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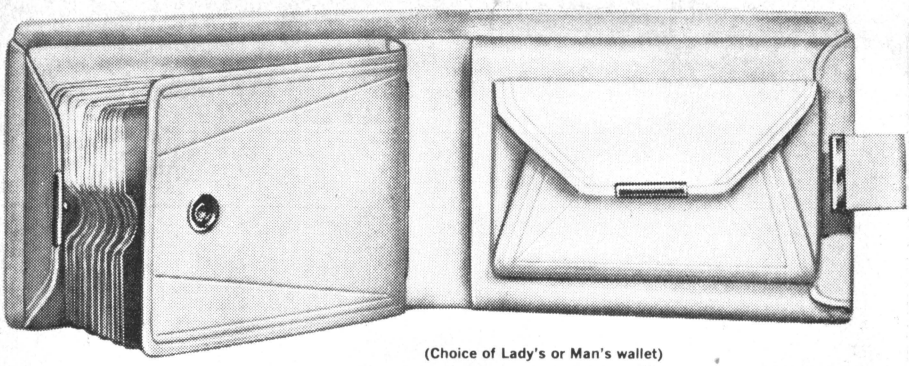
WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

THE IMPERIAL STARS — E. E. SMITH
FIRE, 2016! — GEORGE O.
THE STORE OF HEART'S DESIRES — CORDWAINER
THE FINAL EQUATION — JACK



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MAY, 1964
VOL. 14, NO. 2

WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

ALL NEW STORIES

Frederik Pohl, Editor — *Sol Cohen, Publisher*
David Perton, Production Manager — *Dave Geller, Assoc.*

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Ode to a Skylark

The not-quite yet city of Tampeta, Florida, described in this issue's *The Imperial Stars,* is Doc Smith's conception of what will happen to Manatee County and surrounding areas in another couple of centuries. It is in this area of Florida's Golf coast, stretching from Dunedin and Tampa on the north to Sarasota on the south, that Smith spends his winters; it was here that he wrote *The Imperial Stars;* and, in fact, it is in this same area that your editor is writing these notes.

Yesterday we spent the day with Doc Smith, clearing up a few loose ends in his forthcoming, long-delayed and long-awaited conclusion of his famous Skylark series, *Skylark DuQuesne,* which we will be printing in *If* as soon as the Heinlein *Farnham's Freehold* and one or two other items are done. (If you think we're name-dropping — we are! It isn't often that an editor has a chance to announce a lineup like this!) Doc had a bit of eye surgery come up — complains somebody has stuck about a 30% neutral gray filter on his vision when he wasn't looking — and at the pleading of his doctor has agreed to budget a few weeks for operation and convalescence. But we talked mostly about the future — *Skylark DuQuesne,* the future d'Alembert Family series to follow *The Imperial Stars* and so on. Doc, who has been writing for all but half a century, has plenty of future to count on, and we're hoping to keep printing his stories for half a century more. Hail to thee, blithe spirit! And keep 'em coming.

* * *

In case you hadn't noticed, this is an All-Smith issue . . . all different Smiths, of course. Besides Doc Smith we've got Mister and professor Smith, *Herr Doktor* Smith and Mr. Smith, Esq. Mister and professor Cordwainer Smith, a world traveler, confides that he was a great disappointment to his family because at the age of nine he could speak only five languages. *Herr Doktor* George O. Smith does all his writing now in Potsdam, Germany, where he is an electronics engineer on one of those enormous world-girdling projects that keep our satellites in orbit and our messages going through. Also from Potsdam — but the other Potsdam, the one in upstate New York — is Mr. Jack Smith, Esq. Proving it's a small world, he worked there for radio station WPDT, which, as it happens, is operated by our old friend David A. Kyle. Mr. Smith, Esq., is our "first" for this issue; the others, of course are long-time favorites.

— FREDERIK POHL

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THERE are some things that cannot be generally told—*things you ought to know.* Great truths are dangerous to some—but factors for *personal power* and *accomplishment* in the hands of those who understand them. Behind the tales of the miracles and mysteries of the ancients, lie centuries of their secret probing into nature's laws—their amazing discoveries of *the hidden processes of man's mind,* and *the mastery of life's problems.* Once shrouded in mystery to avoid their destruction by mass fear and ignorance, these facts remain a useful heritage for the thousands of men and women who privately use them in their homes today.

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THE IMPERIAL STARS

BY E. E. SMITH, PH.D.

ILLUSTRATED BY MORROW

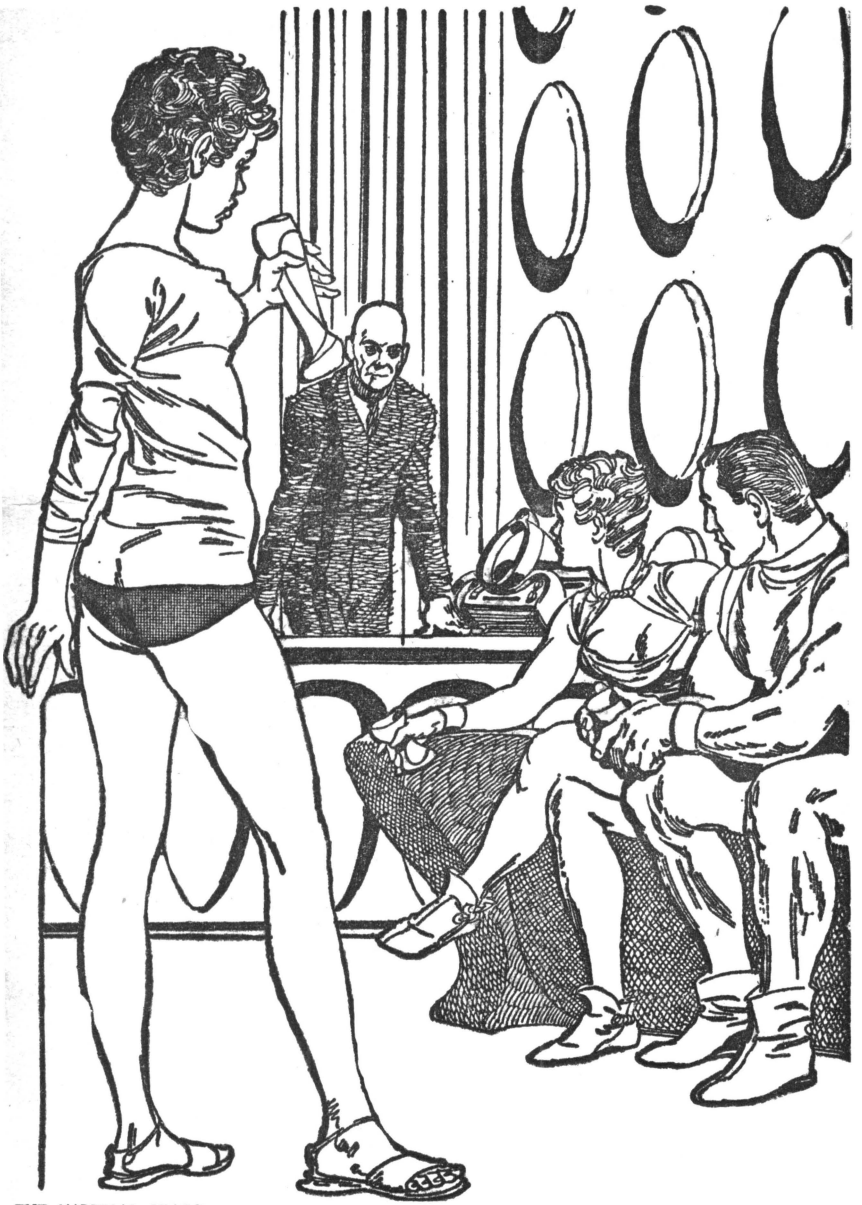
They were the finest interstellar agents — and greatest circus stars — the Service of the Empire had!

I

Des Plaines (Plan) 15 rev cat 4-1076-9525. Hostile PX-3M-RKQ. Pop (2440) 7500 00. COL 2015 Fr (qv) & NrAm (qv) phys. cult. Comml stndg, 229th. Prin ctrib gal: Circus o/t Gal, heav met, prec stones. (Encyclopedia Galactica, Vol. 9, p2937)

Jules and Yvette

For twenty-eight minutes The Flying d'Alemberts — who throughout two centuries had been the greatest troupe of aerialists of the entire Empire of Earth — had kept the vast audience of the Circus of the Galaxy spellbound: densely silent; almost tranced. For twenty-



eight minutes both side rings had been empty and dark. The air over the center ring, from the hard-packed, imitation-sawdust-covered earth floor up to the plastic top one hundred forty-five feet above that floor, had been full of flying white-clad forms — singles and pairs and groups all doing something utterly breath-taking.

Suddenly, in perfect unison, eighteen of the twenty d'Alemberts then performing swung to their perches, secured their apparatus, and stood motionless, each with his or her right arm pointing upward at the highest part of the Big Top.

As all those arms pointed up at her, Yvette d'Alembert moved swiftly, smoothly, out to the middle of her high wire — and that wire was high indeed, being one hundred thirty-two feet above the floor of the ring. She did not carry even a fan for balance. She maintained her equilibrium by almost imperceptible movements of her hands, feet, and body. Reaching the center of the span, she stopped and posed. To the audience she appeared as motionless as a statue.

Like all the other d'Alemberts, she was dressed in silver-spangled tights that clung to every part of her body like a second skin. Thus, while she was too short and too wide and too thick to be acceptable as an Earthly high-fashion model, her flamboyantly female figure made a very striking and very attractive picture — at a distance. Close up, however, that picture changed.

Her ankles were much larger than any Earthwoman's should have been. Her wrists were those of a six-foot-four, two-hundred-fifty-pound timberman. Her musculature, from toenails to ears to fingertips, would have made all the beach-boys of Southern California turn green with envy.

After a few seconds of posing, she turned her head and looked down at her brother Jules, on a perch sixty-one feet below her and an "impossible" sixty-four feet off to one side. Then, flexing her knees and swinging her horizontally outstretched arms in ever-increasing arcs, she put more and more power into her tightly stretched steel — and Jules, grasping a flying ring in his left hand, began to flex his knees and move his body in precise synchronization with the natural period of the girl-wire system so far above him. Finally, in the last cycle through which she could hold the wire, Yvette squatted and drove both powerful legs downward and to her right — and something snapped, with a harsh, metallic report as loud as a pistol shot

The wire, all its terrific tension released instantly as one end broke free and dropped, coiled itself up in the air with metallic whinings and slitherings; and Yvette d'Alembert, *premiere aerialiste* of all civilization, sprawling helplessly in mid-air, began her long fall to the floor.

Eighteen d'Alemberts came to life on their perches, seized all the equipment they could reach, and hurled it all at the falling girl. One of her frantically reaching fingertips barely touched the bar of one swing-

ing trapeze; none of the other apparatus came even close.

Jules, in the lowest position, had more time than did any of the others; but he did not have a millisecond to spare. In the instant of the break he went outward and downward along the arc of the ninety-eight-foot radius of his top-hung flying ring. His aim was true and the force of launching had been precisely right.

Yvette was falling face down, flat and horizontal, at a speed of over seventy feet a second as she neared the point of meeting. Jules, rigidly vertical at the bottom of his prodigious swing, was moving almost half that fast. In the instant before a right-angle collision that would have smashed any two ordinary athletes into masses of bloody flesh, two strong right hands smacked together in the practically unbreakable hand-over-wrist grip of the aerialist and Yvette spun and twisted like a cat — except much faster. Both her feet went flat against his hard, flat belly. Her hard-sprung knees and powerful leg muscles absorbed most of the momentum of his mass and speed. Then, at the last possible instant, her legs went around his waist and locked behind his back, and his right hand flashed up to join his left in gripping the ring.

That took care of the horizontal component of energy, but the vertical one was worse — much worse; almost twice as great. Its violence drove their locked bodies downward and into a small but vicious arc; a savagely wrenching violence that would have broken any ordinary man's back in a fraction of a second. But Jules d'Alembert, although only five feet eight in height, had a mass of two hundred twenty-five pounds, most of which was composed of super-hard, super-reactive muscle; unstretchable, unbreakable gristle; and super-dense, super-strong, horse-sized bone. His arms were as large as, and immensely stronger than, an ordinary Earthman's legs.

The two bodies, unstressed now relative to each other, began to hurtle downward together, at an angle of thirty degrees from the vertical, toward the edge of the ring facing the reserved-seat and box section of the stands.

The weakest point in the whole stressed system was now Jules' grip on that leather-covered steel ring. Could he hold it? Could he *possibly* hold it? Not one person in all that immense audience moved a muscle: not one of them even breathed.

He held his grip for just under half a second, held it while that half-inch nylon cable stretched a good seven feet, held it while the entire supporting framework creaked and groaned. Then the merest moment before that frightful fall would have been arrested and both would have been safe, Jules' hands slipped from the ring and both began to fall the remaining forty feet to the ground.

A high-speed camera, however, would have revealed the fact that they did not fall out of control. Each landed in perfect position.

Hard-sprung knees took half of the shock of landing; hard-sprung elbows took half of what was left. Heads bent low on chests; powerful leg muscles drove forward; thick, hard shoulders and back muscles struck the floor in perfect rolls; and both brother and sister somersaulted lightly to their feet.

Hand in hand, they posed motionless for a moment; then bowed deeply in unison, turned and ran lightly to an exit — and they covered that one hundred yards of distance in less than five seconds.

And the multitude of spectators went wild.

They had seen a girl falling to certain death. They had felt a momentary flash of relief — or actually of disappointment? — when it seemed as though her life might be saved. Then they had watched two magnificently alive young people fall, if not to certain death, at least to maiming, crippling injury. Then, in the climactic last split second, the whole terrible accident had become the grand finale of the act.

That it was a grand finale — a crashing smash of a finish — there was no possible doubt. The only question was, what emotion predominated in that shrieking, yelling, clapping, jeering, cheering, whistling and catcalling throng of Earthpeople — relief, appreciation or disappointment?

Whatever it was, however, they had all had the thrill of a life-time; and few if any of them could understand how it could possibly have been done.

For of the teeming billions of people inhabiting the nine hundred forty-two other planets of the Empire of Earth, scarcely one in a million had ever even heard of the planet DesPlaines. Of those who had heard of it, comparatively few knew that its surface gravity was approximately three thousand centimeters per second squared — more than three times that of small, green Earth. And most of those who knew that fact neither knew nor cared that harsh, forbidding, hostile DesPlaines was the home world of the Circus of the Galaxy and of The Family d'Alembert.

II

The Service of the Empire (SOTE) was founded in 2239 *by Empress Stanley* 3, *the first of the Great Stanleys, who, during her reign of* 37 *years* (2237-2274) *inculcated in it the spirit of loyalty and devotion that has characterized it ever since. Its spirit wavered only once, under weak and vicious Empress Stanley* 5, *whose reign — fortunately very short* (2293-2299) *— was calamitous in every respect. SOTE came to full power, however, only under Emperor Stanley* 10 *(reign* 2379-—), *the third and greatest of the Great Stanleys, under whom it became the finest organization of its kind ever known. (Baird, A Study of Security, Ed.* 2447, p291).

The Brawl in the Dunedin Arms

The city of Tampeta, Florida, had a population of over fifteen million. It included, not only what

had once been Tampa, St. Petersburg and Clearwater, but also all the other cities and villages between Sarasota on the south and Port Richey on the north. Just outside Tampeta's city limit, well out toward Lakeland, lay the Pinellas Fair Ground. There the Circus of the Galaxy had been playing to capacity crowds for over a week, with a different show — especially with an entirely different climax — every night.

Jules and Yvette d'Alembert, as top stars of the show, of course had private dressing rooms. They also had private entrances. Thus no one connected with the show saw, and no one else either noticed or cared, that two short, fat Delfians, muffled to the eyes in the shapelessly billowing robes and hoods of their race, joined one of the columns of people moving slowly toward the exits leading to the immense parking lot. It took them half an hour to get to their car, but they were in no hurry.

Out of the traffic jam at last, Jules maneuvered his heavy vehicle up into the second-level, west-bound Interstate Four and sped for the Dunedin district and the Dunedin Arms, one of the plushiest night spots in all North America. At the Arms, he gave a dollar to the parking-lot attendant, another to the resplendently-uniformed doorman and a third to the usher who escorted them ceremoniously into the elevator and up to the fourth floor. At the check-stand the two Delfians refused — as expected — to part with any of their mufflings. Jules did, however — also as expected — give the provocatively clad hat-check girl a dollar before he handed his reservation slip and a five-dollar bill to the bowing captain.

"Thank you, sir and madam," that worthy said. "We are very glad indeed to have you with us this evening, Mister and Misses Tygven. Will you have your table now, or perhaps a little later?"

"A little later, I think," Jules said, using faultlessly the Russo-English "Empirese" that was the court language of the Empire. He paused then, and gazed about the huge room. At his right, along the full two-hundred-foot length of the room, ran the subduedly ornate, mirror-backed bar. At his left were three tremendous windows overlooking the beach and the open Gulf. Heavy tables of genuine oak, not too closely spaced, filled the place except for a large central dance floor. On a stage at the far end of the room a spot-lighted, red-haired stripper was doing her stuff. Priceless paintings and fabulous tapestries adorned the walls. Suits of armor dating from the ancient days of chivalry stood on pedestals and niches here and there. The place was jammed with a gay, colorful and festive crowd; there were only a few vacant places even at that tremendously long bar.

It was quite evident why the captain had suggested a short delay, so Jules said, "Yes, later, please. We will do a little serious drinking at the bar before we eat."

And at the bar, Jules laid a fifty-dollar bill on the oak and said, "A

liter of vodnak, please. Estvan's, if you have it. In the original bottle — sealed."

"We have it, Mister." The bartender set out two glasses, a bowl of ice and the heavy, crudely molded, green-glass bottle of the one-hundred-and-twenty-proof beverage that was the favored tipple of the rim-world, Delf. "We've got everything. And don't worry about it not being the clear quill. We don't cheat. With our prices we don't have to" — and he put down on the bar a dollar and fifteen cents in change, which Jules waved away.

Before Jules opened the bottle — he was looking into the mirror, and so was Yvette — the man at Yvette's left finished his drink and moved away, and a tall, slim Earthman came up to take his place. Holding up one finger to the bartender, the newcomer said, "I'll take a jigger of the . . ."

That was as far as he got. "Rube!" Yvette snapped — throughout the years, half of the old-time circus battle-cry of "Hey Rube!" had survived. She grabbed the heavy bottle by its neck, and hurling it even as she dropped — dropped safely under the vicious blaster-beam that, having incinerated the slender Earthman, swept through the space her chest had occupied an instant before. Still in air, falling almost flat, she braced one foot against the bar, dived headlong under the nearest table, bent her back and heaved.

The blaster-beam, however, had already expired. The heavy bottle, still full and still sealed, hurled with a DesPlainian's strength and with an aerialist's sure control, had struck bottom-on squarely in the middle of the gunner's face — and that gunner now had no face at all and scarcely enough head to be recognizable as human.

Jules, too, was busy. He too had dropped at his sister's warning word, scanning the room as he fell. He too made a dive; but his was high and far, toward a table for six at which only two couples sat. One of the men at that table, half hidden behind a tall and statuesque blonde, had started to rise to his feet and was reaching for his left armpit.

Jules lit flat on the table and slid angle-wise across its length, in a welter of breaking and flying dishes, glassware, silverware, food and drink, directly at the man trying so frantically to draw his weapon. En route, Jules brushed the blonde aside. He didn't push her hard at all — just a one-handed gentle shove; just enough to get her out of the way. Nevertheless, she went over backward, chair and all, and performed an involuntary back somersault — thus revealing to all interested observers that she wore only a lacy trifle of nylon in the way of underwear.

Continuing his slide, Jules made a point of his left elbow and rammed it into the man's gut. Then, as the man doubled up and "w-h-o-o-s-h-e-d" in agony, Jules whirled to his feet off of the table and chopped the hard edge of his right hand down onto the back of his victim's neck — which broke with a snap audible for dozens of feet

above the uproar then going on. Then, seizing the man's half-drawn weapon — it was a stun-gun, not a blaster — he glanced at its dial. Ten. Wide open. Instantly lethal. Clicking it back to three — a half-hour stun — he played its beam briefly over the other man at the table (the guy had been too quiet and too unconcerned by far during all this action) and whirled around to see how his sister was making out.

Yvette was doing all right. The table under which she had disappeared had leaped into the air, turned over — shedding dishes and so forth far and wide — and crashed down onto the table at which the first blasterman and three other goons had been sitting. She had picked the blaster up and had tried to bend it around the side of Number Two's head; but it broke up almost as thoroughly as the head did. Ducking as only such a performer as she was could duck, she grabbed Number Three by the ankles, up-ended him, kicked the flaming blaster out of his hand before it could kill more than three innocent bystanders and was going to use him as a flail on Number Four when that unlucky (or lucky) wight slumped bonelessly to the floor in the beam of her brother's stunner.

She had the motion all made — why waste it? — So, continuing her swing, she hammer-threw Number Three over a few rows of tables and out into fifty feet of air through the middle of one of the three immense windows already mentioned.

Have you ever heard four hundred and thirty-two square feet of three-eighths-inch-thick plate glass shatter all at once? It makes a noise.

Such a noise that all lesser noises stopped instantly.

And in that strained, tense silence Jules spoke quietly to his sister. Both were apparently perfectly calm. Neither breathed one count faster than normal. Only their eyes — his a glacially cold gray; hers a furiously hot blue — showed how angry and how disconcerted they both were. "Many more of 'em, you think?" he asked.

"Not to spot." Yvette shook her head. "And we've got no time to check."

"Right. Take that one, I'll bring the other. Flit." Carrying two unconscious men, the two ran lightly, but at terrific speed, down three flights of stairs and out into the parking lot. The attendant, upon seeing what burdens they carried, tried simultaneously to run and to yell, but accomplished neither — a half-hour stun saw to that.

Tortured rubber shrieked and smoked as the heavy car spun out of the lot and into the highway Fortunately, traffic was so light — it was then half past two in the morning — that Jules did not have to drive far before a moment came when no other car was in sight.

The d'Alembert vehicle, while it looked pretty much like an ordinary groundcar, was a little too long and too wide and too round and much too heavy to be any standard model. Thus, alone in the road for a moment, Jules punched

three buttons and three things happened: 1) the car's lights went out; 2) from those too-round sides the two halves of an airtight, bullet-proof, transparent canopy shot up, snapped together, and locked; and 3) the vehicle went straight up, at an acceleration of four Earthly gravities — having two Earthers aboard they couldn't hurry — to an altitude of a hundred and ninety thousand feet before it stopped.

Jules and Yvette removed what was left of their Delfian costumes — which wasn't very much — and stared wordlessly into each other's eyes for a long half minute. Then Yvette spoke:

"That was our contact. Our only contact. And we don't know anybody in SOTE on Earth . . . and there was a leak. There *had* to be a leak, Julie."

"That's for sure, and it was no ordinary leak, either. It had to be right in the Head's own office . . ." Jules voice died away.

Yvette shivered. "I'm afraid so. And we haven't an inkling, except for his retinal pattern, of who the Head is or where he is. He may not be on Earth, even."

"Well, there'll be somebody in the Tampeta office here and they'll be on the alert. That brawl put the stuff into the fan but good. They'll be monitoring the channel every second."

"But our friends' friends down there will be monitoring *all* channels every second — and they probably have the codes."

He thought for a moment, then grinned. "So I'll go back to one that's so old and so simple that they probably never heard of it . . . unless it'd fool our monitor, too . . . uh-uh. Whoever they've got on monitor right now is no dumb bunny; so here goes."

He flipped a blue switch and raised his powerful — and not too unmusical — deep bass voice in song: "Sing of the evening star, Oh Susan; sweetest old tune ever sung. Oh, Susan, sweet one, 'tis . . ."

"Susan here." A lilting, smooth-as-cream contralto voice came from the speaker. There was a moment of silence, then the voice said "Cut!" and Jules flipped his switch; whereupon the voice concluded, "We'll beep you in. Out."

"I'll say they're alert!" Yvette exclaimed; then went on, half-giggling in relief. "And she's fast on the trigger — 'Susan here' my left eyeball. You made that whole thing up, didn't you, on the spur of the moment."

"Uh-huh. If I'd had a little time the verse would have been as good as the music."

Yvette snorted. "Ha! Modesty, thy name is Jules! I expect them to tap you for the Met any minute now. But you were right on one thing — no dumb bunny could make 'S-O-T-E- — S-O-S' so fast out of *that* mess of yowling. But it won't really be a beeper, you think?"

"Anything else but. My guess is a laser. They've got us lined up and they'll pour it right into our cup — so I'd better set the cup to spinning."

He did so, and in less than a minute the pencil-thin beam came

in, chopped up into evenly-spaced dashes by the rotation of the cup-antenna of the car. There was of course no voice or signal.

While Jules was manipulating his finders to determine the exact line of the beam, he said, "Better unlimber the launchers, Evie, and break out some bombs. Just in case somebody wants to argue with us on the way. I'll handle the other stuff."

"That's a thought —" She broke off; her tone changed, "But just suppose that's *their* beam?"

"Could be; so we'll have to look a little bit out when we land. But they know that. So if everything's oke they'll engineer a safe approach — we won't have to. They *know* who we are." Things had gone wrong. They had given the right signal at the rendezvous — but the wrong people had responded. Now they had to find out why!

III

Democracy failed because it could not cope with Communism. This failure, which began early in the twentieth century, became very evident when, in 1922, *Canada, the United States of America and Mexico united to form the United States of North America. The Congress of the USNA agrued and filibustered, but could not agree upon any effective action against Communism. The Premier of Russia, however, acted. He issued orders; the recipients of which either obeyed them promptly or were promptly shot. (Mees, History of Civilization, Vol.* 21, p1077)

The Head

Sliding down the beam, the d'Alembert's vehicle was heading directly toward the roof of a building that towered at least forty stories above any other structure in its neighborhood.

Jules slowed down; approached it gingerly; stopped half a mile away. It was all dark, except, strangely enough, for a small, brightly-lighted spot on the roof of one wing.

"Scan it," Jules said. "Infra first. See what it is."

Yvette put her eye to the scanner. "Hall of State; Sector Four. That makes sense. State would be the best place to hide the Service, wouldn't it?"

"Check. And the spot?"

"Floodlight. One. That's a girl, standing in it. Young. Skinny, but not bad for an Earther. Black hair — throat-mike — sweater — shorts — two Mark Twenty-Nine Service blasters hanging loose — sandals. Sneak up, Julie."

Jules dropped the "car" — which was in fact one of the deadliest fighting machines of its weight ever built by man — down to within a couple of hundred yards of the lighted spot and stopped; and that highly distinctive throaty contralto voice came again from the speaker.

"It's safe to talk now if we don't say too much," the voice said conversationally. "Are you armed?"

"Yes." Jules wasn't saying much, yet.

"Good. You won't need these, then." The girl walked out of the

ring of light, put the brutal big hand-weapons down on the roof, and resumed her former place. "You recognize my voice, of course."

"Yes."

"You have a retinascope, I suppose."

"Yes. Hold it a minute."

Jules cut com and turned to his sister. "I don't like this a nickel's worth. What Earther's pattern, except the Head's, would we recognize without a comparison disk? Nobody's. So, if this is on the up and up, we've got to manhandle the Head himself."

Yvette bit her lip. "Well, you said they'd arrange a safe approach, and that certainly would be one. What else can we do?"

"Nothing," and Jules again flipped the blue switch. "Go ahead."

"Land anywhere you please and one person will come aboard. Unarmed."

"Oke." Jules landed the car well away from the ring of light and opened a port.

In the darkness all that could be seen of the man who came up, empty hands outstretched, was that he was of medium height, of medium build and almost completely bald. He put his hands in through the port and Yvette, taking one of his wrists in each hand, helped him through the narrow opening and into the cramped front compartment of the car, where she held him gently but securely while Jules applied the retinascope to the Earthman's right eye.

"The head himself," Jules said. "I'm sorry, sir . . . "

"Think nothing of it, Jules." The stranger laughed deeply. "If you had acted differently I would have been amazed, displeased and disappointed. As it is, I am very glad indeed to meet you in the flesh," and he shook hands vigorously. "And you too, Yvette, my dear." Taking her hand, he kissed it in as courtly a fashion as though that tiny, cramped compartment were a ballroom. "And now — purely a formality, of course — the eyes. Yvette first, please," and he handed her the 'scope.

She fitted it to her eye. "But you didn't put any disk in," she said. "Surely, sir, you don't . . . "

"I surely do." He studied her pattern briefly, then Jules'. "I don't know very many patterns, of course; but Jules and Yvette d'Alembert? You're too modest altogether, my dear." Then, opening the port, he called out, "Still safe, Helena?"

"Still safe, father," the girl called back, and began to walk toward the car. "Nothing suspicious, they say, within three hundred miles of here."

"Fine," Jules said. He opened the car up and all three got out. Jules went on, "I was hoping we were fast enough to get away clean, but I couldn't be sure. Now, sir, about our guests," and he jerked a thumb toward the rear compartment where the prisoners soddenly slept.

"Ah, yes. I've been wondering about them. The reports were confused and contradictory."

"I'm not surprised; it happened

fast. That one —" Jules pointed — "is probably just a low-bred gunnie that doesn't know a thing. The other one may not know anything or he may know a lot," and he told, in a very few words, about the too imperturbable observer of the brawl. He finished: "So our secret rendezvous was no secret."

"I see." The Head raised his left wrist to his lips and said, "Colonel Grandon."

"Yes, sir?"

"Be on the roof in exactly two minutes. You'll find two men who got number three stunbeams about twenty minutes ago. They're in a Mark Forty-One Service Special near Space Jay Twelve. Revive them, find what they know and report."

"Very well, sir," and the Head led the way to an elevator.

The elevator took them down to the thirty-first floor, where it stopped of itself and opened its door into what was very evidently the private office of an exceedingly important man.

It was a fairly large room, furnished richly but quietly. The rug, brown in color, was thick and soft. The beamed ceiling was of beautifully grained brown solentawood; the paneled walls were of the same fine, almost metal-hard wood. On the wall behind the big solentawood desk was inlaid the gold-crowned Shield of Empire.

"Now we can talk," the girl said then, holding out her hand to Jules. "I'm Grand Lady . . . Oh, excuse that please!" She flushed hotly, whereupon Jules kissed her hand in true Court style; after which she shook hands cordially with both Jules and Yvette.

"She should blush, friends," the Head said, but with no reproof in his voice. "But she hasn't been in the Service very long." Turning to the girl, he went on. "You are the Head's Girl Friday here, my dear. Our guests are of the thinnest upper crust of the entire Service; their worth to the Crown is immeasurable — beyond any number of Grand Ladies. We'll sit down, please, and Helena will pour. A whiskey sour for me, if you please." He cocked an eyebrow at his two agents. "Yours?"

"Orange juice, please," Yvette said, promptly; and Jules said, "Lemonade, please, if you have it handy."

Drinks in hand — Grand Lady Helena was drinking a weird-looking ice-cream concoction — the Head said:

"The attack on you was a complete surprise. No leak, no hanky-panky was even suspected until the man who was to bring you to me here was killed. The connection between this business and the matter that brought you to Earth is clear. In that connection it is a highly pleasing thought that the opposition knows nothing of you or of the Circus. You agree?"

"I agree, sir," Jules said, and Yvette nodded.

But Helena was puzzled. "How can it follow that they don't know, father?"

"The d'Alemberts are new to you because there is no record anywhere

of any connection between them and us. Except for this surprise attack you would not be learning of them now. I will go into detail after they leave, but for the present I will simply state as a fact that no one who knows anything about them would send only six men against Jules and Yvette d'Alembert. Or, if only six, all six would have fired simultaneously and on sight at them instead of burning the contact man first. That shows that they were more afraid of the Service here than of the supposed Delfian agents — a fatal error."

"Oh, I see — excuse me, please, for interrupting."

"That's quite all right. It's part of your education, Girl Friday. To proceed: we are investigating. We will find out where the leak is here and clean up the mess. In the meantime we will go ahead with the business for which we scheduled the Circus of Earth. There's trouble: centering, probably, on Durward. I'll give you all forty-odd reels of the record on it, but there are many things that are not on record and never will be, which is why I had to discuss it with you in person. You'll also have to talk to some outsiders to get the full picture. You may want to conduct preliminary investigation on Earth and/or elsewhere before you go anywhere near Durward."

The Head got up. These were his most valuable agents, and the fact that he had brought them here was a measure of the importance he attached to the situation. He had fully expected that there would be trouble waiting for them between the Circus and his office . . . and he had been equally confident that the d'Alemberts would be able to handle it.

What he was less sure of was that they — even they — would be able to handle the trouble that lay ahead.

He said abruptly, "Let's fill in some background. For example, consider the question of loyalty. The Service is loyal to the Crown as the symbol of Empire; to the wearer of the Crown, whoever or whatever he or she may be, as the focal point of the Empire. You agree?"

"Of course, sir," Jules said, and both girls nodded.

"Very well. In early 2378, when Crown Prince Ansel was planning the murder of every other member of the Royal Family, if we could have caught him at it in time we would have burned him down, Crown Prince though he was."

"Why, I . . . suppose that . . . yes, sir," Jules said, and Yvette added thoughtfully:

"I never thought of it before in just that way, sir. But that's the way it would have to be."

"Nevertheless, after those eleven murders were accomplished facts Ansel, as the sole surviving member of the House of Stanley, became Emporer Stanley Nine. Was there then any question of gunning him? No. We instantly became as loyal to him as we had been to his father Stanley Eight and now are to his son Stanley Ten."

