July-August 1970 60¢ MAC

WORLDS OF if SCIENCE FICTION

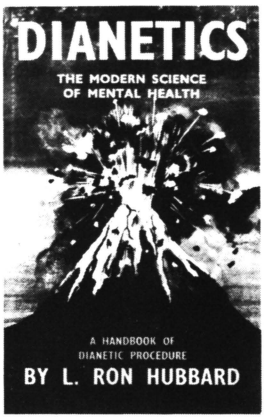
SECOND-HAND STONEHENGE
Ernest Taves

TIME PIECE
Joe Haldeman

THE FIFTH PLANET
Larry Eisenberg

if the magazine of alternatives

Whatever happened to DIANETICS?



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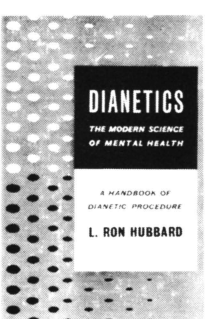

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Dianetics was first announced to the public in a popular science fiction magazine in 1950. Without formal training or an organization, the superior technology in the first book made Dianetics tremendously popular. Informal groups mushroomed all over the country and hundreds of thousands actively applied Dianetic techniques with amazing results.

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☐ Enclosed is $5 for a copy of Dianetics: the Modern Science of Mental Health.

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WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

ALL NEW STORIES

Cover by GAUGHAN, suggested by TIME PIECE

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Readers write—and wrong!

NOT EVERY knock is a boost. I have recently been compared to the dung under a camel's foot and have had the curses of the Seven Blind Bastards evoked upon my head through the U.S. mails by a gentleman who objects to my enjoyment of the technicolor variety of the human kind. And this is all right. It has pertinence to the current scene. I would rather be cursed by blind bastards than be one.

We're all having a hard time. But we could make it harder. The following is a good letter.

It brings up the question of meanings.

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

Galaxy *has always been one of my favorite science fiction magazines (after* IF*), and that's why I am writing you today to express my disappointment about the February issue.*

Actually you started out with a very good story, The Shaker Revival. *Both my husband and I enjoyed reading it very much. But then we got to Dannie Plachta's* The Last Night of the Festival. *We thought it looked extremely interesting (something different for a change) and started reading it with great anticipation. We stopped after about 6 or 8 pages because we did not want to waste our time reading such meaningless gibberish. I guess you call it fantasy, and I realize that it must take some talent to write this nonsense, but why not leave this kind of thing to the fantasy magazines?*

The other thing which irritated us in the issue was the comic strip. Heavens, I hope we won't have to put up with the kind of material boys in the sixth grade enjoy reading. I suppose it is an imitation of Playboy's comic strip, but if it is, it is a very bad imitation indeed. It lacks sophistication and the quality of paper Playboy uses.

I hope you don't mind my criticism, Mr. Jakobsson. I am writing you because I care about the magazine. My husband and I have been reading it for many years and we want to continue doing so.

Sincerely,
Mrs. Victor Porguen
Stamford, Conn.

Dannie Plachta's *The Last Night of the Festival* is a survival story. Dannie envisioned a race of humans, survivals of mutual abuse of each other, who had evolved into creatures capable of existing only in festival atmosphere—a happy twist on a sad scene.

For me the story had significance—and not as fantasy. Its underlying realities are around us—as real as the camel's foot and the seven blind Bs.

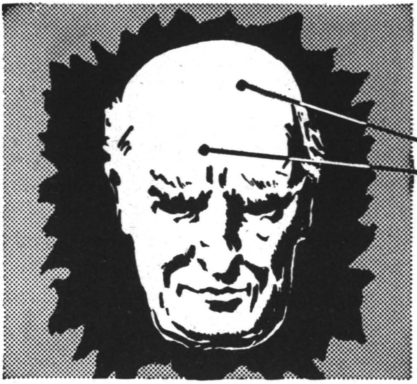
Here's a different view.

