until, last of all, the captain showed up.

"The Ophiucan's bald head slowly turned a deep purple, and then faded gradually back to its normal light blue. He didn't speak until the reversible color change was complete. Then, regretfully I thought, he said, 'You, Captain Clark, have

visited us before. At that time your behavior gave us concern. Now, since the visit of the *Empress of Glory,* your own return leaves us no choice. You, and all of your crew, must be given Stage Two Education.

"Without hesitation, as if he'd been held down on springs and released by a trigger, Captain Clark dove for the ladder and swarmed up it, trying desperately to escape back into the interior of his ship.

"The rest of us just stood with our jaws slightly dropped, watching the performance. The Ophiucans, though, for all of their awkwardness, moved as quickly as the Captain did. One of them caught him by the heels just before he disappeared entirely from view. They hauled him, still scrabbling, back down the ladder.

" 'Don't let them take us!' he screamed. 'Help me! Help me!' At that, a few of us tried a sally to free Captain Clark and break through into the ship, but the natives were ready for that, too. They rounded all of us up, and held us with a casual air of complete boredom that was infuriating.

"Their boss took no notice of all of this. He just led the way slowly back to the column of Ophiucan vehicles, and jacknifed into the first one. We Earthmen were herded into the trucks behind, and wheeled to a windowless building at the edge of the landing area. There we were led into a long, featureless corridor lined on both sides with doors and were popped, one to a room, into the torture cubicles behind the doors.

"They were entirely impersonal and dispassionate about the whole thing. They strapped me into a chair, the only one in the room, and got right to work. They hit me with needles that sent fire and ice through my body. They wheeled up a machine that blinked agonizing lights and howled agonizing sounds at me for days and months — for and eternity of time. And through it all, and it was the most unendurable thing of all, a calm voice spoke to me continuously, pounding at my brain until it broke into little pieces. Actually, I've found out since, the whole thing didn't take more than a couple of hours.

"I've only been given a dose of the rack or thumbscrews once, but I can bet that the best experts with those tools are amateurs in comparison with the Ophiucans when it comes to dishing out pain. Only what they had done didn't show when they were finished. Afterwards, when they let me go, I could walk without a limp. There wasn't so much as a red mark on me.

"They turned all of us loose — just like that. They even apologized for the discomfort that they felt they had caused us, and set up a trade meeting for the following day. None of us headed back for the ship, except the captain. The crew headed for a pub that was pointed out by an Ophiucan, and I turned into the Officer's Bar.

"It was all very normal and customary for a spaceship's crew after planetfall, except for that intermin-

able two hours of torture just behind me. I tell you, I resolved to behave myself on Gamma Ophiuchus Four." Captain Hannah paused to take a sip of his drink.

"It's a very sad story," I told Captain Hannah. "And maybe I even believe it. But I understand that people forget the lessons taught them by pain very quickly. And after all, this isn't Gamma Ophiuchus Four. Why should all of this that you've told me give me confidence in your present veracity?"

Captain Hannah stared at me for several seconds, and then very slowly set down his glass. Didn't you hear me when I started?" he asked. "This is the story of how I got *Delta Crucis*. Wait until you hear the rest.

"There was only one other Earthman in the bar," said Captain Hannah. "He waited until I had a drink in front of me, and then wandered over to my table. 'Do you mind?' he asked, motioning to a chair beside mine.

"I shrugged, and he sat down. 'I'm Captain Jones,' he said. 'Maybe you saw my ship when you set down. Mine is *Delta Crucis*, over there on the other side of the field.'

"I said nothing, and he looked at me for a very long time. 'So they gave you the Cure?' he asked softly, as last.

"I nodded. 'The bastards.'

"Jones shook his head. 'You've got them all wrong,' he said. 'In their own minds, they were doing you a favor. They weren't torturing you. They weren't trying to hurt you at all. What they were doing was treating your sick mind. Unfortunately, they don't know much about human metabolism and such, so the treatment hurts.'

"I nodded in agreement.

" 'They are the best mind-tinkerers that I've ever heard of in the Universe. And they are a very moral people. They can't stand liars. Also, and not very surprisingly, they hate to be cheated. You — or your outfit at least — must have tried to put something over on them at some time or other. They let that happen only once, if they're careless.'

"I nodded. 'It's possible,' I agreed. With the Glory Line, it was so possible as to be a certainty.

" 'What they did to you,' said Captain Jones, 'was to treat your mind so that it is now impossible for you to tell a lie. Also, they have fixed it so that if you have stolen anything of theirs, or of anybody else's on this world, you can't take it off-planet with you when you leave. Nor can you knowingly lift off with anything that anyone else has stolen on board your ship. That's what they refer to as Stage Two Education. They figure that treatment will put an end to lying and stealing on this planet. They never lie or steal themselves.'

" 'It sounds mighty effective, too, if you're telling the truth,' I said.

" 'Oh, I can prove that it's the truth, easily enough,' said Captain Jones. 'Just you try to tell me a lie — any lie at all.'

"Well, I tried, and I couldn't do it. I couldn't force myself to tell a lie, no matter how much I sweated and tried. It was hell. I was horrified. What good is a trader in the spaceways who has to tell the truth all the time, even when he dickers?

"Captain Jones tried to console me. We had several drinks, which we paid for alternately, and he said that maybe it wouldn't be too bad for me after all — that Earthmen are a mighty ingenious bunch of people, all in all, and that in an emergency, they might even be able to tell the truth and make out all right with a small profit at the end.

"Well, when it came time for the Ophiucan bartender to shut up shop, my friend Captain Jones asked if I had any spare money. 'We can go over to my ship,' he said, 'and play a little poker. After all, it's perfectly safe. I know I can trust you to be honest with the cards.'

"This sounded fine and fair to me at the time. In my condition it somehow never occurred to me that I had no equivalent assurance as to the honesty of Captain Jones. I've got three thousand, about,' I told him, patting my pocket. 'Got it right here. Don't mind too much losing in an honest game — hate to be cheated. Like an Ophi — Ophu — ' I let that idea lie where it belonged, and let Captain Jones lead me around the edges of the sprawling spaceport, to where his ship stood in an isolated launching bay. The ship wasn't new and it wasn't big — you know the *Delta* class almost as well as I do — but it looked beautiful to me. You know, you've hired my ship often enough: one-man controls, and freedom of action, instead of the large crews and the steady schedules and the complicated regulations and the demanding passengers of a Glory Liner.

"We climbed up into the control room. Captain Jones broke out a bottle, but the walk had sobered me enough that I turned him down. 'Look,' I asked. 'How can I play poker with you? I've got to tell the truth all the time.'

" 'Of course,' he answered. 'You weren't intending to cheat, were you? When you pull a bluff and make a bet on a bad hand, you aren't lying. You are just saying that you are willing to bet that much money on that hand; and with your cash in the pot, you are sure telling the truth. I just don't have to worry about cheating, that's all. Of course, you won't be able to look happy when you've got a bad hand, or pretend that you don't know the correct odds, or pull any shady plays like that. But then, you don't look to me like a man who would try to play that brand of poker, with or without the Ophiucan treatment.'

"So I accepted his drink, and we started playing.

"Captain Jones wasn't a very good poker player. He knew the odds all right, but he bet a little too hard when he had a good hand, and there was a sort of unconscious twitch in his left eye when he was thinking of pulling a bluff. He ran out of money pretty soon, and started writing I.O.U.s. We kept the

game going for several hours — it must have been the middle of the night by the time we finished — and when we counted up Captain Jones' I.O.U.'s we figured out that I had just acquired a spaceship, complete with mortgage.

"I felt an impulse to tell Jones to take back his ship, that it wasn't fair for him to gamble it away in a single night, but I found that I couldn't say it. It wouldn't have been true. The game had been an honest one. I would have paid if I had lost. I did want a spaceship — this spaceship. *Delta Crucis* was what I had been longing for during all of my years in space.

"I wouldn't be being dishonest to Captain Clark or the Glory Line either, if I left the *Star of Glory* to skipper my own ship. I was already old to be a mere first officer. My contract had expired and not renewed — they were just taking me back home through courtesy and a provision of my contract that required them to. The second officer was fully qualified to take my place.

" 'What are you going to do with yourself, now that you haven't got a ship?' I asked Jones. 'Captain Clark might take you on as first officer, to keep the passengers impressed with the number of officers he's got, but I'm not a bit sure of that. He carries all the Blue Suits the law requires, even without me.'

" 'It might be worth giving him a try,' said Jones. 'Or I may just have to stay here on the Diogenes Planet and see what develops.'

"He shook his head, a little sadly, I thought. 'Do you know,' he said, 'one of the things I'll be sorry for about all this, if I stay here, is that I'll miss setting down on the planet most of your cargo is assigned to. Eden Number Five. I had planned to take a little vacation there — hunting and fishing, and maybe a little bit more. They've got some mighty good-looking girls.

" 'I'll tell you what,' I said, 'I'll take you there. There's no reason that you shouldn't stay on board. And you should be able to ship out of Eden Number Five without a bit of trouble. A lot of ship's officers are just looking for the chance to stay awhile. Let's consider that it's all settled, then.'

'No, thank you,' said Jones. 'That would be charity, and I'd never forgive myself if I took that kind of charity from you now. I lost fair and square, and I'm not whining. Let's just leave it at that.'

"Well, I couldn't persuade him to agree to come with me. He wanted to, it was clear enough, but he had that old spacer pride. I liked him a good deal better for showing it. It eased some of the contempt I had felt toward him for gambling away a fine ship like *Delta Crucis*.

" 'At least you'll spend the night here, what's left of it,' I said at last. 'You can use your old cabin. I won't be moving in until tomorrow anyway. Not that there's anything on the *Star* that I really want to bring with me aboard my ship. Some uniforms with the wrong insignia, and some other clothes.'

" 'I'll take you up on that," said Jones, 'and thanks. Thanks a lot. I'll take my own things dirtside tomorrow.

" 'And don't forget to make your arrangements with the Port Authorities to lift. You have to start within about three days if you're going to make it to Eden Number Five in time, and there's a penalty clause in your contract if you're late, that you can't afford to pay. It only takes a few minutes to get clearance, provided you do it at night. You may not have had occasion to find out about it, but these stilt-legs are nocturnal. You were met by the offshift. By the way, your ship is all topped off and ready to go.' Jones ran his fingers slowly over the smooth enamel of the main computer, patted it a couple of times without any noticeable change of expression and then stumbled into my cabin.

"I stayed in the control room for a while, thinking, and finally managed to reach a decision. Jones wanted to come with me. It was just his pride that was keeping him from riding along. He couldn't object if I took off while he was still on board; in fact, he'd be grateful. I tiptoed over and locked the door to the cabin. Then I called up my old ship, and told the O.D. of the *Star of Glory* that it was up to him, as Officer of the Deck, to wake up the skipper and tell him that I wouldn't be back. Morgon — the O.D. — told me he figured that could wait until morning, but that Captain Clark wasn't getting much sleep.

"That chore accomplished. I buzzed the Spaceport Control Tower, and got clearance to lift.

"Within a couple of hours from the time she had become mine with the help of a busted flush, *Delta Crucis* was growling up into parking orbit under my command. Jones woke up at that, of course, but I couldn't hear what he was shouting until I cut the jets. And even then I couldn't make out the words. All I could tell was that he was pounding and kicking at the door and yelling. Actually, I wasn't trying to listen to him very hard. I was lining up my ship for my first Jump in my own property, and I wanted it to be a good one.