"Of course, sir. But what . . ."

"Now comes some off-the-record

material. Have you ever heard of Banion the Bastard?"

Jules thought for a moment. "I don't think so, sir," he said.

Yvette shook her head, but this time Helena nodded and said, "Oh-oh — a light beginneth to dawn."

"I didn't think you two had," the Head went on. "Not too many people now alive ever have."

IV

Even before Arnold invented the subether drive and made galactic exploration possible, all Earth except the USNA was under Communism and North America was being infiltrated and undermined. The real explosion of mankind into space, however, did not begin until 2013, *when Copeland discovered the uranium-rich planet Urania Four; thus assuring all mankind of cheap and virtually unlimited power. In* 2016 *the American anti-Communists, disgusted and alarmed by the success of the "do-nothings" and "do-gooders" in blocking all effective action, left Earth en masse for Newhope; whereupon Communism took control of all Earth without firing a shot or launching a missile. (Mees, History of Civilization; Vol.* 21, p-1281).

Banion the Bastard

Marshalling his thoughts, the Head drank half of his whiskey sour slowly, then went on, "Stanley Nine's weakness was women; particularly young ones. Although he married late in 2378,

by the end of that year the Empress was merely a part of the furniture and the then Duke of Durward — one Henry, a bachelor of thirty — saw his big chance. He combed his planet to find one highly special woman. She had to be young, a virgin, spectacularly beautiful, and highly intelligent. Also, as unscrupulous, as vicious, and as hard as he himself was. Also unknown on Earth or at Court. He found her . . ."

The Head paused to finish his drink and build another one.

"The Beast of Durward," Helena said. "Surely you've heard of *her.*"

Neither Jules nor Yvette had, and the Head went on, "A small-time, ruthlessly ambitious actress. The Duke arranged and financed for her a tremendous and tremendously expensive splash at Grand Imperial Court, right here on Earth. Stanley Nine fell hard. He didn't stand a chance — and, with the Duke's full backing, she kept him on the hook much longer than any other woman was ever able to.

"When she was about seven months pregnant the Duke married her; with Nine's full approval. Thus her son Banion was born in wedlock as the first child of and the heir of the Duke and Duchess of Durward. That, however, wasn't enough for the schemers. Stanley Nine, still blindly infatuated with the extremely talented Beast, issued a Patent of Royalty, admitting paternity and bestowing upon the infant the unique title of 'The Prince of Durward'. This patent also authorized a coat of arms as follows:

" 'Purpure, quarterly three dragons rampant or, in chief sinister a bend sinister or, in dexter . . ."

"Wait up, father!" Helena broke in. "You're not getting through to me at all, and I don't believe that's our guests' language, either."

The Head laughed. "Gold dragons, rearing on purple enamel. The bar sinister, which may not be a mark of illegitimacy, in this case definitely was. It goes on that way for a couple of hundred words, only a few of which are pertinent. 'Bordure gules, charged thirteen bezants sable'. Poor heraldry — color on color and an unlucky number of spots on a background of blood — but that and the fact that the Patent was dated Friday the Thirteenth of June, 2380, are perfectly in keeping with the Duke's vicious sense of humor.

"A couple of months later — long overdue — Nine finally got tired of the Beast and came to with a thud. He who had wiped out all the rest of the Royal Family had himself set up a pretender with a completely valid claim. He ordered the Service to kill the Duke and Banion and destroy the Patent; but he was 'way too late. The Beast had seen it coming and they got away clean. *With* the Patent.

"The Patent, of course, was most important. It was hand-written and signed in carbon ink by Emperor Stanley Nine himself, on Imperial parchment, with the signature driven into the parchment by the Great Seal of the Empire of Earth. The Patent was revoked, of course, and erased from all record, and the people were proscribed; but that wasn't enough. That Patent had to

be found and destroyed; but it wasn't. Banion the Bastard had to be found and killed; but he wasn't.

"In 2381 there was a fairly serious uprising; which, it was deduced later, was engineered by the Beast on her own. At least, there was clear evidence that she tried to knife the Duke in bed and he cut her throat with her own blade.

"The search for that Patent and the Bastard and his blood has been going on ever since 2380; twenty years before I was born. As I said, the record of it covers more than forty reels. Results were neglible — except for finding, at a cost of eighty-nine lives, three very good forgeries — until two years ago, when several leads pointed back to Durward again. We sent agents, who found nothing. Three months ago all those agents stopped reporting. I sent in four of our best — with orders, of course, to avoid all previous contacts — and have not heard from any of them. Hence the Circus; the heaviest artillery the Service has. The threat to Stanley Ten and The Family is grave indeed. Just how grave I myself did not fully realize until the event of last night.

"Duke Henry was born in 2350, ninety-seven years ago; so he is probably dead. So it may or may not be his children and/or grandchildren who are carrying on. The Bastard, though, at 67, may still be a potent force; and he undoubtedly has children and grandchildren whom we don't know anything about, either.

"Your job is composed of two equally important parts. One, to find the genuine Patent and to bring it in so we can check its authenticity and so Stanley Ten can destroy it with his own hands. Two, to kill Banion the Bastard and all of his blood. Goodbye and good luck."

Back at the Circus, well after daybreak, Jules and Yvette reported to their father, the Managing Director. Then they drove out to the edge of the field, snugged their "car" down into its berth in their ultra-fast two-man subspacer, and Jules said:

"I knew the Head would have to be a Big Wheel, but not *that* big. If his daughter's a Grand Lady he's got to be a Grand Duke, no less. I think maybe I've seen his picture somewhere or seen him in a parade or something on tri-di . . . "

"Oh, *brother!*" Yvette snorted. "And I use the term advisedly. If you didn't recognize Grand Duke Zander von Wilmenhorst on sight! Oh no, he isn't much of anybody — just one-half Stanley blood and the fifth from the Throne itself, is all. You'd better break out your Peerage and start studying it."

"Uh-huh. *What* a cover for the Head — my God, he *owns* Sector Four!"

They slept until half past two; then went into the main tent to watch the climax of the matinee. They watched, with trained and minutely observant eyes, Yvette and Jules d'Alembert perform flawlessly a heart-stopping variation of the act they themselves had performed the night before.

Five minutes later, the younger couple still in spangles, the four d'Alemberts sat at a table in the commissary. The two men looked very much alike; so did the two girls — which was not surprising, since the two couples were two pairs of twins born of the same parents three years apart. No one except a DesPlainian could have told the two men or the two girls apart except by direct comparison. To the personnel of the Circus of the Galaxy this succession of top stars was routine. In the two-hundred-year history of the Circus there had been almost a hundred pairs called "Jules and Yvette d'Alembert"; there would continue to be a succession of them, one new pair every two or three years, as long as the Circus should endure.

"How'd we do, Gran'paw?" the younger brother asked. "It must have been a treat to see a good performance of your act."

"Close the orifice, Jules," the younger girl broke in.

"Oh, you're calling me Jules already?"

"Certainly. You are Jules now. What I started to say was, that's the way people break their arms, patting themselves on the back so much."

"Oke. What I meant was, I'm glad the Head pulled them out of the Circus for special duty. It wouldn't be too long before they'd spatter themselves all over the ring the way their joints are creaking now. How *about* that, Jules?" and Jules grinned at Jules.

"That is very true and very sad, Jules," Jules agreed, as a waitress came up to take their orders. "These ancient and unwieldy bones are just about ready for the fertilizer mill. The old-time pep is all shot . . ."

"Stop crying, Jules, poor dear," the waitress said. She was, of course, a d'Alembert, too; and she had been a star. "Before I break down and dilute your soup with a flood of tears of my own. The King and Queen are dead, et cetera. So what? You're just getting started on your real jobs. The usual?"

"Not quite," Yvette said. "You can get fresh orange juice here and I'm drowning myself in it. Squeeze me half a liter, please Felice dear, besides the usual."

" 'Drowning yourself' is right," the younger Yvette said, darkly. "I've got to watch my figure; so I'll have one small glass of lemon sour and a lamb chop."

After eating, the older Jules and Yvette left the Circus — without a ripple to show that they had gone.

V

Communism could gain no foothold on the new, raw planets. Communists wanted to agitate, not work; and on the planets a man either worked or died. Confined to Earth and no longer able to keep its masses in line by the imaginary menace of warmongering Capitalism, and facing squarely the fact that men will not produce efficiently under the lash, Communism came to a very low ebb . . . until it was saved by Premier Koslov, a strong and able executive, who in 2020

made himself King Boris I of Earth and formed a harsh but just absolute monarchy based upon the profit motive. (Stanhope, Elements of Empire, p76)

Citizens of Earth

Jules and Yvette studied, analyzed and restudied forty-seven spools of top-secret date, then sent them — top-secretly — through channels back to the Head. Then they visited more or less openly almost every district of Earth.

At every point they encountered the same not-right odor. Something was definitely wrong. Security had been breached — within the Service itself!

To Jules and Yvette d'Alembert the situation shrieked for action — instant effective action, at that. If the Service caught a chill, a hundred outlying planets lay under the threat of double pneumonia. For the Service was the ganglionic nerve system of the Stanleys themselves . . . and every bright, burning star, every immensely long, black spacelane, every whirling world and pocket of cosmic dust trembled and shook when those nerves tingled.

As the evidence grew it became clear that there were two courses of action. They could patiently, painstakingly search, sift and study . . . and hope for a break . . . or they could plunge themselves into a trouble spot — offer themselves as bait — risk life and limb on a gamble, and trust to mind and muscle to get them out. These were the choices . . .

But really, there was no choice — because they were the d'Alemberts.

"Out of everything we've learned I can see only three points of attack outside of Durward itself," Jules said, thoughtfully. "Algonia, Nevander, and Aston. Years apart. Three forged Patents of Royalty. Eighty-nine good agents down the drain . . . most of them probably as smart as we are . . . in spite of all the help the local SOTE could give them . . ." He paused.

"Uh-huh. Go on. Or because of it."

"Check. The higher the SOTE the the solider the security. We think. But that thing in the Head's office didn't smell exactly like Coty's L'Arigon."

"I'll say it didn't. Usually they commit suicide or get their throats cut, but he simply disappeared. Absolutely vanished."

"So we'll roll our own, except maybe for tops. So the big question is, what's our best cover?"

"Well, we can't be Earthers, that's for sure." Yvette shrugged her shoulders and indicated his shape and her own. "Nor Delfians, to stand inspection. We're obviously DesPlainians. No other high-gravity planets were ever colonized, were there? Except Purity, of course . . . I wonder."

Jules frowned in thought. "That's a thought, sis; that splinter-group of crackpots on Purity. We can be Puritans."

Yvette nibbled her lip. "But would it work? They won't have anything to do with anybody they don't absolutely have to. Everybody's too

sinful. They expect all the other planets, especially mother-planet DesPlaines, to be whiffed into incandescent vapor any minute by the wrath of God. There *are* a lot of renegade Puritans, though. Sinners."

"That's what I meant. We'll play it that they kicked us off because we got to be too sinful. We liked to dance and play cards and drink soda pop — to say nothing of mining gold and platinum and diamonds and emeralds and bootlegging all our stuff to Earth. That's the way we made all our money. Remember?"

Yvette laughed. "Just dimly. I must have been looking the other way at the time, but you can fill me in. They *have* kicked a lot of people off of Purity for doing just that — and for much smaller sins, as well. Go ahead; it listens good."

"Oke, but I don't know exactly what . . . get into compound low, brain, and start grinding . . . how about this? We'll have the Head make us ex-Puritan Citizens of Earth. You know how toplofty and you-be-damned Earthers are, out on the planets."

"Uh-huh, and we'll be toploftier and you-be-damneder than anybody. I like."

"Right. Concealment by obviousness. But as you said, not too many people ever even heard of Purity, and with our builds — your build especially — but wait a minute, how about disguising *me*? Hair down to my shoulders; waved and liquid-golded. Eyebrows shaved to a different shape and golded. Handle-bar mustache, waxed to points and golded. A cockeyed hat with gold plumes two feet long. Cloth-of-gold sleeveless jersey and tight purple trunks. Arms and legs bare. A million dollars worth of jewelry — genuine — and a big, heavy swagger-stick that's really a blaster on one end and a stunner on the other. Think anybody'd recognize me as a DesPlainian in that kind of a fancy rig?"

"I'll say they wouldn't!" Yvette laughed delightedly, "anywhere on DesPlaines they'd shoot you on sight. The idea being that everyone would look at you and not bother to even wonder whether I was a DesPlainian or not."

"Uh-huh. Maybe it's a bit thin, but . . ."

"I've got news for you, Buster." Yvette laughed again. "Not only it's thin, but also if you think I'm going to play little brown hen to that gorgeous hunk of rooster you're out of your mind. I'll design me a costume that will knock everybody's eyes right out of their sockets — one that no DesPlainian woman would be caught dead in at a cat-fight."

"Now you're chirping, birdie!"

"That'll be fun! But it'll take months to grow your hair . . . a wig? Uh-uh."

"Uh-uh is correct. Too chancy. But they've been working on this case for sixty-seven years, so a few extra weeks isn't going to make any important difference. And we'll have plenty to do in the meantime."

"That's true. Oke — let's fly at it."

Thus it came about, some time later, that the Executive Office of the Duke of Algonia was invaded by a couple whose likes had never before been seen on the planet Algonia — or, for that matter, on any other planet. Jules was just as spectacular as his specifications had called for; Yvette was even more so. She, too, wore purple and gold — what little there was of it — with the arrangement of colors the exact reverse of his.

Her shoes — not silly pumps, but half-calf-high sure-grips studded with precious stones — were royal purple. Her tight shorts were of golden jersey; her tight, sleeveless upper garment was of exactly the same shade of purple as her shoes and hair. She wore a wide, heavily-jeweled belt of nylon-backed gold; a jeweled half-veil of fine gold mesh; and, to cap the climax, a towering gold-filigree headdress of diamonds, emeralds and rubies that had been appraised at and insured for one million three hundred ninety thousand dollars.

Paying no attention to the startled stares of the waiting people and office personnel, they walked calmly to the head of the line at the receptionist's desk. "We are citizens of Earth," Jules explained, as he courteously but firmly edged himself into the narrow space between a fat woman and the desk. He leaned over, picked up the amazed receptionist's hand and tucked a hundred-dollar bill into it. "Carlos and Carmen Velasquez, Citizens of Earth," he said gently, and dropped two ID cards onto her desk. "This is where visitors to your fair planet register, is it not?"

"Oh, no, sir — thank you, sir," the flustered girl said, as soon as her eyes got back into place and she could again use her voice. "That's downstairs, sir. The SOTE, sir."

"You will take care of it, my dear." Jules dropped three more notes on the desk. "Bring the cards over to the Hotel Splendide, after you have attended to it. We'll be there for a few days . . . or a few weeks, perhaps. Thank you, my girl." And the two walked out of the office as unconcernedly as they had walked in.

At the Splendide, which was the plushiest caravansery the planet boasted, they soon became the favorite guests. Not only because they had the penthouse suite; but also because neither of them knew, apparently, that there was any smaller unit of currency than a five-dollar Earth bill.

Whatever else they did, however, they always walked at a good, stiff hiking gait for at least an hour after supper. For the first few nights they explored; but after that, having found a route they liked, they stuck to it. Every night thereafter they drove out beyond the city limits, parked their car and took a six-mile hike along a fixed succession of narrow, lonely back-country roads and bridle-paths; a route that had five places made to order for ambush — and a route that they had gone to much trouble to publicize.

For six nights they swung along

at their five-miles-an-hour hiking gait in complete silence . . .

Complete silence? Yes. Their sure-grip shoes made not even a whisper of sound against the blacktop: no item of their apparel or equipment rattled or tinkled or squeaked or even rustled. Everything had been designed that way. They could hear, but they could not be heard. Anyone laying for them would have to see them — and they themselves had very acute hearing and aerialists' eyesight.

Swinging along a clear stretch of road, Yvette asked, "S'pose we goofed, Julie?"

"Uh-uh. Pretty sure not. It's just taking them time to get set. Senor and Senora Velasquez aren't the type to just disappear; it'd raise too much of a stink. Also, besides the king-size fortunes we're wearing, everybody knows that we've got enough money in the safe at the Splendide to start a bank and they'll want that. So the job will take a lot of planning. This three-quarters-naked stunt wasn't designed to make it tough to impersonate us, but how would you go about finding two people to check out of the Splendide — and get that half a megabuck out of their safe — as us?"

"Nice!" Yvette laughed. "I never though of it cutting both ways. They'll simply *have* to get a Des Plainian gangster and his moll . . . but wouldn't they have them ready?"

"I don't think so. You don't find very many DesPlainians on light-grav planets except in grav-controlled buildings. They no like — for which I don't blame them. Another month of this with no work at grav and you and I both will be as flabby as two tubs of boiled noodles."

"So we hope it won't be a month. Oke; we'll give 'em a few more days."

Five more hikes were eventless.

But on the sixth, at a place where the road would through a coppice of small trees and dense underbrush, their straining ears heard sounds and their keen eyes saw movement.

For concealment, the place was perfect, but in order to act the attackers had to move — and low-echelon thugs are not very smart. Also, they had no idea whatever how fast their proposed quarry could move. Jules' hat and swagger stick and Yvette's tiara and handbag hit the blacktop practically at once as the two took off in low, flat dives; he to his side of the road, she to hers.

Diving straight through a bush, Jules slapped the nearest man lightly on the head — gently, so as not to break his neck — picked him up, and hurled him at another man, some twelve feet away, who was just getting to his feet. One jump — he slugged the third in the solar plexus and in the same instant kicked the fourth in the face — not with his toe, but with the whole big flat sole of his shoe. Four down and one to go. But this action had taken almost a second of time — plenty of time for Number Five to get organized. Maybe he was the boss, since he'd been smart

enough to station himself well off to one side.

Number Two, who hadn't been hurt much, began to regain consciouness and to thrash around. Jules snaked bellywise over to him, picked his stunner up, and tapped him on the jaw with its butt. Then Jules crawled noiselessly around until he found a place from which he could get a fairly clear view toward Number Five; who, although he did not seem to realize it, was making a lot of noise. The seeing wasn't good — the moon, while high, was only at quarter — but not much light is necessary to use a stun-gun at close quarters.

"*P-s-s-s-t!*" the hood said, finally. "Ed! Hank! Spike! Did you get 'em. What the *hell* goes on?" He put his head out from behind a tree . . . and what went on was a half-hour stun.

"Eve?" Jules asked then, of empty air. "Five here."

"Same here," she replied from across the road. "No sweat. Is there any clear space over there?"

"Yes — we'll lug 'em over here."

Yvette recovered her towering headdress and bag, then came across the road, dragging two limp forms by the collars of their leather jackets. In a few minutes ten unconscious or dead men — Jules was afraid that he had hit Number Three a little too hard — were laid out on their backs in a neat row.

Jules picked up a stunner, then paused. "Uh-uh," he said, "Better give 'em the talk-juice now, so they'll be ready when we get 'em out of the house."

"That'd be better." And Yvette took a hypodermic kit out of her bag and went to work.

VI

In two centuries the colonized planets numbered seven hundred, many of them having large populations. Interstellar commerce increased exponentially. Interstellar crime became rampant. The government of Earth, under a succession of strong and able kings, had been in fact an imperium for many years when, in 2225, *King Stanley the Sixth of Earth crowned himself Emperor Stanley One of the Empire of Earth. (Stanhope, Elements of Empire,* p539).

Storming the Castle

Jules and Yvette did not drive their car — which was of course the biggest and most expensive one obtainable — back to the hotel. Instead, they loaded their victims into the limousine like cordwood and took them to the "house" they had rented long since — an estate so big and so far away from anywhere that the nearest neighbors could not have heard a forty-millimeter Bofors working at full automatic.

They unloaded their freight, then listened to the nine surviving hoodlums tell, completely unable to lie or withhold knowledge, everything they knew about crime — and especially its biggest chief.

The gamble paid off. "Got it!" exulted Jules when they were done.

"I knew our friends — whoever they are — wouldn't stay out of a heist with this kind of money involved. But who would have thought that it was the Baron of Osberg . . ."

"You for one, brother dear," supplied Yvette. "And maybe me for another — at least we knew the boss traitor had to be *somebody* big — but tell me, are we going to sit here all night patting you on the back or are we going to *do* something?"

Jules grinned and gave her a mock-salute. Then they gave each of the men a twelve-hour stun and went elsewhere.

The castle of the Baron of Osberg was some seventy miles away. They parked the car a good mile down the road from it and, after selecting certain items of equipment, went the rest of the way on foot, being very careful not to be seen. Then, very cautiously and keeping continuously under cover, they made their way around what was actually a fortress.

The two gates, front and rear, were built of two-inch-square bar steel, topped with charged barbed wire. Neither could be opened except by electronic impulses from inside the castle. The estate was surrounded by a reenforced concrete wall fifteen feet high, surmounted by interlaced strands of charged barbed wire.

The two grinned at each other and separated. Taking advantage of the high, thick hedges bordering the drive, they sneaked up to within six feet of the wall. Both squatted down. Eyes met eyes through the lower, leafless part of the hedges. Muscles tensed and, at Yvette's nod both leaped at full strength upward and inward. Each cleared the topmost wire by a good three feet, stunners drawn, and at the top of their silent flight they fired rapidly and precisely, stunning every guard they could see. Then, running around the main building, each taking a side, they stunned everything that moved. Yvette ran for the garage; Jules ran to the castle's back door. It was locked, of course! but a Talbot cutter burned the lock away in seconds.

Jules did not know whether that door opened directly into the kitchen or into a hall; but the fact that it did open into the back hall made the job easy and simple. The door to the kitchen was not locked. The dozen or so people in it slumped bonelessly to the floor before any one of them realized that anything unusual was going on. Through the kitchen Jules went, through the butler's pantry and the serving hall, and put an eye to a tiny crack between thick velvet drapes.

The "commons" room was immense. Its beamed ceiling and paneled walls were of waxed yellowwood. It was furnished lavishly and decorated profusely with ancestral portraits. At the far end there was an antlered fireplace in which a six-foot log smoldered.

Eleven men were in that room; some sitting, some standing; smoking or drinking or both; talking only occasionally and mostly in monosyllables; glancing much too frequently at watches on their wrists. Jules brought his stunner to bear and all eleven collapsed limply into

their chairs or onto the floor.

In a couple of minute Yvette came in. "Oke outside," she reported crisply. "Now the big frisk."

"That's right."

They went over the castle from subcellar to garrets, and when they were through they *knew* that everyone else inside the wall was unconscious. Then, and only then. Jules went over to the communicator, cut its video and punched a number.

"This is the Service of the Empire," a perfectly-trained, beautifully-modulated voice came from the speaker. "How may I serve you? If you will turn your vision on, please?"

"Sote six," Jules said. "Affold abacus zymase bezant. The head depends upon the stomach for survival."

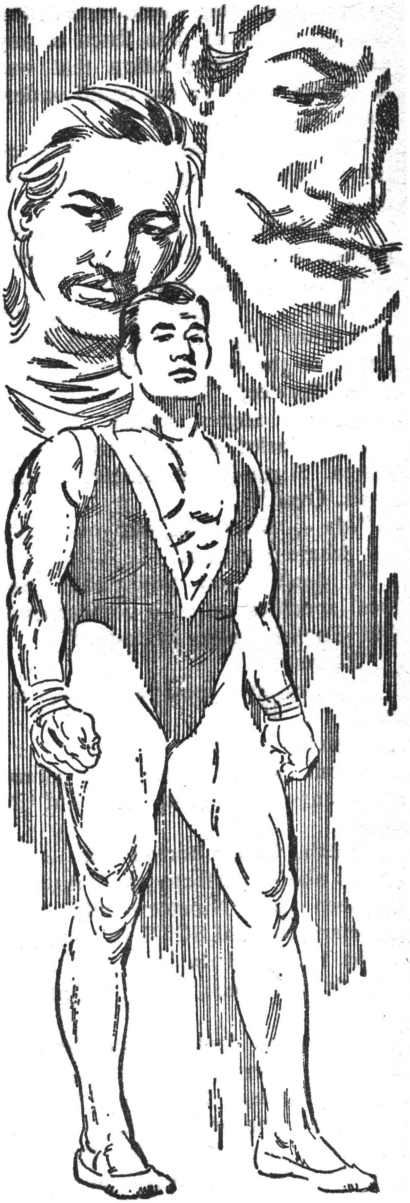
"Bub-but-but, sir . . ." The change in the girl's voice was shocking. She had never heard any two of those four six-letter code words spoken together, and coupled with the words "head" and "survival" they knocked her out of control for a moment; but she rallied quickly. "He's home asleep, sir, but I'll get him right away. One moment, please," and Jules heard the strident clatter of an unusually loud squawk-box.

"Lemme 'lone," a sleepy voice protested. "G'way. Cut out the damn racket or . . ."

"Mr. Borton! Wake up!" the girl almost screamed. "*Please* wake up! It's a crash-pri red urgent!"

"Oh." That had done it. "Oke, Hazel; thanks."

"You are connected, sirs, and I'm out. Signal green, please, when you



are through." She would much rather take a beating than listen to any part of the conversation that was to follow, whether she could understand any of it or not.

"Praxis," Borton said. (Request for identification, symbol, or authority).

"Fazzle and Fezzle." (Their own identifying numbers — Agents Eighteen and Nineteen).

"Holy . . ." Borton began, but shut himself up. The very top skimmings of the very top cream of the entire Service! "Oke."

"Rafter, angles, angels. Angled. Suffer. Harlot static invert, cosine design. Single-joyful, singer, status, stasis. Over."

"*My — God!* Oke, but you didn't say where you are."

"I don't know your code for local specifics, so . . . comprehend Old English ig-pay attin-lay?"

"Ess-yay."

"Tate-ess-ay aron-bay berg-oz-zay."

"Catch."

"Front gate. Douse you glims short-long-short. Over and out if oke."

"Catch. Oke," Borton said. And its *was* oke — perfectly so. If Agents Eighteen and Nineteen told any planetary chief of SOTE to go jump in the lake he'd do it — and fast. "Here's your green, Hazel. Thanks."

In the time that elapsed before Borton's arrival at the estate of Baron's Osberg, Jules and Yvette questioned the eleven men. They didn't get enough to give them a clear lead to the planet Aston and a general idea of what the mob on Aston would have to be like. Then Borton arrived and they let him in.

"You!" he exclaimed, looking from one spectacular agent to the other and back again. "*That's* a switch. You came in with bands blaring and pennons waving."

"Check. They would be looking for pussy-footers."

"Could be . . . If I may ask, I suppose there's a good reason why I wasn't let in on any of this?"

"Very good. Come in and you'll see what it was." They led him back into the commons room and Jules waved an arm at the stupefied men who, glazed eyes unseeing, lolled slackly in chairs.

"You used Nitrobarb," Borton said. "And on the Baron of Osberg. Half of them will die. I see."

"They'll all die," Jules said grimly. "Especially the Baron. Those who live through this will live a few days longer than the others, is all. But you really don't see, yet. Keep on looking."

Borton's fast-panning gaze came to a burly, crew-cut man of thirty-odd and stopped. His face turned gray; he was too shocked and too surprised even to swear.

"That's Alf Rixton," he managed finally. "My first assistant. He's been with me over ten years! top clearance — lie-detector and hypnosis — every year. He's done splendid work."

"Yeah — for the other side," Jules said coldly. "The only ones he ever gave you were the ones they wanted to get rid of. Take over, Borton, it's all yours. We'll

have to stick around for a while — it'd smell cheesy if we'd leave the planet too soon — but we don't want to appear in this. Not a whisper. Nobody around here got a glimpse of us, but there are nine men —" he told him about them — "who shouldn't talk."

"They won't. But listen! This mess here — I couldn't *possibly* have done this alone!"

"Of course not." Jules grinned. "Your assistant there cooked the whole deal up and helped you swing it. He was a tiger on wheels. Too bad the honors are posthumous."

Borton nodded slowly. "Thanks. One of our very best, he died a hero's death, defending gallantly and so forth — sob, sob — the *louse*. But this thing of me taking all the credit for an operation that . . ." He broke off and grinned wryly. "Oke."

"Uh-huh," Jules agreed. Then he and Yvette said in unison, "Here's to tomorrow, fellow and friend. May we all live to see it!" And they strode blithely out. One nest had been cleared out — it was time to move on to the next!

Borton, motionless, stared at the closed door. He knew *what* those two were — Agent Eighteen and Nineteen — but that was all he knew or ever would know about them . . . But he had too much to do to waste much time wool-gathering. Shrugging his shoulders, he called his office and issued orders.

Then he set up his recorder and began to ask questions of the hoodlums who were still alive.

VII

THE STANLEY DOCTRINE. Empress Stanley 3 also reorganized, simplified and in a sense standardized the theretofore chaotic system of nobility. Her system, which has been changed very little throughout the years, is in essence as follows. Grand Dukes rule sectors of space, each containing many planets. Dukes rule single planets. Marquises rule continents or the equivalents thereof. Earls rule states or small nation. Counts rule counties. Barons rule cities or districts. Primogeniture is strict, with no distinction as to sex. Nobles may marry commoners or higher or lower nobles; the lower-born of each pair being automatically raised to the full rank of the higher-born spouse. (Stanhope, Elements of Empire, p541)

The Switch

The news broke early the following morning. It broke with a crash that was channeled to every planet of civilization.

Carlos and Carmen Velasquez knew nothing of it until half past ten, when the eager waiter hurried in with the breakfast they had ordered a few minutes before. He was accompanied this time by his captain, who carried both morning papers in his hand.

"Good morning, sir and madam," that worthy said. "You have perhaps not heard the extraordinary news on your receiver?"

"Uh-us." Jules covered a yawn with his hand an shook his head.

"We're hardly awake yet." He was wearing only purple-and-gold pajamas; Yvette wore her fabulous headpiece and a purple-and-gold robe that, while opaque in a few places here and there, was practically transparent everywhere else. "Something happen?"

"Most assuredly! The most tremendous, the most sensational of happenings, be assured!" He put the papers down on a side table and helped the waiter arrange the breakfast table most meticulously. "But you will read of it later. You will eat your breakfast now, please, while it is hot." And the two hotel men accepted gratuities and went back downstairs.

After eating, Jules and Yvette went through the story with interest — if with an occasional snort or giggle. The official version was of course new to them. SOTE, under the masterly direction and leadership of Planetary Chief Borton, had been keeping this band of traitors under close and continuous surveillance for over a year. They had waited until they were sure that they had found every member and connection of the band, then they had struck everywhere at once. They had made a clean sweep.

Faced with absolute proof of guilt, each traitor had confessed and each had been promptly executed, including the Baron of Osberg, who had been the leader. All had been cremated and their ashes had been dumped. The reporter was very glad to say that, since the Baron was the only member of his family involved in the crime, the Barony of Osberg would not revert to the crown. The Baroness Carlotta, who was very well known as a philanthropic clubwoman would succeed — and so on.

Planetary Chief Borton had had no help, not even from Earth. And there was no hint anywhere that nitrobarb — the mere possession of which was by law a capital offense — had been used.

"Nice," Yvette said. "That story is so tight I almost believe it myself. But you said we'd have to stick around. Why? The fact that we were here on the planet — coupled with the fact that those two Delfians had to be DesPlainians — would be plenty for people not half as smart as they are. Whether we stay here a month or leave today makes no difference — except perhaps as an exercise in the old guessing game."

"That's probably right, at that . . . Oke, we'll shoot in a call for the ship as soon as we're dressed."

Since the ship had to come from DesPlaines, it was eight days later that Carlos and Carmen Velasquez left the Hotel Splendide for the spaceport, scattering largesse from the penthouse to the limousine as they went.

It was good to feel real gravity again; it was vastly more than good, when, safely inside a private lounge of the big subspacer, they were met by three particular people — two of whom were very special people indeed.

"*Jules!*" a brown-haired girl shrieked, and took off at him in

a flying leap from a distance of twelve feet.

"Vonnie! Sweetheart!" He caught her expertly, although her momentum swung him around in a full circle; and for a long, ecstatic minute they stood almost motionless, locked fiercely in each other's arms.

Yvonne pulled back a little, looked at him closely and shook her head. "I've *got* to have a picture of you. Both of you. They told me, but *this* is a thing that has got to be seen to believed. You always were a handsome dog, Julie, but now you're simply *beautiful*!" She kissed him a few more times. "But I *don't* like that mustache — it tickles! You know something? I asked the Council to let me be Carmen Velasquez — begged them, practically on my knees — but the old stinkers wouldn't. They made me take the thousand-point test, just like everybody else, and Gabby here beat me out."

Jules grinned. "Did you think they wouldn't?"

"Well, they certainly *ought* to've given me the job, since I'm engaged to the only thousand-pointer alive. Anyway, I speared second place. I got nine eighty-nine."

"That's mighty good going, sweet." There was a brief interlude, then Jules, with his arm still around his Yvonne's waist, turned to the two others, whom he hadn't even looked at before. The man was of his own age, size and shape, his hair, mustache, and eyebrows matched Jules' exactly. The girl, too, except for costume, was a very reasonable facsimile of Yvette, purple hair and all. The man had been embracing Yvette ardently; the girl, having taken the towering ornament from Yvette's head and put it on her own, was unblushingly admiring herself in a mirror.

"Hi, Gabby; hi, Jacques," Jules said, extending his free hand.