Jakobsson:

Bless you, bless you, bless you. And Jack Gaughan and Judy-Lynn Benjamin and all the other wonderful nuts behind what's happening to Galaxy *and* If. *The stories you print and the way you print them is a credit, big and blatant and beautiful, to you all.*

I was a bit uneasy when I saw that Fred Pohl was going—who in hell is

(Please turn to page 146)



STRANGE *things happen here!*

The Dark Continents of Your Mind

DO YOU struggle for balance? Are you forever trying to maintain *energy*, *enthusiasm* and the *will to do?* Do your personality and power of accomplishment ebb and flow—like a stream controlled by some unseen valve? Deep within you are minute organisms. From their function spring your emotions. They govern your *creative ideas* and *moods*—yes, even your enjoyment of life. Once they were thought to be the mysterious seat of the soul—and to be left unexplored. Now cast aside superstition and learn to direct intelligently these *powers of self*.

Accept This Free Book

Let the Rosicrucians, an age-old fraternity of thinking men and women (not a religion), point out how you may fashion life as you want it—by making the fullest use of these little-understood *natural faculties* which you possess. This is a challenge to make the most of your heritage as a human. Write for the Free Book, "The Mastery of Life," Address: Scribe M.S.B.

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The Rosicrucians (AMORC)
San Jose, California 95114, U.S.A.

Please send copy of booklet, "The Mastery of Life" which I shall read as directed.