"When I finally pushed the button and we went into the Limbo that cut us entirely free from Ophiuchus and sent us hurtling, I hoped, to the vicinity of Eden, the banging and kicking and shouting stopped as if the button had cut them off too.

"I went over to the door and unlocked it to let Jones out. I was beginning to worry that he might be unhappy about my having shanghaied him, even if I had meant it as a gift.

" 'Congratulations, my friend,' he said. 'You got me off that damn planet, in spite of all the Ophiucans could do! You came through in fine style. Somehow, do you know, I never really believed all this would work. It was a real long shot gamble, but I had to take it."

" 'What the hell are you talking about?' I asked him politely. 'You're

babbling. Have you gone off your rocker?'

"'Almost,' said Jones. 'It was a close thing. But I'm fine now. I knew that there had to be some way — some honest way — to get around those stilt legs with their holier-than-thou morality and their brain molding. I couldn't beat their conditioning, so I used it.'

"'Then you've been through that treatment of theirs too?' I asked.

"'I sure have,' Jones nodded proudly. 'And with reason, too, according to their lights. I picked up a handful of Ophiucan fire opals real cheap. The way I did it was honest enough to get me by most places, but it wasn't honest enough for these natives, so they gave me the works. They didn't try to take the stones back; they were mine, all right. The bastards just fixed it up so that they were sure I could never sell them or get them off the planet.

"Remember, they have adjusted my mind so that I can't lie, and so I can't knowingly let the goods I stole be removed from the planet. So I had to arrange for you to do it without my knowledge, and that wasn't easy. That's what I was banging on the door for — to tell you what I had done, so you wouldn't go through with it. If you had heard me, you would have had to set *Delta Crucis* back down on the Diogenes planet. When we shifted into Limbo, the compulsion ceased.

"'As you can understand, that's why I couldn't accept your charity. You wouldn't have locked me out of the control room, and I would have stopped you from lifting. Fortunately. I didn't really believe you'd lock me in and take off — it was just a hope. If I'd been even half sure, I couldn't have carried it off.'

"'But why didn't you just give me the ship? Why the gambling bit? And did you try to lose?'

"Jones laughed. 'Of course I didn't try to lose. That would have been dishonest. You had to earn the ship to take it without asking questions that would have wrecked everything. I'd have had to tell you the truth, you know. If you will think back, you'll realize that every word I told you was the absolute truth. But I've got my gems safely into space anyway, and it's well worth the loss of the *Crucis* to do it. My profits will be big enough to let me buy a dozen ships like this, free and clear.'

"'Aren't you afraid I'll just take the stones away from you?' I asked.

"Jones shook his head. 'I'd raise a stink, and the authorities would ask you about it, and you'd have to tell them the truth. Remember, by Galactic Law I came by these gems legally, and Ophiucan rules don't apply in space.

"'That's why you can't just drop me out through the space lock, either, if you should have that in mind, which I doubt. You'd just talk a noose around your neck, sooner or later.'

"'I'm satisfied,' I said. And I was. I had my ship, and I still have it. And I manage to make a little profit with her, too, even though I have to keep absolutely honest in my dealings, even with crooks."

Captain Hannah finished his drink. "And that, my friend, is why you can trust me," he said. "The treatment I was given on the Diogenes Planet is beyond the ability of anyone else in the Universe to undo, insofar as I've been able to find out up to this time. And I've tried. So, do I get the contract?"

I wasn't sure. It sounded to me as if the captain of a space tramp, even being honest, was more dangerous than most men are, lying up a storm.

"You can read the contract as well as I can," said Captain Hannah. "I'm insured against non-delivery, so you don't have to worry about that. You pay me based on the lowest price you can expect me to get for milna nuts in good condition — you only lose if they spoil. And I promise to keep very careful check on the humidity controls — very careful. Remember, if your profits go up, so do mine. The price I'm quoting you is barely enough to cover my fuel cost and the next payment on the mortgage on *Delta Crucis*, which is about due."

So I gave him my trade, and he made me a profit, too. Almost five times what I expected to make.

He turned the humidity controls up high, so the milna nuts sprouted, and then sold them at premium prices as seedlings. It's honest enough, I suppose, but it's also very risky. Too damp or not quite damp enough, and the nuts just rot. And the risk was all mine. Hannah couldn't lose.

Of course, it took very careful attention to the humidity controls through the whole trip to get the cargo through safely, and that is just what he'd promised.

Maybe Captain Hannah is forced to tell the truth, after all. I wonder if Diogenes would recognize his Honest Man if he saw him? *END*

Assassin & Son

BY THOMAS M. DISCH

His way of life was the dealing of death . . . and his victims were legion!

The intemperate sun of Sepharad had half risen, its golden circle still skewered on the western horizon by the spires of the capital city of Zamorah. To the East, the black, elliptical backside of the Parasol had likewise risen. It stood in opposition to the sun, like a disc of nighttime that the day could not dispel.

Joseph Goldfrank tossed off a brocade coverlet and stumbled out onto his private balcony, where an antique bronze quadrant was mounted on the marble balustrade. After consulting Barron's *Astral Tables*, he adjusted the quadrant a fraction of a degree from its previous position. Then, kneeling, his palms lifted in the direction determined by the quadrant, he began to pray: "Terra-father, Gaea-mother, Earth, which I may never hope to tread — though I am absent, do not forget that I am yours. Yours still: in the press of other Gravities; in the light of other Suns: in the midst of Aliens: still yours. Preserve me human and remember me so. Let my sons return to your land, your light, your air and your people."

While he mumbled through the old ritual, his mind cleared itself of the unconscious clutter of sleep. He kissed the *Tables* and replaced it in its niche under the quadrant.

Sepharad's sun had risen from the spires of Zamorah. It shone on Joseph's naked body, burnt to a dark bronze by eighteen years under its alien brightness. He began, as always after the morning prayer, to exercise.

On his left shoulder was the still-painful mark of the Sephradim, a circle crosshatched with lines of longitude and latitude, with which he had been tattooed on his eighteenth birthday. The Sephradim was a sign that his ancestors had come to Sepharad directly from Earth. Originally, the tattoo had been the mark of a criminal — to be exact, of a murderer. But on Sepharad it was a distinction greatly envied by the rest of the human population.

His right shoulder bore no tattoo: Joseph was a younger son.

"Joseph!" his father's voice rang out from the terrace below. "Breakfast."

With lightning obedience, Joseph threw on a robe woven from Earth-grown cotton and ornamented with Sephradian diamonds. Since it was quicker than the stairs, he jumped down to the terrace from his balcony. His father's hand was extended for a perfunctory kiss, which, perfunctorily, was accorded it. His brother, to whom this honor had only recently come due, made more of a ceremony of it. Joseph poured out two carafes of coffee for them and, as was the duty of a second son, recited the prayer-before-meals.

"I will have only one coffee this morning, Joseph. Therefore, you may have what is left—with David's permission." Joseph glanced hopefully at his brother, who nodded his consent.

"I thank you both." He emptied the dregs of the electric percolator into his own carafe. Usually he had to content himself with a second brewing of the grounds. His father passed him a salver of fruit taken from their own orchards, and Joseph selected a mango and breadfruit. Native-grown products were seldom admitted to the Goldfrank table, but since on Earth the fruit of Sepharad was considered a great delicacy, and exception had been made.

"Your brother and I will be gone throughout the day. I expect you to oversee Chilperic's work. The mosaic in the steam room needs to be repaired, and I shall want a roast to be ready for my evening meal. I shall be home by the next opposition." At sunset, the Parasol in the west and the sun in the east would again be in opposition, marking the end of a full day's work.

"A roast. Then, you —" His father's stern gaze silenced the unnecessary question. Roast meat meant only one thing: his father was going to perform an assassination.

Joseph wondered who was to be his father's victim. But after all the name would probably mean nothing to him. He knew little of Sephradian politics.

The Goldfranks, father and sons, ate in silence, while the sun ruthlessly shortened the shadow of the eight-foot wall circling the terrace. When there was no shade left, the elder Goldfrank rose. David followed him to the heliport.

Joseph watched as the copter rose silently from its couch at the side of the house, like a jewel pendant in the bright morning sky, then turned to the capital city of Zamorah, a brighter jewel at the horizon. The copter had risen slowly, powered by a ten-horse antigravitic generator. Now it sped out of sight to the west as its side-jets caught fire and scorched their path across the sky.

Chilperic, unbidden, wheeled out of the house to gather the breakfast dishes. Chilperic was a "blob," as the natives of Sepharad were called by the Earth-born colonists — who had pre-empted the natural title of *Sephradim* for themselves. It was a measure of Goldfrank's affluence that he could retain a blob as his servant. It was not so much a question of Chilperic's wages (which were exorbitant), but the expense of providing the aluminum, mobile armature in which Chilperic went about his chores in the Goldfrank household.

"Good morning, Master Joseph," Chilperic's voice box piped. "How does the Earth lie!"

"Happily and far," Joseph returned.

"In what conjunction?"

"Please, Chilperic! We don't have to go through the whole ritual. There's work to do."

"Your father has given the most explcit orders that the only ritual—"

"Father is gone for the day, and you will take my orders. My first order is not to tell Father that I told you to be informal with me."

Chilperic laughed: "Ha-ha-ha." Like the other phonetic elements of the voice box, the laughter was taped. It always sounded the same. Blobs, being telepathic among themselves, had no need of voices. Chilperic "spoke" with his fingers, using a phonetic typewriter inside the ovoid armature that enclosed his amorphous body like the eggshell about an egg. The smooth metal shell was dotted with sockets into which a variety of prosthetic limbs could be inserted. Chilperic thus gave all the appearances of being a robot; it was disquieting when he did not act like one.

"I understand that I am to repair the mosaics in the steam room, just as I did last year."

"Yes."

"The steam room, if you will forgive my saying so, is a foolish place for a mosaic. But it is a foolish mosaic."

Chilperic's judgement of the Miro reproduction coincided fairly well with Joseph's own. The fluctuations of taste had led the younger generation on Sepharad to despise abstractionism — as two generations before, when the Goldfrank villa had been constructed, they had been led to admire it. Nevertheless, as a servant, it was not Chilperic's place to make judgments. Joseph reminded him of this.

"It is a beautiful work of art," Chilperic apologized, "and a striking

example of the impossibility of two cultures understanding each other." With this, Chilperic, bland as aluminum, wheeled off to the kitchen with the breakfast table.

Joseph sat down to memorize Volume IV, Chapter XXVII, Section V of Will Durant's *Story of Civilization*. He was preparing for the priesthood.

II

When the sun and the Parasol had each risen 45° from the horizon and one fourth of the day was spent. Joseph set aside his history text and went into the house to check on Chilperic's work.

It was hardly a necessary task. Like the robot he so much resembled, Chilperic was incapable of loitering. By nature the blobs were industrious, but Joseph's father suspected that this invariable trait was no more than a clever deception, and he had communicated a good deal of this attitude to his sons.

Like most Sephradim, the elder Goldfrank was convinced that the blobs were engaged in a subtle and relentless conspiracy against his person — an understandable obsession in a man who, more than twenty years as a professional assassin, had killed so many of their race that mere quantity was somehow beside the point. Goldfrank tolerated Chilperic's presence in the house for four reasons: It was a mark of prestige: Chilperic had worked for the family as long as the elder Goldfrank could remember, and to discharge him now would be an act of cowardice; he did the work of three human servants (but then he was paid accordingly); and, lastly, Chilperic was sexually neuter, so that even Goldfrank could see that his most touchy suspicions had no basis in reason.