"'Gabby', indeed!" the girl said, tossing her head in fine scorn. "'Grand Lady Gabrielle' to you, lout. I don't think I'll even speak to any of the common herd any more unless they come crawling, bumping their foreheads on the floor."

"Hear, hear!" "That's telling him, Gabby!" Yvette and Jacques said at once, and Yvette added:

"I *liked* wearing these jewels and that crown and stuff, darn it," she mourned. "They *did* something for me," and the conversation became general.

Jules and Yvette took off their spectacular finery and turned it over to the new Carlos and Carmen. They had their hair un-dyed and re-barbered long and plain; and Jules un-waxed and un-curled his mustache. They donned shapeless brown trousers and jackets of homespun and became in appearance somewhat unorthodox Puritans. The switch completed, at the next transfer-point a new Carlos and Carmen Velasquez, still tossing five-dollar Earth bills around like confetti, boarded the biggest and plushiest liner in port for a planet halfway across all explored space.

There wasn't room enough in Jules' cabin for him to pace the floor, so he stood still, with

clenched fists jammed into his pockets. Yvette sat on his narrow bunk, frowning in concentration.

"It's like fighting a fog," Jules said, scowling. "And yet everything we find is just too damned pat."

"You just lost me. Fog, yes. But I haven't noticed any patness."

"Look. In sixty-seven years SOTE hasn't found any evidence that Duke Henry of Durward wasn't I, T, IT."

"Which goes to show that he was."

"Does it? He milked Durward of a staggering fortune, yes. Billions of bucks. But could he possibly have got away with enough to finance a project that big this long? And the others . . ."

"I see what you mean. Never mind the others, let's pursue this one. Either he had help from the start or he hooked up with some. He'd have to, to do what he did."

"That's sure. Yet nobody ever got a solid trace, ever. And the leads they did get didn't point to anything solid; just to nit-picking stuff. My thought is that every one of those leads was a trap — a trap that worked."

"And we weren't trapped because we made them come to us."

"I'm not even sure of that."

"My God! Surely you don't think *this* is a trap!"

"Not exactly. I just think it *may* be. We have to follow it, of course, but we'll follow it with our eyes wide open and everything we've got on the trips. And if what we dig up points to Durward — we'll go anywhere else in all space *but* there."

"So you thing everybody's been barking up the wrong trees and all they've got is forty-seven reels of junk and . . . "

"I said *maybe!*" Jules snapped. "I don't *know* anything!"

"Which puts you one up on SOTE," Yvette said quietly. "That makes the most sense of anything I've heard yet. So we jettison the junk and start from scratch . . . the big question being — how? You're implying a Grand Duke. We *can't* go running around sticking nitro-barb into Grand Dukes at random."

"How true; but you've read about how the old FBI used to catch the top mobsters?"

"Uh-huh. CPA's."

"So look. Durward is in Sector Ten. Algonia is in Three, Aston is in Six, Nevander is in Thirteen and Gastonia is a rim-world clear to hellangone out on the edge of Twenty."

"How did Gastonia sneak into this muddle? It was muddled enough already, without another question mark."

"My own idea. Empress Stanley Five started exiling rebels there way back in the twenty-two hundreds sometime and they've been doing it ever since. What could be nicer for recruiting purposes? But to get back on the beam, the Head thinks this thing is getting ripe. If it is, whoever's doing it has had to do a lot of heavy work and spent an ungodly lot of money. You can hide a lot of building — armaments and such — even without putting it underground. But you can't hide big flows of money from experts who know

how to look. So if you don't think I'm nuts,, we'll message the Head tonight to check the growth curves of all the planets for the last seventy years and put the best CPA's he's got onto the top five or six."

She looked at him admiringly. "I'm for it; strong. And then we go to Gastonia, or wherever?"

"No. Then we go to Earth."

She looked puzzled for a moment, then her face cleared. "I see. It *would* have to be a Grand Duke, at that, to get an agent into — and especially out of — the Head's own office . . . and the brains *would* almost have to be on Earth. You *are* smart, Julie; maybe we're getting somewhere, after all."

The ship docked and the two, after killing half and hour — they expected real trouble, and preparations were being made to handle it — made their way to the middle-class dive that was the favorite hangout of the lower officers and the highest crewmen of whatever subspacers happened to be in port. That was all they had — the name of the dive and a cryptic recognition signal bought for them by nitrobarb at the cost of a man's life. But it was enough.

Since the latest ship to come to ground was DesPlainian, the six bouncer-guards of the place — it *was* a somewhat unusual fact that all six of them were DesPlainians — thought nothing of it when half a dozen leather-clad DesPlainian spacemen came bouncing in, shouting for strong drink and friendly girls.

How could the guards have suspected anything? Or the brains, either, since the d'Alemberts had pitched them such a nice curve? There was no evidence that the Veslasquez pair had anything to do with what had happened on Algonia. And if they had had, what were they skyshooting off into the middle of nowhere for?

The renegade Puritans came in — it was quite evident that they were renegades, since no Puritan in good standing would ever enter a bar — and looked unconcernedly around. Since it was early in the afternoon, only one bartender was at work and only a few waitresses and B girls were on hand. The two strolled up to the bar and Jules said, "I was told to ask for the Blinding Flash and say the Deafening Report sent me."

The entire room exploded. The six guards tried, but before any of them could get his blaster half into action he was struck by over an eighth of a ton of the hardest meat he had ever felt. In the same instant Jules put his left arm around the bartender's throat and, with the blaster now in his right hand, drilled a half-inch hole through the PBX operator's head. He then whistled sharply at the terrified girls and waved his weapon at a corner; into which they and the few non-combatant customers were very glad indeed to run.

In the meantime Yvette had dived at the PBX board. She snatched the single earphone off the man's head, put it on her own, let the body fall and sat at the board.

In two minutes the place was a shambles. When a five-hundred-pound pair of DesPlainian free-style brawlers strikes furniture it is the furniture that breaks, not the men. Two tables and half-a-dozen chairs remained intact; one savagely warring pair had gone straight through the heavy yellow-wood bar.

And Jules, standing at ease with his blaster hanging at the loose, studied with keen appreciation the battles going on. He was not worried about the outcome. Only one result was possible. The guards were good, but they were not d'Alembert — and those six d'Alemberts were the pick of the hardest-trained troupe of no-holds-barred fighting wrestlers known to man.

In three and one-half minutes the place was practically a total loss, but the battle was over. The six survivors sported a few eyes that would soon be black, some contusions and abrasions, and several cuts, tears, scratches, gouges and bites that were bleeding more or less freely, but there had been no real damage at all.

"Nice work, fellows; thanks," Jules said, as the sixth spaceman came to his feet, grinning hugely. "Drink up. There'll be at least some ginger ale left in whole bottles — I think. And break out some champagne for the cuties. I wouldn't know whether they're still in the mood for fun and games or not, but at least we'll do the gentlemanly thing about the drinks. Now, barkeep my friend —" he lifted that wight one-handedly over the bar, set him on his feet and put both big hands uncomfortably tight around his throat — "Do you want to tell me all about all the gizmos between here and the boss upstairs or do I wring your neck exactly like a chicken's?"

"I'll tell, I'll tell!" the man squawked. "Don't wring my neck — please don't! It's all on the board there — really it is — the whole works!"

"He isn't lying, Julie," Yvette said. "There's a whole row of special red indicators that doesn't belong on a standard PBX. It looks like the boss rings down and they set the traps from the board here."

"That's it, that's it!" the man babbled. "There are black-light beams across the halls up there, set to trigger blasters and stunners. The boss calls down and the man on the board sets up whatever he orders."

"Oke. What's his door like — wood or steel? Locked? And how about guards up there?"

"Wood. Not locked. No guards — no trouble ever gets to where he is, sir. He would've set 'em, of course —" nodding his head at the dead man beside the PBX — "but you blasted 'im too quick."

"Oke. Lead the way. That's so in case of trouble you'll get it first — from me, if necessary."

Nothing happened until they reached the Boss's door. The bartender knocked — no code, Jules noticed. A voice from inside the room called "Come in," and the pilot opened the door and led the way into the office. The man behind the desk was alone in the room. He gasped once, turned pale and reached for a row of buttons;

but stopped the motion halfway as Jules' blaster came to bear.

"Go ahead, push 'em," Jules said, but the boss, except for twitching muscles, made no move whatever as Jules gave the bartender a tap on the jaw, taking a hypodermic kit out of his pocket, went up to the desk. The man's eyes widened in panic fear.

"Not that — *please* not nitrobarb!" he pleaded, desperately. "I'm allergic to the stuff — it'll kill me sure. my doctor says."

"What makes you think this is nitrobarb? It could be plain distilled water!"

"Don't mace me, mister! I think I probably know what you want . . . and you don't need to give me *anything!* I'll tell you everything I know without it, *honestly* I will!"

And he did, and once again the d'Alemberts listened to the secrets of a traitors' nest. And it was, as Jules had expected it to be, a clear, straight lead to one man in one city of the planet of Durward.

"Oke," Jules said, finally. "I won't kill you — this time. Just tell your boss on Durward I'm coming; loaded to the gills with stuff he never even heard of."

Then the eight d'Alemberts went back to their ship; where Jules and Yvette spent all the rest of the day and almost all of that night in the control room, the most secure spot they could find, composing and encoding a long message to the Head.

When it was done, Jules rose, stretched and walked over to the galactic chart. Her eyes brooding, he set it for maximum span and turned on the activating circuits. As the great wispy star-clouds of the galactic lens took form, each surveyed star positioned with minute accuracy, he keyed the index locators for Durward, the planet to which all their hard-earned information pointed so surely, and for old Earth. Quickly the taped data spools whined and spun and printed out course and the dizzying distance in parsecs between the two planets. He said slowly, "All the signs say Durward is were the action is . . . "

"I know, Julie," said his sister, covering a yawn. "So, of course we go to Earth. Well, what are we waiting for?"

VIII

All explored space was divided into 36 wedge-shaped sectors; the line common to all sectors being the line through the center of Sol perpendicular to the plane of the Earth's orbit. Each sector was owned, subject only to the Throne, by a Grand Duke, Earth, by far the most important planet, did not belong to any sector, but was the private property of the Throne. Each Grand Duke had a palace, several residences and a Hall of State on Earth. Because of these facts the nobility of Earth were far more powerful than their titles indicated. The Principal Palace, in which all Grand Imperial Courts were held, was in Chicago; hence the Count of Chicago had more real power than most Earls and Marquises. More, in fact, than many Dukes. (Manley, Feudalism; Reel I, Intro Sec viii)

In his private office the Head was talking with a gray-haired man who, while old, was in no sense decrepit. Grand Lady Helena sat, shapely legs crossed, working on a twelve-ounce glass of cherry-ice-cream float.

"But what does it *mean*, Zan?" the older man asked. "Route the Circus to Durward — with instructions not to do anything whatever except circus routine. Carlos and Carmen Velasquez will not report and nothing they do, however wild, will be of any importance. And now this *beauty*-parlor business, right here on Earth! It doesn't make sense."

"Not a beauty parlor, Bill. A massagerie de luxe. Or rather, 'The House of Strength of Body and of Heart'."

"But don't you *know* what they're doing?"

"Very little; and I don't want to know more. I give them a job; they do it their own way. I would hazard a guess that they have some reason to believe that a specific person they are interested in is likely to take an interest in body-building. This, you will note, implies that they have reached the point of being interested in specific persons . . . but I don't know who. That is to the good.

"As a recent event proved, the less I know of detail, the better."

"That's true. No trace of your missing person?"

"None. There probably won't be any until the d'Alemberts crack the main case. While they're working on it they get anything they want, with no questions asked."

"As they should, especially since they want so little from us. I know that Circus taxes are rebated, but surely they spend more than that on Empire business?"

"My guess is, they don't. The Circus is so successful that its taxes are very high, but the Duke won't say *how* high. I asked him once if we didn't owe him some money and he told me if I wanted to count pennies I'd better go get myself a job in a dime store."

The old man laughed. "That sounds exactly like him. But Des-Plaines is a rich planet, you know, and Etienne d'Alembert is a tremendously able man — as well as being one of my best friends. Well, I'll leave you to your work. I like to talk to you when I'm feeling low, Zan; you give me a lift." He raised his glass. "Tomorrow, fellow and friend. May we all live to see it." They drank the toast and Emperor Stanley Ten, erect and springy, left the room.

Helena grinned up at her father. "You didn't exactly lie, either; but if he knew as much as we do he wouldn't feel so uplifted."

"He has troubles enough of his own without having to carry ours. Besides, we don't know who they're after. It could turn out to be someone outside those six, as well as not."

The girl nodded. "If we had even a good suspicion, he'd get a shot of nitrobarb. All we *know* is that they haven't got a shred of evidence of anything. But how under the sun and moon and eleven circumpolar

stars can this glorified gymnasium help solve anything?"

"I haven't the most tenuous idea, my dear — and just between us two, I'm just as curious as you are."

A ten-story gravity-controlled building in the Evanston district of Chicago had been remodeled from top to bottom. All the work had been done by the high-grav personnel who now occupied the building. Over its splendidly imposing entrance a triple-tube brilliant sign flared red:

DANGER —
THREE GRAVITIES — DANGER

and on each side of the portal, in small, severely plain obsidian letters on a silver background, a plaque read:

duClos

For weeks before the opening it had been noised abroad that this House of Strength would cater only to the topmost flakes of the upper crust; and that was precisely what it did. It turned down applicants, even of the nobility, by the score. Its first clients, and for some time its only clients, were the extremely powerful Count of Chicago, his Countess and their two gangling teen-age daughters. Since this display of ultra-snobbishness appealed very strongly to the ultra-snobbishness of the high nobility of the Capital of Empire, "duClos" raised snobbery to a height of performance very seldom seen anywhere.

"How're you doing, sis?" Jules asked, one evening. "I'm getting a few bites, but nothing solid. But there's a *feel* about Sector Twenty that I don't like — I'm sure we're on the right track."

"So am I, and I'm getting an idea. I wasn't going to mention it until I could thicken it up a little, but here goes. You know that Duchess of Swingleton? That snooty stinker that's supposed to be the daughter of the Grand Duchess?"

Jules came to attention with a snap. "*Supposed* to be?"

"Well, is then. Maybe I shouldn't have put it quite that way — but you know how I've learned to sneer, in my own inimitable ladylike way?"

"I wouldn't put *that* 'quite that way', either. If it was me on the receiving end I'd sock you right in the middle of your puss."

"She'd really like to. I've been giving her the royal snoot all along and she's burning like a torch. But her mother, Grand Duchess Olga, takes it in stride. So why wouldn't Swingleton . . . unless she's bursting at the seams with something she's bottling up?"

"My God, Eve! You think she's the Bastard's daughter?"

"I'm not that far along yet; it's just a possibility. Not daughter; sixty-seven he would be; she's only about twenty. Still in the silly age — which may account for her touchiness and everything. She's beautiful, athletic, rich, talented, noble and spoiled rotten. Her hobby is men. She works hard at it. So my thought is this: if she gets the idea from somewhere that duClos himself is the

one and only Mister Big in this business I'm positive that she'll insist on you coaching her yourself — personally. You take her on, but instead of bowing down and worshipping, you act like and say that you wouldn't be caught dead with her at a cat-fight, to say nothing of in bed. If I'm right she'll blow up like a bomb and say something she shouldn't."

Jules whistled piercingly through his teeth. "Wow!" he said.

Three days later, Jules accompanied Yvette into the apartment of the Duchess of Swingleton, who proved to be a tall girl — two inches taller than Jules — beautiful of face and figure, with dark blue eyes and a mass of wheat-straw-colored hair piled high on a proudly-held head. Jules, after being presented, walked slowly around her once, studying her from head to foot from every angle. He scowled and then said, "*Maybe* I can do something with this, but there doesn't seem to be much of anything there to work on. Peel, you, and I'll see."

"Peel?" The girl's head went even higher, her eyes blazed. "Are you talking to *me?*" she flared.

"I'm talking to a mass of fat and a little flabby meat that ought to be muscle but isn't," he replied caustically. "Do you expect a master sculptor to make something of a tub of clay without touching it? Wear a bikini or tights if you like — although how you can imagine that I, duClos, would get the thrills over such a slug's body as yours is

completely beyond my comprehension."

"Get out!" Trembling with rage, she pointed at the door. "Leave this castle at once!"

He gave her his choicest top-deck sneer. "Madame, nothing could possibly please me more." He executed a snappy about-face and made for the door.

"Wait, you! Turn around!"

"Yes?" he asked, coldly.

"I am the Duchess of Swingleton!"

"And I, madame, am duClos. There are hundreds and hundreds of duchesses, but there is only one duClos."

She fought her anger down. "I'll put on a swimsuit," she said. "After all, I *do* want to find out whether you're any good or not."

But when she came back, dressed in practically nothing, duClos was even less impressed than before. "Lard," he said, when his talented fingers had reported their preliminary findings to his brain. "Flabby, unrendered lard; but I'll see what I can do with it. We'll go to your gymnasium now."

"Why, aren't you going to take me to your place?"

He looked at her in amused and condescending surprise. "Are you *that* stupid? You'd fall flat and could hardly get up. It'll take a month of work here before you'll be able to work in the House of Strength. To your gymnasium, I say."

In the castle's gymnasium, he said, "First, we'll show you what we, accustomed to three Earth gravities, can do easily here on Earth," and he and Yvette went through a rou-

tine of such violence that the apparatus creaked and groaned and the very floor shook.

"Now what a fair Earth gymnast — such as perhaps I'll be able to make out of you — can do," and they showed her that.

"Now I'll find out what you can do — if anything. You can't do even fifty fast push-ups without going flat on your face," and of course she couldn't.

He worked her fairly hard for half an hour, which was about all she could taken, then said, "That's enough for today, poor thing." Then, turning to Yvette, "Give her a massage in steam, and go deep. After that, the usual."

"No, I want you to do it yourself," the girl said. "They say you're tops and I want nothing but the best."

"Oke," Jules said, in a perfectly matter-of-fact voice, and peeled down to his white nylon shorts. "That'd be better — I'll know more exactly how you come along."

The ladies-in-waiting were shocked — or pretended to be — as the three-quarters-naked man worked on their completely naked mistress; but Jules, alone, of all those present, was — apparently — not affected at all. He was a top-expert masseur working at his profession.

This went on for day after day. Since the Duchess was actually a strong, healthy, athletic girl, splendidly built, and agile both physically and mentally, she learned fast and developed fast. But for the first time in her life she had struck a man and bounced. It was an intolerable situation — a situation that got no better at all as time went on.

He stayed coldly impersonal and more than somewhat contemptuous; he was and he remained a master craftsman wasting his talents on material entirely unworthy of his skill. He paid no attention whatever to any of the little plays she made.

One day, however, when she had become a pretty fair gymnast and was very proud of her accomplishments, all the ladies-in-waiting disappeared before the massage was to begin.

"We don't need them any more, I don't think." She posed, with her skimpy garment half off, and gave him an under-eyebrows look that would have put any other man she knew into a flat spin. "Do we?"

"I don't, that's sure," he said, with the sneer that had become so maddening that she wanted to bash it back into his skull with a sledge-hammer. "And if you're trying to seduce me you're wasting your time. You're a hunk of clay I'm trying to model into something halfway worth while, and nothing else. I'd not rather have you than any other mass of poor-grade clay — or a dime's worth of cat-meat."

That blew it — sky high. "You low-born oaf!" she screamed. "You clod! You base-born peasant, I'll have you flayed alive and staked out on . . ." She stopped screaming suddenly and her eyes widened the veriest little.

"Stop running off at the mouth!" he rasped, timing it so perfectly that she *knew* he had interrupted

her tirade. "My birth, high or low, has no bearing. I am duClos. I am trying to mold you into what our Creator intended you to be; His instrument to produce *men*, not the milksops and flabs now infesting this sinful planet Earth."

"Oh? Don't tell me you're a *Puritan*!" she exclaimed, very glad indeed to change the subject. "I should have known it, though, by all that hair."

"An ex-Puritan," he corrected her. "I do not believe that everything pleasant is sinful, but neglect of the human body most certainly is. So get in there. And snap it [illegible] before you cool off too much."

Work went on, exactly as though nothing had happened. She graduated into the House of Strength and, everything considered, she did very well there.

And she convinced herself quite easily that she had not revealed any tittle of the secret that had been held for sixty-seven years.

IX

As an example of the traditional loyalty of the Navy: When Empress Stanley 5, her husband and four of their five children were assassinated in 2229, *their youngest child, Prince Edward, escaped death only because he, then an ensign in the Navy, was being guarded as no other person had ever been guarded before. Fleet Admiral Simms declared martial law and, in the bloodiest purge in all history, executed not only all those found guilty, including Prince Charles and Princess Charlene, but also their entire families. He then made himself regent and ruled with an iron hand for six years. Then, to the vast surprise of all, he relinquished his regency on the day that Prince Edward came of age and he himself crowned Prince Edward Emperor Stanley Six. (Farnham; The Empire, Vol* 1, p784)

The Fortress of Englewood

Jules and Yvette deigned to accept six Grand Dukes and their wives as personal clients — among whom were Grand Duke Nicholas and Grand Duchess Olga of Sector Twenty — but that was all they would take. In that position of intimacy they dug up a few hints, but neither of them could lay hold of anything solid.

At every opportunity they planted Earth operators in the kitchens, in the garages and everywhere else they could. These detectives found bits and pieces of information, but they could not find any leads to Banion or to any of his blood; nor to the all-important Patent of Royalty.

"We've *got* to take this to the Head, Eve," Jules said finally. "I hate to yell for help on our first really big job, but he's just too damned big for us. And it's more than a possibility that it'd be the Head's head that would roll, not Duke Twenty's. We simply *can't* take the chance."

Yvette nodded. "You're right, I'm afraid. He's really big . . . but he hasn't got a drop of Stanley blood in him . . ."

"Which is why he's playing it this way," Jules declared. "The power behind the Throne. I'll set up a meet."

He set it up and they laid the whole ugly mess squarely on the line, and while they talked the Head aged ten years. When they were done he sat silent and motionless, in intense concentration, for a good fifteen minutes. They could almost feel the master strategist's keen brain at work.

Finally he lifted his head sharply and he said:

"I was hoping it would be one of the others, but you're right. We can't move against *him* without the genuine Patent actually in our hands."

Jules scowled. "That's what I was afraid you'd say. And that Patent must be in the solidest safe-deposit vault on Earth."

"It isn't," the Head said, flatly. "The Emperor can open any bank vault he pleases, with no reason at all. So it's in a vault as good as any on Earth, but in the deepest subcellar of Castle Englewood. I'd stake my head on that. Theoretically, the Emperor could open that vault, too, at whim. But trying it would touch everything off and Nicholas might win. So I'm going to stake all our heads. No matter how daintily we try to pussyfoot it, there's always the chance of our touching off the explosion. However, there'd be no point in his killing the Crown Princess as long as the Emperor and the Empress are alive, so what do you think of this?" and they discussed details for two hours.

Three days later, the news media announced that Emperor Stanley Ten had had a heart attack.

It wasn't too serious, as such things go, but a battery of specialists agreed unanimously that he had to have at least two months of carefree rest, preferably at his favorite summer place, Big Piney in the Rockies. Wherefore Crown Princess Edna was given the unusual title of "Empress Pro Tem" and her parents went, with no pomp or circumstance at all — not to Big Piney, but to an island in the Pacific that was guarded by every defensive device know to the military science of the age.

And Empress Pro Tem Edna announced a party — a getting-acquainted party that, beginning with a full Grand Imperial Court, would last for three days — to which all thirty-six Grand Dukes and their entire families were invited. And did any of the invitees even think of declining? Not one.

As that party began, Jules and Yvette and a regiment of experts went as insidiously as possible to work on Castle Englewood. Having free run of the place, as far as anyone now there was concerned, the two went first — with stunners in their hands — to visit the key personnel. They were followed by fifty cat-footed, fully briefed d'Alemberts, who took care of everyone else; particularly of the many-times-too-numerous Castle Guard.

Architects and engineers had detailed plans of the castle, but they were found useless. The actual details had never been registered. So electronic technicians unlimbered

their most sensitive detectors and explored walls, floors and ceilings. They traced cable after cable, wire after wire; and section after section of the vast building went dark and powerless.

It had been clear from the start that this was no ordinary residence of any ordinary Grand Duke. It was a fortress; a fortress that, except for the Head's brilliant strategy and the d'Alemberts' ability to carry it out, would have been starkly impregnable. And, even so, the attack almost failed.

"How about this, Major?" Jules asked, as the company, after exploring all the other tunnels and corridors in the sub-basements, returned to a grimly thick steel wall.

"It opens from somewhere, somehow." The officer pointed out an almost invisible crack where steel butted against steel. "It'd probably take a week, though, to find out where or how. I *think* we cut all external leads to here, but they could have independent power in that section."

"We'll assume they have," Jules said. "And automatic blasters — or worse, stunners. Gas, maybe, or triggered bombs. But the Head gambled his life on a lot less than we know now, so bring up your shields and high-powers and burn the damned thing down."

When the eight-inches-thick mass of armor-plate fell inward into the brilliantly lighted room, revealing a squad of tremendously-muscled DesPlainians, it struck a steel floor with a crash that shook the very bed-rock upon which Castle Englewood was built.

One glance, however, was all Jules had; for even before steel struck steel he was smashed down flat by a force of twenty-five gravities; and the fact that the musclemen inside the room went down too was of little enough comfort. They were weight-lifters. He wasn't.

Ultra-grav!" Jules gritted, through his clenched teeth. "Can you fellows do anything with it, Rick?" he demanded of the leader of the fighting wrestlers who had done such good work on Aston. "It looks like they've got me just about stuck down."

"We're working on it, Chief," Rick said hoarsely, and they were.

It was fantastic to see two-hundred-fifty-pound brawlers, muscled like Atlases, exerting every iota of their tremendous strength; first to get up onto their knees and then to lift, with the full power of both arms, a five-pound weapon up into some kind of firing position. Unfortunately, one of the guards — a giant even for a DesPlainian weight-lifter — made it first. His first blast went straight through the man in front of Jules; and Jules, who had managed to get almost to his knees, lost a fist-sized chunk of flesh out of his left leg and went back down.

Only the one guard, however, beat the d'Alemberts into action. In the ensuing awkward, slow-motion battle eighteen men died; eight of them being the Grand Duke's guards. Then slowly, ultratoilsomely, the d'Alembert found the gravity controls and restored a heavenly three thousand centimeters per second.

And Yvette, who had been pinned down all this time, rushed over and first-aid-bandaged the ghastly wound in her brother's leg.

They did not try to unlock the vault. It was too late now for cat-footing. Demolition experts brought up their shields and sandbags and blew the whole face of it to bits. They removed the debris and ransacked the vault — and they found a Patent of Royalty.

Then, hearts in throats and scarcely breathing, they looked on while hand-writing experts and documentary experts gave that parchment the works.

"This is the genuine Patent," the chief examiner said finally; and in the joyously relieved clamor that followed even the dead were for the moment forgotten.

The rest of the project went smoothly enough. The full regiment of Imperial Guards sealed the Principal Palace bottle-tight. The Navy put an impenetrable umbrella over all Chicago. Fleet Admiral Armstrong himself led a company of marines into the Grand Ballroom and broke up the Empress Pro Tem's party by putting Grand Duke Nicholas and his entire retinue under arrest. And immediately, then and there in the Grand Ballroom, the Emperor's personal physician administered nitrobarb and the Court Psychologist asked questions. And Empress Pro Tem Edna, her face too stern and hard by far for any girl of her years, listened; and having listened, issued orders which Fleet Admiral Armstrong carried out.

Since it is much faster to work such an inquiry from the top down than from the bottom up, full information was obtained in less than a week. And thus, while the resultant vacancies in the various services were many and terribly shocking, the menace that had hung over the Empire for sixty-seven years was at long last abated.

And thus — a thing supremely important to Jules and Yvette d'Alembert — the Service of the Empire was at long last clean.

X

Because of their high intelligence, their super-cat agility, their hair-trigger speed of reaction and their enormous physical strength, Des-Plainians had been the best secret-service agents of, in turn, the Central Intelligence of Earth, the Galactic Intelligence Agency and the Service of the Empire. And of all Des-Plainians, throughout the years, the d'Alemberts had been by far the best. The fact that the Circus of the Galaxy was SOTE's right arm did not leak from Earth because only the monarch, the Head and a very few of their most highly trusted intimates ever knew it. Nor did it leak from the Circus. Circus people never have spoken to rubes, and the inflexible Code d'Alembert was that d'Alemberts spoke only to d'Alemberts and to the Head. (unpublished data)

Bill, Irene and Edna

Again it was late at night. Again the d'Alemberts Service Special slanted downward through the air

toward the roof of the Hall of State of Sector Four. This time, however, the little speedster was not riding a beam and there was no spot of light upon the building's roof. Except for the light of the almost-full moon, everything was dark and still.

Yvette was the Yvette of old. Jules, again short-haired and smooth-shaved, looked like his usual self; but there was a crutch beside him and his sister was doing the piloting.

She landed the craft near the kiosk of the ultra-private elevator, opened up and leaped lightly out; Jules clambered out, clumsily and stiffly; and Grand Lady Helena came running up in a very ungrand-ladylike fashion.

"Oh, you're wonderful, Yvette — simply *marvelous*!" She put both arms around Yvette's neck and kissed her three times on the lips. "I'm awfully glad father let me be the one to meet you!" She turned and went somewhat carefully into Jules' arms. "And *you*, Jules! Oh, I just can't — but *surely* you can hug a girl tighter than *this*, can't you? Even with a bum leg?"

Jules, returning her kisses enthusiastically, tightened his arms a little, but not much. Then, lifting her by the armpits, he held her feather-lightly out at arms' length, with her toes ten or twelve inches in air. "Sure I can," he said, solemnly but with sparkling eyes, "but the trouble is, I never hugged an Earther before and I'm afraid of breaking you in two. It wouldn't be quite *de rigeur*, would it, to break a Grand Lady's back and half of her ribs?"

"Oh, there's no danger of *that*. I'm ever so much stronger than . . ." She broke off and her eyes widened in surprise as her hands, already on his arms, tried with all their strength to drive her fingertips into them.

"Oh, I see," she said quietly. "I never quite realized."

Jules lowered her gently to the roof and she led the way into the elevator. She did not tell them what the Head wanted of them and they did not ask. As the elevator started down she said, "Jules, I'm going to tell you something. I was all set to fall in love with you and make you love me whether you wanted to or not. But when I couldn't make even a dent in those muscles of yours . . . arms as big and as hard as those of a heroic-size bronze . . . well . . ." Her voice died away.

"You couldn't, possibly," he replied soberly. "There's too much difference. Three of your gravities is a lot of grav, Helena. But we have your friendship?"

"More than that, both of you. Ever so much more. That, and admiration and esteem and . . ." She broke off as the elevator door opened.

She stepped aside; motioned for them to precede her. They took one step into the Head's private office and stopped dead in their tracks, their eyes and mouths becoming O's of astonishment. For —

The big but trim old gray-haired man was Emperor Stanley Ten! The statuesque, regal, brown-haired woman was Empress Irene! And the beautifully built, prematurely stern-

faced girl mixing drinks at the Head's bar was Crown Princess Edna.

The emperor stood up and raised a hand. "Do not kneel," he said — but of course, with their speed of reaction, Yvette was already on her knees and Jules, gimpy leg and all, was on one.

He raised them to their feet, kissed Yvette's hand and shook Jules' and said, "During this visit and hereafter in private, my friends, to you two I am Bill."

"Oh, we couldn't, Your . . . Sire . . . not possibly," Jules said. "But we might call you 'sir', sir?"

Stanley Ten smiled; and in that smiling shed a heavy load. "Oh? I understand. Many of the younger generation are not so well bred. 'Sir' will do very nicely. I take pleasure in presenting you both to Mrs. Stanley . . . and to our daughter, Edna."

Introductions made, Edna Stanley went around with her tray, serving Jules last. As she handed him his glass of lemonade her dark, gray eyes, usually distant, were soft and warm. "It's a damned dirty stinking shame," she said, feelingly, "that we can't give you two, the two who saved our lives, at least a Grand Imperial Court channeled to every planet in space. And to cap it off we have to give that stuffed shirt Armsbold all the credit. The fathead! And he'll get another medal, I suppose — and compared to you two he positively could not detect a smell on a skunk!"

"Well —" Jules began, but the princess rushed on.

"Oh, I know that's the way it has to be, Jules, and I know why. And I know exactly how you feel about it. The Service of the Empire. The fine tradition of the finest group of men and women who ever lived. But knowing all that doesn't make it taste any better or go down any easier that all we can do is thank you for saving all three of our lives at such tremendous risk of your own, and that we have to do even that on the sneak — or cost you yours."

She threw her arms around Jules' neck and kissed him warmly. And, while he could not bring himself to the point of kissing the Crown Princess of the Empire as though she were an ordinary girl, his response was adequate.

Edna Stanley was not the crying type, but her eyes were brimming as she drew her head back, looked straight into Jules' eyes and went on, "But we three will remember it as long as we live; and you two will have a very special place in my heart as long as I live."

Without giving Jules a chance to say anything — which was just as well, since he could not possibly have said a word — she wriggled free and embraced Yvette. "What did *you* expect, Yvette? And call me Edna; we're about the same age."

"I'd love to, Edna, it warms me clear through. What I expected was a pat on the back from the Head there and another tough job."

The Head laughed. "You'll get both, my dear." Then, turning to Stanley, "You see, Bill?"

"I see, Zan. D'Alemberts. Metal of proof. Wrought and tempered."