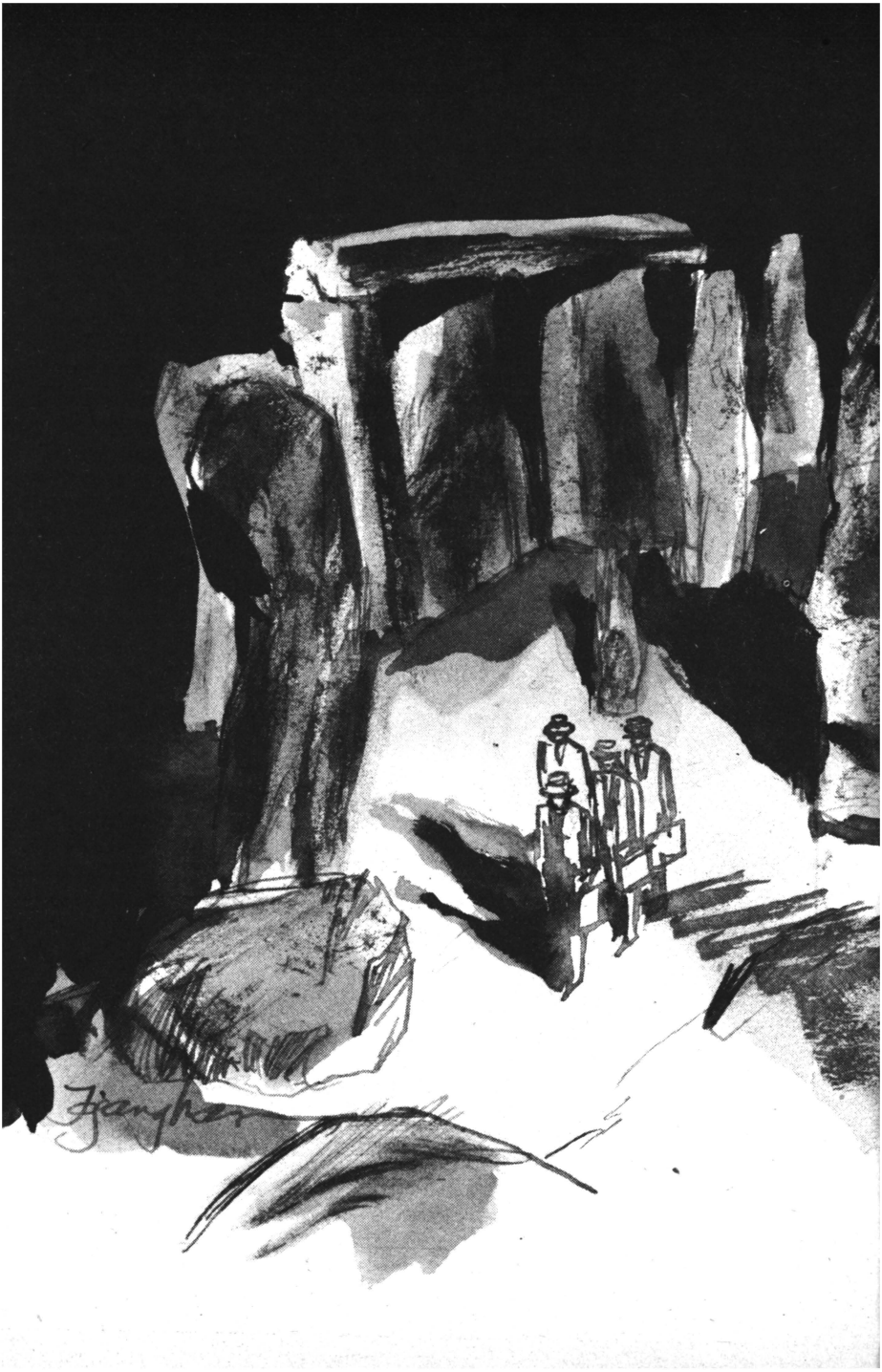
Name_____

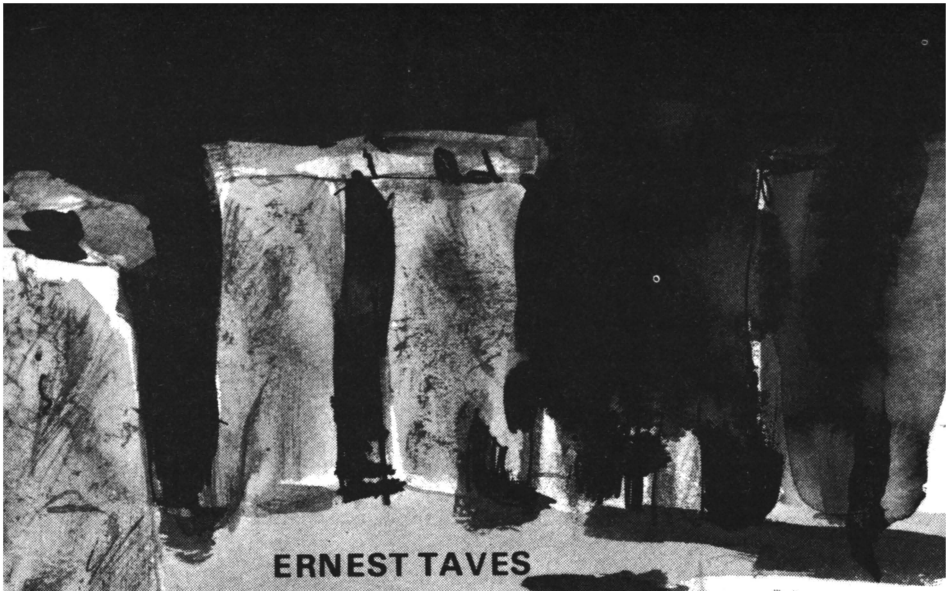
Address_____

City_____

State_____

Please Include Your Zip Code





ERNEST TAVES

SECOND-HAND STONEHENGE

In this century, as before, women and Stonehenge share one trait—they serve both men!

I

BE THE first in your neighborhood to own your own personal and private Stonehenge, think of the advantages. Neighborhood? All right, be the first in your state, continent, any continent. How would you like to be the sole owner and proprietor of the one and only operative Stonehenge on the face of the earth? And the operative word in this offer, friend, is operative, because this one works. Tell you what I'm going to do . . .

My car was shot, Edie needed hers and I was in the subway, out of which I got at Harvard Square, the end of the line. It was hot and humid for almost the end of June. The subway filled with humanoid sardines hadn't helped and I'd had a day of brutal frustration in the lab. I was looking forward to my air-conditioned house, a light supper and cold drinks. I stood on the curb for a moment and decided against a taxi. The green came on and we obediently crossed over to Nini's Corner, where the familiar array of magazines caught my eye. God knew I had enough reading at home to catch up with, plus a bunch of reports in my briefcase, but *Out There* jumped out at me from the gaudy ranks and on impulse I bought it. I hadn't heard of it before but it had an attractive cover. Spaceships.

The streets became quieter as I walked from the Square. Nice large quiet houses on Tory Row. One of them was mine and it was calling me like a beacon. The house was—not Edie exactly. I hoped she'd had a good day—sometimes that made a difference. The Earth had had a good day or a bad one, depending how you looked at it. I had realized in the subway that it was the twenty-first—which meant that at 3:15 A.M. the sun had entered the sign of Cancer, which meant that it had been summer for about fourteen hours, which meant that I was beginning to think of New Hampshire, which meant . . .