"Master Joseph?"

"Yes, Chilperic?"

"If I finish repairing this exquisite mural by Eclipse, may I go into the village I am needed at a mating. It will take only a few minutes."

"Surely. And while you're there stop by the Earth Quarter and pick up a roast for the evening meal. Father will return by opposition. It must be ready then."

"As you say." Chilperic turned back to his work, but Joseph suspected that he was already signaling his six fellow-blobs in the village to expect him for the mating.

The blobs were septsexual, a degree of sexual differentaton found only in free-form telepathic races. Joseph did not understand too precisely the entire Sephradian mating process. There were, he knew, two blobs that performed a masculine function and two others that could be called women; the "mother" was hermaphroditic, then there were two neutral sexes who served somehow as catalysts. The "neuters" were not motivated by strictly sexual desires: the function of one was largely vegetative and of the other (which Chilperic represented) digestive.

Chilperic had once attempted to give Joseph a more detailed explanation. But to Joseph, as to most humans, the subject inspired disgust rather than scientific curiosity. With

a mental shrug of his shoulders, Chilperic had abandoned the discussion.

The effect of this septsexuality on the native Sephradian culture (and, indirectly, upon the human colonists) had been enormous. The government of the planet, from the Councils of the Empress at Zamorah to the meanest village bureaucracy, was based on the dynastic principle. The intricacies of dynastic politics were complicated by five-way sexual intrigues (the two neutral sexes being neutral in this too). Murder — for reasons of passion or ambition — were not uncommon. Moreover, the result of murder among the telepathic blobs was a vampire-like heightening of the mental powers of the murderer at the moment that his victim died. A mass-murderer became, by the very commission of his crimes, almost too powerful to destroy. On Sepharad, therefore, there was every incitement to murder, and so it lay under the strictest taboo. But the taboo did not, of course, affect other races.

The appearance upon Sepharad of Earthmen had brought about a large-scale cultural transformation. Earthmen, not being telepaths and not being subject to telepathic influence, could murder a Sephradian without inheriting his victim's store of mental powers — and without being daunted by them. Earthmen, in fact, seemed to be indifferent to any consideration but the fee they received for their work. The professional assassin was born. The government of Earth, when it learned of these developments on Sepharad, accommodated its economic ally by using the alien planet as a prison colony. Murderers were given the choice between life imprisonment on Venus and transportation to Sepharad.

They all chose Sepharad.

Joseph was the great-great-grandson of Leonard Goldfrank, a professional murderer of some notoriety in Chicago in the year 2330. It was equivalent to a Mayflower pedigree.

Outside, indistinctly, Joseph heard a knock on the gate. Even muted by the heavy walls of the houes, he recognized it as Leora's. He went across the terrace to the thick oak gate (not Earth-grown oak, but expensive just the same) set into the terrace's enclosing wall and admitted his brother's fiancee.

Indiscreetly, Leora Hughes removed her veil. Joseph had seen her face before — when David was present — but even so he averted his eyes.

"Silly!" Leora chided. "You can look at me. After all, in a few weeks, I'll be living here." It was, of course, equally true that in a few weeks Joseph would no longer be living in his father's house, but Leora did not draw such fine distinctions.

Blushing, Joseph looked at her, avoiding the mocking intensity of her dark eyes, covertly admiring the carefully preserved pallor of her skin, the fullness of her lower lip made fuller by carmine. "My brother is gone for the day."

"He's — working!" she asked. The

mockery was suddenly absent from her eyes and her face went somewhat paler.

"With Father, yes. But they'll be back this evening. I'll say you were here."

"I am *still* here. Aren't you going to ask me into the house? If I leave now, I'll certainly be overcome by the heat." With the sun still an hour from Eclipse, the temperature was 98° Farenheit. "Besides," Leora went on, as Joseph led her to the atrium, where a marble dolphin's head (imported from Italy) gargled out a steady stream of chilled water — "besides. I'd just as soon talk to you as David. David never has anything to talk about."

"What would you like him to talk about! His work?"

"Don't be bitter, Joseph. As a priest, you're going to be a fine assassin, I must say."

He laughed. "I'll admit I used to be jealous of David —"

"Didn't you! I remember when we were seven, playing outside, the Quarterhouse. You told me —"

"— But I am over that. If every one could be an assassin just by wanting it, no one would do anything else — farmers, mechanics, store-keepers. Besides being a priest is the next best thing."

"That's just what I meant. *Next* best."

"I mean, with regard to money."

Leora pursed her lips and nodded with ironic sympathy. "What I like about my future brother-in-law is his honesty. When other priests talk about 'keeping alive the sacred heritage of the human race' or 'the delights and comforts of a life of contemplation and learning,' *you* talk about money."

"I like money. The other things are important, too. But when you're eighteen, sacred history —"

"— is a bore."

"What I like about my future sister-in-law is her immodesty."

It was Leora's turn to blush. "What do you mean!" Joseph glanced reproachfully at her veil that she held loosely in her fingers, its silver sash brushing the terrazzo floor. "But that! I mean — all the times when we were children, it's ridiculous."

"But now we're not children. David wouldn't think it was ridiculous."

She fixed the veil over her face, so that Joseph could see only her eyes glaring at him angrily. "I'd better start home. Tell David I missed him."

"Good-by, Leora." But Leora did not glance back, or say good-by.

It seemed strange to think of Leora as his brother's fiancee: Leora, who, in the irresponsible years when they went to school with each other — before, that is, she had adopted the veil of womanhood and stopped coming to the afternoon classes at the Quarterhouse — had been his special friend. In fact, she had been rather more than that, although he had tried not to think how much more.

How it must seem to Leora he did not ask himself. As a woman, it would make little difference how she felt. The marriage had been arranged between their fathers on

the day that David had come of age, one year ago.

It seemed strange that, a whole year later, it still seemed strange.

The last sliver of the sun slipped behind the enormous man-made Parasol, and the artificial night of the Sephradian noonday descended over the land. Joseph knelt and faced the western sky. There, insignificant beside the greater brightness of near-by Vega, Earth's sun shone dimly and listened (or so he had been told at the Quarterhouse school) to his prayer. Joseph knew perfectly well that neither Earth, nor Earth's sun, actually listened to him. He sometimes doubted that anything or anyone listened at all — except sometimes, his father. More than once Joseph had been beaten for neglecting the rituals, so that now they were almost second nature.

The Eclipse lasted twenty minutes as long as it took the sun traveling eastward to pass behind the Parasol, travelling in the contrary direction at the same speed. The great Parasol, its longitudinal axis describing a 10° arc across the sky, shielded Zamorah and its environs from the fiercest heat of the sun, gave a brief respite to the parching earth while the spillgates of the new irrigating systems were opened, and allowed the dweller of the planet, human or otherwise a chance to walk abroad shaded from the merciless sun. The Parasol orbitted a mere hundred miles above the planet, the power for its antigravity plant being provided by the very sun whose rays its giant mirrors, visible as far away as the Lunar Observatory, deflected into space. Earth had built the Parasol and its two fascimiles orbitting beyond the horizon it had given them space. Earth had built the Parasol for Sepharad without cost, but not entirely from selfless motives. As a result of the lower mean temperature and the new pattern of pressure belts over once-arid plains, the agricultural output of Sepharad had more than doubled in the last fifty years.

Of course, population had also boomed but not at all at the same rate. Septsexuality had certian advantages vis-a-vis the Malthusian dilemma. Export was now Sepharad's largest industry, and Earth and her colonies were Sepharad's chief markets.

Joseph set off for his afternoon classes at the Quarterhouse as soon as he had rattled through the noonday prayer. If he hurried he could arrive at the Human Quarter in the village before the twenty-minute Eclipse was over.

Eclipse was not a total darkness. the northern and southern horizons glowed with a dim, refracted light.

In the gloom, Joseph could still discern the gold-lettered sign above the oak gate: GOLDFRANK & SON, ASSASSINATIONS. At the side of the villa was the family cemetery where ostentatious bronze crosses marked the graves of the men, and silver spheres — the mark of the Sephradim — stood above the women's plots. The bronze crosses were weathered to a dull green, and

the silver spheres — all but one — were tarnished and gray. That one was his mother's, killed two years before, while shopping in the village during one of the recurrent outbursts against the colonists.

Over a low hill, on Joseph's right hand, was the Hughes' villa, and farther on the flambuoyant four-story mansion of Oscar Milne. Goldfrank, Hughes and Milne were all three professional assassins, which was three more than the nearby village had need of itself. Most of their work was carried on in Zamorah. Prudence, however, had led them to establish suburban residences at a comfortable distance from the scene of their business.

A few crude structures of scrap plastic, the dwellings of lower-caste Sephradians, stood on the outskirts of the Human Quarter. No blobs were at large during Eclipse — or, as the blobs referred to it, the Time of the Assassin. Although the Council of the Empress had sanctioned the construction of the Parasol, the average blob still regarded the daily blackout with superstitious terror. Custom had it that in the beginning the Eclipse had lasted mere seconds. Now the period of darkness was twenty minutes: and tomorrow? Rumors would spring up that the Time of the Assassin was growing longer. There would be local attacks on the colonists, who were thought to be responsible. Then the Empress' Army would dismiss the rioters and calm their fears — which the next Eclipse would resurrect, keeping the vicious circle steadily a-spin. There was little hope of stopping it as long as the blobs worshipped the sun.

The Human Quarter looked slightly shabbier than the Sephradian slums on its outskirts. While the professonal assassin enjoyed the luxury of his villa, the average colonist paid the price of his legal criminality. They were rigidly segregated from the blobs, and building permits for their quarter were not easily obtained. Even jobs were scarce, short-lived and poorly paid. Since the colonists—and their offspring—were considered outlaws by the government of Earth, they were denied even the hope of someday departing their prison. But for all that they were probably happier on Sepharad than they would have been on Venus. Happiness is a relative state.

Joseph did not like the Quarter. He hurried through it to his school, haunted by the thought that in only a few weeks this would be his home.

Then, abruptly, he halted. Directly ahead of him a blob cased in the special fenestrated armature of the Imperial Civil Service wheeled down the street from the Quarterhouse, flanked on each side by guards in less ornamental shells. Joseph recognized the blob (or, more exactly, he recognized the armature) and bowed his head as it passed him: Sisebat, the most powerful Sephradian in the village and its mayor.

He did not look like a murderer, Joseph thought. But then — neither did his own father.

III

"Yer father's a blob-lover!"

"Shut up, Jamie," Joseph

calmly commanded, but his eyes revealed well enough that he was afraid. A ring of boys had begun to form around them in the street outside the Quarterhouse.

Jamie Hughes, his father's only son and a future assassin himself, was not to be shut up that easily. "Yeah — he's the eighth man at a mating!" He made an obscene gesture.

Joseph swung. Jamie had been ready, and Joseph found himself lying on the stony street, blood dripping from his nose.

"Say he is!" Jamie taunted. "Say he's a blob-lover." Jamie fed Joseph's rage with professional expertise.

Enraged, Joseph lunged to his feet, not flailing his fists as Jamie had expected, instead butting his head into the boy's stomach. They went down together. Jamie pounded at the base of Joseph's neck with the calloused side of his hand, Joseph bringing up his knee toward Jamie's midriff. Jamie twisted out of his grasp, ripping his clothing to avoid the well-aimed knee. Then Jamie began to kick his ribs.