Stanley turned to Jules and Yvette. "You young people don't realize that your lives are more important to the Empire than mine is."

"I not only don't realize it, sir," Jules said, doggedly, "but I don't see how it can possibly be true. You are the third and the greatest of the Great Stanleys. Eve and I are just two d'Alemberts out of over a thousand."

"Correction, please. As of now you are, and probably for the next two or three years will continue to be the two most capable human beings alive." Stanley replenished his drink and brought Yvette a small pitcher of fresh orange juice, while Edna waited on the others. "Let's examine this 'Great Stanley' business a little; it will be a good way to get better acquainted. I've studied the House of Stanley quite thoroughly; enough to have developed what is — to me, at least — a new theory. Has it ever occurred to you to wonder why the three so-called Great Stanleys happened to be the three who reigned longest? Empress Stanley Three, thirty-seven years; Emperor Stanley Six, thirty-six years; and I, who have more than either, and will probably — thanks to you — reign two more before reaching the age of seventy and abdicating in favor of Edna here?"

"N-o-o-o, sir. I can't say that I have."

"It's a highly pertinent fact. You know, I'm sure, that only one Stanley so far has died in bed."

"Yes, sir, but . . ."

"And one died in a space accident. The other seven were assassinated, usually by their own sons or daughters or brothers or sisters."

"Yes, sir. I know that."

"They had too many children, too young. So Irene and I had only one child, and Edna wasn't born until I was forty-five years old. So as soon as she's able to carry the load we'll hand it to her on a platter and step out."

"Dad!" the Crown Princess exclaimed. "You know very well I'd never even *think* of such a thing!" And:

"William!" the Empress protested. "What a *nasty* thing to say!"

The Emperor grinned. "If you'll analyze what I actually said you'll see that you read that wicked thought of regicide and patricide into it — and you'll know why. Anyway, Irene, you helped plan it. And it's worked out beautifully for all of us. You've all heard the old wheeze that 'Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely'?"

They all had.

"My theory is that only the first part of that old. "Is really true. For, as a matter of fact, no human being ever had absolute power until King Stanley the Sixth crowned himself Emperor Stanley One and took it. He had the whole galaxy. Every other despot in history was always reaching for more; so the truth of that old saying was never tested.

"Indeed, there is much in pre-Stanley history that argues against its truth. The worst gangsters and the most rapacious capitalists Earth ever knew, when they got old enough and powerful enough and rich enough, turned from crime and rapacity to something that was for

the good of all mankind. And the entire history of the House of Stanley bears this out."

There was a short silence, then the Empress said, thoughtfully, "Well, it's something to think about, at least . . . and it *does* seem to make sense . . . but my dear, what has all that to do with the present case?"

"Everything," Stanley said, deadly serious now. "It shows why these two d'Alemberts — highly trained, uniquely gifted, innately and completely loyal to the Empire — are much more important to the Empire than I am. Not that they are indispensable. No one is. But they are at present irreplaceable and I am not. Any Stanley who is able to live long enough becomes a Great Stanley by sheer force of circumstance, and Edna will be one from the day she is crowned."

The Emperor turned to face Jules and Yvette. "Nevertheless, my young friends, my life is extremely important to me. It is also extremely important to Irene and to Edna, as are their lives to me. Our three lives are important to a few real friends, such as Zander there and your father the Duke; but you would be surprised to know just how scarce such real friends are. The life of any individual Emperor or Empress, however, is of very little importance to the Empire itself, of which its rulers are merely the symbols. The Empire endures only because of the loyalty to it of such people as you. Such loyalty can not be commanded; it must be earned. The Empire will endure as long as, and only as long as, it continues to be worthy of such loyalty. Without that loyalty the Empire would fall. Instead of prosperity and peace there would be widespread and terribly destructive wars of planetary conquest. Our present cilization would degenerate into barbarism and savagery.

"We Stanleys do what we can; but in the last analysis the Empire rests squarely upon the arch of its various services, and your Service of the Empire is the very keystone of that arch.

"As Edna said, it is a shame that we three can give you only our thanks. It is not, however the thanks of only three people. I am speaking for the Empire when I say to you and through you to those who work with you . . ." Emperor Stanley Ten took the d'Alemberts' right hands, one in each of his own:

"Thanks." END

FIRE, 2016!

BY GEORGE O. SMITH

ILLUSTRATED BY NODEL

Fire is Man's oldest, best servant — and his oldest, fiercest foe!

I

The scene was eerie, as ugly as fire at night in a dwelling has always been and always will be. The searchlights of the fire department gave no feeling of comfort; rather, they added to the conflict between man and the element of fire. The dancing flames threw their yellow flickerings on the firemen as they raced back and forth arranging things, making observations, calculating how this fire was to be stopped.

It was not done in silence!

"Get that hose line in there!"

"Get me a three-inch wye!"

"Water ready."

"Pumper running!"

"Steady, now. Steady! Got her set?"

"Right!"

"Okay, give her the works!"

The hose bucked as the high-pressure water hit the nozzle. It roared forth, arched toward the blaze, and crashed through a window. The color of the smoke began to change immediately as the dancing flames within the house fought their losing battle. No more than minutes later, the stream of water was cut. The firemen went in to the house with hand extinguishers to kill the few remaining sparks and to quench smouldering embers. Now all there was left was the dirty clean-up job, and the task of packing the fire equipment and returning to the station.

Fire Chief Mooney looked at the rookie beside him. "Still want to be a fireman?" he asked

"More than ever," said the rookie. whose name was Bill Lansing

"Did this one give you enough to write your thesis?" asked the chief, pointing at the ruined home with his thumb.

"I'm not certain. Could be," replied Bill.

"Well, if you've an idea, let me know If it's good, I can tell you to go ahead If it isn't, I can save you the trouble of trying something foolish," said Fire Chief Mooney.

"Chief, the process of adding something significant to the field of fire fighting isn't very easy. On the other hand, it isn't necessary to know the answer before you can point out that a problem does exist or that there is room for improvement."

"This is true; of course, if you do a thesis on those lines it will get you your appointment if it's good enough But it's not the best way, nor the surest way."

"I know. But what can be added to the field of fire fighting in the year of twenty-sixteen?"

"You'll have to add something or you won't be appointed."

"I know I didn't mean that nothing could possibly be added, chief. What I meant is that a rookie can't very well increase the scope of knowledge. Not when experienced, dedicated men have been working to advance the science. But I can point out one rather odd area, chief."

"Go on."

"Chief, do you realize that here in twenty-sixteen. we're still fighting fire in the same way that they did in the day of Julius Caesar? We pour water on it. All that's changed is our more efficient ways of delivering the water."

The fire chief smiled. "Not quite Back in the day of Julius Caesar, they had private fire-fighting concerns, run as a business. If you were a customer of the Mooney Fire Company and your neighbor's house caught fire, we wouldn't touch it unless he were our customer too We'd go out all right, just to keep the fire from spreading to your house, but we'd let your neighbor's house burn to the ground. And if your neighbor's fire company happened to be a bitter rival of ours, we might even start a street fight."

"That's not a matter of fire fighting," objected Bill. "It's just organization."


NOBEL

"Of course. But I did want you to understand that things are not exactly the same as they were a couple of thousand years ago."

"Other things have changed, too," said the rookie thoughtfully. "They used to race through the streets carrying buckets because they hadn't invented the pump. The gizmo that Archimedes invented wasn't much of a pump, sir. It was more of a water lifter. I grant that the mobile steam engine, with its pump, was a vast improvement over the hand pump . . . which was superior to the bucket brigade. Then the gasoline engine replaced the horses and the high-pressure rotary pump was driven by the same engine when the vehicle got to the scene. But the same argument still stands, chief. For all of our modern science, we still pour water on the fire."

"I can point out one other item that's changed."

"Yes?"

"The nature of the fireman, Bill."

"Yes?"

"A long time ago; in fact, it was a long long time ago. your fireman was not of an admirable, civic-minded character. The work was rough and largely physical, and its nature was such that it attracted the kind of man who did not mind sitting on his duff playing checkers for days on end, waiting for the alarm to ring."

"That must have been a long time ago."

"It was. Then came a breed of a better cut. These men held jobs and public offices, and instead of a man joining the fire department because the job was easy, a man was accepted by his local fire department in about the same way that a candidate was accepted for a lodge or a freshman to a fraternity. This was the beginning. Fire-fighting operations took a sudden upswing; the men took pride in their equipment and in their work. It was an honor, and they accepted it as such. They were not paid.

"But the standard was set and the results were visible. And so now we have the present system of rewarding deserving citizens by appointing them to the fire department and paying them an honorarium. This makes it possible for a truly talented man to be an artist or a writer, or to study for advanced degrees, or to devote himself to civic betterment."

"This much I know."

"Then you also know that the mere proclamation that you propose to be a deserving citizen isn't going to make you a scholar."

"I do."

"And I'm also afraid that your criticism isn't going to get you very far. I doubt that merely pointing out that we're still dousing a fire with water despite our vaunted science is going to do it, Bill. The criticism may be valid, but in this case, I think someone is going to pose the question, 'If, in two thousand and more years, no one has discovered anything more efficient, isn't it just barely possible that there isn't anything more efficient?'"

"Thomas Edison had a slogan," said Bill. "There's a better way to do it—Find it!"

"Edison wasn't always right," objected the chief. "And he could have made a vast improvement on his slogan by starting it with the word, 'If.' *IF* there's a better way to do it—Find it!"

II

Bill Lansing's thesis was thorough, but its scientific excellence was marred by a strong taint of emotion. His theme, that the basic improvements in fire fighting were only to deliver a larger volume of water in a shorter time, concluded by suggesting that other substances and processes were ignored simply because water was so cheap and so plentiful that it hardly paid a man to rack his brains to improve upon it. It was, he said, plain laziness.

Fire Commissioner Frank T. Edwards arose at the end of Bill Lansing's treatise and asked, "I presume that you are aware of the fundamental principle of extinguishing a fire, young man?"

"Of course."

"Not 'Of course.' You haven't proved that you know it at all."

With a labored, overly patient tone of voice, Bill Lansing replied, "Water is the total product of combustion; it can't be oxidized any further. Technically, it is the ultimate ash. As such, it smothers the blaze by keeping out the oxygen of the atmosphere. Second, the specific heat of water—that is, the number of calories required to raise the temperature of one cubic centimeter of water by one degree centigrade—is exceeded only by hydrogen. The on-pour of water therefore reduces the temperature of the burning stuff until the latter is below the kindling point."

"Then you will grant that insofar as its smothering and cooling properties are concerned, there is nothing better?"

"This I concede," smiled Bill. "Since the substance with the highest specific heat is hydrogen, second-best water indeed become first-best."

"Then what is your point?" demanded the commissioner. "If water is the best, what better can you want?"

"My father," said Bill, "was a fire claim adjuster. I learned some things from him—for example that the damage caused by water generally exceeds the damage caused by the fire, a fact for many hundreds of years."

"Your father was hardly fool enough to suggest that we avoid the water damage by letting the fire run on," snapped Commissioner Edwards. "What's your point? Do you want someone to invent or discover some substance that will do a better job."

"I am no chemist," said Bill. "But I do know that specific heat is not the entire answer to the problem of heat absorption. There's the heat of conversion, for example. When the one degree centigrade variation in the definition of specific heat happens to span the freezing point, the amount of heat required to thaw a gram of ice into a gram of water—or boil water into steam — is considerably higher than the

specific heat—maybe a thousand times greater."

"And you propose to use this sort of thing?"

"It's already in use," said Bill. "When the water hits a hot fire, the first cooling is done when the heat boils the water into steam."

"And so we're right back to the same argument. We use water, just as they did in Rome, because it is the best."

Lansing shook his head. "There are many substances with a higher heat of conversion."

"Yes," sneered the commissioner, "and I'll bet that when you look them up, you'll find that they are corrosive as the devil, or that their fine high heat of conversion takes place either at minus two hundred, or at plus fifteen hundred. But let's abandon that for a moment. Just why are you so all-fired interested in becoming a fireman?"

"I thought we were here to evaluate my thesis," objected Lansing.

"Young man, you want an appointment to the Academy of Fire Fighters. You've received your proper degrees in the humanities and the sciences, and you've produced a thesis of dubious worth. I—"

"Of dubious worth?" exploded Bill Lansing.

"Yes," said the commissioner calmly. "I'd have said totally worthless if I were as sure of my facts as I am of my opinion. This is just a simple admission that I do not know all there is to know about everything. Therefore it may be possible that your thesis has a trace of merit; now drop it, and let's examine your motives."

"You can't!"

"Yes, I can: I have that prerogative as fire commissioner. I said 'examine,' not 'question.' If your motives are above reproach, a strong mark will be made in your favor."

"All right. Go ahead."

"Isn't it true that all you want is the honor and glory of having been appointed?"

"The honor exists, sure. But there's more. I am ambitious. I believe that I can go far as a member of the Academy Of Fire Fighters."

"And, maybe, a little ambitious for Gloria Mooney's favor?"

Lansing tensed, then controlled himself and said easily, "Sir, a rather staggering proportion of all male effort is undertaken to make an impression on a girl."

"All right, I grant your argument. Ambition is by no means wrong."

Commissioner Edwards paused, then said to the assembly, "Gentlemen, I move that we do not accept this thesis, on the grounds that it offers nothing constructive. However, for his honesty in telling of his ambition instead of mouthing some platitude about service and civic consciousness, I move that Bill Lansing be retained as a rookie and that he be urged to attack his appointment-thesis from another angle."

While fire fighting was still a matter of flooding the blaze with water as it had been for several thousands of years, the city of twenty-sixteen and its component

parts were quite different than the city of nineteen-sixty.

For example, the word "dwelling" was still used; but it did not define a single-family structure situated on a plot of vacant ground. In even the least crowded areas of the megalopolis that stretched from Boston to Washington, the dwellings were low structures, seldom more than three stories high. They were constructed with an economy of building materials by the clever process of using a single wall between the adjoining structures instead of the wastefulness of erecting separate walls for each building.

In the more densely populated areas, the tight cores of the original cities, dwellings were veritable cliffs. The walls of the apartment buildings rose sheer from the edge of the sidewalk, and each rectangular city block carried its own. Above the city, there was a thin, noisy population of helicopters. And below, the only reason traffic moved at all through the streets was because only essential vehicles were permitted in the dense knots.

Had the Sleeper of H. G. Wells awakened, he would have found at least two things missing from his story. First, moving sidewalks did not hurl pedestrian traffic along a series of belts running at different speeds. There were no moving sidewalks. Below the city, in the subways, there were moving cars that closed tight, bumper-to-bumper as they crawled along the station platform, then stretched out into headlong flight to the next station. It was not a case of the quick or the dead, because he who lost his footing was merely thrust aside — or, if he fell, elbow, knee or anatomy was mildly abraded as he was moved to safety. Second, the clever little advertising gimmick of projecting names and slogans on the sidewalk couldn't be done . . . because the sidewalks were elbow-to-elbow, cheek-to-jowl and nose-to-spine with those people who did not take to the subways.

Within the individual dwelling units, things had not changed greatly, but enough to make a difference. Wooden furniture was still present, but mostly in the form of a solid core or foundation for fabrications with a simulated wood-grain surface. Natural fabrics were not plentiful, but the synthetics were so numerous that a story was told about using an alphanumeric computer to compose fetching names for them.

One thing had hardly changed at all: The people.

Oh, the faces and the figures of twenty-sixteen were not those of nineteen-sixty-odd by a factor of seventy-six years. But three generations isn't enough to detect a trend in evolution.

Boys, for example, still called on girls — especially when they had come to a turning point in their careers . . .

So Lansing said, "I failed, Gloria."

"But they kept you on as a rookie, didn't they?"

Bill Lansing looked gloomy. "Sure, but that's sort of like handing out praise by writing it in Sanskrit and sealing it in the cornerstone of a granite building."

"I still say you've got another chance."

"Gloria, how often do they have fires these days?"

"Why, I don't really know."

"I've been a rookie for two years. I've been to one fire. Things simply do not go *Whoosh!* at the touch of a spark any more."

"But doesn't that give you loads of time to study?"

"Sure," he replied gloomily. "But study doesn't solve the problem. I've read the detailed account of every fire in the entire megalopolis for the past fifteen years. It's not enough. Nothing gives you firsthand knowledge like being on the actual scene of a fire so you can watch them work, see how they go about it and observe the results. So where does this leave me?"

"Well, outside of being disappointed, Bill, just where do you think it leaves you?"

"I know where it leaves me," he said. "I'm the son of a fire claim adjuster."

"Is that so bad?"

"Bad enough so that your father gave me a rough time until I made the rookie grade and was on my way toward being a real fireman. Now one false step and I'll be the son of a fire claim adjuster again. And believe me, Gloria, you know as well as I do that the only thing worse than being the son of a fire claim adjuster is to be the adjuster himself."

"Oh, now, it isn't that bad."

"Isn't it? Does your father know I'm here?"

"He didn't say anything about not seeing you, if that's what you mean."

"Gloria, if you want to find out the degree of my welcome as a failed-to-make-it candidate for the Academy Of Fire Fighters, let's you and I go and announce that we're about to go dancing, or to a show, or something similar."

"All right. Let's," said Gloria.

III

They found Gloria's father in the family recreation room watching a comedy show. Here at home there was nothing to set him off as a fireman except for the traditional red suspenders that were, like a uniform, the insignia of his position; the silver buckles indicated that he was an official of the Academy, and the four tiny shields embossed on the buckles denoted his rank as fire chief.

He looked up and blinked as they entered hand in hand. A fleeting frown crossed his face, but it came and went so fast that no one, not even Bill Lansing, could be certain that the frown was not caused by the change in eye-focus from the bright viewing screen to the couple walking through the diminished light.

Gloria said, "Bill and I are going dancing, dad."

"Dancing?"

"Yes. The gang's throwing an impromptu at the Silver Garden."

"Oh. The gang."

"Yes."

"All right. You sounded as though you intended to go alone."

Bill Lansing bristled slightly. Gloria caught it first and squeezed his hand. He subsided without say-

ing anything, and Gloria said gently, "Why, dad, we're all big enough to be out alone. Even after dark."

Fire Chief Mooney looked at them and nodded slowly. "That isn't exactly what I meant," he said. "Jim Potter said last night that he was getting an idea for his thesis that he was going to work out in model form. And he said that if he finished it, he'd be over to show it to us this evening. But if the gang is going to be at the Silver Garden, he will too. Tell him I'm quite interested in his model, Gloria. Jim has a real head on his shoulders. Like father, like son, I always say."

"Yes," said Gloria simply.

Gloria's father looked at Bill. "And how is your program, Bill? Got any new ideas?"

"Nothing clear yet. I've a couple of ideas that need some study before they're even presentable as possible ideas."

"Good. Come around any time you have something to offer."

Outside, on the crowded sidewalk, they were part of the surrounded-alones that make up the population of any city. Had they stood on that same location fifty years earlier, they would have been truly alone, in the middle of a tract of land too rough for farming and not yet needed for dwelling space. Then they could have counted the dabs of sky-glow that marked the location of the larger towns hidden by the slightly rolling hills that someone had dubbed the Watchung Mountains of New Jersey.

But they were not fifty years earlier. Two generations of dwelling construction had changed the face of the Earth. The first had cleared out the thin forestation and dotted the landscape with a polka-pattern of rubber-stamp houses built by the production-line process. The first crew dug for the foundation, the second crew poured it. A third removed the forms and installed them forward of the line, while the next crew began to put up stringers and studs. When they moved along, the sheathing came, the plumbers and the electricians installed their hardware, the flooring was laid and the walls were plastered, and the roof was slapped on. A coat of paint went next, followed by the real estate salesmen and their clients.

And while the foremost was still digging holes for more foundations, miles behind them the sheriff was serving foreclosure notices on those whose payments were delinquent.

The second generation of building pushed the Watchung Mountains around until the terrain was level, and then erected row upon row of the two and three story dwellings, laid out in a closed formation of rectangles. This was the low-density population of the central megalopolis.

Gloria and Bill were part of the surrounded-alones. When the density of population forces a man to breathe his neighbor's exhalation, aloofness takes the place of privacy. It becomes a studied thing to not-observe; let some outrage take place, and the people who stop to stare are from a distant part of the city, while the folks next door pass by

with the talent of a waiter who can walk through a crowded restaurant without letting anyone catch his eye or attention.

And so Gloria and Bill could talk as if they were alone, and he said, "Well, that's about it, isn't it?"

"Now what do you mean by that?"

"There's no gang dance tonight. And that Potter creep isn't going — "

"Now, don't you go calling Jim Potter a creep. He isn't."

"I suppose he's a fine fellow with grace, charm, money, an interesting mind, sex appeal — and has the right to wear his father's red suspenders."

"Don't be bitter, Bill."

"What else can I be?" he demanded. "Jim has a real head on his shoulders. Like father, like son, I always say. Come around when *you* have something to offer."

"Now, Bill!"

"That isn't all, Gloria. He backwatered fast after that glum, 'You sounded as if you were going out alone,' line of his, but what is he going to say when his favorite, Jim Potter, turns up and declares there's no impromptu dance tonight? He's going to accuse the both of us of lying so that we could go out and canoodle somewhere."

"Don't worry, Bill. There are ways of coping with that."

"For example?"

"By proving that I'm not playing favorites."

"In other words, you're going out with Jim Potter."

"Now you see here, Bill Lansing! I've got every right to go out with whom I choose. You have no more right to object to Jim Potter than he has a right to object to you, and neither of you has a right to object to anybody else. Now that's not only clear, but it's also logical and sensible— "

Bill put out a hand and caught her elbow, just as she was about to step off the curb to cross the street.

The traffic light had flashed red, and the cross-traffic fought its way into the intersection without waiting for the last of the running traffic to clear. Bumper to bumper and curb to curb, everything came to a halt. Then came a crescendo of horns. The horns died as the intersection cleared. There was a flurry in the vehicular pattern as one driver tried to fight his way from the middle lane to make a turn; he didn't make it, but with luck, perseverance and the unlikely possibility of meeting a polite driver that would give way, he might make his turn in the next couple of blocks.

"Okay," said Bill, disconsolately replying to her argument. "But right now what do we do? There's no dance at the Silver Garden."

"So we'll walk there, find that it isn't open and then turn over on March Street and see if we can get tickets to *Bitter Love*." She hugged his arm. "It isn't a big event, but a girl can paste theater tickets in her diary, can't she?"

"I guess."

"So we were disappointed about being mistaken about the dance, but it worked out even better because we saw that big new hit."


NODELL

"If we can get tickets."

"We'll get tickets," she promised. "They wouldn't dare refuse the daughter of Fire Chief Mooney."

IV

There was a murmur of voices when Bill opened the door with Gloria's key. Gloria said, "Maybe you'd best not come in, Bill. That father of mine — he's still up."

"The other is Jim Potter. He's still here. Look," he said hoarsely. "I'm not going to leave with Jim Potter in the house waiting to get you alone!"

The hallway door before them opened to display Fire Chief Mooney, with Jim Potter in the background. Gloria's father used the voice that he'd found helpful in making himself heard over the crackle of open flames, the shouts of hard-working firemen, and the roar of newly-arriving fire equipment: "And how was the dance at the club that's closed? Find the floor crowded? So just what have you been doing, you two?"

Gloria replied, "Now father, don't take that tone — "

"I'll take any tone I want to in my own home! What have you two been up to?"

"We got tickets to *Bitter Love*, playing at the Orpheum," said Bill, waving the ticket stubs.

"Did you stay to watch the show, or are you using the tickets as an alibi?" demanded Gloria's father.

"Now, sir, that's no way to talk. Don't you trust your daughter?"

"Yes, I trust her, you young schemer. But I don't trust you not to make a fool of her."

"But I — "

"You, Lansing, might have spent your time better if you'd honestly tried to advance the science of fire fighting instead of thinking of clever schemes to marry into it. Hah! you yell about water, and how things haven't changed for two thousand years. Well, while you were carping about water and lack of progress, Jim Potter was *thinking*. His idea will get him appointed *cum laude*, possibly *summa*, and maybe even *magna*."

"But, sir — "

"Lansing, I think you are a thrill-seeker. While you were complaining about lack of progress, and wailing that you couldn't really study a fire and the methods we use without really watching one, Jim Potter did what you couldn't do. He has made a very sensible plan."

"Congratulations," said Lansing in a flat tone. "And may I ask what it is?"

"I'm proud to be the one to tell you," said Fire Chief Mooney. "Assume you are called to a fire in a dwelling, Lansing. It is yours to fight, to plan against, to lay out your campaign to extinguish the blaze in the shortest time with the minimum damage. Understand?"

"That is the job of the fire boss, the ranking official present."

"Pre-cisely! Now, Lansing, suppose that you could make an instantaneous determination of the amount and placement of all flammable material in the dwelling, the chemistry and physical characteristics of these

burnables, and the possible interaction between the various products of combustion."

"That would be a help," Lansing said thoughtfully. "It would be as great a help to us as it helps a general who knows the strength and deployment of the entire enemy force against him."

"Exactly! Well, Lansing, young Jim Potter proposes that every citicitizen post a layout of his dwelling, and the contents, and the material of which the articles are made! This information will go into a rapid cross-access file, so that the full information will be available as soon as the fire alarm delivers the identification of the dwelling."

Bill Lansing shook his head slowly. "I suppose you'd want penalties for falsification of the records?"

"Naturally. False information might be quite deadly."

"And sooner or later you'd issue licenses to purchase furniture and household goods to make certain that your records were accurate?"

"Now that's the first good suggestion that I have ever heard you make, Lansing. Jim," he said to Potter, "I know you'll give full credit for this suggestion when you present your thesis."

"Most certainly, sir," said Potter, scribbling. Lansing raised his hands.

"Chief Mooney, sir?"

"Now what, Lansing?"

"Before you continue along this line of reasoning, I think you had better consult an attorney for advice."

"Why?"

"Because I believe that any such requirement is a violation of the citizen's right to be free of unwarranted search. At any rate it is a violation of his privacy."

"It's for his own protection, confound it!" Mooney shook his head violently. "What do you know about law?"

"Very little. That's why I suggested that you consult someone who does. I think your plan would require a Constitutional amendment, a Supreme Court ruling, and a special department formed to enforce the requirements. It's a grand, blue-sky scheme, and totally impractical."

"Lansing, have you ever heard of the N.I.H. Attitude?"

"No, sir. What does N. I. H. stand for?"

" 'Not Invented Here.' It refers to those people who go nit-picking and raising objections to anything they did not think of themselves. I withdraw my congratulations for your excellent suggestion because, it seems, it was meant as sarcasm. But to show you that we, at least, do not have the N. I. H. Attitude, we'll still use your suggestion. It's a good one — regardless of its intent."

"It won't work," said Lansing doggedly. "You'll hear a yell about 'Police State' go up so loud that no one will touch the idea."

"Now, don't accuse me of advocating anything anti-democratic."

"I didn't."

"Yes, you did! And if you and your kind would only offer positive suggestions instead of throwing stumbling blocks in the way of

progress, we would all be better off. You think fast enough when you're objecting to someone else's idea, or when you're scheming a plot to squirrel my daughter out from under my eyes. Why don't you bend that fine brain to something constructive?"

"Mr. Mooney, I—"

"Lansing, you're nothing but an inept social climber who is playing in the wrong league. Why don't you leave quietly, you son of a fire claim adjuster?"

"Now see here—"

"*You* see here, Lansing. Get out!"

"Father, Bill Lansing is *my* guest, and I—"

"You go to your room and stay there, young missy! Bill Lansing *was* your guest, past tense. No progress, just water? Well, fathers have been pouring cold water over hot romances for a couple of thousand years, too. So get!"

Bill Lansing's return to his station was a doleful journey.

It was late at night; or more accurately, it was very early in the morning. Crammed in and jostling were the night people of the city. Some were tired, some were bored. Not a few were dozing in their subway seats. There were many couples engrossed with their own business to the point where they cared little for their surroundings. But if there was one who could be as unhappy and frustrated with helpless rage and utter futility as Bill Lansing, it could not be known. For Lansing had no one to tell, no sympathetic ear to listen.

But if Bill Lansing thought that he had been kicked as low as any man could be kicked, he found that he had one more bitter blow awaiting him at the station. He was hailed just inside of the door by Fire Commissioner Edwards.

"Lansing, I have a complaint against you."

"A complaint, sir?"

"Yes. Did you, or did you not imply that you were taking Gloria Lansing to a dance that in reality was non-existent?"

Lansing gulped. It was a loaded question. In reality, the plan had simply been to test Fire Chief Mooney's reaction to Gloria going out on a late date with her. It had been Gloria's spur-of-the-moment picking, not his, that chose the dance. Bill could no more tell the commmissioner that they were testing Mooney's reaction than he could permit himself to place the blame on Gloria. Neither was the act of a gentleman and a fire fighter; furthermore, he was at fault anyway because the code of the fire fighter demanded that he correct any erroneous impression that Gloria might have given.

But Bill Lansing had no doubt at all that the commissioner knew the entire story as close as Mooney could repeat it. For the commissioner's word had been "imply" and that meant that Gloria's statement had been undersigned; or in this case, underspoken, by Lansing.

"Yes," he said.

"This has been an unfortunate experience for all of us, Lansing. I hope it's over. You know the penalty

of the Academy of Fire Fighters for permitting an implied untruth to stand."

"Yes."

"While you are relieved of all duty and responsibility, you may not leave your station until the Board of Fire Regents accepts your resignation officially."

"And if there is a fire in the interim, sir?"

"While every hand is needed at a fire, Lansing, our code is our protection. It is clear. No one who has not the full confidence of the Academy of Fire Fighters may have the honor of joining us in our chosen profession."

"But, sir — "

The commissioner eyed Lansing coldly and in a sepulchral intonation, he said, "You have been weighed in the balance and found wanting."

It was the traditional phrase of cold dismissal from the Academy. The phrase was, indeed, a translation of the Handwriting on the Wall.

V

With absolutely nothing to do but eat, sleep and kill the waking hours, because those that surround you will not speak nor admit they heard you, time hangs heavy indeed.

It is worse when your cell can not be left. It is even worse than that when you, and they, and everybody knows that the process of separating you from your tomb could be expedited in ten minutes if anybody gave a tinkle. But the Academy of Fire Fighters was thoroughly finished with Mr. Bill Lansing; so completely finished with him that its members wouldn't lift a finger to get rid of him. To them, he had ceased to exist. To place action before the treadmill brought his card to the top was to recognize that such a person had rights.

And it might have gone that way, right on out until Bill Lansing's life turned a corner and became part of another world of activity.

But a new world was not to be for Bill Lansing. Clotho, the Fate that weaves the lives of men, discovered the bowline, the knot that makes the closed loop which will not slip, and this she tied into her web.

Call it fate. Call it coincidence. Call it anything you care to; but accept, even though reluctantly, the fire that flared up in the cellar of Fire Chief Mooney's home at one o'clock in the morning.

The alarm clangored through the station, alerting the firemen, the rookies and the nearly-ex-rookie Bill Lansing.

Next came the stentorian voice:

"Now hear this! The address is one seven nine, three nine six four Rushman Avenue in the Watchung area near the metropolitan shopping area of Mountainside. The weather is clear. Temperature seventy-one, humidity fifty-three, wind from the southwest at ten. The time is one zero seven hours."

Near him, Lansing heard someone mutter, "And the New York theater crowd will just be getting home, too!"

In answer, the fire sub-chief said, "Right, Al. Look, you and Pete are

temporarily detached. Get out there right now and plant traffic stoppers. Go now; we'll bring your fire gear in the equipment wagon."

"Right, chief. But won't that leave you short-handed?"

"We'll make out."

Lansing said, "I volunteer."

For the first time in three weeks, Lansing got a reply. "We don't accept outsiders," was the cold response.

"Might as well use me," said Lansing. "I'm going anyway."

"Not in any fire wagon this station uses!"

From the roof of the station came the rising drone of a siren. It went up and up into a scream, undulated between shrill and ear-splitting, and then began to slide down the scale as the motor coasted to its well-balanced and near-frictionless stop. A banging scatter of cold motors came next; they settled down into a muted, vibrant roar.

Stop him from going they could, but stop him from watching them leave they could not. He followed them to the equipment, then stood on the edge of the roof, leaning into the blast of the big choppers of the heavy equipment. They wasted no time clawing for altitude. Instead, they lurched forward off the roof and arrowed straight across the city, no more than a hundred feet above the forest of television antennas that reached up for them.

It was a thrilling and a noisy spectacle, but once it was over, all that Lansing could do was to go back below and wait. This was a world that had rejected him. A world that he was not permitted to join.

He sprawled on his narrow bunk and listened to the radio. It was spilling orders and counter-orders, acknowledgements, and direction data and other information. To anyone not used to the patter, it would have been a hopeless mess of gabble. But to the ex-rookie, it was part of his nostalgia. He had the knowledge and the skill to build a radio receiver for this frequency (they could not be purchased) but once away from this station he would sever all ties. To maintain even the least of them would be more hurtful than not.

One thing he could not envision was the spectacle of the Mooney dwelling in flame. That was a murky, flickering thing. But the approach of the sub-chief's hopper he could follow without difficulty, for he knew that it would dip and circle the fire; the sub-chief would be collecting preliminary information so that he could plan his counter-attack. Then the radio became more orderly:

"Redman, get the pyrometer over here."

"Right, chief."

"Harrington, get one of your spectographs aimed at that picture window in front. Put the second looking about ten feet above that tiled roof over on the side, and the third in the back. High, I'd say."

"Right."