I entered my lovely house like a hand going into a worn and comfortable glove.

"I'm home," I called out, dumping the briefcase and hanging my coat in the closet. No answer. "Edie?"

I found her on the terrace out back. She was reading something, had a tall drink to hand, looked up from her book.

"Hi," I said, tentatively.

"Hi yourself. Everything's there." She nodded toward a table she had set up—ice, vodka, vermouth, a lemon even. "How did the boy wonder of MIT make out today?"

"He had a vicious day working with modules that wouldn't mod, circuits that wouldn't circ. Bad. You?"

I dropped *Out There* on the table by the chair and made a mar-

tini. How to make a martini work I do know. Drink it.

"So-so."

I sat there a moment, delaying the first sip, sat there looking at my wife. She was tiny—five feet one. Her hair was black and her figure was hard and muscular—but feminine as anything. Don't get me wrong. She got her muscles from her work. She was a sculptor and I knew from a number of sources that she wielded a respectable blowtorch. Her work pad was in an abandoned loft downtown. I'd been there several times and they had been bad times, as bad as when she had come to my lab in the computer center for a grudging look at what I was up to. She knew—and cared—as much about an electronic circuit as I did about her thing, whatever it was, and that was part of the trouble with us, maybe most of it. Plus she wasn't getting the recognition she wanted. I'd had some lucky accidents in the lab—hence the boy-wonder crack—but that was no fault of mine.

"Well," I tried again, "how's it going? What are you working on?"

"You wouldn't understand if I told you," she said and I had no answer to that. I topped up her gin and tonic, made myself another martini and leafed through my magazine. It was quiet out there on the terrace, with soft distant traffic sounds now and then letting me know I was still in Cambridge. I'd rather have been inside where it was cooler but Edie loved the terrace and garden even in midsummer. "What's that?" she asked.

"Science fiction," I said. "I picked it up on the way home. Nice cover."

I showed it to her and my artist wife turned up her nose. She rose.

"We're having a cold supper, all right?"

"Of course."

"I'll bring it out. It's ready. It's good, too, lobster salad. You want another martini first?"

My glass was half full. I shook my head.

"For a hot-shot electronic genius," she said, leaving, "you do read the damndest crap."

"LISTEN to this," I said later, in bed. The supper had indeed been good. Edie had thought to chill a bottle of Pouilly-Fuissé and I and my house and my tiny wife were in a state of precarious harmony. We had kept the conversation out of danger areas, threading through mine fields. I had finished two stories in *Out There*, given them both *B*-plus, and was looking at the classified ads. "Listen to this—do it yourself Stonehenge kit," I read. "For the man who has everything. Five hundred bucks."

"You've got to be kidding."

"Not so." I showed her the ad:

A Do-It-Yourself Stonehenge Kit. For the man who has everything. A faithful reproduction of the Salisbury Plain original, though somewhat smaller. Best Vermont granite. Space required: circular area 200' diameter, from which complete horizon should be visible. Limited supply, order now. $500 delivered (E. of Miss.). Novel Products Co., Box 201, Barre, Vt.

Edie sniffed. "I suppose there are one or two people in the U.S. nutty enough to be taken in by that. What nonsense. Really."

"What's wrong with having your own Stonehenge?" My mine detectors were beginning to hum faintly. "I've got plenty of room for it at Round Hill. I could put it on top of the hill, matter of fact. You know what a view that is. Full horizon except for a wee bit of Monadnock—" Edie looked at me aghast. "What have you got against it, for God's sake?" I asked. "It's sculpture, isn't it?"

Those words I shouldn't have said—I should not have said them. They detonated the first mine and that was the beginning of a chain reaction which involved a plethora of words and drinks and eventually found me at the desk in my study, writing a check for five hundred dollars. Not only that, I threw on some clothes and went to the box at the corner and dropped in the envelope, clanging the slot shut with a mighty crash. Satisfying. On my way to the cot in my study I stopped by our bedroom to tell Edie I'd ordered a Stonehenge —but she was asleep.

So next morning, coward that I was, I didn't tell her. I tried to lighten things up at breakfast but Edie was glacial. She scathingly said, "Sculpture!" once, and that was about it. I was glad I wasn't a hunk of metal awaiting her pleasure in her studio.