It was not an even match. Jamie, although he was two years younger and inches shorter than Joseph, was in training to be a killer. Joseph had not fought with anyone for the past year —and he had never, except for some playful tussles with his brother, fought with an assassin-to-be.

Two of the older boys were trying to pull Jamie away. While his attention was diverted by the peacemakers, Joseph grabbed his leg and toppled him to the pavement, cracking his head against the stone and stunning him sufficiently to allow Joseph to purchase hold on his throat unresisted. Thumbs pressed against the windpipe, quite blind now to anything but the pleasure of the violence — the triumph — strangling . . .

"Joseph! *Joseph!*"

It was unmistakably the voice of Magister Sontag, the Instructor of Earth History at the Quarterhouse and Master of the Rituals. Joseph loosened his grip on Jame's throat and looked to the Magister where he frowned down from a second-floor dormer window. "Come up to my office this minute — but first apologize to Master Hughes."

"I apologize," Joseph mumbled.

"Yeah — blob-lover," Jamie said, *sotto voice,* accepting Joseph's hand.

As he ascended the stairs to Sontag's office, tears of shame welled up in Joseph's eyes.

"Sit down, Joseph. Here's a damp towel for your nose. Do you feel all in one piece?"

"Yes. I'm very sorry; it was my fault. I —"

"Please, no false contrition. If I know Jamie at all, it was probably his fault. What did he do?"

"He wanted me to kiss his ring. As though I were *his* younger brother! I don't have to do that — it's not part of the Rituals."

"Strictly speaking, of course not. But I have noticed that usually you are rather liberal in interpreting the Rituals. By refusing Jamie, you gave him the pretext he was looking for to fight with you."

"He called my father —"

" — enough names, doubtless, so that you struck the first blow. Jamie would see to that." The Magister sat down behind his desk and began to stroke the long beard signalizing his priesthood. "Humility is a lesson that is difficult for the young to learn. I don't want to scold you for today's little adventure — you're not one to repeat mistakes. And I don't want to suggest that you're too high-spirited. A candidate for the priesthood should not be devoid of spirit, though that is using the word in a rather different sense. Yours seem to be animal spirits."

Joseph looked up from the blood-stained towel, smiling. The Magister was smiling too. "I'm sure you'll learn to tame them at the seminary. Now —" he pressed a button on the side of his desk — "will you join me for a late lunch?"

"With pleasure."

A girl, obviously still in her teens despite the veil that hid her face and the loose robe that hid most of her other features, entered and stood before the Magister.

"Bring wine and biscuits for two, Esther."

Esther Sontag acknowledged her father's order with a slight bow. She glanced quickly at the towel Joseph still held to his nose and then, less quickly, into Joseph's eyes where she found no reply nor recognition. Joseph always avoided meeting her anxious, darting eyes, for he knew that his father and the Magister were still bickering over the financial details of their betrothal. It was only a matter of time before their engagement was announced, and Joseph did not want Esther to read in his eyes the complete indifference he felt for her. Until their wedding, he could spare her that pain, at least.

"Well, Joseph, are you eager to be off to the seminary? Eh? No one is ever eager to become a priest, so don't lie."

"Willing, but not eager."

"You'll like it. You're a good student, and there will be many history texts there you've never seen — Toynebee, Gibbon. Or, if you prefer the classics, as I do, Plutarch, Herodotus. You do enjoy studying history, don't you?"

"Next to making it. I can think of no finer pursuit."

"I shall debate that point when you have had a chance to read Caesar's *Commentaries.* But, tell me, Joseph, if you could *choose* your way of life instead of inheriting it, would you have become a priest? No, don't answer that; it's not a fair question. We always imagine that, if we were free, we would be somewhere else, doing something better. Perhaps you know that I was the second son of an assassin myself. Sontag was once a famous name on Zamorah. I can remember the day my father packed me off for the seminary. I wasn't exactly eager myself. Willing, but not eager."

"And *you* had wanted to be an assassin?" Indirectly, this was Joseph's answer to the Magister's question. Neither of them felt it necessary to be more explicit than that.

"I did. Three months later my father was killed. By the time I

was a priest, my older brother was also dead — but not before he had avenged our father's death."

"It's a dangerous profession."

"But that is not my lesson. The assassin sows death, and death is his reaping."

"The *lex talionis*," Joseph observed as though reciting a lesson, and the Magister, as though satisfied with his recitation, changed the subject.

"Do you wish to return to Earth someday, Joseph?"

"It is the wish of every Sephradim."

"We will never be allowed to leave this planet. Not until we can learn to live here without doing violence, or sanctioning it. On Earth, your father would be a criminal."

"For killing blobs!"

"Yes — and for his other murders."

"The men he killed were assassins. He had no choice when he did it! The courts proved it was self-defense."

"A murderer defending himself against other murderers. On Earth, a court that tolerate *any* murder is considered criminal itself. In short, we live in a criminal society."

"Will a few priests and a dozen history books be able to change that? Excuse me, I didn't mean —"

"Of course you meant it. You're right. But it isn't the priests, or even the society that must be changed. It is each person, in his heart. You have read enough Earth history by now to have come to that conclusion yourself. Durant says—"

Esther entered without knocking. "Father!" she gasped. Her face was unveiled, but the features which Joseph saw revealed now for the first time communicated only one sensation — fear. "Father, there are blobs downstairs! They —"

Sisebat stood in the open door behind Esther. Four guards wheeled into the room. "I have come for the prisoner, Joseph Goldfrank," Sisebat announced. There was the sting of the guard's needle at the base of his neck, and then nothing . . . darkness . . . eclipse.

IV

Terra-father, Gaea-mother, Earth! You may have what is left — with David's permission . . .

Under his body, bare, cold stone; hands tied tight behind his back.

Then Leora's voice: . . . *a fine assassin, I must say*. And his reply: *the lex talionis . . . avenged . . .*

The image of Chilperic wheeling toward him, at the edge of consciousness now, was part of a dream. He was waking.

The image seemed too real.

There was a blob, but it was not Chilperic. He did not recognize the room in which he found himself. It was almost a cell. He remembered that he was a prisoner and rose to his knees on the floor, straining against the ropes that tightly bound him.

"Father!" he cried. "My father, is he —"

"Your father is dead. And your brother as well. They attempted to assassinate the Empress. The village has confiscated their estate, but

generously our mayor, Sisebat, has allowed you to live. I am to accompany you to the village where you may gather your personal possessions. My name is Egica."

"Dead, you say? Both? Dead?"

"Will you need to be guarded, or shall I untie you?"

"I don't feel angry . . . or violent. That's strange."

"Not strange at all: the sedation does not wear off immediately. But I advise you not to *become* violent. I am, as your language has it, armed." Joseph felt Egica's dextrous psuedopodia unravelling the knots in the rope. The wet plasma brushed his wrists. His skin had never felt the flesh of a blob till then.

"This way."

"It's night."

"Yes, two hours, past the sunset."

"And I am not a prisoner?"

"No. The Magister spoke on your behalf— and quite eloquently, too. He promised Sisebat that you were devoted to ideals of nonviolence, that you were to be a priest. Sisebat seemed to believe him. At least, he accepted his bribe, which was probably all that he wanted."

"Then you didn't believe him?"

"I advised our mayor to be merciful. Your death might have offended the human colonists unnecessarily. As for your idealism or lack of it, I profess no opinion."

Joseph discovered that he had been crying, and it came over him now that his father and his brother were no longer alive, that the roast was either cold now or forgotten in the oven, turning to ash.

"How were they killed?"

"With laser-guns. They felt no pain, I'm sure. The bodies — what was left — were brought back to your villa. You will see."

They walked the rest of the way in silence. Chilperic admitted them at the gate. The bodies lay on separate plastic mats on the terrace. It was impossible to tell which had been his father.

The next thing Joseph was aware of was Chilperic's voice — *Joseph, get up. Can you stand up? Joseph, can I help?* And then the wet pressure of Chilperic's psuedopodia against his bare shoulders. Joseph recoiled from that touch, not screaming yet, though perhaps he was — *Get away* — remembering the sensation, his horror, Chilperic's touch, wishing only to be outside his body. And then it seemed he was merely a spectator as his hands upended the blob's armature and rolled it over on the stone floor, a spectator of the fully-distended psuedopod that reached toward him until the heavy armature rolled over on it, and it broke then and lay on the stone floor, a streak of jelly. And Chilperic's cry — *Jo-seph* — that seemed though it issued from a mechanical voice box, to be choked with pain and grief.

He did scream then — stricken by a terror not of the forgotten touch but of his own irredeemable deed. He only noticed the laser projecting from Egica's metal shell after he had raised Chilperic upright.

"He did not mean to do it," Chilperic's voice box enunciated, more for Joseph's benefit than

Egica's whom he had already restrained from using the laser, telepathically. "When his father's father was killed, it was just the same. To them, we are all alike . . . all guilty. I am older now; that is the only difference. Slower to move — and to mend."

"Chilperic — "

"Quite. I have no time to . . . Humans are a little insane, but it is over quickly . . . a terrible mosaic."

"I know. I'll have it taken down."

"Ha-ha-ha . . . Joseph — be like —" Chilperic spoke no more. There was a vague, liquid sound within the armature, as the blob's body relaxed into death.

"What did he want to say?" Joseph asked, turning to Egica.

"Be like your father."

"An assassin?"

"That was his meaning, but he would not have used that word." Egica paused. When he resumed, his words came more slowly. "It is also my meaning. As I understand your laws, your Ritual, you are entitled now, since your brother is dead, to become an assassin. It is hereditary. Am I right?"

"Can you talk about that *now?*"

"At no time else, I am afraid. You are responsible for Chilperic's death."

"I know. *I know.*"

"My testimony could damn you. You can be tried, convicted, and sentenced to death. But an assassin would not be tried. He is licensed to do murder, and he lives outside the laws. Sisebat will never grant that license to you; he has to much to fear. But I will — when I am mayor. I will also allow you to reclaim your father's estate. Therefore, you will assassinate Sisebat tonight."

"And if I refuse?"

"I cannot return to the village until Sisebat is dead. He will know that I have plotted his death, and he will kill me. Therefore, if you refuse I will kill you."

"You give me little choice."

"There is not much to give."

"I will do it."

"Chilperic was right. You will be the very image of your father."

V

Returning to the village that night, his father's laser-gun hidden beneath a heavy woolen robe (made in England), Joseph allowed himself the luxury of idle speculation. In the future, it would be a luxury that he could ill afford.

He speculated, for instance, on the problem of free will. He reflected that, being forced into a career that he had only that afternoon freely desired, he no longer desired that career. Necessity had a bitter taste.

He thought of Leora, whom he would now surely marry, although a few hours ago he would not have allowed himself to admit that he was in love with her. Though she would be happier wed to him, though she might even have desired it, she was as much a slave of necessity as Joseph. She would wed him not for love's sake, but because he had inherited her from his brother and her father would not leave her any choice.

Joseph wondered if necessity would have the same taste for Leora.

He thought of Magister Sontag, gratefully and already with a sense of nostalgia. Later that night he would have the Magister tattoo on his right shoulder the mark of the Assassin: a shortsword crossed by a dagger, the same emblem that would be cast in bronze and set over his father's grave. Esther would probably be watching in secret. He was surprised that, for the first time, he thought of Esther with affection.

And, when he stood before the mayor's dwelling in the center of the village, he thought of Sisebat.

A servant answered the door.

"I wish to see the mayor — to thank him for sparing my life."