"Now, where's the XXX!!!XXX! hosewagon?"

Bill Lansing grinned. The fire radio band was speech-scrambled within weeks after it had first been used. Language that would offend

the delicate ear was denied to that ear because the government realized that it was easier to conceal the bad language of men working under danger and stress than it was to train them to use, "Oh my goodness!" as a verbal indication of dismay.

The sub-chief got his reply: "Layin' hose, chief!"

"From where, for XXX!!!'X sake?"

"The Bound Brook Reservoir."

"What the XX!!'s the matter with the standpipes?"

"They ain't been used in seven years, chief. Besides, we've got time to run a clear line before swoosh-second, and it's better that way."

"Okay. Now — "

"Who's in charge here?" This was a new voice.

"I am. Sub-Chief Walter Lang. From the Newark district station."

"Where is Fire Chief Mooney?"

"We haven't been able to contact him."

"Commissioner Edwards?"

"Probably on his way. And who are you — sir?"

"Sub-Secretary of Public Safety, James Moriarity. You mean that neither Mooney nor Edwards are present?"

"No, sir. I — "

"I'm here, X#% %X## it," came the unmistakable voice of Fire Chief Mooney. "And get me out!"

"Trapped?"

"Second floor rear."

"How long can you hold out?"

"Not too long. It's hot and it stinks of blowup."

"Do you want to take cognizance, chief?" asked Lang.

"From within?" The sound of was unmistakable.

"Well, someone has got to give the orders." Lang turned to Moriarty. "Shall we go in and get him, sir?"

"How do you figure the fire, Mr. Lang?"

"One mo. Redman, what do the pyros say?"

"Hotspots running up to three hundred, bits and flares to five-fifty. Average is reasonable but going up."

"Harrigan, what does spectro say?"

"The usual clutch of standard volatiles. You know. Polyesters, acrylics, acetates, eurenthanes, plus a mixture of ordinary smokes, wood distillates and monoxides."

"How bad?"

"The mixture is deadly in concentration, you know. Right now it will give a man an awful headache if he breathes it very long — say a half hour or more. But the temperatures recorded by Redman say that the mix isn't to the whoosh point yet."

"Then I can't take the emergency chance nor justify it," said Moriarity. "Where's your fire claim adjuster?"

"He hasn't shown yet. He should have been here."

"My God! Is there *anyone* who can work pro tem?"

"Of course not. There never is when they're needed."

Mooney's voice broke in, "Is Gloria safe?"

"Isn't she with you?"

"No. She has her own apartment on the top floor of this building."

"Front or rear?"

"Front."

"And your wife?"

"With me. But about Gloria — ?"

"Redman! Top floor front?"

"About the same as below, maybe a bit cooler in the hot spots. Less total variation."

"Harrigan?"

"Rough, chief. The whole, standard list of hot, flammable volatiles are thick, plus traces of phosgene, hydrogen chloride and some nitrides. By comparison, Gloria's folks are breathing pure mountain air."

"That's an emergency, chief! Can we go in?"

"General call! Isn't there anybody who can certify this spot as an emergency? Anybody?"

Bill Lansing could stand it no more. He got up from his bunk and snapped the press-to-talk switch on his radio. He said, "Sub-Secretary Moriarity from Bill Lansing. I am an ex-rookie fireman and therefore disqualified to talk, act, or participate on that basis. However, I am also the son of James Lansing, a journeyman and fellow of the College of Fire Claim Underwriters, through whom I was granted my certificate of competence in fire evaluation."

"How fast can you get here?"

"A matter of minutes if I can commandeer the hopper on the roof."

Mooney's voice broke in, "Make him a #%& &#%% present of it, but get us the $#&& out of here!"

Lansing headed for the roof on a dead run. Meanwhile, a new voice came in, thin and wavering, on the edge of radio contact. "Am I within range yet? Do you hear me? This is Commissioner Edwards. Respond, please, over and out."

"We hear you now, Commissioner. Go ahead."

"How does it stand?"

"It apparently started below, point and cause of origin unknown. The dwelling is a special, belonging to Fire Chief Mooney. You know the place, Commissioner."

"Yes. Well, the elder Mooney dwelling, I do. But their daughter has a separate on the third floor that I haven't been in."

"And the fire conditions?"

"Top-floor apartment, front side, isn't as separate as if the place were truly unconnected. Therefore a lot of the volatile stuff has been seeping up through the stair wells and halls. It's been collecting in Gloria's apartment."

"Any sign of the girl?"

"None. Harrigan?"

"No trace of animal charcoal nor hydrocarbon vapor. She may be suffocated but she isn't burned."

"Stop talking like that," yelled Mooney. "Get me out of here and I'll go up there myself!"

"Is that an order, chief?"

"Yes, #%& &#%% it!"

Moriarity said, "Commissioner, the only fire claim adjuster on the spot is ex-rookie Lansing. You know him?"

"Yes, I know him," said Commissioner Edwards wearily. "Lansing? Will you authorize a breach of Mooney's section?"

"Does Fire Chief Mooney wave his insurance?"

"Now, see here! This is no time to —"

"If you're going to accuse me of vindictiveness, don't. Spectro and pyro give the Mooneys a good fifty-five minutes before the whoosh point and threaten them with no more than a headache. I'm mindful of their lives and of their comfort, but I have the property to protect. Furthermore, the real danger is to the girl in the top floor front."

"Shall we go in there?"

"Without seeing it, I shouldn't grant permission. But the reports say — yes, go in. Use the clear-out, grab and re-containment process, but be fast."

"Pyro, what's the draft-coefficient?"

"Fairly slow. But once that roof is open, you'll have a furnace condition in the whole place in a matter of minutes. All it takes is one tongue of flame to lick through a firebreak and —"

"Yes, yes, we know. Sky crew? Go in!"

VI

Lausing's hopper crossed the ring of billowing red flares that barred all surface traffic from entering the area. Then he saw the stricken dwelling. Fire apparatus hung in the sky on their helicopter blades, hovering about the scene. As for the fire itself, there was not much to see to indicate how dangerous it was. Only a flicker and a flash of yellow flame showed at the windows. And, of course, the inevitable group of civilians huddled together in night clothing; the the dwellers on either side and to the back of the Mooney place that fronted on the next street.

As Lansing approached, the sky crew went into action. The first 'copter lowered carefully down onto the flat roof. On the bottom a six-foot, circular object began to rotate — the well-known but seldom seen sawing circle. When the cylindrical saw-teeth hit the material of the roof, the crunching noise could be heard above the racket of the many engines. It ground and it sawed, and the backlash from its effort made the pilot fight his stick to maintain hoverage.

Then with a final crash, three things happened in so close a serial order that they appeared to have taken place at once.

A slow-motion picture would have shown first that the thrust of the sawing circle and its helicopter drove the equipment down when the final resistance ceased; second that the pilot fought the thrust deftly by revving the engine and throwing the bite of the rotor blades to full life; and third that when the plug of the roof was lifted free, the gout of hot volatiles belched forth to carry the helicopter high and precariously pitching in the turbulence.

"Where's the sky hook?"

"Coming in, with hot papa in the iron claw."

"Ready with the flush tank?"

"Ready!"

"Toss it!"

From one of the helicopters, a

small glistening object arched out. With computer-accuracy it curved through the air to plunge into the newly made opening in the roof. There was no sound, but all at once the final billow of dirty smoke gushed forth and there was no more.

"Snappy, now!"

Hot papa, in his glistening fire-reflecting suit, was lowered through the opening. The iron claw line went slack; the pilot of the helicopter hovered and fought his stick, for despite flushing the smoke out of the apartment with a tank of clear helium, the air above the scene was turbulent. Indeed, the helium did no more than to provide visibility. It was non-poisonous, but just as deadly for the human lungs.

"Got baby!" came the cry. The iron claw line went taught again.

"How is she?"

"Alive and wrapped in baby's bunting, double-folded with cold feet."

"All right! No re-contain!"

The sawing circle lowered again, hovered, turned and fitted the roof-plug back in place. Some battens were slapped over the circular cut and then there came a rapid-fire series of sharp detonations as anchor-fasteners were driven home with cartridge guns. The sawing circle rose, followed by the first of a thin trickle of smoke that began to seep through the cut.

Mooney asked, "My daughter?"

Someone replied, "She's being treated for smoke and vapor inhalation, some poisoning and a mild anoxia. No burns."

"Thanks.

"Now let's take care of the Mooneys," said Commissioner Edwards.

"Shall we go in?"

"Lansing?" asked Edwards.

"Look," interjected Mooney, "if pyro and spectro say we're in no imminent danger, we'll play it by the rules."

"Yes, but as fire chief you should be here. Lansing?"

"Mr. Commisioner, will the Academy of Fire Fighters undertake Fire Chief Mooney's insurance? I can't underwrite it and accept the additional losses just to place him in his rightful command."

"Now I think you are being vindictive."

"Put yourself in my shoes, Commissioner, and take a look from a long way outside. If I go in too soon, someone is going to accuse me of trying to curry favor with the very obvious combination of fire chief and father of the girl I love. Aren't they?"

"You'll find, young Mister Lansing, that no matter what you do, someone will criticize."

"Then the best way is to do what I think right, isn't it?"

"Um —"

"All right! Now get off the air, Commissioner, and let your data gang go to work."

Sub-Chief Walter Lang took over. "Data gang?"

"Pyro here," said Redman. "General room ambient is about four-sixteen, with hot spots to seven-fifty."

"Spectro," said Harrigan, "noth-

ing new to report. The same cross-section of gases from burning or decomposed plastic fabrics, artificial leathers and so forth."

"All right, plug your data directly into the computer."

The voices on the fire-radio band ceased. In their place there came a tuneless, and apparently patternless, mixture of short pulses in many frequencies from low to high pitch. It was digital data covering the composition of the flammable gases within the confined dwelling, the temperatures found at a number of places within each room and the rate at which each factor was changing. From the computer there spilled lengths of tape, carrying their own computer code in punched holes. These would be used for analysis later; the information they contained was already used and coded by the computer. From the collectable evidence, estimates and a computer-grade reconstruction was made of the conditions that existed in parts of the dwelling that could not be seen from the outside.

Within minutes, the information was complete and the counter-attack planned with computer-accuracy.

"Can we get the Mooneys, Lansing? Haven't you stalled long enough? What'll happen if we open that lower bedroom now?"

"The computer says it is a little early," said Bill Lansing. "And the book says that it's frequently better to let it burn a bit longer and tend to smother itself. We've come a long way from the day when the first act was to chop a hole in the roof to vent the explosive gases. Now we can afford to wait until they get threatening before starting the inevitable fire-draft up through the house. But my experience," he went on, "isn't extensive enough to furnish a considered opinion, other than to believe that there is a reasonable period during which only a computer could tell the difference. So I'll say go in and get them."

"Thanks," said Commissioner Edwards. "Mooney? We're coming in!"

"I hear you. We're ready."

There was a quick roar of engines as the twin rotors of the flying bridge fired up. The flying bridge, parked in the street and poised for the operation, took no spare time in rising to window height and plunging forward to thrust its covered outrigger through the bedroom window behind which the Mooneys were waiting. Smoke burst forth around the bridge, and a gout of flame followed as the hot volatiles belched forth, rose and created an out-draft.

The fire fighter in the hot papa suit aboard the flying bridge did not make it all the way to the end of the covered runway. The Mooneys, she first and he second, were already aboard and running toward the body of the vehicle.

"Baby's aboard," yelled hot papa, "and cryin' for cool air!"

The flying bridge backed, turned and dropped to the street. Fire Chief Mooney came out of the exit door, steadying his wife by a hand at her elbow.

Commissioner Edwards said, "Want to take over?"

Mooney shook his head. "No. The headache they promised me is here. all right. It's a pip. I couldn't think straight."

"You better get some treament, chief."

"After this thing is out. Let Lang go on. He's done a fine job so far."

Walter Lang said, "Thanks chief." Then he asked, "Lansing? When is whoosh second?"

Lansing looked at the last tape from the computer. "We've still a large margin of safety before it goes whoosh," said Lansing. "But I don't think we'll gain much by waiting, especially now that the bedroom window is gone. Hit it when you're ready, Lang."

Then with the precision of computer programming, Pumper One hurled 1,750 liters of water through the smashed bedroom window; Pumper Two delivered 2,500 liters through a second floor window; and a hose line rigged to the sawing circle dropped 500 liters through the re-opened hole in the roof.

The smoke billowed briefly through the shattered windows; then made its characteristic change from dirty brown to the steamy white that comes when water fights fire.

There was only one re-burst. Just as the mop-up squad was about to enter with their absorbent machines, a flare was seen in the living room. Pumper Two responded with an additional 500 liters, a quantity determined by human estimate and not by the computer. As a result the mop-up squad found puddles on the floor when they entered ten minutes later to finish off the job.

Voices died around the table as Fire Commissioner Edwards arose; there was one tiny clink as one of the Board of Regents put down his coffee cup. The Regents of the Academy of Fire Fighters were present in their full red-suspendered regalia. But they were all uncomfortably aware of the stranger in their midst.

For he, too, was in full regalia. There was the shiny blue-serge suit and the hard white hat of the fire-claim adjuster, and he carried the small, leather-covered attache case that contained the decimal computer used during on-the-spot estimates of fire, smoke and water damage.

Commissioner Edwards said, "I am in the very uncomfortable position of having to offer an honor upon a man who has already received what he may well believe to be a higher one. In retrospect, I regret that Mr. Lansing did not make a material contribution to the science of fire fighting. He did not invent some new process of extinguishing the blaze or eliminating the smoke, nor did he discover some fabulous new chemical that would kill the fleas without drowning the dog. In fact, Mr. Lansing did not even prove his own contention that fire fighting was unchanged from the day when our remote ancestors discovered that water was the master of fire, provided you poured enough of it on the blaze."

"Indeed, gentlemen, I can only

apologize for being impatient. I take the responsibility for having urged the premature action that required a second charge of water, hastily estimated instead of carefully computed, to be hurled into the Mooney dwelling.

"But in the act of acquiescing to our premature pleas, Mr. Bill Lansing, recently appointed Adjuster First Class, and a member of the College of Fire Claim Adjusters, revealed a part of his human nature seldom displayed by other members of his college. Humanely and humanly, Mr. Lansing understood that our natural enemy is *Fire*, to be killed at all cost and at once.

"And to continue this understanding and to hope that it becomes mutual, I am conferring upon him the highest office that a non-member can hold, the unglorious, undignified, unrewarding post of Associate Member. By appointment."

"And I," added Fire Chief Mooney, "find myself appointing him to the post of son-in-law, first class. By marriage."

To his bride-to-be, Bill Lansing whispered, "I still say there's a better way to do it."

"Than marriage?"

"No. A better way to put out a fire."

"There is," she chuckled. "And I'll show you the way after the ceremony." END

THE FINAL EQUATION

BY JACK SMITH

They expected to hear a revelation. They didn't expect — what they got!

In the semidarkness of the classroom the collection of intellectuals mulled over the possible reasons for their having been called together. They had come because Schuffman was their acknowledged master and because he was an old man, near death. They knew he was a tyrant and, at times, a crackpot. But no one could deny the man's genius with figures.

As the professor entered the classroom, his colleagues gave him a respectful, if not enthusiastic, round of applause. Schuffman walked stiffly to the front of the room and stepped upon the raised platform. Behind him was a black velvet curtain that concealed a blackboard. "Gentlemen, please be seated." The professor was smiling. The thick lenses of his glasses made his eyes appear huge. "You are wondering why you have been called together?"

Schuffman looked at the thirty-seven men before him. They sat behind grade-school desks and made notations in loose leaf binders. With

their features blurred by cigarette smoke and the lack of light in the room they looked for all the world like a class of aged fifth graders.

The old man smiled his all but toothless smile, raised his right hand and moved his right foot forward. Having assumed his favorite theatrical pose he said, quite slowly, "The unknowns no longer exist."

A profound silence descended. Men in their forties looked in bewilderment at men in their eighties, who candidly returned their glances.

"We have always assumed, rather blindly, that galaxies are unique units. Well, they most certainly are not. They are only as unique as is one physical entity unique from another. It is a separation of mass and of mass only."

As Schuffman continued the room seemed to darken, almost imperceptibly. Only his face and the black velvet curtain behind him remained illuminated. "I have discovered the relationship between these sets or masses. There is a pattern. A key."

The scientists squirmed in their seats. They felt vaguely that they should be astounded. They did not yet understand why.

"What is the importance of this deduction? Gentlemen, think. The person who could describe the workings of the universe in a single mathematical formula would be a god. He would be all-knowing. When will life arise on a certain planet? When will life on a given mass destroy itself? What kinds of life may evolve, given certain conditions? These questions that made mockeries of our pitiful intellects, these questions would be child's play for the person who possessed the equation of the universe."

The tension in the room was almost unbearable. Thirty-seven men held their breath.

"In brief, gentlemen, I have the equation of the universe!"

So saying, Schuffman pulled the velvet curtain back and revealed a series of figures that had been almost carelessly scribbled on the blackboard.

"Look at it. Look at it, gentlemen!" The professor's voice had become louder and higher in pitch. "The universe depends for its very existence on this equation!"

There was no sound in the room except Schuffman's voice and the labored breathing of some of the elder members of his audience. One or two of them prayed silently. The professor was no doubt exaggerating. Yet . . .

"Look at it, you damned fools! You laughed at Schuffman before. No more! Now you will kneel down and ask favors like little children. I am like God. I *am* God — and you are all damned idiots!"

Thirty-seven pairs of fists were clenched and white-knuckled. Thirty-seven pairs of eyes strained at the equation. Thirty-seven foreheads became damp with perspiration.

Suddenly, from the back of the room, came a clear, well modulated baritone voice. "The equation is wrong, professor."

All heads turned to see who had questioned Schuffman. It was a

young man, in his early thirties. Several of the scientists thought they recognized him. He stood perfectly erect and stared at the professor.

"Who are you? How did you get in here?"

"That is of little importance."

"Well, however you came in, you will do me the kindness of leaving by the same . . ."

"Schuffman." The young man's voice shook the room. It had a strange and fascinating depth to it. "Look at the seventh derivative of your equation. You have made an error that a careful high-school student could have avoided. The equation is impressive — but it is invalid."

An audible sigh went up from the thirty-seven men as they took note of the error. Someone laughed, "If the universe depends on that equation for its existence, none of us exist!"

Now everyone was laughing. The sound of so much mirth dinned in Schuffman's ears. The young man's voice was all he could distinguish in the jumble of sound: "Erase the equation!"

Schuffman knew he was wrong. He picked up an eraser and slammed it against the blackboard. The thirty-seven men were taunting him, "Nothing exists . . . the equation is wrong . . . nobody here but us chickens!" they howled.

The old man began to erase the blackboard with quick, agitated strokes. "Damn you, sir!" he screamed at the young man.

As Professor Schuffman's eraser ran over and obliterated the last symbol of his equation, the universe disappeared.

In the void, the young man sighed and wondered what to call the eighth day.

END

The Store Of Heart's Desire

BY CORDWAINER SMITH

Illustrated by GIUNTA

Anything your heart desired was here — wealth — power — hatred — love — even death!

I

The animal-derived underpeople talked about it for hundreds of years thereafter. The story became a part of their legend, their balladry. Real people, walking innocently around on the surface of the Earth, some kilometers above, never heard anything about it. To most of them, downdeep-downdeep was a place where robots and underpeople worked to provide the luxuries, comforts and pleasures of mankind. They knew nothing of the mysterious Aitch Eye or of its

weird leader, the E-telekeli, and if they had known, they would have been very surprised to find out that a true man had penetrated the uttermost depths and had conferred with the Aitch Eye itself.

Very surprised.

But not interested.

Why should they care? Curiosity had died out a long time ago and the attempted Rediscovery of Man was awakening it only very slowly. A few officials knew or suspected the whole story, but then officials never talked much.

Only the underpeople cared and they were startled indeed.

A true man in downdeep-downdeep?

How had that happened?

What could have gone wrong?

Nothing went wrong.

C'mell took him, and took him at the bidding of the E-telekeli himself. He was an offworlder. He had the odd pompous name of Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan the hundred and fifty-first and he was the richest sheep-owner from the richest planet in the galaxy, Old North Australia, which most people just called Norstrilia. He had gambled wildly, grotesquely, with help from his family's old computer, and he had won the largest fortune in the known or suspected universe. With this, he had bought Earth.

The name didn't mean much. He was no crabbed financier, no empire-builder in civilian clothes. He was a boy, blond, tall, athletic. His shortname was Rod McBan. Though he was a mister and owner and a full-franchise landholder in Norstrilia, he had been driven to adventure by mischance; he had not sought it for lust of power.

He didn't even go to downdeep-downdeep in true-man form. The traps would have killed him if he had.

He had gone down disguised as a cat-man.

The cat-man disguise was not for the sake of downdeep; it was to keep him alive while all the thieves in space and Earth were looking for him. He had escaped death from the weapons of an old enemy, the Hon. Sec. in Norstrilia; he had bought Earth; he had abandoned his cousin-sweetheart Lavinia on Norstrilia, at the urgent insistence of his own government, and he had arrived on Earth in a cat-body as the unwelcome but honored guest of the Instrumentality. The Instrumentality, which always ruled and never reigned, had even provided him the undergirl C'mell as his consort and escort for his time on Earth; and C'mell was the most brilliant, the most beautiful, and the most enticing of the girlygirls of Earth.

Knowing C'mell had been adventure incarnate. She had led him to things which he had not even imagined, including a knowledge of himself and of others. He had been places in the wet rich air of Earth, on the old streets and the complex cities, which no Norstrilian at home would ever believe; he had faced dangers, and now Rod knew that his time was drawing to a close. At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last she was asking something of him and he could not refuse. All the time he had known her — days which seemed as long and busy as years — she had been giving: of herself, her time, the risk of her life. Now, for the first time, it was she who asked. He could not refuse.

He went with her down to a store. A commissary, run by a wonderful person called the Catmaster. Five hundred years old, and still allowed to live, and still allowed to run his store.

It was called the Department Store of Hearts' Desires.

II

The trip was a vivid, quick dream. They had only a few hundred meters to fall before they reached ground level.

They came out on the people-street. A robot policeman watched them from a corner.

Human beings in the costumes of a hundred historical periods were walking around in the warm, wet air of Earth. Rod could not smell as much salt in the air as he had smelled at the top of the tower, but down here in the city it smelled of more people than he had ever even imagined in one place. Thousands of individuals, hundreds and thousands of different kinds of foods, the odors of robots, of underpeople and of other things which seemed to be unmodified animals.

"This is the most interesting-smelling place I have ever been," said he to C'mell.

She glanced at him idly. "That's nice. You can smell like a dog-man. Most of the real people I have known couldn't smell their own feet. Come on though, C'roderick — *remember who you are!* If we're not tagged and licensed for the surface, we'll get stopped by that policeman in one minute or less."

She carried E-ikasus and steered Rod with a pressure on his elbow. They came to a ramp which led to an underground passage, well illuminated. Machines, robots and underpeople were hurrying back and forth along it, busy with the commerce of Earth.

Rod would have been completely lost if he had been without C'mell. Though his miraculous broad-band hiering, which had so often surprised him and pleased him at home, had not returned during his few hours on Old Earth, his other senses gave him a suffocating awareness of the huge number of people around him and above him. (He never realized that there were times, long gone, when the cities of Earth had populations which reached the tens of millions. To him, several hundred thousand people, and a comparable number of underpeople, was a crowd almost beyond measure.)

The sounds and smells of underpeople were subtly different from those of people; some of the machines of Earth were bigger and older than anything which he had previously imagined; and above all, the circulation of water in immense volumes, millions upon millions of gallons, for the multiple purposes of Earthport — sanitation, cool-

ing, drinking, industrial purposes — made him feel that he was not among a few buildings, which he would have called a city in Old North Australia, but that he himself had become a blood-cell thrusting through the circulatory system of some enormous composite animal, the nature of which he imperfectly understood. This city was alive with a sticky, wet, complicated aliveness which he had hitherto not even imagined to be possible. Movement characterized it. He suspected that the movement went on by night and day, that there was no real cessation to it, that the great pumps thrust water through feeder pipes and drains whether people were awake or not, that the brains of this organization could be no one place, but had to comprise many sub-brains, each committed and responsible for its particular tasks.

No wonder underpeople were needed! It would be boredom and pain, even with perfected automation, to have enough human supervisors to reconnect the various systems if they had breakdowns inside themselves or at their interconnections. Old North Australia had vitality. But it was the vitality of open fields, few people, immense wealth, and perpetual military danger. This was the vitality of the cesspool or the compost heap, but the rotting, blooming components were not waste material, but human beings and near-human beings.

No wonder that his forefathers had fled the cities as they had been. They must have been solid plague to free men. And even Old Original Australia, somewhere here on Earth, had lost its openness and freedom in order to become the single giant city-complex of Nanbien. It must, Rod thought with horror, have been a thousand times the size of this city of Earthport. (He was wrong, because it reached three hundred thousand times the size of Earthport before it died. Earthport had only about two hundred thousand permanent residents when Rod visited it, with an additional number walking in from the nearer suburbs, the outer suburbs still being ruined and abandoned. But Australia — under the name of Aojou Nanbien — had reached a population of thirty billion before it died, and before the Wild Ones and the Menschenjager had set to work killing off the survivors.)

Rod was bewildered, but C'mell was not. She put A'gentur down, over his whined monkey-like protest. He trotted unwillingly beside them.

With the impudent knowledgeability of a true city girl, she led them to a cross-walk from which a continuous whistling roar came forth. By writing, by picture, and by loudspeaker, the warning system repeated, KEEP OFF. FREIGHT ONLY. DANGER. KEEP OFF. She snatched up E-ikasus A'gentur, grabbed Rod by the arm, and jumped with them on a series of rapidly-moving airborne platforms. Rod, startled by the suddenness in which they had found the trackway, shouted to ask what it was:

"Freight? What's that?"

"Things, Boxes. Food. This is the Central trackway. No sense in walking six kilometers when we can get this. Be ready to jump off with me when I give you the sign!"

"It feels dangerous," he said.

"It isn't," said she, "not if you're a cat."

With this somewhat equivocal reassurance, she let them ride. A'gentur could not care less. He cuddled his head against her shoulder, wrapped his long gibbon-like arms around her upper arm and went soundly to sleep.

C'mell nodded at Rod. "Soon now!" she called, judging their distance by landmarks which he found meaningless. The landing points had flat, concrete-lined areas where the individual flat cars, rushing along on their river of air, could be shunted suddenly to the side for loading or unloading. Each of these loading areas had a number, but Rod had not even noticed at what point they had gotten on. The smells of the underground city changed so much as they moved from one district to another that he was more interested in odors than in the numbers on the platforms.

She pinched his upper arm very sharply as a sign that he should get ready.

They jumped.

He staggered across the platform until he caught himself up against a large vertical crate marked *Algonquin Paper Works — Credit Slips, Miniature — 2m.* C'mell landed as gracefully as if she had been acting a rehearsed piece of acrobatics. The little monkey on her shoulder stared with wide bright eyes.

"This," said the monkey A'genturEikasus firmly and contemptuously, "is where all the people play at working. I'm tired, I'm hungry and my body sugar is low." He curled himself tight against C'mell's shoulder, closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

"He has a point," said Rod. "Could we eat?"

C'mell started to nod and then caught herself short. "You're a cat," you know.

He nodded. Then he grinned. "I'm hungry, anyhow. And I need a sandbox."

"Sandbox?" she said, staring at him.

"An awef," he said very clearly, using the Old North Australian term.

"Awef?"

It was his turn to get embarrassed. He said it in full: "An animal waste evacuation facility."

"You mean a johnny," she cried. She thought a minute and then said, "Fooey."

"What's the matter?" he asked, puzzled.

"Each kind of underpeople has to use its own. It's death if you don't use one and it's death if you use the wrong one. The cat one is four stations back on this underground trackway. Or we can walk back on the surface. It would only be a half hour."

He said something rude to Earth. She wrinkled her brow.

"All I said was, 'Earth is a large healthy sheep.' That's not so dirty." Her good humor returned.

Before she could ask him another question he held up a firm hand. "I am *not* going to waste a half hour. You wait here." He had seen the universal sign for "men's room" at the upper level of the platform. Before she could stop him he had gone into it. She caught her hand up to her mouth, knowing that the robot police would kill him on sight if they found him in the wrong place. It would be such a ghastly joke if the man who owned the earth were to die in the wrong toilet.

As quick as thought she followed him, stopping just outside the door to the "men's room." She dared not to go in; she trusted that the place was empty when Rod entered it, because she had heard no boom of a slow, heavy bullet, none of the crisp buzzing of a burner. Robots did not use toilets, so they went in only when they were investigating something. She was prepared to distract any man living if he tried to enter that toilet by offering him the combination of an immediate seduction or a complimentary and unwanted monkey.

A'gentur had waked up.

"Don't bother," he said. "I called my father. Anything approaching that door will fall asleep."

An ordinary man, rather tired and worried-looking, headed for the men's room. C'mell was prepared to stop him at any cost, but she remembered what A'gentur-E-ikasus had told her, so she waited. The man reeled as he neared them. He stared at them, saw that they were underpeople, looked on through them as though they were not there. He took two more steps toward the door and suddenly reached out his hands as if he were going blind. He walked into the wall two meters from the door, touched it firmly and blindly with his hands and crumpled gently to the floor, where he lay snoring.

"My dad's good," said A'gentur-E-ikasus. "He usually leaves real people alone, but when he must get them, he gets them. He even gave that man the distinct memory that he mistakenly took a sleeping pill when he was reaching for a pain-killer. When the human wakes up, he will feel foolish and will tell no one of his experience."

Rod came out of the ever-so-dangerous doorway. He grinned at them boyishly and did not notice the crumpled man lying beside the wall. "That's easier than turning back, and nobody noticed me at all."

He was so proud of his foolhardy adventure that she did not have the heart to blame him. He smiled widely, his cat-whiskers tipping as he did so. For a moment, just a moment, she forgot that he was an important person and a real man to boot. He was a boy, and mighty like a cat, but all boy in his satisfaction, his wanton bravery, his passing happiness with vainglory. For a second or two she loved him.

Then she thought of the terrible hours ahead, and of how he would go home, rich and scornful, to his all-people planet. The moment of love passed but she still liked him very much.

"Come along, young fellow. You can eat. You are going to eat cat food since you are C'roderick, but it's not so bad."

He frowned. "What is it? Do you have fish here? I tasted fish one time. A neighbor bought one. He traded two horses for it. It was delicious."

"He wants fish," she cried to E-ikasus.

"Give him a whole tuna for himself," grumbled the monkey. "My blood sugar is still low. I need some pineapple."

C'mell did not argue. She stayed underground and led them into a hall which had a picture of dogs, cats, cattle, pigs, bears and snakes above the door; that indicated the kinds of people who could be served there. E-ikasus scowled at the sign but he rode C'mell's shoulder in.

"This gentlemen," said C'mell, speaking pleasantly to an old bear-man who was scratching his belly and smoking a pipe, all at the same time, "has forgotten his credits."

"No food," said the bear-man. "Rules. He can drink water, though."

"I'll pay for him," said C'mell.

The bear-man yawned. "Are you sure that he won't pay you back? If he does, that is private trading and it is punished by death."

"I know the rules," said C'mell. "I've never been disciplined yet."

The bear looked her over critically. He took his pipe out of his mouth and whistled. "No," said he, "and I can see that you won't be. What are you, anyhow? A model."

"A girlygirl," said C'mell.

The bear-man leapt from his stool with astonishing speed. "Cat-madam!" he cried. "A thousand pardons. You can have anything in the place. You come from the top of Earthport? You know the Lords of the Instrumentality personally? You would like a table roped off with curtains? Or should I just throw everybody else out of here and report to my Man that we have a famous, beautiful slave from the highplaces?"

"Nothing that drastic," said C'mell. "Just food."

"Wait a bit," said A'gentur E-ikasus, "if you're offering specials, I'll have two fresh pineapples, a quarter-kilo of ground fresh coconut and a tenth of a kilo of live insect grubs."

The bear-man hesitated. "I was offering things to the cat-lady, who serves the mighty ones, not to you, monkey. But if the lady desires it, I will send for those things." He waited for C'mell's nod, got it, and pushed a button for a low-grade robot to come. He turned to Rod McBan, "And you, cat-gentleman. What would you like?"

Before Rod could speak, C'mell said, "He wants two sailfish steaks, french fried potatoes, Waldorf salad, an order of ice cream and a large glass of orange juice."

The bear-man shuddered visibly. "I've been here for many years and that is the most horrible lunch I ever ordered for a cat. I think I'll try it myself."

C'mell smiled the smile which

had graced a thousand welcomes. "I'll just help myself from the things you have on the counters. I'm not fussy."

He started to protest but she cut him short with a graceful but unmistakable wave of the hand. He gave up.

They sat at a table.

A'gentur-E-ikasus waited for his combination monkey and bird lunch. Rod saw an old robot, dressed in a prehistoric tuxedo jacket, ask a question of the bear-man, leave one tray and bring another tray to him. The robot whipped off a freshly starched napkin. There was the most beautiful lunch which Rod McBan had ever seen. Even at a state banquet, the Old North Australians did not feed their guests like that.

Just as they were finishing, the bear-cashier came to the table and asked, "Your name, cat-madam? I will charge these lunches to the government."

"C'mell, servant to Teadrinker, subject to the Lord Jestocost, a Chief of the Instrumentality."

The bear's face had been epilated, so that they could see him pale.