On the subway I thought about five-hundred-dollar Stonehenges. I could see my smaller version of Salisbury Plain brooding up there on top of Round Hill—I could see it, say, on a windy October night by the light of a waning moon. I could see it, all right, and if I could have it for five hundred I wanted it. Uneasy thoughts now in my mind. How could Novel Products do it for five hundred? Anywhere east of the Mississippi? Miami? This Stonehenge was smaller than the original, yes, but if it needed as much space as the ad said, that would be a lot of granite. To deliver that mass to Miami would cost more than five hundred for transportation alone. I reluctantly decided I'd been had. I called the bank from the lab to stop payment on the check and got on with the business of being a boy wizard.

JULY six. Tag ends at the lab all finished and here I am at Round Hill for the summer. Here

we are, I should say, but Edie just now is playing tennis at the club. I'm working the hell away in my study when I hear a bashing at the kitchen door. I confront a wiry redhead in overalls, holding in his freckled hand a piece of paper.

"You Thomas Gridley?" he asked. I admitted it. "Then we've come to the right place. And a good thing, too. Where you want it?"

"Want what?"

He jerked his head toward the parking area behind the house. I looked over his shoulder. Merciful Jesus! Two enormous flat trailers loaded with granite—it looked like two million tons. I had time to wonder how soon Edie would be back from the club.

"But—I stopped the check—I didn't pay—"

I stepped onto the porch. The redhead handed me the bill of lading or whatever that piece of paper was. It was stamped: Paid. So they'd made a mistake.

So I had my Stonehenge.

"It's yours, buddy. Sign here."

I did. "You have the—manual?"

"In the truck. So where do we put it?"

"I'll show you."

Let's get out of here now. . .

"Follow me, Art," the redhead said to the other driver.

"Okay, Stan."

I sat in the cab next to Stan, directed him to the road through the north field to the edge of the woods. A jeep road led through those woods to the top of Round Hill but those trailers couldn't begin to go through that. I'd have to haul those stones up myself, one by one. Some of them looked fifteen feet long or more. I wondered if my four-wheel-drive jeep pickup could handle them.

"Here," I said at the edge of the woods. "As near as you can get to the road entrance but not blocking it, right?"

"You're the boss."

"The manual—you have it?"

He handed me a bulky pliofilm envelope. I started to walk back to the house, then stopped. Do you tip the workmen who bring you your Stonehenge? Stan was manipulating the crane on the lead trailer. I slipped him a five, another to Art, who was slinging cables around one of the stones. For a few minutes I watched Stan manipulate those imposing masses. They bore neatly inscribed numbers. I was glad of that—it gave me a sense of security. I went back to the study then, I wanted to read that manual. I was lost in it when Edie came back.

"Any calls?" she asked.

"No. No—calls." The trailers must have unloaded and gone. I'd been so deep in the manual I hadn't heard them go. As I hadn't heard them come.

"What are you looking so—silly about?"

"I'm not looking silly. I'm

working. How did the tennis go?"

But she had already left.

I STAYED up late that night, thinking about hauling that granite to the bald area on top of Round Hill. I kept wondering if the jeep could do the job. I skimmed all the way through the manual, knowing I'd have to read it again page by page, paragraph by paragraph. The charts and plans were elaborate. Novel Products had obviously done their homework.

I went to sleep wondering from whence had come the druid in my woodpile. I was conducting a sensuous priestly rite when Edie shook me awake. She interrupted my rite, yes, and her touch held nothing of tenderness. The sun was well up; Edie was dressed.

She got me somewhat awake, but I still wore ancient robes. I was not amused. It's not every night . . .

"Will you kindly tell me what the goddam hell is that pile of rocks at the edge of the field, will you?" Megatons of stuff coming at me from that five-foot-one bundle. "You bought that goddam Stonehenge bit, right? You stupid son of a—"

"Your invective is unoriginal," I said, rubbing my eyes, my priestly robes fading. "Besides, I was dreaming. There was this priestess, see, and I was the priest and our robes were of many colors. We—"

"You silly bastard, will you listen to me for one minute—"

"—and our robes were of many colors. You listen to me, baby, I bought it, yes, and it didn't cost one nickel, not a cent. I ordered it last June, yes, but—"

I told her about the stopped check, their mistake, my Stonehenge for free.