The servant (who was a human) bowed to Joseph and ushered him into a large hall. "This way, please."

END

FATHER OF THE STARS

BY FREDERIK POHL

Illustrated by EMSH

Marchand's life was in vain — but his failure was his greatest possible success!

I

Norman Marchand sat in the wings of the ballroom's small stage, on a leather hassock someone had found for him. There were fifteen hundred people outside in the ballroom, waiting to do him honor.

Marchand remembered the ballroom very well. He had once owned it. Forty . . . no, it wasn't forty. Not even fifty. Sixty years ago it had been, sixty and more years ago that he and Joyce had danced in that ballroom. Then the hotel was the newest on Earth and he was the newly married son of the man who had built it, and the party was the reception for his wedding to Joyce. Of course, none of these people

would know about that. But Marchand remembered . . . *Oh, Joyce, my very dear!* But she had been dead a long time now.

It was a noisy crowd. He peered out through the wings, and could see the head table filling up. There was the Vice-President of the United States shaking hands with the Governor of Ontario as though, for the moment, they had forgotten they were of different parties. There was Linfox, from the Institute, obligingly helping a chimpanzee into the chair next to what, judging by the microphones ranked before it, would probably be Marchand's own. Linfox seemed a little ill at ease with the chimp. The chimpanzee had no doubt been smithed, but the imposition of human intelligence did not lengthen its ape's legs.

Then Dan Fleury appeared, up the steps from the floor of the ballroom where the rest of the fifteen hundred diners were taking their places.

Fleury didn't look well at all, Marchand thought—not without a small touch of satisfaction, since Fleury was fifteen years younger than himself. Still, Marchand wasn't jealous. Not even of the young bellman who had brought him the hassock, twenty years at the most and built like a fullback. One life was enough for a man to live. Especially when you had accomplished the dream you had set out to bring to fruition. Or almost.

Of course, it cost him everything his father left. But what else was money for?

"It's time to go in, sir. May I help you!" It was the young fullback nearly bursting his bellman's uniform with the huge hard muscles of youth. He was very solicitous. One of the nice things about having this testimonial dinner in a Marchand hotel was that the staff was as deferential to him as though he still owned the place. Probably that was why the committee had picked it, Marchand ruminated, quaint and old-fashioned as the hotel must seem now. Though at one time—

He recollected himself. "I'm sorry, young man. I was—woolgathering. Thank you."

He stood up, slowly but not very painfully, considering that it had been a long day. As the fullback walked him onto the stage the applause was enough to drive down the automatic volume control on his hearing aid.

For that reason he missed the first words from Dan Fleury. No doubt they were complimentary. Very carefully he lowered himself into his chair, and as the clapping eased off he was able to begin to hear the words.

Dan Fleury was still a tall man, built like a barrel, with bushy eyebrows and a huge mane of hair. He had helped Marchand's mad project for thrusting man into space from its very beginnings. He said as much now. "Man's grandest dream!" he roared. "The conquering of the stars themselves! And here is the one man who taught us how to dream it, Norman Marchand!"

Marchand bowed to the storm of applause.

Again his hearing aid saved his ears and cost him the next few words: "—and now that we are on the threshhold of success," Fleury was booming, "it is altogether fitting that we should gather here tonight . . . to join in fellowship and in the expression of that grand hope . . . to rededicate ourselves to its fulfillment . . . and to pay our respects, and give of our love, to the man who first showed us what dream to have!"

While the AVC registered the power of Dan Fleury's oratory Marchand smiled out on the foggy sea of faces. It was, he thought, almost cruel of Fleury to put it like that. The threshhold of success indeed! How many years now had they waited on it patiently? — and the door still locked in their faces. Of course, he thought wryly, they must have calculated that the testimonial dinner would have to be held soon unless they wanted a cadaver for a guest. But still . . . He turned painfully and looked at Fleury, half perplexed. There was something in his tone. Was there — Could there be—

There could not, he told himself firmly There was no news, no breakthrough, no report from one of the wandering ships, no dream come true at last. He would have been the first to know. Not for anything would they have kept a thing like that from him. And he did not know that thing.

"— and now," Fleury was saying, "I won't keep you from your dinners. There will be many a long, strong speech to help your digestions afterwards, I promise you! But now, let's eat!"

Laughter. Applause. A buzz and clash of forks.

The injunction to eat did not, of course, include Norman Marchand. He sat with his hands in his lap, watching them dig in, smiling and feeling just a touch deprived, with the wry regret of the very old. He didn't envy the young people anything *really*, he told himself. Not their health, their youth or their life expectancy. But he envied them the bowls of ice.

He tried to pretend he enjoyed his wine and the huge pink shrimp in crackers and milk. According to Asa Czerny, who ought to know since he had kept Marchand alive this long, he had a clear choice. He could eat whatever he chose, or he could stay alive. For a while. And ever since Czerny had been good enough, or despairing enough, to give him a maximum date for his life exectancy, Marchand had in idle moments tried to calculate just how much of those remaining months he was willing to give up for one really good meal. He rather believed that when Czerny looked up at him after the weekly medical checkup and said that only days were left, that he would take those last days and trade them in for a sauerbraten with potato pancakes and sweet-sour red cabbage on the side. But that time was not yet. With any kind of luck he still had a month. Perhaps as much as two . . . "I beg your — pardon," he said, half-turning to the chimpanzee. Even smithed, the animal spoke so poorly that Marchand had not

at first known that he was being addressed.

He should not have turned.

His wrist had lost its suppleness; the spoon in his hand tilted: the soggy crackers fell. He made the mistake of trying to move his knee out of the way — it was bad enough to be old, he did not want to be sloppy — and he moved too quickly.

The chair was at the very edge of the little platform. He felt himself going over.

Ninety-six is too old to be falling on your head, he thought, if I was going to do this sort of thing I might just as well have eaten some of those shrimp . . . But he did not kill himself.

He only knocked himself unconscious. And not for very long at that, because he began to wake up while they were still carrying him back to his dressing room behind the stage.

Once upon a time. Norman Marchand had given his life to a hope.

Rich, intelligent, married to a girl of beauty and tenderness, he had taken everything he owned and given it to the Institute for Colonizing Extra-Solar Planets. He had, to begin with, given away several million dollars.

That was the whole of the personal fortune his father had left him, and it was nowhere near enough to do the job. It was only a catalyst. He had used it to hire publicity men, fund-raisers, investment counselors, foundation managers. He had spent it on documentary films and on TV commercials. With it he had financed cocktail parties for United States senators and prize contests for the nation's sixth grades, and he had done what he set out to do.

He had raised money. A very great deal of money.

He had taken all the money he had begged and teased out of the pockets of the world and used it to finance the building of twenty-six great ships, each the size of a dozen ocean liners, and he had cast them into space like a farmer sowing wheat upon the wind.

I tried, he whispered to himself, returning from the darkest place he had ever seen. I wanted to see man reach out and touch a new home . . . and I wanted to be the one to guide him there . . .

And someone was saying: "—he know about it, did he? But we were trying to keep it quiet —" Someone else told the first person to shut his mouth. Marchand opened his eyes.

Czerny was there, unsmiling He saw that Marchand was conscious. "You're all right," he said and Marchand knew that it was true, since Czerny was scowling angrily at him. If the news had been bad he would have smiled — "No you don't!" cried Czerney, catching him by the shoulder. "You stay right there. You're going home to bed."

"But you said I was all right."

"I meant you were still breathing. Don't push it, Norm."

Marchand protested, "But the dinner — I ought to be there —"

Asa Czerny had cared for Marchand for thirty years. They had gone fishing together, and once or

twice they had gotten drunk. Czerny would not have refused for nothing. He only shook his head.

Marchand slumped back. Behind Czerny the chimpanzee was squatting silently on the edge of a chair, watching. He's worried, Marchand though. Worried because he feels it's his fault, what happened to me. The thought gave him enough strength to say: "Stupid of me to fall like that, Mr. — I'm sorry."

Czerny supplied the introduction. "This is Duane Ferguson, Norman. He was supernumary on the Copernicus. Smithed. He's attending the dinner in costume, as it were." The chimpanzee nodded but did not speak. He was watching that silver-tongued orator, Dan Fleury, who seemed upset. "Where is that ambulance?" demanded Czerny, with a doctor's impatience with internes, and the fullback in bellman's uniform hurried silently away to find out.

The chimpanzee made a barking sound, clearing his throat. "Ghwadd," he said — more or less: the German *ich* sound followed by word "what" — "Ghwadd did jou mee-an aboud evdial, Midda Vleury?"

Dan Fleury turned and looked at the chimp blankly. But not, Marchand thought suddenly, as though he didn't know what the chimp was talking about. Only as if he didn't intend to answer.

Marchand rasped, "What's this 'evdial' Dan?"

"Search me. Look, Mr Ferguson, perhaps we'd better go outside."

"Ghwadd?" The harsh barking voice struggled against the simian body it occupied, and came closer to the sounds it meant to emit. "*What* did you bean — did you *mean?*"

He was a rude young man, Marchand thought irritably. The fellow was tiring him.

Although there was something about that insistent question —

Marchand winced and felt for a moment as though he were going to throw up. It passed, leaving him wobbly. It wasn't possible he had broken anything, he told himself. Czerny would not lie about that. But he felt as if he had.

He lost interest in the chimp-man, did not even turn his head as Fleury hurried him out of the room, whispering to him in an agitated and lowpitched chirrup like the scratching of a cricket's legs.

If a man wanted to abandon his God-given human body and put his mind, thoughts and — yes — soul into the corpus of an anthropoid, there was nothing in that to entitle him to any special consideration from Norman Marchand.

Of course not! Marchand rehearsed the familiar argument as he waited for the ambulance. Men who volunteered for the interstellar flights he had done so much to bring about knew what they were getting into. Until some frabjous super-Batman invented the mythical FTL drive it would always be so. At possible speeds — less than light's 186,000 mps crawl — it was a matter of decades to reach almost every worthwhile planet that was known.

The Smith process allowed these men to use their minds to control chimpanzee bodies — easily bred, utterly expendable — while their own bodes rested in the deep-freeze for all the long years between the stars.

It took brave men, naturally. They were entitled to courtesy and consideration.

But so was he, and it was not courteous to blather about "evdial", whatever that was, while the man who had made their trip possible was seriously injured . . .

Unless . . .

Marchand opened his eyes again.

"Evdial." Unless "evdial" was the closest chimpanzee vocal chords and chimpanzee lips could come to — to —

— unless what they had been talking about, while he was unconscious, was that utterly impossible, hopeless and fantastic dream that he, Marchand, has had turned his back upon when he began organizing the colonization campaign.

Unless someone had really found the way to FTL travel.

II

As soon as he was able the next day, Marchand got himself into a wheelchair — all by himself, he didn't want any help in this — and rolled it out into the chartroom of the home the Institute had given him rentfree for all of his life. (He had, of course, given it in the first place to the Institute.)

The Institute had put three hundred thousand dollars into the chart room. Stayed and guywired stars flecked the volume of a forty-foot ballroom, representing in scale all the space within fifty-five light-years of Sol. Every star was mapped and tagged. They had even moved a few of them slightly, a year ago, to correct for proper motion: it was that carefully done.

The twenty-six great starships the Institute had financed were there, too, or such of them as were still in space. They were out of scale, of course, but Marchand understood what they represented. He rolled his chair down the marked path to the center of the room and sat there, looking around, just under yellow Sol.