"C'mell," he whispered. "C'mell! Forgive me, my lady. I have never seen you before. You have blessed this place. You have blessed my life. You are the friend of all underpeople. Go in peace."

C'mell gave him the bow and smile which a reigning empress might give to an active Lord of the Instrumentality. She started to pick up the monkey but he scampered on ahead of her. Rod was puzzled. As the bear-man bowed him out, he asked, "C'mell. You are famous?"

"In a way," she said. "Only among the underpeople."* She hurried them both toward a ramp. They reached daylight at last, but even before they came to the surface, Rod's nose was assaulted by a riot of smells — foods frying, cakes baking, liquor spilling its pungency on the air, perfumes fighting with each other for attention and, above all, the smell of old things: dusty treasures, old leathers, tapestries, the echo-smells of people who had died a long time ago.

C'mell stopped and watched him. "You're smelling things again? I must say, you have a better nose than any human being I ever met before. How does it smell to you?"

"Wonderful," he gasped. "Wonderful. Like all the treasures of the universe spilled out into one little place."

"It's just the Thieves' Market of Paris."

"There are thieves on Earth? Open ones, like Viola Siderea?"

"Oh no," she laughed. "They would die in a few days. The Instrumentality would catch them. These are just people, playing. The Rediscovery of Man found some old institutions, and an old market was one of them. They make the robots and underpeople find things for them and then they pretend to be ancient, and make bargains with each other. Or they cook food. Not many real people ever cook food these

* See the story, "The Ballad of Lost C'mell," in GALAXY MAGAZINE, Vol. 21, No. 1 (October, 1962), pages 8-28.

days. It's so funny that it tastes good to them. They all pick up money on their way in. They have barrels of it at the gate. In the evening, or when they leave, they usually throw the money in the gutter, even though they should really put it back in the barrel. It's not money we underpeople could use. We go by numbers and computer cards," she sighed. "I could certainly use some of that extra money."

"And underpeople like you — like us—" said Rod, "what do we do in the market?"

"Nothing," she whispered. "Absolutely nothing. We can walk through if we are not too big and not too small and not too dirty and not too smelly. And even if we are all right, we must walk right through without looking directly at the real people and without touching anything in the market."

"Suppose we do?" asked Rod defiantly.

"The robot police are there, with orders to kill on sight when they observe an infraction. Don't you realize, C'rod," she sobbed at him, "that there are millions of us in tanks, way below in Downdeep-downdeep, ready to be born, to be trained, to be sent up here to serve Man? We're not scarce at all, C'rod, we're not scarce at all!"

"Why are we going through the market, then?"

"It's the only way to the Catmaster's store. We'll be tagged. Come along."

Where the ramp reached the surface, four bright-eyed robots, the blue-enamel bodies shining and their milky eyes glowing, stood at the ready. Their weapons had an ugly buzz to them and were obviously already off the "safety" mark.

C'mell talked to them quietly and submissively. When the robot-sergeant led her to a desk, she stared into an instrument like binoculars and blinked when she took her eyes away. She put her palm on a desk. The identification was completed. The robot sergeant handed her three bright disks, like saucers, each with a chain attached. Wordlessly she hung them around her own neck, Rod's neck, and A'gentur's. The robots let them pass. They walked in demure single file through the place of beautiful sights and smells.

Rod felt that his eyes were wet with tears of rage. "I'll buy this place," he thought to himself, "if it's the only thing I'll ever buy!"

C'mell had stopped walking.

He looked up, very carefully.

There was the sign: THE DEPARTMENT STORE OF HEARTS' DESIRES.

A door opened. A wise old cat-person face looked out, stared at them, snapped, "No underpeople!" and slammed the door. C'mell rang the doorbell a second time. The face reappeared, more puzzled than angry.

"Business," she whispered, "of the Aitch Eye."

The face said, "In. Quick!"

III

Once inside, Rod realized that the store was as rich as the market. There were no other cus-

tomers. After the outside sounds of music, laughter, frying, boiling, things falling, dishes clattering, people arguing and the low undertone of the ever-ready robot weapons buzzing, the quietness of the room was itself a luxury, like old, heavy velvet. The smells were no less variegated than those on the outside. But they were different, more complicated, and many more of them were completely unidentifiable.

One smell he was sure of: human fear. It had been in this room not long before.

"Quick," said the old cat-man. "I'm in trouble if you don't get out of my store soon. What it your business?"

"I'm C'mell," said C'mell.

He nodded pleasantly, but showed no sign of recognition. "I forget people," he said.

"This is A'gentur." She indicated the monkey.

The old cat-man did not even look at the animal.

C'mell persisted, a note of triumph coming into her voice: "You may have heard of him under his real name, E-ikasus."

The old man stood there, blinking, as though he were taking it in. "Yeekasoose? With the letter E?"

"Transformed," said C'mell inexorably, "for a trip all the way to Old North Australia and back."

"Is this true?" said the old man to the monkey.

E-ikasus said calmly, "I am the son of him of whom you think."

The old man dropped to his knees, but did so with dignity: "I

salute you, E-ikasus. When you next think-with your father, give him my greetings and ask from him his blessing. I am C'William, the Catmaster."

"You are famous," said E-ikasus tranquilly.

"But you are still in danger, merely being here. I have no license for underpeople!"

C'mell produced her trump. "Catmaster, your next guest is no c'man. He is a true man, an offworlder, and he has just bought most of the planet Earth."

C'William looked at Rod with more than ordinary shrewdness. There was a touch of kindness in his attitude. He was tall for a cat-man; few animal features were left to him, because old age, which reduces racial and sexual contrasts to mere memories, had wrinkled him into a uniform beige. His hair was not white, but beige too; his few cat-whiskers looked old and worn. He was garbed in a fantastic costume which — Rod later learned — consisted of the court robes of one of the Original Emperors, a dynasty which had prevailed many centuries among the further stars. Age was upon him, but wisdom was too: the habits of life, in his case, had been cleverness and kindness, themselves unusual in combination. Now very old, he was reaping the harvest of his years. He had done well with the thousands upon thousands of days behind him, with the result that age had brought a curious joy into his manner, as though each experience meant one more treat before the long bleak dark closed in. Rod felt himself attracted to this strange creature, who looked at him with such penetrating and very personal curiosity, and who managed to do so without giving offense.

The catmaster spoke in very passable Norstrilian: "I know what you are thinking, mister and owner McBan."

"You can hier me?" cried Rod.

"Not your thoughts. Your face. It reads easily. I am sure that I can help you."

"What makes you think I need help?"

"All things need help," said the old c'man briskly, "but we must get rid of our other guests first. Where do you want to go, excellent one? And you, cat-madam?"

"Home," said E-ikasus. He was tired and cross again. After speaking brusquely, he felt the need to make his tone more civil. "This body suits me badly, catmaster."

"Are you good at falling?" said the catmaster. "Free fall?"

The monkey grinned. "With this body? Of course. Excellent."

"Fine," said the catmaster, "you can drop down my waste chute. It falls next to the forgotten palace where the great wings beat against time."

The catmaster stepped to one side of the room. With only a nod at C'mell and Rod and a brief, "See you later," the monkey watched as the catsmaster opened a manhole cover, leaped trustingly into the complete black depth which appeared and was gone. The catmaster replaced the cover carefully.

He turned to C'mell. She faced him truculently, the defiance of her posture oddly at variance with the innocent voluptuousness of her young female body. "I'm going nowhere."

"You'll die," said the catmaster. "Can't you hear their weapons buzzing just outside the door? You know what they do to us underpeople. Especially to us cats. They use us, but do they trust us?"

"I know one who does," she said. "The Lord Jestocost could protect me, even here, just as he protects you, far beyond your limit of years."

"Don't argue it. You will make trouble for him with the other real people. Here, girl, I will give you a tray to carry with a dummy package on it. Go back to the underground and rest in the commissary of the bear-man. I will send Rod to you when we are through."

"Yes," she said hotly, "but will you send him alive or dead?"

The catmaster rolled his yellow eyes over Rod. "Alive," he said. "This one — alive. I have predicted. Did you ever know me to be wrong? Come on, girl, out the door with you."

C'mell let herself be handed a tray and a package, taken seemingly at random. As she left Rod thought of her with quick affection. She was his closest link with earth. He blurted out, "C'mell, will you be all right."

She turned around at the door itself, looking all woman and all cat. Her red wild hair gleamed like a hearth-fire against the open light from the doorway. She stood erect, as though she were a citizen of Earth and not a mere underperson or girlygirl. She held out her right hand clearly and commandingly while balancing the tray on her left hand. When he shook hands with her, Rod realized that her hand felt utterly human but very strong. With scarcely a break in her voice she said, "Rod, goodbye. I'm taking a chance with you, but it's the best chance I've ever taken. You can trust the Catmaster, here in the department store of hearts' desires. He does strange things, Rod, but they're good strange things."

He released her hand and she left. C'William closed the door behind her. The room became hushed.

"Sit down for a minute while I get ready. Or look around."

"Sir catmaster —" said Rod.

"No title, please. I am an underperson, made out of cats. You may call me C'William."

"C'William, please tell me first. I miss C'mell. I'm worried about her. Am I falling in love with her? Is that what falling in love means?"

"She's your wife," said the catmaster. "Just temporarily and just in pretense, but she's still your wife. It's Earthlike to worry about one's mate. She's all right."

The old c'man disappeared behind a door which had an odd sign on it: HATE HALL.

Rod looked around.

The very first thing he saw was a display cabinet full of postage stamps. It was made of glass, but he could see the soft blues and the inimitable warm brick reds of his Cape of Good Hope triangular post-

age stamps. He had come to earth and there they were! He peered through the glass at them. They were even better than the illustrations which he had seen back on Norstrilia. They had the temper of great age upon them and yet, somehow, they seemed to freight with them the love which men, living men now dead, had given them for thousands and thousands of years. He looked around, and saw that the whole room was full of odd riches. There were ancient toys of all periods, flying toys, copies of machines, things which he suspected were trains. There was a two-story closet of clothing, shimmering with embroidery and gleaming with gold. There was a bin of weapons, clean and tidy — models so ancient that he could not possibly guess what they had been used for, or by whom. Everywhere, there were buckets of coins, usually gold ones. He picked up a handful. They had languages he could not even guess at and they showed the proud imperious faces of the ancient dead. Another cabinet was one which he glanced at and then turned away from, shocked and yet inquisitive; it was filled with indecent souvenirs and pictures from a hundred periods of men's history, images, sketches, photographs, dolls and models, all of them portraying grisly, comical, sweet, friendly, impressive or horrible versions of the many acts of love. The next section made him pause utterly. Who would have ever wanted these things? Whips, knives, hoods, leather corsets. He passed on, very puzzled.

There was a slight sound. Rod turned around to face the Catmaster.

"You like my poems? You like my things? I like them myself. Many men come in here to take things from me, but they find that title is vested in the Lord Jestocost, and they must do strange things to obtain my trifles."

"Are all these things genuine?" asked Rod, thinking that even Old North Australia could not buy out this shop if they were.

"Certainly not," said the old man. "Most of them are wonderful forgeries. The Instrumentality lets me go to the robot-pits where insane or worn-out robots are destroyed. I can have my pick of them if they are not dangerous. I put them to work making copies of anything which I find in the museums."

"Those Cape triangles?" said Rod. "Are they real?"

"Cape triangles? You mean the letter stickers. They are genuine, all right, but they are not mine. Those are on loan from the Earth museum until I can get them copied."

"I will buy them," said Rod.

"You will not," said the catmaster. "They are not for sale."

"Then I will buy Earth and you and them too," said Rod.

"Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan to the one hundred and fifty-first, you will not."

"Who are you to tell me?"

"I have looked at one person and I have talked to two others."

"All right," said Rod. "Who?"

"I looked at the other Rod Mc-

Ban, your workman, Eleanor. She is a little mixed up about having a young man's body, because she is very drunk in the home of the Lord William Not-from-here and a beautiful young woman named Ruth Not-from-here is trying to make Eleanor marry her. She has no idea that she is dealing with another woman and Eleanor, in her copy of your proper body, is finding the experience exciting but terribly confusing. No harm will come of it, and your Eleanor is perfectly safe. Half the rascals of Earth have converged on the Lord William's house, but he has a whole battalion from the Defense Fleet on loan around the place. So nothing is going to happen — except that Eleanor will have a headache and Ruth will have a disappointment."

Rod smiled. "You couldn't have told me anything better. Who else did you talk to?"

"The Lord Jestocost and John Fisher to the hundredth."

"Mister and owner Fisher? He's here?"

"He's at his home, station of the Good Fresh Joey. I asked him if you could have your heart's desire. After a little while, he and somebody named doctor Wentworth said that the Commonwealth of Old North Australia would approve it."

"How did you ever pay for such a call?" cried Rod. "Those things are frightfully expensive."

"I didn't pay for it, mister and owner. *You* did. I charged it to your account, by the authority of your trustee, the Lord Jestocost. He and his forefathers have been my patrons for four hundred and twenty-six years."

"You've got your nerve," said Rod, "spending my money when I was right here and not even asking me!"

"You are an adult for some purposes and a minor for other purposes. I am offering you the skills which keep me alive. Do you think any ordinary cat-man would be allowed to live as long as this?"

"No," said Rod. "Give me those stamps and let me go."

The catmaster looked at him levelly. Once again there was the *personal* look on his face, which in Norstrilia would have been taken as an unpardonable affront; but along with the nosiness, there was an air of confidence and kindness which put Rod a little in awe of the man, underperson though he was. "Do you think that you could love these stamps when you get back home? Could they talk to you? Could they make you like yourself? Those pieces of paper are not your heart's desire. Something else is."

"What?" said Rod, truculently.

"In a bit, I'll explain. First, you cannot kill me. Second, you cannot hurt me. Third, if I kill you, it will be all for your own good. Fourth, if you get out of here, you will be a very happy man."

"Are you barmy, mister?" cried Rod. "I can knock you flat and walk out that door. I don't know what you are talking about."

"Try it," said the catmaster levelly.

Rod looked at the tall withered old man with the bright eyes. He

looked at the door, a mere seven or eight meters away. He did not want to try it.

"All right." he conceded, "play your pitch."

"I am a clinical psychologist. The only one on Earth and probably the only one on any planet. I got my knowledge from some ancient books when I was a kitten, being changed into a young man. I change people just a little, little bit. You know that the Instrumentality has surgeons and brain experts and all sorts of doctors. They can do almost anything with personality but the light stuff. That I do."

"I don't get it," said Rod.

"Would you go to a brain surgeon to get a haircut? Would you need a dermatologist to give you a bath? Of course not. I don't do heavy work. I just change people a little bit. It makes them happy. If I can't do anything with them, I give them souvenirs from this junkpile out here. The real work is in there. That's where you're going, pretty soon." He nodded his head at the door marked HATE HALL.

IV

Rod was not a coward, but it was with feet and legs of lead that he walked to the door. It opened by itself. He walked in, steady but afraid.

The room was dark with a darkness deeper than mere black. It was the dark of blindness, the expanse of cheek where no eye has ever been.

The door closed behind him and he swam in the dark, so tangible had the darkness become.

He felt blind. He felt as though he had never seen.

But he could hear.

He heard his own blood pulsing through his head.

He could smell — indeed, he was good at smelling. And this air — this air smelled of the open night of Old North Australia.

The smell made him feel little and afraid. It reminded him of his repeated childhoods, of the artificial drownings in the laboratories where he had gone to be re-born from one childhood to another.

He reached out his hands.

Nothing.

He jumped gently. No ceiling.

Using a fieldsman's trick familiar from times of dust-storms, he dropped lightly to his hands and feet. He scuttled crabwise on two feet and one hand, using the other hand as a shield to protect his face. In a very few meters he found the wall. He followed the wall around.

Circular.

This was the door.

Follow again.

With more confidence, he moved fast. Around, around, around. He could not tell whether the floor was asphalt or some kind of rough worn tile.

Door again.

A voice spieked to him.

Spieked! *And he heard it.*

He looked upward into the nothing which was bleaker than blindness, almost expecting to see the words in letters of fire, so clear had they been.

The voice was Norstrilian and it said, *Rod McBan is a man, man, man. But what is man?*

Immediate percussion of crazy, sad laughter.

Rod never noticed that he reverted to the habits of babyhood. He sat flat on his rump, legs spread out in front of him at a 90° angle. He put his hands a little behind him and leaned back, letting the weight of his body push his shoulders a little bit upward. He knew the ideas that would follow the words, but he never knew why he so readily expected them.

Light formed in the room, as he had been sure it would.

The images were little, but they looked real.

Men and women and children, children and women and men marched into his vision and out again.

They were not freaks. They were not beasts. They were not alien monstrosities begotten in some outside universe. They were not robots. They were not underpeople. They were all hominids like himself, kinsmen in the Earthborn races of men.

First came people like Old North Australians and Earth people, very much alike, and both similar to the ancient types, except that Norstrilians were pale beneath their tanned skins and more robust.

Then came Daimoni, white-eyed pale giants with a magical assurance, whose very babies walked as though they had already been given ballet lessons.

Then heavy men, fathers, mothers, infants swimming on the solid ground from which they would never arise.

Then rainmen from Amazonas Triste, their skins hanging in enormous folds around them, so that they looked like bundles of wet rags wrapped around monkeys.

Blind men from Olympia, staring fiercely at the world through the radars mounted on their foreheads.

Bloated monster-men from abandoned planets — people as bad off as his own race had been after escaping from Paradise VII.

And still more races.

People he had never heard of.

Men with shells.

Men and women so thin that they looked like insects.

A race of smiling, foolish giants, lost in the irreparable hebephrenia of their world. (Rod had the feeling that they were shepherded by a race of devoted dogs, more intelligent than themselves, who cajoled them into breeding, begged them to eat, led them to sleep. He saw no dogs, only the smiling unfocused fools, but the feeling *dog, good dog!* was somehow very near.)

A funny little people who pranced with an indefinable deformity of gait.

Water-people, the clean water of some unidentified world pulsing through their gills.

And then —

More people, still, but hostile ones. Lipsticked hermaphrodites with enormous beards and fluting voices. Carcinomas which had taken over men. Giants rooted in the earth.

Human bodies crawling and weeping as they crept through wet grass, contaminated themselves and looking for more people to infect.

Rod did not know it, but he growled.

He jumped into a squatting position and swept his hands across the rough floor, looking for a weapon.

These were not men — they were enemies!

Still they came. People who had lost eyes, or who had grown fire-resistant, the wrecks and residues of abandoned settlements and forgotten colonies. The waste and spoilage of the human race.

And then —

Him.

Himself.

The child Rod McBan.

And voices, Norstrilian voices calling: "He can't hier. He can't spiek. He's a freak. He's a freak! He can't hier. He can't spiek."

And another voice: "His poor parents!"

The child Rod disappeared and there were his parents again. Twelve times taller than life, so high that he had to peer up into the black absorptive ceiling to see the underside of their faces.

The mother wept.

The father sounded stern.

The father was saying, "It's no use. Doris can watch him while we're gone, but if he isn't any better, we'll turn him in."

"Kill him?" shrieked the woman. "Kill my baby? Oh, no! No!"

The calm, loving, horrible voice of the man. "Darling, spiek to him yourself. He'll never hier. Can that be a Rod McBan?"

Then the woman's voice, sweet-poisonous and worse than death, sobbing agreement with her man against her son.

"I don't know, Rod. I don't know. Just don't tell me about it."

He *had* hiered them, in one of his moments of wild penetrating hiering when everything telepathic came in with startling clarity. He had hiered them when he was a baby.

The real Rod in the dark room let out a roar of fear, desolation, loneliness, rage, hate. This was the telepathic bomb with which he had so often startled or alarmed the neighbors.

But this time, the room was closed. His mind roared back at itself.

Rage, loudness, hate, raw noise poured into him from the floor, the circular wall, the high ceiling.

He cringed beneath it and as he cringed, the sizes of the images changed. His parents sat in chairs, chairs. They were little, little. He was an almighty baby, so enormous that he could scoop them up with his hand.

He reached the tiny loathesome parents who had said, "Let him die."

To crush them, but they faded first.

Their faces turned frightened. They looked wildly around. Their chairs dissolved, the fabric falling to a floor which in turn looked like storm-eroded cloth. They turned for a last kiss and had no lips. They

reached to hug each other and their arms fell off. Their space ship had gone milky in mid-trip, dissolving into traceless nothing. And he, himself had seen it!

The rage was followed by tears, by a guilt too deep for regret, by a self-accusation so raw and wet that it lived like one more organ inside his living body.

He wanted nothing.

No money, no stroon, no Station of Doom. He wanted no friends, no companionship, no welcome, no house, no food. He wanted no walks, no solitary discoveries in the field, no friendly sheep, no treasures in the gap, no computer, no day, no night, no life.

He wanted nothing, and he could not understand death.

The enormous room lost all light and all sound, and he did not notice it. His own naked life lay before him like a freshly dissected cadaver. It lay there and it made no sense. There had been many Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBans, one hundred and fifty of them in a room, but he — 151! 151! — was not one of them, not a giant who had wrestled treasure from the sick earth and hidden sunshine of the Norstrilian plains. It wasn't his telepathic deformity, his spieklessness, his braindeafness to hiering. It was himself, the "me-subtile" inside him, which was all wrong. He was the baby worth killing, who had killed instead. He had hated mama and papa for their pride and their hate: when he hated them, they crumpled and died out in the mystery of space, so that they did not even leave bodies to bury.

Rod stood to his feet. His hands were wet. He touched his face and he realized that he had been weeping with his face cupped in his hands.

Wait.

There was something that still remained.

There was *one* thing that he wanted, and he wanted it from his one enemy. He wanted Houghton Syme not to hate him. Houghton could hier and spiek, but he was a shortie, living with the sickness of death lying between himself and every girl, every friend, every job he had met. And he, Rod, had mocked that man, calling him Old Hot and Simple.

Rod might be worthless but he was not as bad off as Houghton Syme, the Hon. Sec. Houghton Syme was at least trying to be a man, to live his miserable scrap of a life, and all Rod had ever done was to flaunt his wealth and near-immortality before the poor cripple who had just one hundred and sixty years to live. Rod wanted only one thing — to get back to Old North Australia in time to help Houghton Syme, to let Houghton Syme know that the guilt was his, Rod's, and not Syme's. The Onseck had a bit of a life and he deserved the best that he could make of it.

Rod stood there, expecting nothing.

He had forgiven his last and worst enemy.

He had forgiven himself.

The door opened very matter-of-factly and there stood the Catmaster, a quiet, wise smile upon his face.

"You can come out now, Mister and owner McBan, and if there is anything in this outer room which you want, you may certainly have it."

Rod walked out slowly. He had no idea how long he had been in HATE HALL.

When he emerged, the door closed behind him.

"No thanks, cobber. It's mighty friendly of you, but I don't need anything much, and I'd better be getting back to my own planet."

"Nothing?" said the Catmaster, still smiling very attentively and very quietly.

"I'd like to hier and spiek but it's not very important."

"This is for you," said the Catmaster. "You put it in your ear and leave it there. If it itches or gets dirty, you take it out, wash it, and put it back in. It's not a rare device, but apparently you don't have them on your planet." He held out an object no larger than the kernel of a ground-nut.

Rod took it absently and was ready to put it into his pocket, not into his ear, when he saw that the smiling attentive face was watching, very gently but very alertly. He put the device into his ear. It felt a little cold.

"I will now," said the Catmaster, "take you to C'mell, who will lead you to your friends in Downdeep-downdeep. You had better take this blue two-penny Cape of Good Hope postage stamp with you. I will report to Jestocost that it was lost while I attempted to copy it. That is slightly true, isn't it?"

Rod started to thank him absent-mindedly and then —

Then, with a thrill which sent gooseflesh all over his neck, back and arms, he realized that the Catmaster had not moved his lips in the slightest, had not pushed air through his throat, had not disturbed the air with the pressure of noise. The Catmaster had spieked to Rod and Rod had hiered him.

V

Rod McBan left the Department Store of Hearts' Desires simply, humbly. He carried a package of books, wrapped in dustproofing paper, and he looked like any other first-class cat-man messenger.

The human beings in the market were still making their uproar, their smells of foods, spices, and odd objects, but he walked so calmly and so straightforwardly through their scattered groups that even the robot police, weapons on the buzz, paid no attention to him.

When he had come across the Thieves' Market, going the other way with C'mell and A'gentur, he had been ill at ease. As a mister-and-owner from Old North Australia, he had been compelled to keep his external dignity, but he had not felt ease within his heart. These people were strange. His destination had been unfamiliar, and the problems of wealth and survival lay heavy upon him.

Now, it was all different. Catman he might be on the outside, but on the inside he once again felt his proper pride of home and planet.

And more.

He felt calm, down to the very tips of his nerve endings.

The hiering-spieking device should have alerted and excited him: it did not. As he walked through the market, he noticed that very few of the Earth people were communicating with one another telepathically. They preferred to babble in their loud airborne language, of which they had not one but many kinds, with the old Common Tongue serving as a referent for those who had been endowed with different kinds of ancient language by the processes of the Rediscovery of Man. He had even heard Ancient Inglish, the Queen's Own Language, sounding remarkably close to his own spoken language of Norstrilian. These things caused neither stimulation nor excitement, not even pity. He had his own problems, but they were no longer the problems of wealth or of survival. Somehow he had a confidence that a hidden, friendly power in the universe would take care of him, if he took care of others. He wanted to get Eleanor out of trouble, to disembarrass the Hon. Sec., to see Lavinia, to reassure Doris, to say goodbye to C'mell, to get back to his sheep, to protect his computer and to keep the Lord Redlady away from his bad habit of killing other people lawfully on occasions too slight for manslaughter.

One of the robot police, a little more perceptive than the others, watched this cat-man who walked with preternatural assurance through the crowds of men, but "C'roderick" did nothing but enter the market from one side, thread his way through it and leave at the other side, still carrying his package. The robot turned away. His dreadful, milky eyes, always ready for disorder and death, scanned the market place again and again with fatigue-free vigilance.

Rod went down the ramp and turned right.

There was the underpeople commissary with the bear-man cashier. The cashier remembered him.

"It's been a long day, cat-sir, since I saw you. Would you like another special order of fish?"

"Where's my girl?" said Rod bluntly.

"C'mell?" said the bear-cashier. "She waited here a long time but then she went on and she left this message, 'Tell my man C'Rod that he should eat before following me, but that when he has eaten he can either follow me by going to Upshaft Four, Ground Level Hostel of the Singing Birds, Room Nine, where I am taking care of an offworld visitor, or he can send a robot to me and I will come to him.' Don't you think, cat-sir, that I've done well, remembering so complicated a message?" The bear-man flushed a little and the edge went off his pride as he confessed, for the sake of some abstract honesty, "Of course, that address part, I wrote that down. It would be very

bad and very confusing if I sent you to the wrong address in people's country. Somebody might burn you down if you came into an unauthorized corridor."

"Fish, then," said Rod. "A fish dinner, please."

He wondered why C'mell, with his life in the balance, would go off to another visitor. Even as he thought this, he detected the mean jealousy behind it, and he confessed to himself that he had no idea of the terms, conditions, or hours of work required in the girlygirl business.

He sat dully on the bench, waiting for his food.

The uproar of HATE HALL was still in his mind, the pathos of his parents, those dying dissolving mannikins, was bright within his heart, and his body throbbed with the fatigue of the ordeal. Idly he asked the bear-cashier, "How long has it been since I was here?"

The bear-cashier looked at the clock on the wall, "About fourteen hours, worthy cat."

"How long is that in real time?" Rod was trying to compare Norstrilian hours with Earth hours. He thought that Earth hours were one-seventh shorter, but he was not sure.

The bear-man was completely baffled. "If you mean galactic navigation time, dear guest, we never use that down here anyhow. Are there any other kinds of time?"

Rod realized his mistake and tried to correct it. "It doesn't matter. I am thirsty. What is lawful for underpeople to drink? I am tired and thirsty, both, but I have no desire to become the least bit drunk."

"Since you are a c'man," said the bear-cashier, "I recommend strong black coffee mixed with sweet whipped cream."

"I have no money," said Rod.

"The famous cat-madam, C'mell your consort, has guaranteed payment for anything at all that you order."

"Go ahead, then."

The bear-man called a robot over and gave him the orders.

Rod stared at the wall, wondering what he was going to do with this Earth he had bought. He wasn't thinking very hard, just musing idly. A voice cut directly into his mind. He realized that the bear-man was spieking to him and that he could hear it.

"You are not an underman, sir and master."

"What?" spieked Rod.

"You heard me," said the telepathic voice. "I am not going to repeat it. If you come in the sign of the Fish, may blessings be upon you."

"I don't know that sign," said Rod.

"Then," spieked the bear-man, "no matter who you are, may you eat and drink in peace because you are a friend of C'mell and you are under the protection of the One Who Lives in Downdeep."

"I don't know," spieked Rod. "I just don't know, but I thank you for your welcome, friend."

"I do not give such welcomes lightly," said the bear-man, "and

ordinarily I would be ready to run away from anything as dangerous and unexplained as yourself, but you bring with you the quality of peace, which made me think that you might travel in the fellowship of the sign of the Fish. I have heard that in that sign, people and underpeople remember the blessed Joan and mingle in complete comradeship."

"No," said Rod, "no. I travel alone."

His food and drink came. He consumed them quietly. The bear-cashier had given him a table and bench far from the serving tables and away from the other underpeople who dropped in, interrupting their tasks, eating in a hurry so that they could get back in a hurry. He saw one wolf-man, wearing the insigne of Auxiliary Police, who came to the wall, forced his identity-card into a slot, opened his mouth, bolted down five large chunks of red, raw meat and left the commissary, all in less than one and one-half minutes. Rod was amazed but not impressed. He had too much on his mind.

At the desk he confirmed the address which C'mell had left, offered the bear-man a handshake and went along to Upshaft Four. He still looked like a c'man and he carried his package alertly and humbly, as he had seen other underpeople behave in the presence of real persons.

He almost met death on the way.

Upshaft Four was one-directional and was plainly marked, "People Only." Rod did not like the looks of it, as long as he moved in a cat-man body, but he did not think that C'mell would give him directions wrongly or lightly. (Later, he found that she had forgotten to tell him the phrase, "Special business under the protection of Jetocost, a Chief of the Instrumentality," if he were to be challenged; but he did not know the phrase.)

An arrogant human man, wearing a billowing red cloak, looked at him sharply as he took a belt, hooked it and stepped into the shaft. When Rod stepped free, he and the man were on a level.

Rod tried to look like a humble, modest messenger, but the strange voice grated his ears: "Just what do you think you are doing? This is a human shaft."

Rod pretended that he did not know it was himself whom the redcloaked man was addressing. He continued to float quietly upward, his magnet-belt tugging uncomfortably at his waist.

A pain in the ribs made him turn suddenly, almost losing his balance in the belt.

"Animal!" cried the man. "Speak up or die."

Still holding his package of books, Rod said mildly, "I'm on an errand and I was told to go this way."

The man's senseless hostility gave caliber to his voice: "And who told you?"

"C'mell," said Rod absently.

The man and his companions laughed at that, and for some reason their laughter had no humor

in it, just savagery, cruelty and — way down underneath — something of fear. "Listen to that!" said the man in a red cloak. "One animal says another animal told it to do something." He whipped out a knife.

"What are you doing?" cried Rod.

"Just cutting your belt," said the man. "There's nobody at all below us and you will make a nice red blob at the bottom of the shaft, cat-man. That ought to teach you which shaft to use."

The man actually reached over and seized Rod's belt.

He lifted the knife to slash.

Rod became frightened and angry. His brain ran red.

He spat thoughts at them —

pommy!

shortie!

Earthie!

dead red dirty blue stinking little man,

die, puke, burst, blaze, die!

It all came out in a single flash, faster than he could control it. The red-cloaked man twisted oddly, as if in spasm. His two companions threshed in their belts. They turned slowly.

High above them, two women began screaming.

Further up a man was shouting, both with his voice and with his mind, "Police! Help! Police! Police! Brainbomb! Brainbomb! Help!"

The effort of his telepathic explosion left Rod feeling disoriented and weak. He shook his head and blinked his eyes. He started to wipe his face, only to hit himself on the jaw with the package of books, which he still carried. This aroused him a little. He looked at the three men.

Redcloak was dead, his head at an odd angle. The other two seemed to be dead. One was floating upside down, his rump pointing upmost and the two limp legs swinging out at odd angles; the other was right-side up but had sagged in his belt. All three of them kept moving a steady ten meters a minute, right along with Rod.

There were strange sounds from above.

An enormous voice, filling the shaft with its volume, roared down: "Stay where you are! Police. Police. Police."

Rod glanced at the bodies floating upward. A corridor came by. He reached for the grip-bar, made it, and swung himself into the horizontal passage. He sat down immediately, not getting away from the Upshaft. He thought sharply with his new hiering. Excited, frantic minds beat all around him, looking for enemies, lunatics, crimes, aliens, anything strange.

Softly he began spieking to the empty corridor and to himself, "I am a dumb cat. I am the messenger C'rod. I must take the books to the gentleman from the stars. I am a dumb cat. I do not know much."

A robot, gleaming with the ornamental body-armor of Old Earth, landed at his cross-corridor, looked at Rod and called up the shaft, "Master, here's one. A c'man with a package.

A young subchief came into view, feet first as he managed to ride down the shaft instead of going up it. He seized the ceiling of the transverse corridor, gave himself a push and (once free of the shaft's magnetism) dropped heavily on his feet beside Rod. Rod hiered him thinking, "I'm good at this. I'm a good telepath. I clean things up fast. Look at this dumb cat."