There was blue-white Sirius dominating them all, Procyon hanging just above. The two of them together were incomparably the brightest objects in the room, though red Altair was brighter in its own right than Procyon. In the center of the chamber Sol and Alpha Centauri A made a brillant pair.

He gazed with rheuming eyes at that greatest disappointment of his life Alpha Centauri B. So close. So right. So sterile. It was an ironic blunder of creation that the nearest and best chance of another home had never formed planets . . . or had formed them and swept them into the Bode-area traps set by itself and its two companions.

But there were other hopes . . . .

Marchand sought and found Tau Ceti, yellow and pale. Only eleven light-years away, the colony should be definitely established by now. In another decade or less they should have an answer . . . if, of course, it

had planets Man could live on.

That was the big question, to which they had already received so many "nos". But Tau Ceti was still a good bet, Marchand told himself stoutly. It was a dimmer, cooler sun than Sol. But it was type G, and according to spectropolarimetry, almost certainly planetiferous. And if it were another disappointment —

Marchand turned his eyes to 40 Eridani A, even dimmer, even farther away. The expedition to 40 Eridani A had been, he remembered, the fifth ship he had launched. It ought to be reaching its destination soon — this year, or perhaps next. There was no sure way of estimating time when the top velocity was so close to light's own . . .

But now of course the top velocity was more.

The sudden wash of failure almost made him physically ill. Faster than light travel — why, how dared they!

But he didn't have time to waste on that particular emotion, or indeed on any emotion at all. He felt time draining away from him and sat up straight again, looking around. At ninety-six you dare not do anything slowly, not even daydream.

He glanced at, and dismissed, Procyon. They had tried Procyon lately — the ship would not be even halfway. They had tried almost everything. Even Epsilon Eridani and Groombridge 1618; even, far down past the probable good bets among the spectroscopic classes, 61 Cygni A and Epsilon Indi, a late and despairing try at Proxima Centauri (though they were very nearly sure it was wasted, the Alpha Centauri expedition had detected nothing like viable planets.)

There had been twenty-six of them in all. Three ships lost, three returned, one still Earthbound. Nineteen were still out there.

Marchand looked for comfort at the bright green arrow that marked where the *Tycho Brahe* rode its jets of ionized gas, the biggest of his ships, three thousand men and women. It seemed to him that someone had mentioned the *Tycho Brahe* recently. When? Why? He was not sure, but the name stuck in his mind.

The door opened and Dan Fleury walked in, glancing at the arrayed stars and ships and not seeing them. The chart room had never meant anything to Fleury. He scolded, "Damn it, Norman, you scared us witless! Why you're not in the hospital now —"

"I was in the hospital, Dan. I wouldn't stay. And finally I got it through Asa Czerny's head that I meant it, so he said I could come home if I would stay quiet and let him look in. Well, as you see, I'm quiet. And I don't care if he looks in. I only care about finding out the truth about FTL."

"Oh, cripes, Norm! Honestly, you shouldn't worry yourself —"

"Dan, for thirty years you've never used the word 'honestly' except when you were lying to me. Now give. I sent for you this morning because you know the answer. I want it."

"For God's sake, Dan."

Fleury glanced around the room,

as though he were seeing the glowing points of light for the first time . . . perhaps he was, Marchand thought.

He said at last, "Well, there is something."

Marchand waited. He had had a great deal of practice at waiting.

"There's a young fellow," said Fleury, starting over again. "He's named Eisele. A mathematician, would you believe it? He's got an idea."

Fleury pulled over a chair and sat down.

"It's far from perfect," he added.

"In fact," he said, "a lot of people think it won't work at all. You know the theory, of course. Einstein, Lorentz-Fitzgerald, the whole roster — they're all against it. It's called — get this! — polynomiation."

He waited for a laugh, hopelessly. Then he said, "Although I must say he appears to have something, since the tests —"

Marchand said gently and with enormous restraint: "Dan, will you please spit it out? Let's see what you said so far. There's this fellow named Eisele and he has something and it's crazy but it works."

"Well — yes."

Marchand slowly leaned back and closed his eyes. "So that means that we were all wrong. Especially me. And all our work —"

"Look, Norman! Don't *ever* think like that. Your work has made it all the difference. If it weren't for you, people like Eisele never would have had the chance. Don't you know he was working under one of our grants?"

"No. I didn't know that." Marchand's eyes went out to the *Tycho Brahe* for a moment. "But it doesn't help much. I wonder if fifty-odd thousand men and women who have given most of their lives to the deep-freeze because of — my work — will feel the way you do. But thanks. You've told me what I want to know."

When Czerny entered the chart room an hour later Marchand said at once, "Am I in good enough shape to stand a smith?"

The doctor put down his bag and took a chair before he answered. "We don't have anyone available, Norman. There hasn't been a volunteer for years."

"No. I don't mean smithed into a human body. I don't want any would-be suicide volunteer donors, you said yourself the smithed bodies sometimes suicided anyway. I'll settle for a chimp. Why should I be any better than that young fellow — what's his name?"

"You mean Duane Ferguson."

"Sure. Why should I be any better than he is?"

"Oh, cut it out, Norman. You're too old. Your phospholipids —"

"I'm not too old to die, am I? And that's the worst that could happen."

"It wouldn't be stable! Not at your age; you just don't understand the chemistry. I couldn't promise you more than a few weeks."

Marchand said joyously, "Really! I didn't expect that much. That's more than you can promise me now."

The doctor argued, but Marchand had held up his end of many a hard-

fought battle in ninety-six years, and besides he had an advantage over Czerny. The doctor knew even better than Marchand himself that getting into a passion would kill him. At the moment when Czerny gauged the risk of a smith translation less than the risk of going on arguing about it, he frowned, shook his head grudgingly and left.

Slowly Marchand wheeled after him.

He did not have to hurry to what might be the last act of his life. There was plenty of time. In the Institute they kept a supply of breeding chimpanzees, but it would take several hours to prepare one.

One mind had to be sacrificed in the smith imposition. The man would ultimately be able to return to his own body, his risk less than one chance in fifty of failure. But the chimp would never be the same. Marchand submitted to the beginnings of the irradiation, the delicate titration of his body fluids, the endless strapping and patching and clamping. He had seen it done and there were no surprises in the procedure . . . He had not known, however, that it would hurt so much.

III

Trying not to walk on his knuckles (but it was hard; the ape body was meant to crouch, the arms were too long to hang comfortably along his sides), Marchand waddled out into the pad area and bent his rigid chimp's spine back in order to look up at the hated thing.

Dan Fleury came toward him. "Norm?" he asked tentatively. Marchand attempted to nod: it was not a success, but Fleury understood. "Norman," he said, "this is Sigmund Eisele. He invented the FTL drive."

Marchard raised one long arm and extended a hand that resisted being opened: it was used to being clawed into a fist. "Congradulazhuns," he said, as clearly as he could. Virtuously he did not squeeze the hand of the young dark-eyed man who was bebeing introduced to him. He had been warned that chimpanzee strength maimed human beings. He was not likely to forget, but it was tempting to allow himself to consider it for a moment.

He dropped the hand and winced as pain flooded through him.

Czerny had warned him to expect it. *Unstable, dangerous, won't last* had rumbled through his conversation; *and don't forget, Norman, the sensory equipment is set high for you; you're not used to so much input: it will hurt.*

But Marchand had assured the doctor he would not mind that, and indeed he didn't. He looked at the ship again. "*Zo thads id,*" he grumbled, and again bent the backbone, the whole barrel chest of the brute he occupied, to stare at the ship on the pad. It was perhaps a hundred feet tall. "Nod, mudge," he said scornfully. "*De Zirian,* dad was our firzd, zdood nine hoonderd feed dall and garried a dousand beople to Alpha Zendauri."

"And it brought a hundred and fifty back alive." said Eisele. He

didn't emphasize the words in any way, but he said it quite clearly. "I want to tell you I've always admired you, Dr. Marchand. I hope you won't mind my company. I understand you want to go along with me out to the *Tycho Brahe.*"

"Why zhould I mind?" He did, of course. With the best will in the world, this young fellow had thrown seventy years of dedication, plus a handsome fortune—eight million dollars of his own, countless hundreds of millions that Marchand had begged from millionaires, from government handouts, from the pennies of school children—tossed them all into the chamber pot and flushed them into history. They would say: *A nonce figure of the early twenty-first century, Norman Marchand, or Marquand, attempted stellar colonization with primitive rocket-propelled craft. He was of course unsuccessful, and the toll of life and wealth in his ill-conceived venture enormous. However, after Eisle's faster-than-light became practicable* . . . They would say that he was a failure. And he was.

When *Tycho Brahe* blasted off to the stars massed bands of five hundred pieces played it to its countdown and television audiences all over the world watched it through their orbiting satellites. A president, a governor and half the senate were on hand.

When Eisele's little ship took off to catch it and tell its people their efforts had been all in vain, it was like the departure of the 7:17 ferry for Jersey City. To that extent, thought Marchand, had Eisele degraded the majesty of starflight. Yet he would not have missed it for anything. Not though it meant forcing himself as supercargo on Eisele, who had destroyed his life, and on the other smithed chimpanzee, Duane Ferguson, who was for some reason deemed to have special privileges in regard to the *Brahe.*

They shipped an extra FTL unit—Marchand heard one of the men call it a polyflecter, but he would not do it the honor of asking anyone what that meant—for some reason. Because it was likely to break down, so spares were needed? Marchand dismissed the question, realizing that it had not been a fear but a hope. Whatever the reason he didn't care; he didn't want even to be here, he only regarded it as his inescapable duty.

And he entered Eisele's ship.

The interior of Eisele's damned ship was built to human scale, nine-foot ceilings and broad acceleration couches, but they had brought hammocks scaled to a chimpanzee torso for himself and Duane Ferguson. Doubtless they had looted the hammocks from the new ship. The one that would never fly—or at least not on streams of ionized gas. And doubtless this was almost the last time that a man's mind would have to leave Earth in an ape's body.

What Eisele's damned ship rode to the stars on in place of ionized gas Marchand did not understand. The whatcha-flecter, whatever the damned thing was named, was so tiny. The whole ship was a pigmy.

There was no room for reaction

mass, or at least only for enough to get it off-Earth. Then the little black box — it was not really little, since it was the size of a grand piano; and it was not black but gray; but it was a box, all right — would work its magic. They called that magic "polynomiation". What polynomiation was Marchand did not try to understand, beyond listening, or seeming to listen, to Eisele's brief, crude attempt to translate mathematics into English. He heard just enough to recognize a few words. Space was N dmensional. All right, that answered the whole question, as far as he was concerned and he did not hear Eisele's tortuous efforts to explain how one jacked oneself up, so to speak, into a polynomial dimension—or no, not that, but translated the existing polynomial extensions of a standard 4-space mass into higher orders—he didn't hear. He didn't hear any of it. What he was listening to was the deep liquid thump of the great ape's heart that now was sustaining his brain.

Duane Ferguson appeared, in the ape's body that he would never leave now. That was one more count of Marchand's self-indictment; he had heard them say that the odds had worked against Ferguson, and his body had died in the imposition.

As soon as he had heard what Eisele was up to, Marchand had seized on it as a chance for expiation. The project was very simple. A good test for Eisele's drive, and a mission of mercy, too. They intended to fleet after the plodding, long-gone *Tycho Brahe* and catch it in mid-space . . . for even now, thirty years after it had left Port Kennedy, it was still decelerating to begin its search orbit around Groombridge 1618. As Marchand strapped himself in, Eisele was explaining it all over again. He was making tests on his black box and talking at the same time: "You see, sir, we'll try to match course and velocity, but frankly that's the hard part. Catching them's nothing: we've got the speed. Then we'll transfer the extra polyflecter to the *Tycho Brahe* — "

"Yez, thanggs," said Marchand politely, but he still did not listen to the talk about the machine. As long as it existed he would use it, his conscience would not let him off that, but he didn't want details.

Because the thing was, there were all those wasted lives.

Every year in the *Tycho Brahe's* deep freeze means a month off the life of the body that lay there. Respiration was slowed, but it was not stopped. The heart did not beat but blood was perfused through a pump; tubes dripped sugar and minerals into the torpid blood, catheters carried wastes away. And Groombridge 1618 was a flight of ninety years.

The best a forty-year-old man could hope for on arriving was to be restored into a body whose biological age was nearly fifty — while behind him on the Earth was nothing but a family long dead, friends turned into dust.

It had been worth it. Or so the colonists had thought. Driven by the worm that wriggled in the spine of the explorer, the itch that drove him on; because of the wealth and the power and the freedom that a new

world could give them, and because of the place they would have in the history books — not Washington's place, or even Christ's. They would have the place of an Adam and an Eve.

It had been worth it, all those thousands had thought when they volunteered and set out. But what would they think when they landed!

If they landed without knowing the truth, if some ship like Eisele's did not reach and tell them in midspace, they would find the greatest disappointment any man had ever borne. The Groombridge 1618 expedition aboard the *Tycho Brahe* still had forty years to go on its original trip plan. With Eisele's invention driving faster-than-light commerce, there would be a planet populated by hundreds of thousands of people, factories at work, roads built, the best land taken, the history books already into their fifth chapter . . . and what would the three thousand aging adventurers think then?

Marchand moaned and shook, not entirely because the ship was taking off and the acceleration squeezed his rib cage down against his spine.

When they were in the polyflecter's grip he floated across the pilot room to join the others. "I vas never in zpaze bevore," he said.

Eisele said with great deference, "Your work was on the Earth."

"Vas, yez." But Marchand left it at that. A man whose whole life was a failure owed something to humanity, and one of the things he owed was the privilege of allowing them to over look it.

He watched carefully while Eisele and Ferguson read their instruments and made micrometric settings on the polyflecter. He did not understand anything about the faster-than-light drive, but he understood that a chart was a chart. Here there was a doubly profiled representation of the course-line of the Groombridge 1618 expedition. The *Tycho Brahe* was a point of light, some nine-tenths of the way from Sol to the Groombridge star in distance, which meant something under three-quarters of the way in time.

"Mass detectors, Dr. Marchand," said Eisele cheerfully pointing to the charts. "Good thing they're not much closer, or they wouldn't have mass enough to show." Marchand understood: the same detectors that would show a sun or a planet would also show a mere million-ton ship if its speed were great enough to add sufficient mass. "And a good thing," added Eisele, looking worried, "that they're not much farther away. We're going to have trouble matching their velocity now, even though they've been decelerating for nine years . . . Let's get strapped in."

From the hammock Marchand braced himself for another surge of acceleration. But it was not that, it was something different and far worse.

It was a sausage-grinder, chewing his heart and sinews and spitting them out in strange crippled shapes.

It was a wine-press, squeezing his throat, collapsing his heart.

It was the giddy nausea of a roller-coaster or a small craft in a typhoon. Wherever it took them, the

stars on the profile charts slipped and slid and flowed into new positions.

Marchand, absorbed in the most crushing migraine of all but a century, hardly knew what was happening, but he knew that in the hours they found the *Tycho Brahe*, after giving it a thirty-year start.

IV

The captain of the *Tycho Brahe* was a graying, yellow-fanged chimp named Lafcadio, his brown animal eyes hooded with shock, his long, stringy arms still quivering with the reaction of seeing a ship — a ship — and human beings.

He could not take his eyes off Eisele, Marchand noted, and looked? It had been thirty years in an ape's body for the captain. The ape was old now. Lafcadio would be thinking himself more than half chimp already, the human frame only a memory that blurred against the everyday reminders of furry-backed hands and splayed prehensile feet. Marchand himself could feel the ape's mind stealing back, though he knew it was only imagination.

Or was it imagination? Asa Czerny had said the imposition would not be stable — something to do with the phospholipids — he could not remember. He could not, in fact, remember anything with the clarity and certainly he could wish, and it was not merely because his mind was ninety-six years old.

Without emotion Marchand realized that his measured months or weeks had dwindled to a few days.

It could, of course, be the throbbing pain between his temples that was robbng him of reason. But Marchand only entertained that thought to dismiss it; if he had courage enough to realize that his life's work was wasted, he could face the fact that pain was only a second-order derivative of the killer that stalked his ape's body. But it made it hard for him to concentrate. It was through a haze that he heard the talk of the captain and his crew — the twenty-two smithed chimpanzees who superintended the running of the *Tycho Brahe* and watched over the three thousand frozen bodies in its hold. It was over a deep, confusing roar that he heard Eiesle instruct them in the transfer of the FTL unit from his tiny ship to the great, lumbering ark that his box could make fleet enough to span the stars in a day's journey.

He was aware that they looked on him, from time to time, with pity.

He did not mind their pity. He only asked that they allow him to live with them until he died, knowing as he knew that that would be no long time; and he passed, while they were still talking, into a painful, dizzying reverie that lasted until — he did not know the measure of the time — until he found himself strapped in a hammock in the control room of the ship, and felt the added crushing agony that told him they were once again slipping through the space of other dimensions.

"Are you all right?" said a familiar thick, slurred voice.

It was the other, last victim of his blundering, the one called Ferguson.

Marchand managed to say that he was.

"We're almost there," said Ferguson "I thought you'd like to know. There's a planet. Inhabitable, they think."

From Earth the star called Groombrige 1618 was not even visible to the naked eye. Binoculars might make it a tiny flicker of light, lost among countless thousands of farther, but brighter, stars. From Groombridge 1618 Sol was not much more.

Marchand remembered struggling out of his hammock, overruling the worry on Ferguson's simian face, to look back at the view that showed Sol. Ferguson had picked it out for him, and Marchand looked at light that had been fifteen years journeying from his home. The photons that impinged on his eyes now had paused to drench the Earth in the colors of sunset when he was in his seventies and his wife only a few years mourned . . He did not remember getting back to his haccock.

He did not remember, either, at what moment of time someone told him about the planet they hoped to own. It hung low around the little orange disk of Groombridge 1618 — by solar standards, at least. The captain's first approximation made its orbit quite irregular, but at its nearest approach it would be less than ten million miles from the glowing fire-coal of its primary. Near enough. Warm enough. Telescopes showed it a planet with oceans and forests, removing the lingering doubts of the captain, for its orbit could not freeze it even at greatest remove from its star, or char it at closest — or else the forest could not have grown. Spectroscopes, thermocouples, filarometers showed more, the instruments racing ahead of the ship, now in orbit and compelled to creep at rocket speeds the last little inch of its journey. The atmosphere could be breathed, for the ferny woods had flushed out the poisons and filled it with oxygen. The gravity was more than Earth's — a drag on the first generation, to be sure, and an expense in foot troubles and lumbar aches for many more — but nothing that could not be borne. The world was fair.

Marchand remembered nothing of how he learned this, or of the landing, or of the hurried, joyful opening of the freezing crypts, the awakening of the colonists, the beginning of life on the planet . . . he only knew that there was a time when he found himself curled on a soft, warm hummock, and he looked up and saw sky.

V

The protuberant hairy lip and sloping brows of a chimpanzee were hovering over him. Marchand recognized that young fellow Ferguson. "Hello," he said. "How long have I been unconscious?"

The chimp said, with embarrassment, "Well — you haven't been unconscious at all, exactly. You've been —" His voice trailed off.

"I see," said Marchand, and struggled up. He was grateful for the strength of the slope-shouldered,

short-legged body he had borrowed, for this world he had come to had an uncomfortably powerful grip. The effort made him dizzy. A pale sky and thin clouds spiraled around him; he felt queer flashes of pain and pleasure, remembered tastes he had never experienced, felt joys he had never known . . . With an effort he repressed the vestigial ape and said, "You mean I've been — what would you call it? Unstable? The smithing didn't quite take." But he didn't need confirmation from Feguson. He knew; and knew that the next time he slipped away would be the last. Czerny had warned him. The phospholipids, wasn't that it? It was almost time to go home . . .

Off to one side he saw men and women, *human* men and women, on various errands and it made him ask: "You're still an ape?"

"I will be for a while, Dr. Marchand. "My body's gone, you know."

Marchand puzzled over that for a while. His attention wandering, he caught himself licking his forearm and grooming his round belly. "No!" he shouted, and tried to stand up.

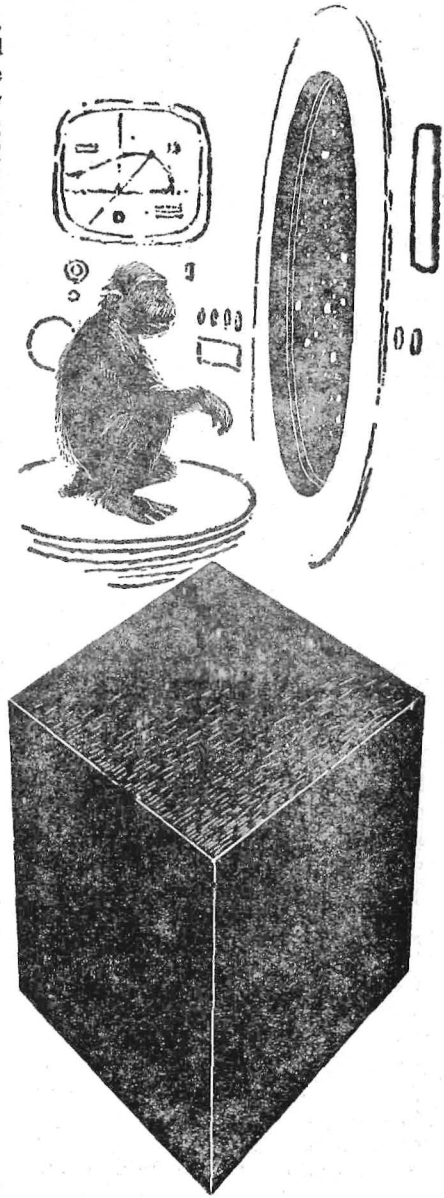
Ferguson helped him, and Marchand was grateful for the ape's strong arm. He remembered what had been bothering him. "Why?" he asked.

"Why what, Dr. Marchand?"

"Why did you come?"

Ferguson said anxiously, "I wish you'd sit down till the doctor gets here. I came because there's someone on the *Tycho Brahe* I wanted to see."

A girl? thought Marchand wonderingly, "And did you see her?"



"Not her, them. Yes, I saw them. My parents. You see, I was two years old when the *Tycho Brahe* left. My parents were good breeding stock — volunteers were hard to get then, they tell me — oh, of course, you'd know better than I. Anyway they — I was adopted by an aunt. They left me a letter to read when I was old enough . . . Dr. Marchand! What's the matter?"

Marchand reeled and fell; he could not help it; he knew he was a spectacle, could feel the incongruous tears rheuming out of his beast eyes; but this last and unexpected blow was too harsh. He had faced the fact of fifty thousand damaged lives and accepted guilt for them, but one abandoned baby, left to an aunt and the apology of a letter, broke his heart.