Rod went on concentrating, "I'm a dumb cat. I have a package to deliver. I'm a dumb cat."

The subchief looked down at him scornfully. Rod felt the other's mind slide over his own in the rough equivalent of a search. He remained relaxed and tried to feel stupid while the other hiered him. Rod said nothing. The subchief flashed his baton over the package, eying the crystal knob at the end.

"Books," he snorted.

Rod nodded.

"You!" said the bright young subchief. "You see bodies?" He spoke in a painfully clear, almost childish version of the Old Common Tongue.

Rod held up three fingers and then pointed upward.

"You, cat-man, you feel the brain-bomb!"

Rod, beginning to enjoy the game, threw his head backward and let out a cattish yowl expressing pain. The subchief could not help clapping his hands over his ears. He started to turn away. "I can see what you think of it, cat fellow. You're pretty stupid, aren't you?"

Still thinking low dull thoughts as evenly as he could, Rod said promptly and modestly, "Me smart cat. Very handsome, too."

"Come along," said the subchief to his robot, disregarding Rod altogether.

Rod plucked at his sleeve.

The subchief turned back.

Very humbly Rod said, "Sir and master, which way, Hostel of Singing Birds, Room Nine?"

"Mother of poodles!" cried the subchief. "I'm on a murder case and this dumb cat asks *me* for directions." He was a decent young man and he thought for a minute. "This way —" said he, pointing up the Upshaft — "it's twenty more meters and then the third street over. But that's 'people only.' It's about a kilometer over to the steps for animals." He stood, frowning, and then swung on one of his robots: "Wush', you see this cat!"

"Yes, master, a cat-man, very handsome."

"So you think he's handsome, too. He already thinks so, so that makes it unanimous. He may be handsome, but he's dumb. Wush', take this cat-man to the address he tells you. Use the upshaft by my authority. Don't put a belt on him, just hug him."

Rod was immeasurably grateful that he had slipped his shaftbelt off and had left it negligently on the rack, just before the robot arrived.

The robot seized him around the waist with what was literally a grip of iron. They did not wait for the slow upward magnetic drive of the shaft to lift them. The robot had some kind of jet in his backpack and lifted Rod with sickening speed

to the next level. He pushed Rod into the corridor and followed him.

"Where do you go?" said the robot, very plainly.

Rod, concentrating on feeling stupid just in case someone might still be trying to hier his mind, said slowly and stumblingly, "Hostel of the Singing Birds, Room Nine."

The robot stopped still, as though he were communicating telepathically, but Rod's mind, though alert, could catch not the faintest whisper of telepathic communication. "Hot buttered sheep!" thought Rod. "He's using radio to check the address with his headquarters right from here!"

VI

Wush' appeared to be doing just that. He came to in a moment. They emerged under the sky, filled with Earth's own moon, the loveliest thing that Rod had ever seen. He did not dare to stop and enjoy the scenery, but he trotted lithely beside the robot-policeman.

They came down a road with heavy, scented flowers. The wet warm air of Earth spread the sweetness everywhere.

On their right there was a courtyard with copies of ancient fountains, a dining space now completely empty of diners, a robot waiter in the corner and many individual rooms opening on the plaza. The robot policeman called to the robot-waiter, "Where's number nine?"

The waiter answered him with a lifting of the hand and an odd twist of the wrist, twice repeated, which the robot-policeman seemed to understand perfectly well.

"Come along," he said to Rod, leading the way to an outside stairway which reached up to an outside balcony serving the second story of rooms. One of the rooms had a plain number nine on it.

Rod was about to tell the robot-policeman that he could see the number nine, when Wush' with officious kindness, took the doorknob and flung it open with a gesture of welcome to Rod.

There was the great cough of a heavy gun and Wush', his head blown almost completely off, clanked metallically to the iron floor of the balcony. Rod instinctively jumped for cover and flattened himself against the wall of the building.

A handsome man, wearing what seemed to be a black suit, came into the doorway, a heavy-caliber police pistol in his hand.

"Oh, there you are," said he to Rod evenly enough. "Come on in."

Rod felt his legs working, felt himself walking into the room despite the effort of his mind to resist. He stopped pretending to be a dumb cat. He dropped the books on the ground and went back to thinking like his normal Old North Australian self, despite the cat body. It did no good. He kept on walking involuntarily, and entered the room.

As he passed the man himself, he was conscious of a sticky sweet rotten smell, like nothing he had ever smelled before. He also saw that the man, though fully clothed, was sopping wet.

He entered the room.

It was raining inside. Somebody had jammed the fire-sprinkler system so that a steady rain fell from the ceiling to the floor.

C'mell stood in the middle of the room, her glorious red hair a wet stringy mop hanging down her shoulders. There was a look of concentration and alarm on her face.

"I," said the man, "am Tostig Amaral. This girl said that her husband would come with a policeman. I did not think she was right. But she was right. With the cat-husband there comes a policeman. I shoot the policeman. He is a robot and I can pay the Earth government for as many robots as I like. You are a cat. I can kill you also, and pay the charges on you. But I am a nice man, and I want to make love with your little red cat over there, so I will be generous and pay you something so that you can tell her she is mine and not yours. Do you understand that, cat-man?"

Rod found himself released from the unexplained muscular bonds which had hampered his freedom.

"My lord, my master from afar," he said, "C'mell is an underperson. It is the law here that if an underperson and a person become involved in love, the underperson dies and the human person gets brainscrubbed. I am sure, my master, that you would not want to be brainscrubbed by the Earth authorities. Let the girl go."

Amaral glided across the room. His face was pale, petulant, human, but Rod saw that the black clothes were not clothes at all.

The "clothes" were mucous membranes, an extension of Amaral's living skin,

The pale face turned even more pale with rage.

"You're a bold cat-man to talk like that. My body is bigger than yours, and it is poisonous as well. We have had to live hard in the rain of Amazonas Triste, and we have mental and physical powers which you had better not disturb. If you will not take payment, go away anyhow. The girl is mine. What happens to her is my business. If I violate Earth regulations, I will destroy the c'girl and pay for her. Go away, or you die."

Rod spoke with deliberate calm and calculated risk. "Citizen, I play no game. I am not a cat-man but a subject of Her Absent Majesty the Queen, from Old North Australia. I give you warning that it is a man you face, and no mere animal. Let that girl go."

C'mell struggled as though she were trying to speak, but could not.

Amaral laughed, "That's a lie, animal and a bold one. I admire you for trying to save your mate. But she is mine. She is a girlygirl and the Instrumentality gave her to me. She is my pleasure. Go, bold cat! You are a good liar."

Rod took his last chance, "Scan me if you will."

He stood his ground.

Amaral's mind ran over his personality like filthy hands pawing naked flesh. Rod recoiled at the dirtiness and intimacy of being felt by such a person's thoughts, because he could sense the kinds of pleasure

and cruelty which Amaral had experienced. He stood firm, calm, sure, just. He was not going to leave C'mell with this — this monster from the stars, man though he might be, of the old true human stock.

Amaral laughed. "You're a man, all right. A boy. A farmer. And you cannot hier or spiek except for the button in your ear. Get out, child, before I box your ears!"

Rod spoke: "Amaral, I herewith put you in danger."

Amaral did not reply with words.

His peaked sharp face grew paler and the folds of his skin dilated. They quivered, like the edges of wet, torn balloons. The room began to fill with a sickening sweet stench, as though it were a candy shop in which all the unburied bodies had died weeks before. There was a smell of vanilla, of sugar, of fresh hot cookies, of baked bread, of chocolate boiling in the pot; there was even a whiff of stroon. But as Amaral tensed and shook out his auxiliary skins each smell turned wrong, into a caricature and abomination of itself. The composite was hypnotic. Rod glanced at C'mell. She had turned completely white.

That decided him.

The calm which he had found with the Catmaster might be good, but there were moments for calm and other moments for anger.

Rod deliberately chose anger.

He felt fury rising in him as hot and quick and greedy as if it had been love. He felt his heart go faster, his muscles become stronger, his mind clearer. Amaral apparently had total confidence in his own poisonous and hypnotic powers, because he was staring straightforward as his skins swelled and waved in the air like wet leaves under water. The steady drizzle from the sprinkler kept everything penetratingly wet.

Rod disregarded this. He welcomed fury.

With his new hiering device, he focused on Amaral's mind, and only on Amaral's.

Amaral saw the movement of his eyes and whipped a knife into view.

"Man or cat, you're dying!" said Amaral, himself hot with the excitement of hate and collision.

Rod then spoke, in his worst scream —

beast, filth, offal —
spot, dirt, vileness,
wet, nasty —
die, die, die!

He was sure it was the loudest cry he had ever given. There was no echo, no effect. Amaral stared at him, the evil knife-point flickering in his hand like the flame atop a candle.

Rod's anger reached a new height.

He felt pain in his mind when he walked forward, cramps in his muscles as he used them. He felt a real fear of the offworld poison which this man-creature might exude, but the thought of C'mell—cat or not cat—alone with Amaral was enough to give him the rage of a beast and the strength of a machine.

Only at the very last moment did Amaral realize Rod had broken loose.

Rod never could tell whether the telepathic scream had really hurt the wet-worlder or not, because he did something very simple.

He reached with all the speed of a Norstrilian farmer, snatched the knife from Amaral's hand, ripping folds of soft, sticky skin with it, and then slashed the other man from clavicle to clavicle.

He jumped back in time to avoid the spurt of blood.

The "wet black suit" collapsed as Amaral died on the floor.

Rod took the dazed C'mell by the arm and led her out of the room. The air on the balcony was fresh, but the murder-smell of Amazonas Triste was still upon him. He knew that he would hate himself for weeks, just from the memory of that smell.

There were whole armies of robots and police outside. The body of Wush' had been taken away.

There was silence as they emerged.

Then a clear, civilized, commanding voice spoke from the plaza below, "Is he dead?"

Rod nodded.

"Forgive me for not coming closer. I am the Lord Jestocost. I know you, C'roderick, and I know who you really are. These people are all under my orders. You and the girl can wash and wash in the rooms below. Then you can run a certain errand. Tomorrow, at the second hour, I will see you."

Robots came close to them—apparently programmed to have no sense of smell, because the fulsome stench did not bother them in the least.

People stepped out of their way looking startled and repelled, as they passed.

Rod was able to murmur, "C'mell, are you all right?"

She nodded and she gave him a wan smile. Then she forced herself to speak. "You are brave, mister McBan. You are even braver than a cat."

The robots separated the two of them.

Within moments Rod found little white medical robots taking his clothing off him gently, deftly and quickly. A hot shower, with a smell of medication to it, was already hissing in the bath-stall. Rod was tired of wetness, tired of all this water everywhere, tired of wet things and complicated people, but he stumbled into the shower with gratitude and hope. He was still alive. He had unknown friends to help him.

And C'mell. C'mell was safe from the rain-man.

"Is this," thought Rod, "what people call love?"

The clean stringing astringency of the shower drove all thoughts from his mind. Two of the little white robots had followed him in. He sat on a hot, wet wooden bench and they scrubbed him with brushes which felt as though they would remove his very skin as they worked to get him clean.

Bit by bit, the terrible odor faded.

VII

Rod McBan went from the room of the stinkman to a place where a doctor gave him new smells to experience, smells of chemistry and of medicine and of heat and cold. The doctor's name was Vomact, and Rod would have enjoyed his company if he had not wondered where C'mell was and what she was doing.

Vomact was a small man, a full head shorter than Rod himself, but so gracefully proportioned that he did not look stunted or little. His face was thin, with a mop of ungovernable black hair which fell in all directions. Among Norstrilians, this fashion would have been deemed eccentric; to judge by the fact that other Earthmen let their hair grow wild and long, it must have been an Earth fashion. Rod found it foolish but not repulsive.

It was not Vomact's appearance which caused the impression. It was the personality which tingled out of every pore. Vomact could become clam when he knew, from his medical wisdom, that kindness and tranquility were in order, but these qualities were not usual to him. He was vivacious, moody, lively, talkative to an extreme, but he was sensitive enough to the person to whom he was talking: he never became a bore. Even among Norstrilian women, Rod had never seen a person who expressed so much, so fluently. When Vomact talked, his hands were in constant motion — outlining, describing, clarifying the points which he described. When he talked he smiled, scowled, raised his eyebrows in questioning, stared with amazement, looked aside in wonder. Rod was used to the sight of two Norstrilians having a long telepathic conversation, spieking and hiering one another as their bodies reposed, comfortable and immobile, while their minds worked directly on one another. To do all this with the speaking voice—that, to a Norstrilian, was a marvel to hear and behold. There was something graceful and pleasant about the animation of this earth doctor which stood in complete contrast to the quick dangerous decisiveness of the Lords of the Instrumentality. Rod began to think that if Earth were full of people, all of them like Vomact, it must be a delightful but confusing place. Vomact had once hinted that his family was unusual, so that even in the long weary years of perfection, when everyone else had numbers, they kept their family name secret but remembered.

"I am doctor Vomact. I know that you are not a cat, mister and owner McBan, and it is only my business to check up on you. May I?"

"C'mell—" began Rod.

"She is perfectly all right. We have given her a sedative and for the time being she is being treated as though she was a human woman. From the Instrumentality, the Lord Jestocost told me to suspend the rules in her case, and I did so. But I think we will both have trouble about the matter later on."

"Trouble?" said Rod. "I'll pay—"

"No, no, it's not payment. It's just the rule that damaged underpeople should be destroyed and not put in hospitals. Mind you, I treat them myself now and then, if I can do it on the sly. But now let's have a look at you."

"Why are we talking?" spieked Rod telepathically. "Didn't you know that I can hier mind-to-mind now?"

Instead of getting a physical examination, Rod had a wonderful visit with the doctor, in which they drank enormous glasses of a sweet Earth beverage called *chai* by the ancient Parosski ones. He found that this doctor Vomact was a candidate for a Chiefship of the Instrumentality, and he learned something of the strange tests required for that office. He even found that the doctor knew more than he himself did about his own financial position, and that the actuarial balances of Earth were sagging with the weight of his wealth, since the increase in the price of stroon might lead to shorter lives. The doctor and he ended by discussing the underpeople; he found that the doctor had just as vivid an admiration for C'mell as he himself did. The evening ended when Rod said, "I'm young, doctor and sir, and I sleep well, but I'm never going to sleep again if you don't get that smell away from me. I can smell it inside my nose."

The doctor became professional. He said, "Open your mouth and breathe right into my face!"

Rod hesitated and then obeyed.

"Great crooked stars!" said the doctor. "I can smell it too. There's a little in your upper respiratory system, perhaps a little even in your lungs. Do you need your sense of smell for the next few days?"

Rod said he did not.

"Fine," said the doctor. "We can numb that section of the brain very gently. There'll be no residual damage. You won't smell anything for eight to ten days, and by that time the smell of Amaral will be gone. Incidentally, you were charged with first degree murder, tried and acquitted, on the matter of Tostig Amaral."

"How could I be?" said Rod. "I wasn't even arrested."

"The Instrumentality computered it. Now lie down, so I can kill off that smell."

Rod lay down. The doctor put his head in a clamp and called in robot assistants. The smell-killing process knocked him out, and when he wakened, it was in a different building. He sat up in bed and saw the sea itself. C'mell was standing at the edge of water. He sniffed. He smelled no salt, no wet, no water — and no Amaral. It was worth the change.

C'mell came to him. "My dear, my very dear, my sire and master but my very dear! You chanced your life for me last night."

"I'm a cat myself," laughed Rod.

He leaped from the bed and ran out to the water margin. The immensity of blue water was incredible. The white waves were separate, definable miracles, each one of them. He had seen the enclosed

lakes of Australia, but none of them did things like this.

C'mell had the tact to stay silent till he had seen his fill.

Then she broke the news.

"You own Earth. You have work to do. Either you stay here and begin studying how to manage your property, or you go somewhere else. Either way, something a little bit sad is going to happen today."

He looked at her seriously, his pajamas flapping in the wet wind which he could no longer smell.

"I'm ready," he said. "What is it?"

"You lose me."

"Is that all?' he laughed.

C'mell looked very hurt. She stretched her fingers as though she were a nervous cat looking for something to claw.

"I thought—" said she, and stopped. She turned to look at him, staring fully, trustingly into his face. "You're such a young man, but you can do anything. Even among men you are fierce and decided. Tell me, what—what do you wish?"

"Nothing much," he smiled at her, "except that I am buying you and taking you home. We can't go to Norstrilia unless the law changes, but we can go to New Mars. They don't have any rules there, or none which a few tons of stroon won't get changed. C'mell, I'll stay cat. Will you marry me?"

She started laughing but the laughter turned into weeping. She hugged him and buried her face against his chest. At last she wiped her ears off on her arm and looked up at him

"Poor silly me! Poor silly you! Don't you see it, mister? I *am* a cat. If I had children, they would be cat-kittens, every one of them, unless I went every single week to get the genetic code recycled so that they would turn out underpeople. Don't you know that you and I can never marry — not with any real hope? Besides, Rod, there is the other rule. You and I connot even see each other again from this sunset onward. How do you think the Lord Jestocost saved my life yesterday? How did he break almost all the rules of the book?"

The brightness had gone out of Rod's day. "I don't know," he said dully.

"By promising them I would die promptly and obediently if there were any more irregularities. By saying I was a nice animal. A biddable one. My death is hostage for what you and I must do. It's not a law. It's something worse than a law—it's an agreement between the Lords of the Instrumentality."

"I see," said he, understanding the logic of it, but hating the cruel Earth customs which put C'mell and himself together, only to tear them apart.

"Let's walk down the beach, Rod," she said. "Unless you want your breakfast first of all . . ."

"Oh, no," he said. Breakfast! a flutty crupp for all the breakfasts on Earth!

She walked as though she had not a care in the world, but there was an undertone of meaning to her walk which warned Rod that she was up to something.

It happened.

First, she kissed him, with a kiss he remembered the rest of his life.

Then, before he could say a word, she spieked in a penetrating telepathic shout. But her spieking was not words or ideas at all. It was singing of a high wild kind. It was the music which went along with her very own poem, which she had sung to him atop Earthport:

And oh, my love, for you!
High birds flying, and a
High sky crying, and a
High heart striving, and a
High wind driving, and
High brave place for you!

But it was not those words, not those ideas, even though they seemed subtly different this time. She was doing something which the best telepaths of Old North Australia had tried in vain for thousands of years to accomplish — she was transmitting the mathematical and proportional essence of music right out of her mind, and she was doing it with a clarity and force which would have been worthy of a great orchestra. The "high wind driving" fugue kept recurring.

He turned his eyes away from her to see the astonishing thing which was happening all around them. The air, the ground, the sea were all becoming thick with life. Fish flashed out of blue waves. Wings circled by the multitude above them. The beach was thick with little running birds. Dogs and running animals which he had never seen before stood restlessly around C'mell—hectares of them.

Abruptly she stopped her song. With very high volume and clairty, she spat commands in all directions:

"Think of people.

"Think of this cat and me running away somewhere

"Think of ships.

"Look for strangers.

"Think of things in the sky."

Rod was glad he did not have his broad-band telepathic hiering come on, as it sometimes had done at home. He was sure he would have gone dizzy with the pictures and the contradictions of it all.

She had grabbed his shoulders and was whispering fiercely into his ear:

"Rod, they'll cover us. Please make a trip with me, Rod. One last dangerous trip. Not for you. Not for me. Not even for mankind. For life, Rod. The Aitch Eye wants to see you."

"Who's the Aitch Eye?"

"He'll tell you the secret if you see him," she hissed. "Do it for me, then, if you don't trust my ideas."

He smiled. "For you, C'mell, yes."

"Don't even think, then, till you get there. Don't even ask questions. Just come along. Millions of lives depend on you, Rod."

She stood up and sang again, but the new song had no grief in it, no anguish, no weird keening from species to species. It was as cool and pretty as a music box, as simple as an assured and happy goodby.

"That," said C'mell, "should rat-

tle the telepathic monitors for a while. They are not very imaginative anyhow, and when they get something like this they write up reports about it. Then they can't understand their reports and sooner or later one of them asks me what I did. I tell them the truth."

"What are you going to tell them this time?" he asked, as they walked back to the house.

"That I had something which I did not want them to hear."

"They won't take that."

"Of course not, but they will suspect me of trying to beg stroon for you to give to the underpeople."

"Do you want some, C'mell?"

"Of course not! It's illegal and it would just make me live longer than my natural life. Why bother?"

They had reached the house. C'mell paused.

"No questions, Rod." The smile she gave him would have melted a monument. He felt well. He was amused and pleased by the physical delight of hiering and spieking with the occasional true people who passed by. (Some underpeople could hier and spiek but they tried to conceal it, for fear that they would be resented.) He felt strong. Losing C'mell was a sad thing to do, but it was a whole day off; he began dreaming of things that he could do for her when they parted. Buying her services of thousands of people for the rest of her life? Giving her jewelry which would be the envy of Earthmankind? Leasing her a private planoform yacht? He suspected these might not be legal, but they were pleasant to think about.

VIII

Three hours later, he had no time for pleasant thoughts. They had flown into Earthport city, and they had started going down. Forty-five minutes of dropping had made his stomach very queasy. He felt the air go warm and stale and he wished desperately that he had not given up his sense of smell.

Where the drop-shafts ended, the tunnels and the elevators began.

Down they went, where incredibly old machinery spun slowly in a spray of oil, performing tasks which only the wildest mind could guess at.

In one room, C'mell stopped and shouted at him over the noise of engines: "That's a pump."

It did not look obvious. Huge turbines moved wearily. They seemed to be hooked up to an enormous steam engine powered by nuclear fuel. Five or six brightly-polished robots eyed them suspiciously as they walked around the machine, which was at least eighty meters long by forty-five high.

"And come here..." shouted C'mell.

They went into another room, empty and clean and quiet except for a rigid column of moving water which shot from floor to ceiling with no evidence of machinery at all. An underman, sloppily formed from a rat body, got up from his rocking chair when they entered. He bowed to C'mell as though she were a great lady but she waved him back to his chair.

She took Rod near the column

of water and pointed to a shiny ring on the floor.

"That's the other pump. They do the same amount of work."

"What is it?" he shouted.

"Force-field, I guess. I'm not an engineer." They went on.

In a quieter corridor she explained that the pumps were both of them for the service of weather control. The old one had been running six or seven thousand years, and showed very little wear. When people needed a supplementary one, they had simply printed it on plastic, set it in the floor, and turned it on with a few amps. The underman was there just to make sure that nothing broke down or went critical.

"Can't real people design things any more?" asked Rod.

"Only if they want to. Making them want to do things is the hard part now."

"You mean, they don't want to do anything?"

"Not exactly," said C'mell, "but they find that we are better than they are at almost anything. Real work, that is. Not statesmanship like running the Instrumentality and the Earth government. Here and there a real human being gets to work, and there are always offworlders like you to stimulate them and challenge them with new problems. But they used to have secure lives of four hundred years, a common language, and a standard conditioning. They were dying off, just by being too perfect. One way to get better would have been to kill off us underpeople, but they couldn't do that all the way. There was too much messy work to be done that you couldn't count on robots for. Even the best robot, if he's a computer linked to the mind of a mouse will do fine for routine, but unless he has a very complete human education, he's going to make some wild judgments which won't suit what people want. So they need underpeople. I'm still a cat underneath it all, but even the cats which are unchanged are pretty close relatives of human beings. They make the same basic choices between power and beauty, between survival and self-sacrifice, between common sense and high courage. So the Lady Alice More worked out this plan for the Rediscovery of Man. Set up the Ancient Nations, give everybody an extra culture besides the old one based on the Old Common Tongue, let them get mad at each other, restore some disease, some danger, some accidents, but average it out so that nothing is really unchanged."

They had come to a storeroom, the sheer size of which made Rod blink. The great reception hall at the top of Earthport had astounded him. This room was twice the size.

The room was filled with extremely ancient cargoes which had not even been unpacked from their containers. Rod could see that some were marked outbound for worlds which no longer existed, or which had changed their names. Others were inbound,, but no one had unpacked them for five thousand years and more.

"What's all this stuff?"

"Shipping, Technological change. Somebody wrote it all off the computers, so they didn't have to think of it any more. This is the thing which underpeople and robots are searching, to supply the ancient artifacts for the Rediscovery of Man. One of our boys — rat stock, with a human I.Q. of 300 — found something marked Musee Nationale. It was the whole National Museum of the Republic of Mali, which had been put inside a mountain when the ancient wars became severe. Mali apparently was not a very important 'nation,' as they called those groupings, but it had the same language as France, and we were able to supply real material, almost everything that was needed, to restore some kind of a French civilization. China has been hard. The Chinesians survived longer than any other nation, and they did their own grave-robbing. So we have found it impossible to reconstruct China before the age of space. We can't modify people into being Ancient Chinese."

Rod stopped, thunderstruck. "Can I talk to you here?"

C'mell listened with a faraway look on her face. "Not here. I feel the very weak sweep of a monitor across my mind now and then. In a couple of minutes you can. Let's hurry along."

"I just thought," cried Rod, "of the most important question in all the worlds!"

"Stop thinking it, then," said C'mell, "until we come to a safe place."

Instead of going straight on through the big aisle between the forgotten crates and packages, she squeezed between two crates and made her way to the edge of the big underground storeroom.

"That package," she said, "is stroon. They lost it. We could help ourselves to it if we wanted to, but we're afraid of it."

Rod looked at the names on the package. It had been shipped by Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan XXVI to Adaminaby Port and reconsigned to Earthport. "That's seventy-five generations ago, shipped from the Station of Doom. My farm. But I think it turns to poison if you leave it for more than two hundred years. Our own military people have some horrible uses for it, when invaders show up, but ordinary Norstrilians, when they find old stroon, always turn it in to the Commonwealth. We're afraid of it. Not that we often lose it. It's too valuable and we're too greedy, with a 20,000,000 per cent import duty on everything."

C'mell led on. They unexpectedly passed a tiny robot, a lamp fixed to his head, who was seated between two enormous piles of books. He was apparently reading them one by one, because he had beside him a pile of notes larger in bulk than he was. He did not look up, nor did they interrupt him.

At the wall, C'mell said, "Now do exactly what you're told. See the dust along the base of this crate?"

"I see it," said Rod.

"That must be left undisturbed.

Now watch. I'm going to jump from the top of this crate to the top of that one, without disturbing the dust. Then I want you to jump the same way and go exactly where I point — without even thinking about it, if you can manage. I'll follow. Don't try to be polite or chivalrous, or you'll mess up the whole arrangement."

Rod nodded.

She jumped to a case against the wall. Her red hair did not fly behind her, because she had tied it up in a turban before they started out, when she had obtained coveralls for each of them from the robot-servants. They had looked like an ordinary couple of working c'people.

Either she was very strong or the case was very light. Standing on the case, she tipped it very delicately, so that the pattern of dust around its base would be unchanged, save for microscopic examination. A blue glow came from beyond the case. With an odd, practised turn of the wrist she indicated that Rod should jump from his case to the tipped one, and from there into the area — whatever it might be — beyond the case. It seemed easy for him, but he wondered if she could support both his weight and hers on the case. He remembered her order not to talk or think. He tried to think of the salmon steak he had eaten the day before. That should certainly be a good cat-thought, if a monitor happened to catch his mind at that moment! He jumped, teetered on the slanting top of the second packing case, and scrambled into a tiny doorway just big enough for him to crawl through. It was apparently designed for cables, pipes and maintenance, not for habitual human use: it was too low to stand in. He scrambled forward. There was a slam.

C'mell had jumped in after him, letting the case fall back into its old, apparently undisturbed position.

She crawled up to him. "Keep going," she said.

"Can we talk here?"

"Of course. Do you want to? It's not a very sociable place."

"That question, that big question," said Rod. "I've got to ask you. You underpeople are taking charge of people. If you're fixing up their new cultures for them, you're getting to be the masters of men!"

"Yes," said C'mell and let the explosive affirmative hang in the air between them.

He couldn't think of anything to say; it was his big bright idea for the day, and the fact that she already knew underpeople were becoming secret masters — that was too much!

She looked at his friendly face and said, more gently, "We underpeople have seen it coming for a long time. Some of the human people do, too. Especially the Lord Jestocost. He's no fool. And, Rod, you fit in."

"I?"

"Not as a person. As an economic change. As a source of unallocated power."

"You mean, C'mell, you're after me, too? I can't believe it! I can recognize a pest or a nuisance or a robber. You don't seem like any of these. You're good, all the way through." His voice faltered. "I meant it this morning, C'mell, when I asked you to marry me."

The delicacy of cat and the tenderness of woman combined in her voice as she answered, "I know you meant it." She stroked a lock of hair away from his forehead, in a caress as restrained as any touch could be. "But it's not for us. And I'm not using you myself, Rod. I want nothing for myself, but I want a good world for underpeople. And for people, too. For people, too! We cats loved you people long before we had brains. We've been *your* cats longer than anyone can remember. Do you think our loyalty to the human race would stop just because you changed our shapes and added a lot of thinking power? I love you, Rod, but I love people too. That's why I'm taking you to the Aitch Eye."

"Can you tell me what that is — now?"

She laughed. "This place is safe. It's the Holy Insurgency. The secret government of the underpeople. This is a silly place to talk about it, Rod. You're going to meet the head of it, right now."

"All of them?" Rod was thinking of the Chiefs of the Instrumentality.

"It's not a them, it's a him. The E-telekeli. The bird beneath the ground."

"If there's only one, how did you choose him? Is he like the British Queen, whom we lost so long ago?"

C'mell laughed. "We didn't choose him. He *grew* and now he leads us. You people took an eagle's egg and tried to make it into a Daimoni man. When the experiment failed, you threw the fetus out. It lived. It's he. It'll be the strongest mind you've ever met. Come on. This is no place to talk, and we're still talking."

She started crawling down the horizontal shaft, waving at Rod to follow her.

He followed, and as they crawled he called to her, "C'mell, stop a minute."

She stopped until he caught up with her. She thought that he might ask for a kiss, so worried and lonely did he look. She was ready to be kissed. He surprised her by saying, instead:

"I can't smell, C'mell. Please, I'm so used to smelling that I miss it. What does this place smell like?"

Her eyes widened and then she laughed. "It smells like underground. Electricity burning the air. Animals somewhere far away, a lot of different smells of them. The old, old smell of man, almost gone. Engine oil and bad exhaust. It smells like a headache. It smells like silence, like things untouched. There, is that it?"

He nodded and they went on.

At the end of the horizontal C'mell turned and said, "All men die here. Come on!"

Rod started to follow and then

stopped, "C'mell, are you disco-ordinated? Why should I die? There's no reason to."

Her laughter was pure happiness. "Silly C'rod! You are a *cat*, cat enough to come where no man has passed for centuries. Come on. Watch out for those skeletons. They're a lot of them around here. We hate to kill real people, but there are some that we can't warn off in time."

They emerged on a balcony, overlooking and even more enormous storeroom than the one before. This had thousands more boxes in it. C'mell paid no attention to it. She went to the end of the balcony and raced down a slender steel ladder.

"More junk from the past!" she said, anticipating Rod's comment. "People have forgotten it up above; we mess around in it."

Though he could not smell the air, at this depth it felt thick, heavy, immobile.

C'mell did not slow down. She threaded her way through the junk and treasures on the floor as though she were an acrobat. On the far side of the old room she stopped. "Take one of these," she commanded.

They looked like enormous umbrellas, like the pictures his computer had showed him. These seemed oddly large, compared to the ones in the pictures. He looked around for rain. C'mell did not understand his supicions.

"The shaft," she said, "has no magnetic controls, no updraft of air. It's just a shaft twelve meters in diameter. These are parachutes. We jump into the shaft with them and then we float straight down, four kilometers. It's close to the Moho."

Since he did not pick up one of the big umbrellas, she handed him one. It was clumsy to hold but surprisingly light.

He blinked at her. "How will we ever get out?"

"One of the bird-men will fly us up the shaft. It's hard work, but they can do it. Be sure to hook that thing to your belt. It's a long slow time falling, and we won't be able to talk on the way. And it's terribly dark, too."

He complied.

She opened a big door, beyond which there was the feel of nothing. She gave him a wave, partially opened her "umbrella", stepped over the edge of the door and vanished.

He looked over the edge himself. There was nothing to be seen. Nothing of C'mell, no sound except for the slippage of air and an occasional mechanical whisper of metal against metal. He supposed that must be the rib-tips of the umbrella touching the metallic edge of the shaft as she fell.

He sighed. Norstrilia was safe and quiet compared to this.

He opened his umbrella too.

Acting on an odd premonition, he took his little hiering-spieking shell out of his ear and put it carefully in his coverall pocket. This was his telepathic amplifier, something like an ancient hearing aid. That act saved his life.

Rod McBan remembered falling and falling. He shouted into the wet adhesive darkness, but there was no reply. He thought of cutting himself loose from his big umbrella and letting himself drop to the death below him, but then he thought of C'mell and he knew his body would drop upon her like a bomb.

He wondered about his desperation, but could not understand it. (Only later did he find out that he was passing telepathic suicide screens which the underpeople had set up, screens fitted to the human mind, designed to dredge filth and despair from the paleocortex, the smell-bite-mate sequence of the nose-guided animals who first walked Earth. But Rod was cat enough, just barely cat enough, and he was also telepathically subnormal, so that the screens did not do to him what they would have done to any normal man of Earth — delivered a twisted dead body at the bottom. No man had ever gotten that far, but the underpeople were resolved that none ever should.)

Rod twisted in his harness and at last he fainted.

He awakened in a relatively small room, enormous by Earth standards but still much smaller than the storerooms which he had passed through on the way down. The lights were bright. He suspected that the room stank but he could not prove it with his smell gone.

A man was speaking: "The Forbidden Word is never given unless the man who does not know it plainly asks for it."

There was a chorus of voices sighing, "We remember. We remember what we remember."

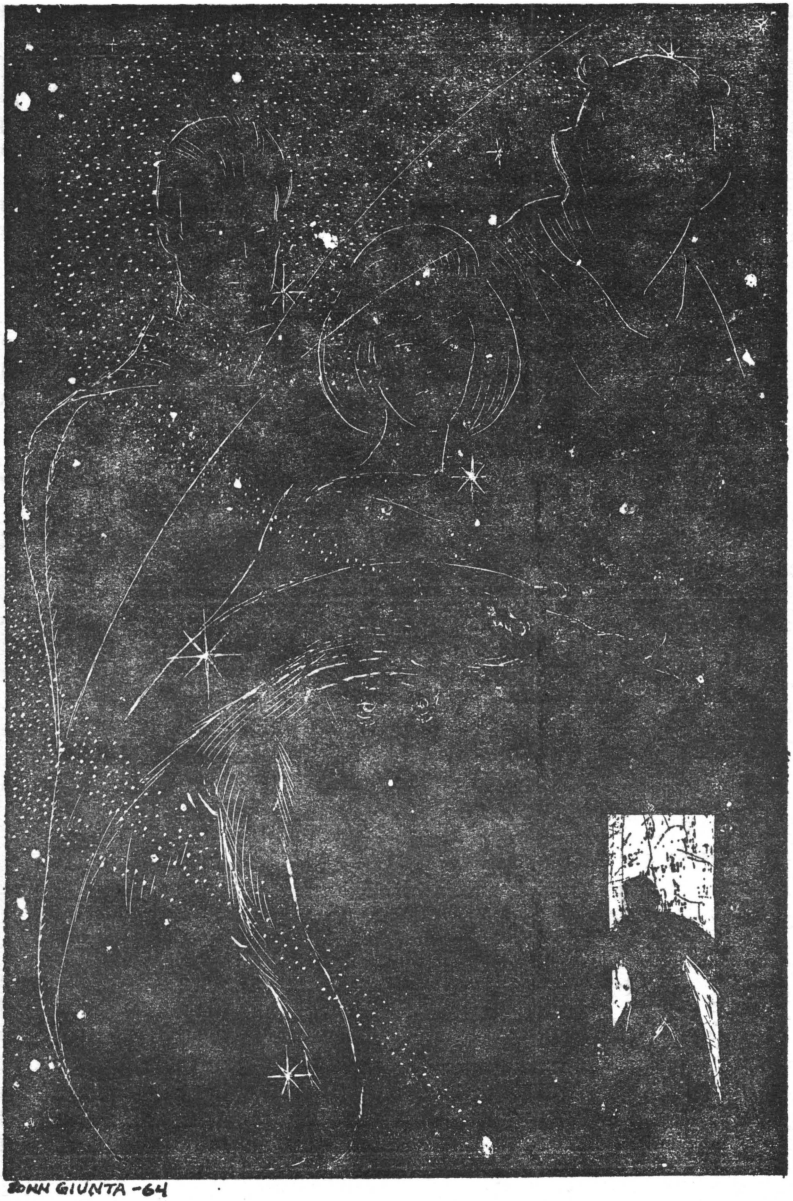
The speaker was almost a giant, thin and pale. His face was the face of a dead saint, white as alabaster, with glowing eyes. His body was that of man and bird both, man from the hips up, except that human hands grew out of the elbows of enormous, clean white wings. From the hips down to his legs were bird-legs, ending in horny, almost translucent bird-feet which stood steadily on the ground.

"I am sorry, mister and owner McBan, that you took that risk. I was misinformed. You are a good cat on the outside but still completely a human man on the inside. Our safety devices bruised your mind and they might have killed you."

Rod stared at the man as he stumbled to his feet. He saw that C'mell was one of the people helping him. When he was erect, someone handed him a beaker of very cold water. He drank it thirstily. It was hot down here — hot, stuffy, and with the feel of big engines nearby.

"I," said the great bird-man, "am E-telekeli." He pronounced it Ee-telly-kelly. "You are the first human being in all of time to see me in the flesh."

"Blessed, blessed, blessed, fourfold blessed is the name of our leader, our father, our brother, our son the E-telekeli," chorused the underpeople.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Rod looked around. There was every kind of underperson imaginable here, including several that he had never even thought of. One was a head on a shelf, with no apparent body. When he looked, somewhat shocked, directly at the head, its face smiled and one eye closed in a deliberate wink. The E-telekeli followed his glance. "Do not let us shock you. Some of us are normal, but many of us down here are the discards of men's laboratories. This is my son, who has come here to meet you this day."

A tall, very pale young man with no feathers stood up at this point. He was stark naked and completely unembarrassed. He held out a friendly hand to Rod. Rod was sure he had never seen the young man before. The young man sensed Rod's hesitation and said, "I am the E-ikasus."

"Blessed, blessed, threefold blessed is the name of our leader-to-be, the Yeekasoose!" chanted the underpeople.

Something about the scene caught Rod's rough Norstrilian humor. He spoke to the great underman as he would have spoken to another mister-and-owner back home, friendlily but bluntly. "Glad you welcome me, sir!"

"Glad, glad, glad is the stranger from beyond the stars!" sang the chorus.

"Can't you make them shut up?" asked Rod.

" 'Shut up, shut up, shut up,' says the stranger from the stars!" chorused the group.

The E-telekeli did not exactly laugh, but his smile was not pure benevolence. "We can disregard them and talk, or I can blank out your mind everytime they repeat what we say. This is a sort of court ceremony."

Rod glanced around. "I'm in your power already," said he, "so it won't matter if you mess around with my mind. Blank them out."

The E-telekeli stirred the air in front of him as though he were writing a mathematical equation with his finger. Rod's eyes followed the finger and he suddenly felt the room quiet down.

"Come over here and sit down," said the E-telekeli.

Rod followed. "What do you want?" he asked as he followed.

The E-telekeli did not even turn around to answer. He merely spoke while walking ahead. "Your money, mister and owner McBan. Almost all of your money."

Rod stopped walking. He heard himself laughing wildly. "Money? You? Here? What could you possibly do with it?"

"That," said the E-telekeli, "is why you should sit down."

"Do sit," said C'mell, who had followed.

Rod sat down.

"We are afraid that Man himself will die and leave us alone in the universe. We need Man, and there is still an immensity of time before we all pour into a common destiny. People have always assumed that the end of things is around the corner, and we have the promise of

the First Forbidden One that this will be so. But it could be hundreds of thousands of years. Maybe millions. People are scattered, mister McBan, so that no weapon will ever kill them all on all planets. But no matter how scattered they are, they are still haunted by themselves. They reach a point of development and then they stop."

"Yes," said Rod, reaching for a carafe of water and helping himself to another drink. "But it's a long way from the philosophy of the universe down to my money. We have plenty of barmy swarmy talk in Old North Australia, but I never heard of anybody asking for another citizen's money, right off the bat."

The eyes of the E-telekeli glowed like cold fire but Rod knew that this was no hynosis, no trick being played upon himself. It was the sheer force of the personality burning outward from the birdman.

"Listen carefully, mister McBan. We are the creatures of man. You are gods to us. You have made us into people who talk, who worry, who think, who love, who die. Most of our races were the friends of man before we became underpeople. Like C'mell. How many cats have served and loved man, and for how long? How many cattle have worked for men, been eaten by men, been milked by men across the ages, and have still followed where men went? Even to the stars. And dogs. I do not have to tell you about the love of dogs for men. We call ourselves the Holy Insurgency because we are rebels. We are a government. We are a power almost as big as the Instrumentality. Why do you think Teadrinker did not catch you when you arrived?"

"Who is Teadrinker?"

"An official who wanted to kidnap you. He failed because his underman reported to me. We love you, Rod, not because you are a rich Norstrilian, but because it is our faith to love the mankind which created us."

"This is a long slow wicket for my money," said Rod. "Come to the point, sir"

The E-telekeli smiled with sweetness and sadness. Rod immediately knew that it was his own denseness which made the bird-man sad and patient. For the very first time he began to accept the feeling that this person might actually be the superior of any human.

"I'm sorry," said Rod. "I haven't had a minute to enjoy my money since I got it. People have been telling me that everybody is after it. I'm beginning to think that I shall do nothing but run the rest of my life..."

The E-telekeli smiled happily, the way a teacher smiles when a student has suddenly turned in a spectacular performance. "Correct. You have learned a lot. I am offering you something more — the chance to do enormous good. Have you ever heard of Foundations?"

Rod frowned. "The bottoms of buildings?"

"No. Institutions. From the very ancient past."

Rod shook his head. He hadn't.

"If a gift was big enough, it endured and kept on giving, until the culture in which it was set had fallen. If you took most of your money and gave it to some good, wise men, it could be spent over and over again to improve the race of man. We need that. Better men will give us better lives. Do you think that we don't know how pilots and pinlighters have sometimes died, saving their cats in space?"

"Or how they kill underpeople without a thought?" countered Rod. "Or humiliate them without noticing that they do it. It seems to me that you must have some self-interest, sir."

"I do. Some. But not so much as you think. Men are evil when they are frightened or bored. They are good when they are happy and busy. I want you to give your money to provide games, sports, competitions, shows, music — and a chance for honest hatred."

"Hatred?" said Rod. "I was beginning to think that I had found a Believer bird . . . somebody who mouthed old magic."

"We're not ending time," said the great bird-man. "We are just altering the material conditions of man's situation for the present historical period. We want to steer mankind away from tragedy and self-defeat. Though the cliffs crumble, we want man to remain. Do you know Swinburne?"

"Where is it?" said Rod.

"It's not a place. It's a poet, before the age of space. Listen."

Till the slow sea rise and the sheer cliff crumble,
Till terrace and meadow the deep gulfs drink,
Till the strength of the waves of the high tide crumble
The fields that lessen, the rocks that shrink,
Here now in his triumph where all things falter,
Stretched out on the spoils that his own hand spread,
As a god self-slain on his own strange altar,
Death lies dead.

"Do you agree with that?"

"It sounds nice, but I don't understand it," said Rod. "Please, sir, I'm tireder than I thought. And I have only this one day with C'mell. Can I finish the business with you and have a little time with her?"

The great underman lifted his arms. His wings spread like a canopy over Rod.

"So be it!" he said, and the words rang out like great song.

Rod could see the lips of the underpeople chorusing, but he did not notice the sound.

"I offer you a tangible bargain. Tell me if you find I read your mind correctly."

Rod nodded, somewhat in awe.

"You want your money, but you do not want it. You will keep one hundred thousand credits, FOE money, which will leave you the richest man in Old North Australia for the rest of a very long life. The rest you will give to a foundation which will teach men to hate easily and lightly, as in a game, not sickly and wearily, as in habit. The trustees will be Lords of the Instrumentality whom I know, such as

Jestocost, Crudelta, the Lady Johanna Gnade."

"And what do I get?"

"Your heart's desire." The beautiful wise pale face stared down at Rod like a father seeking to fathom the puzzlement of his own child. Rod was a little afraid of the face, but he confided in it, too.

"I want too much. I can't have it all."

"I'll tell you what you want. First, you want to be home right now, and all the trouble done with. I can start you back to the Station of Doom this very night."

"But I want to see Earth!"

"Come back, when you are older and wiser. Some day. See what your money has done."

"Well —" said Rod.

"You want C'mell." The bland wise white face showed no embarrassment, no anger, no condescension. "You shall have her, in a linked dream, her mind to yours, for a happy subjective time of about a thousand years. You will live through all the happy things that you might have done together if you had stayed here and become a c'man. You will see your kitten-children flourish, grow old and die. That will take about one half-hour."

"It's just a dream," said Rod. "You want to take megacredits from me and give me a dreamy!"

"With two minds? Two living, accelerated minds, thinking into each other? Have you ever heard of that?"

"No," said Rod.

"Do you trust me?" said the E-telekeli.

Rod stared at the bird-man inquisitively and a great weight fell from him. He did trust this creature, more than he had ever trusted the father who did not want him, the mother who gave him up, the neighbors who looked at him and were kind. He sighed, "I trust you."

"I also," added the E-telekeli, "will take care of all the little incidentals through my own network and I will leave the memory of them in your mind. If you trust me that should be enough. You get home, safe. You are protected, off Norstrilia, into which I rarely reach, for as long as you live. You have a separate life right now with C'mell and you will remember most of it. In return, you go to the wall and transfer your fortune, minus one-half FOE megacredit, to the Foundation of Rod McBan."

Rod did not see that the underpeople thronged around him like worshippers. He had to stop when a very pale, tall girl took his hand and held it to her cheek. "You may not be the promised One, but you are a great and good man. We can take nothing from you. We can only ask. That is the teaching of Joan. And you have given."

"Who are you?" said Rod in a frightened voice, thinking that she might be some lost human girl whom the underpeople had abducted to the guts of the Earth.

"E-lamelanie, daughter of the E-telekeli."

Rod stared at her and went to the wall. He pushed a routine sort of button. What a place to find it!

"The Lord Jestocost," he called. "McBan speaking. No, you fool, I own this system."

A handsome, polished plumpish man appeared on the screen. This was the Lord Jestocost himself, one of the governing Instrumentality. "If I guess right," said the strangeman, "you are the first human being ever to get into the depths. Can I serve you, mister and owner McBan?"

"Take a note —" said the E-telekeli, out of sight of the machine, beside Rod.

Rod repeated it.

The Lord Jestocost called witnesses at his end.

It was a long dictation, but at last the conveyance was finished. Only at one point did Rod balk. When they tried to call it the McBan Foundation, he said, "Just call it the One Hundred and Fifty Fund."

"One Hundred and Fifty?" asked Jestocost.

"For my father. It's his number in our family. I'm to-the-hundred-and-fifty-first. He was before me. Don't explain the number. Just use it."

"All clear," said Jestocost. "Now we have to get notaries and official witnesses to veridicate our imprints of your eyes, hand and brain. Ask the Person with you to give you a mask, so that the cat-man face will not upset the witnesses. Where is this machine you are using supposed to be located? I know perfectly well where I think it is."

"At the foot of Alpha Ralpha, in a forgotten market," and the E-telekeli. "Your servicemen will find it there tomorrow when they come to check the authenticity of the machine." He still stood out of line of the machine, so that Jestocost could hear him but not see him.

"I know the voice," said Jestocost. "It comes to me as in a real dream. But I shall not ask to see the face."

"Your friend down here has gone where only underpeople go," said the E-telekeli, "and we are disposing of his fate in more ways than one, my lord. Subject to your gracious approval."

"My approval does not seem to have been needed much," snorted Jestocost, with a little laugh.

"I would like to talk to you. Do you have any intelligent underperson near you?"

"I can call C'mell. She's always somewhere around."

"This time, my lord, you cannot. She's here."

"There? With *you?* I never knew she went there." The amazement showed on the face of the Lord Jestocost.

"She is here, nevertheless. Do you have some other underperson?"

Rod felt like a dummy, standing in the visiphone while the two voices, unseen by one another, talked past him. But he felt, very truly, that they both wished him well. He was almost nervous in anticipation of the strange happiness which had been offered to him and C'mell, but he was a respectful enough young man to wait until the great ones got through their business.

"Wait a moment," said Jestocost.

On the screen, in the depths, Rod could see the Lord of the Instrumentality work the controls of other, secondary screens. A moment later Jestocost answered:

"B'dank is here. He will enter the room in a few minutes."

"Twenty minutes from now, my sir and lord, will you hold hands with your servant B'dank as you once did with C'mell? I have the problem of this young man and his return. There are things which you do not know, and I would rather not put them on the wires."

Jestocost hesitated only for the slightest of moments. "Good, then," he laughed. "I might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb."

The E-telekeli stood aside. Someone handed Rod a mask which hid his cat-man features and still left his eyes and hands exposed. The brainprint was gotten through the eyes.

The recordings were made.

Rod went back to the bench and table. He helped himself to another drink of water from the carafe. Someone threw a wreath of fresh flowers around his shoulders. Fresh flowers! In such a place . . . he wondered. Three rather pretty undergirls, two of them of cat origin and one of them derived from dogs, were leading a freshly dressed C'mell toward him. She wore the simplest and most modest of all possible white dresses. Her waist was cinched by a broad golden belt. She laughed, stopped laughing and then blushed as they led her to Rod.

Two seats were arranged on the bench. Cushions were disposed so that both of them would be comfortable. Silky metallic caps used in surgeries, were fitted on their heads. Rod felt his sense of smell explode within his brain; it came alive richly and suddenly. He took C'mell by the hand and began walking through the immemorial Earth forest, with a temple older than time shining in the clear soft light cast by Earth's old moon. He knew that he was already dreaming. C'mell caught his thought and said, "Rod, my master and lover, this *is* a dream. But I am in it with you . . ."

XI

Who can measure a thousand years of happy dreaming — the travels, the hunts, the picnics, the visits to forgotten and empty cities, the discovery of beautiful views and strange places? And the love, and the sharing, and the reflection of everything wonderful and strange by two separate, distinct and utterly harmonious personalities. C'mell the c'girl and C'roderick the c'man; they seemed happily doomed to be with one another. Who can live whole centuries of real bliss and then report it in minutes? Who can tell the full tale of such real lives — happiness, quarrels, reconciliations, problems, solutions and always sharing, happiness, and more sharing . . . ?

When they awakened Rod very gently, they let C'mell sleep on. He looked down at himself and expected to find himself old. But

he was a young man still, in the deep forgotten underground of the E-telekeli, and he could not even smell. He reached for the thousand wonderful years as he watched C'mell, young again, lying on the bench, but the dream-years had started fading even as he reached for them.

Rod stumbled on his feet. They led him to a chair. The E-telekeli sat in an adjacent chair, at the same table. He seemed weary.

"My mister and owner McBan, I monitored your dream sharing, just to make sure it stayed in the right general direction. I hope you are satisfied."

Rod nodded, very slowly, and reached for the carafe of water, which someone had re-filled while he slept. Slept, and lived, and dreamed, and grew old, and woke.

"While you slept, mister McBan," said the great E-man, "I had a telepathic conference with the Lord Jestocost, who has been your friend, even though you do not know him. You have heard of the new automatic planoform ships."

"They are experimental," said Rod.

"So they are," said the E-telekeli, "but perfectly safe. And the best 'automatic' pilots are not automatic at all. They have snake-men pilots. My pilots. They can outperform any pilots of the Instrumentality."

"Of course," said Rod, "because they are dead."

"No more dead than I," laughed the white calm bird of the underground. "I put them in cataleptic trances, with the help of my son the doctor E-ikasus. On the ships they wake up. One of them can take you to Norstrilia in a single long fast jump. And my son can work on you right here. We have a good medical workshop in one of those rooms. It will seem like a single night to you, though it will be several days in objective time. If you say goodbye to me now, and if you are ready to go, you will wake up in orbit just outside the Old North Australian subspace net. I have no wish for one of my underpeople to tear himself to pieces if he meets Mother Hitton's dreadful little kittens, whatever they may be. Do you happen to know?"

"I don't know," said Rod quickly, "and if I did, I couldn't tell you. It's the Queen's secret."

"The Queen?"

"The Absent Queen. We use it to mean the Commonwealth government. Anyhow, mister bird, I can't go now. I've got to go back up to the surface of Earth. And I want my stamp that the catmaster gave me. And the books."

"Do you trust me, mister and owner McBan?" The white giant rose to his feet; his eyes shone like fire.

The underpeople spontaneously chorused, "Put your trust in the joyful lawful, put your trust in the loyal-awful bright blank power of the under-bird!"

"I've trusted you with my life and my fortune, so far," said Rod, a little sullenly, "but you're not going to *make* me go. No matter how much I want to get home. And

I have an old enemy at home that I want to help. Houghton Syme the Hon. Sec. There might be something on Old Earth which I could take back to him."

"I think you can trust me a little further," said the E-telekeli. "Would it solve the problem of the Hon. Sec. if you gave him a dream-share with someone he loved, to make up his having a short life?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"I can," said the master of underpeople, "have his prescription made up. It will have to be mixed with plasma from his blood before he takes it. It would be good for about three thousand years of subjective life. We have never let this out of our own undercity before, but you are the Friend of Earth, and you shall have it."

Rod tried to stammer his thanks.

The white giant took Rod by the arm and led him back to the visiphone, still trembling with the connection for Earth's surface, many kilometers above.

Rod trembled. Odd shards of dream-memory, coming out of his recently dreamed "life" with C'mell, pulsed through his mind.

The bird-giant showed him the surface of Earth by borrowing a spying eye through the visiphone. They swooped through the streets of earth one last time. Rod saw his rare postage stamps — Cape triangles, they were, printed before the beginning of time — being packed carefully into a metal box which had his formal address printed on it, very proper indeed:

Roderick Frederick Ronald
Arnold William MacArthur McBan
CLI
"The Station of Doom"
c-o Any Lawful Entry-port
Planet of Old North Australia

At last the E-telekeli sighed and Rod sighed with him.

"Enough?" asked the pale bird-giant.

"Enough," said Rod. He started to leave the visiphone and then stopped.

Rod made no move to leave. He had turned off the screen but he just stood there.

"Something else?" said the E-telekeli.

"She's all right," said the lord of the underworld. "She expects nothing from you. She's a good underperson."

"*I* want to do something for her."

"There's nothing she wants. She is happy. You do not need to meddle."

"She won't be a girlygirl forever," Rod insisted. "You underpeople get old. I don't know how you manage without stroon."

"Neither do I," said the E-telekeli. "I just happen to have long life. But you're right about her. She will age soon enough, by your kind of time."

"I'd like to buy the restaurant for her, the one the bear-man has, and let it become a sort of meeting place open to people and underpeople. She could give it the romantic and interesting touch so that it could be a success."

"A wonderful idea. A perfect project for your Foundation," smiled the E-telekeli. "It shall be done." The bird-man went on: "Now, if you are ready, we will put you to sleep, my son E-ikasus will change you out of your cat body and you will wake in orbit around your home."

"C'mell? Can you wake her up so I can say goodbye after that thousand years?"

The master of the underworld took Rod gently by the arm and walked him across the huge underground room, talking as they went. "Would you want to have another goodbye, after that thousand years she remembers with you, if you were she? Let her be. It is kinder this way. You are human. You can afford to be rich with kindness. It is one of the best traits which you human people have."

Rod stopped. "Do you have a recorder of some kind, then? She welcomed me to Earth with a wonderful little song about 'high birds crying' and I want to leave one of our Norstrilian songs for her."

"Sing anything," said the E-telekeli, "and the chorus of my attendants will remember it as long as they live. The others would appreciate it too."

Rod looked around at the underpeople who had followed them. For a moment he was embarrassed at singing to all of them, but when he saw their warm, adoring smiles, he was at ease with them. "Remember this, then, and be sure to sing it to C'mell for me, when she awakens." He lifted his voice a little and sang.

Run where the ram is dancing, prancing!
Listen where the ewe is greeting, bleating.
Rush where the lambs are running, funning.
Watch where the stroon is flowing, growing.
See how the men are reaping, heaping
Wealth for their world!

Look where the hills are dipping, ripping.
Sit where the air is frying, drying.
Go where the clouds are pacing, racing.
Stand where the wealth is gleaming, teeming.
Shout to the top of the singing ringing
Norstrilian power and pride!

The chorus sang it back at him with a wealth and richness which he had never heard in the little song before.

"And now," said the E-telekeli, "the blessing of the First Forbidden One be upon you." The giant bowed a little and kissed Rod McBan on the forehead. Rod thought it strange and started to speak, but the eyes were upon him.

Eyes — like twin fires.

Fire — like friendship and like warmth, like a welcome and a farewell.

Eyes — which became a single fire.

He awakened only when he was in orbit around the planet of Old North Australia.

The descent was easy. The ship had a viewer. The snake pilot said very little.

He put Rod down in the Station of Doom, a few hundred meters from his own door. He left two heavy packages. An Old North Australian patrol ship hovered overhead and the air hummed with danger while Norstrilian police floated to the ground and made sure that no one besides Rod McBan got off. The Earth ship whispered and was gone.

"I'll give you a hand, mister," said one of the police. He clutched Rod with one mechanical claw of his ornithopter, caught the two packages in the other, and flung his machine into the air with a single beat of the giant wings. They coasted into the yard. The wings tipped up, Rod and his packages were deposited deftly and the machine flapped away back to its distant base in silence.

There was nobody there. He knew that Aunt Doris would come soon. And somebody else. His own sweetheart, on his own farm — Lavinia. Lavinia! Here, now, on this dear poor dry earth, he knew how much Lavinia suited him. Now he could spiek, he could hier!

It was strange. Yesterday — or was it yesterday, for it felt like yesterday? — he had felt very young indeed. He seemed to know in his deepest mind that C'mell had never been more than nine-tenths his, and that other tenth — the most valuable and beautiful and most secret tenth of her life — was forever given to some other man or underman who he would never know. He felt that C'mell would never give her heart again. And yet he kept for her a special kind of tenderness, which would never recur. It was not marriage which they had had, but it was pure romance.

But here, here waited home itself, and love.

Lavinia was in it, dear Lavinia with her mad lost father and her kindness to a Rod who had not let much kindness into his life.

Suddenly, the words of an old poem rose unbidden to his mind:

> Ever. Never. Forever.
> Three words. The lever
> Of life upon time.
> Never, forever, ever!

He spieked. He spieked very loud, "Lavinia!"

Beyond the hill the cry came back, right into his mind, "Rod, Rod! Oh, Rod! Rod?

"Yes," he spieked. "Don't run. I'm home."

He felt her mind coming near, though she must have been beyond one of the nearby hills. When he touched minds with Lavinia, he knew that this was her ground, and his too. Nor for them the wet wonders of Earth, the golden-haired beauties of C'mell and Earth people! He knew without doubt that Lavinia would love and recognize the new Rod as she had loved the old.

He waited very quietly and then he laughed to himself under the gray nearby friendly sky of Norstrilia. He had momentarily the childish impulse to rush across the hills of his home and to kiss his own computer.

He waited for Lavinia instead.

END

The Place Where Readers And Editor Meet . . .

Dear Editor:

I have just finished the November *If*, and it prompted me to write my first letter to a magazine.

Firstly, I am amazed how a magazine such as *If* could improve as much as it has in as little time as it has. There is not one point of the mag which has not increased in interest.

Secondly, I suggest you have Keith Laumer sign an eighty-year contract. The more he writes, the better he gets, and he's writing more and more these days. The Retief series can't be beat as space opera and his singles in *Worlds of Tomorrow* are among the best I've seen in years.

Thirdly, I just finished *The Reefs of Space* in *If* and *All We Marsmen* in *Worlds of Tomorrow* and they have strengthened my opinion of serial stories. In my opinion there is nothing more suspenseful than a good serial, and these are two of the best I've ever read.

Fourthly, *Worlds of Tomorrow* has proved to be beyond my wildest expectations. Every one of these stories is from good to excellent. I'm quite pleased over the resumption of Jack Sharkey's "contact" series. If only they could all be as good as *The Creature Inside*.

Fifthly, Jonathan Brand. Hear, hear! I'd like to see more by this fellow.

Finally, how about having an annual contest for amateur writers, the five best stories appearing throughout the following year in one of the Galaxy publications, with criticism being offered to the contestants? The chance for recognition in one of the top sf mags of the business could attract a lot of new talent. — Sydney Silverstein, 8104 Thouron Avenue, Philadelphia 50, Pennsylvania.

● The National Fantasy Fan Federation has such a contest (in which we cooperate), except that publication in a professional magazine is

not guaranteed to the winners — although chances are good that at least one or two of them will be accepted. For that matter, every issue we publish at least one "first" story; this issue's is *The Final Equation*, by Jack Smith. — *Editor.*

* * *

Dear Editor:

Congratulations on your January issue. It was undoubtedly the best I've seen this year (the first, too). The cover was good — very distinctive — except that I don't think much of your habit of blurbing your novels on the cover and putting features on the spine. It makes the mag seem (even) pulpier than it is.

More Van Vogt, more Van Vogt, more Van Vogt! By the way, what about his *Haunted Atoms* which was in *Authentic* in 1951 and *SF Digest* in 1954?

I wonder if some of your readers could help me with a little question I have. Sometime between 1953 and 1954 or thereabouts I read my first sf magazine. Now I wonder what it was. All I remember about it was two of the stories. The first one was about this alien spaceship. It dropped this bright-yellow blob on the Earth, and the blob grew until it covered the entire planet except for one island with a man on it. It turned out that the blob had transformed all the people of Earth into sort of monsters.

The other story was about an alien who is spotted by hunters as he gets out of his ship. The alien shoots one of them and he becomes encased in jelly-like substance. The other hunters chase the alien into a village, where he is rammed by a car and finally killed. The alien has been clutching a bag to his side, and just as the villagers are about to open it, the hunter who was shot turns up feeling ten years younger. Then the villagers discover that in the bag was a bag of grass seed and a Holy Bible. Does anyone know what magazine this was? — Robert Olsen, 1006 Buoy, Orange, California.

● More Van Vogt? Coming up in the next issue! — *Editor.*

* * *

Dear Editor:

Jim Maugham's letter (IF, January '64) on the subject of letter columns and S-F reader motivation, calls up a number of thoughts:

If a reader really has reforming instincts he ought to write the kind of letters he wants to see. If they are good enough they'll be published and answered by other readers. It's mainly up to the people who write the letters to determine the character of Hue and Cry or any other forum.

The readers want hot discussions, new ideas, sweeping concepts, unique philosophies — or so they say. Frankly, most S-F readers don't seem to care for new thoughts any more than anyone else. In actual point of fact, they read primarily for escape, they react in a mild and passive manner to the supposed mental stimulation of the stories, and their comments are limited to expressions of generalized approval and petty dislkes.

J. R. Parks, 921 4th Avenue, Rochelle, Illinois.

* * *

Dear Editor:

I feel that *If*, *Galaxy* and *Worlds of Tomorrow* are probably the best science-fiction publications on the market today. But the trouble with your magazine, and all the others

too, is that you do not report the news of what is going on in the world of science-fiction fandom. You never report on science-fiction organizations, conventions, or even review fanzines. I would appreciate it if you would please print this letter in your magazine so the readers may decide and comment on this. Thank you very much. — Guy Guden, 1013 South Malden, Fullerton, California.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Gaughan's cover for the November *If* was wonderful. A few like this and he might win the Hugo, instead of just getting nominated. That drawing he had on page 8, though. Is it so very needful that every square inch be full of marks? I shouldn't think so.

The Governor of Glave was one of the best Retief so far, *Muck Man* was pretty good, A *Better Mousetrap* was all right, but I would have liked to seen more from Brunner. Knight's story was a bit disappointing, however it had its high points, too.

I wouldn't say that *Long Day* in *Court* is the best "first" you have had as yet, for you have had some very god ones. But I will say it was one of the best, and I'm happy to see that Mr. Brand has more stories yet to be published. By the way, have any of your other firsts sold anything else to you? — Hank Luttrell, Rt. 13-2936 Barrett Sta. Rd., Kirkwood 22, Missouri.

● Yep. Gary Wright (he wrote *Captain of the Kali*) has a new one coming up soon, and several others are in the offing. — Editor.

* * *

Dear Editor:

I enjoy *IF* very much. I have not been reading it long, but already it is my favorite magazine. I especially liked the Crossword Puzzle.

My only regret about *If* is that I enjoy it so much and it only comes out once every *two* months. — Drake Maynard, 2509 Columbine Lane, Burlington, North Carolina.

* * *

Dear Editor:

I was disappointed in the ending of your serial, The *Reefs of Space*. The ending was contrived, unconvincing, glib and much too fast. I had the impression that the writers, having written our hero (Ryeland) and themselves into a corner, were not willing to take the hard, painstaking work needed to write a convincing ending to the story. But they are professionals, and I'm used to seeing professional work from them. I did, for 5/6 of the story; but the ending left me unbelieving. Back to your typewriters, boys, and do your homework! — Michael N. Tierstein, 1577 East 37th Street, Brooklyn 34, New York.

● If that's all that's worrying you — starting next issue, we can take care of it! That's right: Starting with the July issue, *If* is monthly. And what an issue July will be! A. E. Van Vogt's *The Silkie* — the beginning of Robert A. Heinlein's *Farnham's Freehold* — and coming up soon thereafter a whole new batch of Retief stories, Doc Smith's fourth and greatest Skylark story, *Skylark DuQuesne* . . . and *much* more.

Things are looking very definitely and conspicuously *up!* — *Editor.*

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The School's instructors are themselves professional writers. Under the supervision of the 12 Famous Writers, these instructors work with students by mail, just as magazine and book editors work with many established authors. And they spend up to several hours on each assignment completed by a student . . . revising, correcting, and advising.

The Famous Writers School is less than three years old. Its first students are not due to graduate until later this year. Yet, many have sold their writings to such varied publications as *The Reader's Digest, Redbook, Popular Science, True Story.*

To select people with writing talent worth developing, the 12 Famous Writers have designed a revealing Talent Test. The coupon will bring you a copy, along with a brochure about the School. Your completed Test will be graded without charge or obligation by one of the School's instructors. If your Test indicates writing talent, you are then eligible to enroll in the School. You are, however, under absolutely no obligation to do so.

Famous Writers School
Dept. 6392, Westport, Connecticut

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Miss
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