"I wonder why you don't kill me," he said.

"Dr. Marchand! I don't know what you're talking about."

"If only," said Marchand carefully, "I don't expect any favors, but if only there were some way I could *pay*. But I can't. I have nothing left, not even enough life to matter. But I'm sorry, Mr. Ferguson, and that will have to do."

Ferguson said, "Dr. Marchand, if I'm not mistaken, you're saying that you apologize for the Institute." Marchand nodded. "But — oh, I'm not the one to say this, but there's no one else. Look. Let me try to make it clear. The first thing the colonists did yesterday was choose a name for the planet. The vote was unanimous. Do you know what they called it?"

Marchand only looked at him dully.

"Please listen, Dr. Marchand. They named it after the man who inspired all their lives. Their greatest hero. They named it Marchand."

Marchand stared at him, and stared longer, and then without changing expression closed his eyes. "Dr. Marchand!" said Ferguson tentatively, and then, seriously worried at last, turned and scuttled ape-like, legs and knuckles bearing him rapidly across the ground, to get the ship's doctor who had left him with strict orders to call him as soon as the patient showed any signs of life.

When they got back the chimp was gone. They looked at the fronded forest and at each other.

"Wandered off, I expect," said the doctor. "It may be just as well."

"But the nights are cold! He'll get pneumonia. He'll die."

"Not any more," said the doctor, as kindly as he could. "He's already dead in every way that matters."

He bent and rubbed his aching thighs, worn already from the struggle against this new Eden's gravity, then straightened and looked at the stars in the darkening western sky. A bright green one was another planet of Groombridge 1618's, farther out, all ice and copper salts. One of the very faintest ones, perhaps, was Sol. "He gave us these planets," said the doctor, and turned back toward the city. "Do you know what being a good man means, Ferguson? It means being better than you really are — so that even your failures carry someone a little farther to success — and that's what he did for us. I

hope he heard what you were trying to tell him. I hope he remembers it when he dies," the doctor said.

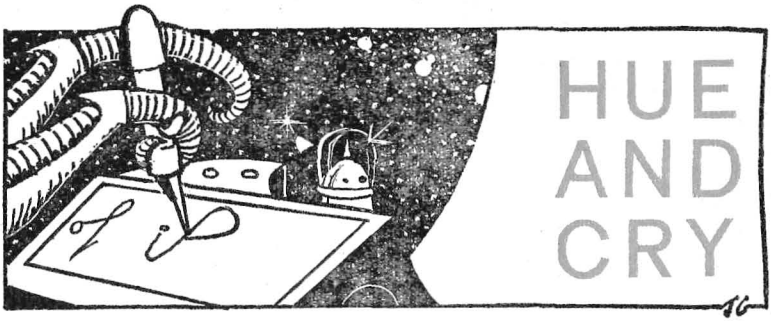
"If he doesn't," said Ferguson very clearly, "the rest of us always will."

The next day they found the curled-up body.

It was the first funeral ever held on the planet, and the one that the history books describe. That is why, on the planet called Marchand, the statue at the spaceport has a small bas-relief carved over the legend:

THE FATHER OF THE STARS

The bas-relief is the shape of a chimpanzee, curled on itself and looking out with blind, frightened eyes upon the world, for it was the chimpanzee's body that they found, and the chimpanzee's body that they buried under the monument. The bas-relief and the body, they are ape. But the statue that rises above them is a god's. END



The Place Where Readers And Editor Meet...

Dear Editor:

In my opinion *If* is at this moment the best science fiction magazine on the market. It contains everything that I could possibly want in an S.F. magazine, big name authors who continue to write some of the best stories available, plus a continuous supply of new authors who seem to be almost as good as the old reliable pros, also witty and informative editorials which seems to enhance the quality of the magazine. Put these all together, and they spell, in my opinion anyway, a great magazine.

Just to make it plain that the purpose of this letter is not solely to butter you up, I have a complaint to make. It seems that through someone's fault I have not received the September issue of *If*. My first thought was that my subscription had run out, but on checking I found that I still had two issues of my sub still forthcoming. I hope that this mistake can be rectified soon, and my issue sent to me. I had especially wanted this issue since it contained the final installment of Robert A. Heinlein's *Farnham's Freehold*, but, aside from this slight mistake I have no other complaints to make, and in my opinion *If* is still the best S.F. magazines sold today. — Charles J. Bing, 711 Center Street, Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania.

● Hope you discovered the explanation by now. We had to omit the September issue because of printing difficulties. But hopefully we're straightened out now! — *Editor.*

* * *

Dear Editor:

I happened to see you on the Johnny Carson Tonight show, and I must say that you helped add to the more respectful attitude shown today towards science fiction. I feel that the trend is gradually swinging over to the romantic type of reading and that it will continue to do so as long as *Galaxy, Worlds of Tomorrow,* and *If* continue their remarkable output of entertaining and delightful science-fiction stories. The

success of any magazine depends on the editor. There couldn't be any better editor than the one of the previously mentioned three magazines.

As usual, the issue of *If* scored an excellent grade. Even though I am relatively new to reading science fiction, I haven't noticed one story published in *If* that did not measure up to its usually high standards. What I can't understand is why this certain magazine (I wonder which one) wins the Hugo every year. But I'm sure of one thing: Keep up the good work and the Hugo award for the best science fiction magazine for 1964 will certainly go to IF. — Calvin Cahan, 6306 Lafayette, Omaha, Nebraska.

* * *

Dear Editor:

With your knowledge of recent science fiction, you can perhaps answer a question: In what anthology or magazine can I find again a wonderful S.F. yarn about dogs? If you ever saw it, you will remember this plot.

A space ship from a planet closely resembling Earth lands here. Its crew also closely resemble Earth people, so that they receive an enthusiastic welcome and when ready to return to their home, their ship is loaded with gifts from Earth.

Among the gifts are a pair of fine dogs for breeding stock, as their planet has no dogs. While the ports of the space ship are open and the crew is taking a farewell look at their Earth friends, one of the crew (a co-pilot?) informs the captain that he understood the dogs' thoughts and warns the captain about burdening their planet with these parasitic pests whose only thought is to cajole and flatter human beings into sheltering and feeding and cherishing them for life, and giving nothing in return.

The captain ridicules the warning. He cannot read the dogs' thoughts himself and already the dogs are licking his hand and showing all the signs of servile affection that all dogs use.

The co-pilot sees that his warning is useless and plans to get rid of the dogs before the ship arrives home. But as he stands near an open port, one of the dogs suddenly shoves him out and he suffers a fatal fall to Earth, a few hundred feet below the open port.

I have searched through a dozen anthologies and can't find it. I read it within the last three years, I'm sure. You may know of it. — Dabney Horton, 550 Main Street, Northport, New York.

* * *

Dear Editor,

You are correct; *If* has, for the last two issues, done all you claimed it was trying to do . . . adventure, excitement, color, drama, etc.

You might just as well leave out "Hue and Cry", or at least cut it down to never more than one and a half pages. Most of the letters are of more interest to you than to the readers (like this one). — Irvin Koch, 835 Chattanooga Bank Building, Chattanooga, Tennessee 37402.

* * *

Dear Editor:

You run a fine magazine but your geography ain't good. Potsdam is in

East Germany and not very far from Berlin. If I am in Potsdam, engineering a communication system, I am in trouble. And if that's where you folks have been sending my mail, it is no wonder I have not heard from you.

So please pass the word around that I am in Frankfurt am Main, in the German Federal Republic, a Part Of The Free World, and that I have never been, and am not now, affiliated with any organization, political party, or anything else Period. — George O. Smith, Frankfurt am Main, West Germany.

* * *

Dear Editor:

The March issue of *If* proved to be a quite a good one for two basic reasons. First, your all-Smith idea was good, and all the stories were of high quality. E.E. Smith's *The Imperial Stars* was different from the usual *If* material, but I think that it could have been improved with more work. *The Store of Heart's Desires* was the best story in the issue. It contained a plot that kept moving and only slowed up a few places. I like Cordwainer Smith's underpeople, and I am looking forward to more stories from him.

Secondly, do you always drop such bombshells so casually? The announcement that *If* was going monthly bowled me over. I can't tell you how glad I am to hear it. *If* is really on the upswing. — Paul Gilster, 42 Godwin Lane, St. Louis, Missouri.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Because I am a younger generation reader of science fiction (I am fifteen years old) I don't know too much about the field as it was in its early days. I have read "Doc" Smith's yarns, *The Skylark of Space, Skylark Three and Skylark of Valeron* in recent paperback editions. They are pretty good stories, but I couldn't help but visualize a long string of *Skylark* stories, each beginning with a new revival of Dr. Marc DuQuesne and ending with Richard Seaton adding another, larger spaceship to his collection and a red feather to his cap to commemorate his mastery of another order of radiation.

The other day I came upon an issue of *If* on the stands and was greatly surprised to read your announcement concerning *Skylark DuQuesne.*

Good grief! How many *Skylark* stories have there been? — Bill Beck, 2210 Vassar Drive, Boulder, Colorado.

* * *

Dear Editor:

If gets better by the issue. It couldn't be better except (and here I go with my two cents worth) . . .1) More Retief stories, please. 2) More illustrations by Finlay and Gaughan (who has improved a lot in the last few issues). 3) A book review column. 4) A story or so by Theodore Sturgeon wouldn't be out of order. (And by the way, what happened to him? I didn't see his name on the content's page or any article by him.) 5) I would like to see stories by Clifford Simak, Robert Sheckley and the light-hearted side of Isaac Asimov. — Brian Baldwin, 212 Harding Road, Chattanooga, Tennessee.

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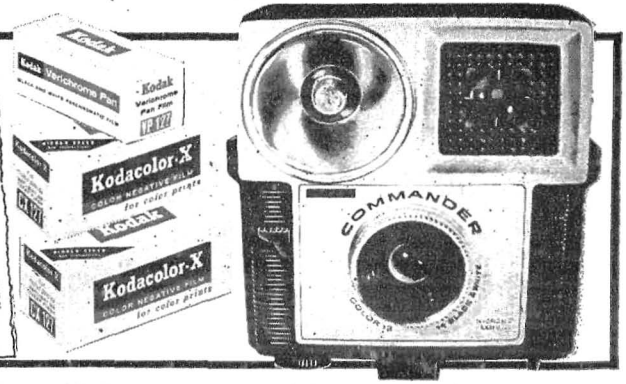

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Forgotten road to success in writing

By J. D. Ratcliff

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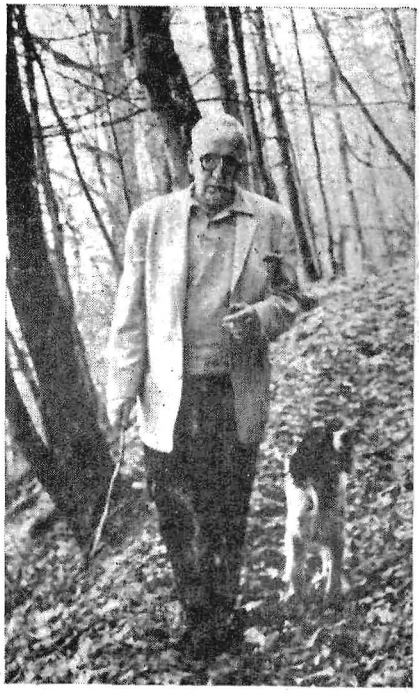

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