"That's not the point, you doughhead, the point is—"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"The point is I will not have the whole damn corner of the State thinking I'm the wife of the most eccentric weirdo this side of—of—anywhere. I won't—"

After years of living with my tiny wife and sometimes loving her, caring about her, I understood in a nanosecond why she was no good with her junkyard iron and blowtorch and I felt sorry for her, I did. In that same microslice of time I knew that what was wrong between us was irreparable. Our prognosis was—negative.

Edie left me not long after that. Round Hill had always been mine and I bought her half of the Cambridge house. She really didn't want it, didn't have the feeling for it I did. So Edie left me, left me to my house in Cambridge, to my Round Hill, to my haphazard pile of granite at the north end of the field.

"It's best," she said and I agreed.

Off she went—finally no fuss be-

tween us, only the sense and fact of finality. She walked to her car and I watched that little bottom for the last time. She didn't turn round to say or wave goodbye.

II

I MISSED my tiny wife in a way or two but I knew it was good that she was gone and those granite monsters were coming on strong. The manual looked to be a good one. The charts were explicit.

You ever put together a Stonehenge kit? You bet your life you haven't. Tell you how it goes. First, you do a great deal of extremely intricate measuring and surveying and, if your Stonehenge is to work, this must be done with impeccable accuracy. The outer circle of stones in mine would be, according to the plans, sixty-five feet and some inches in diameter—and the stones comprising that circle would have to be placed within a tolerance of two inches.

Then you dig holes, lots of holes in the ground, and you dig these to precise depths in precisely determined locations. In these holes you stand monoliths, each of which must end up within two inches of where it's supposed to be. And, don't forget, all the tops must be level with each other. This generates within you a feeling of profound respect for some engineers who practiced their art in England thirty-five hundred years ago. Having breezed through this you come to the hard part, which is putting the lintels atop the monoliths.

I wanted to get this project off the pad by digging one hole, hauling up one stone, setting it up—so I'd have at least the beginning of this construction to look at, enjoy. I knew I could dig the holes all right, no problem, and I didn't anticipate trouble staking the layout—but when I cabled the first stone to the jeep and tried to drag it up the road I found I needed a crane and a big one at that. At the same time I realized I could also use some human-type help. I knew some girls—yes, a few girls I did know—but I didn't know any girl crane operators, not even any girls willing to spend the summer digging holes in the ground on top of Round Hill. A poverty of acquaintanceship. So I called Bill Crosby. Bill was a colleague at MIT. We were in the same boat—his wife had just left him—and I thought he might be at loose ends. He was.

"You're out of your cotton-picking mind," he said at the end of our conversation, "but I'm 'most as crazy as you are. I'll be up day after tomorrow." And he was.

Bill was one of the more brilliant lights at the computer center, and I liked him. We had written a few papers together. He was gigantic—six feet five with other di-

mensions to match—that massive figure belying the intricate brain within. It seemed appropriate he should help me with my megalithic enterprise.

We drove into Keene and I persuaded a construction outfit to rent me a crane capable of lifting weights up to fifteen tons. People are always moving granite around in New Hampshire. They didn't ask questions, except did I know how to operate one. I lied that I did—I knew Bill and I could figure it out in ten minutes of trial and error—and they said they'd deliver one in a week or ten days. Good.

That night we cut stakes and the next day we drove the jeep to the plateau-like summit of the Hill. We walked about for a time like dowsers clutching apple twigs and finally I drove a stake into the ground at what seemed to me the uniquely proper focal point of the one and only Stonehenge this side of Salisbury Plain. This wasn't in the center of that lonesome space but somewhat to the southwest—we had to leave room for the heel stone, which would be out to the northeast, more than a hundred feet outside the sarsen circle.

I had a beautiful theodolite at Round Hill, a reminder of when we had built the tennis court. It was an uncanny pleasure, erotic almost, to go to work with that gleaming instrument, a compass and a glistening tape, to lay out the plan, measure the feet. The inches. We drove the last stake just before sunset the following day. In time those markers would be replaced by somber granitic masses but just the stakes, standing silently in that cryptic configuration, said something that tingled my spine. I couldn't decode it but I got a message. So did Bill.

"This is going to be the hell of a place with the stones in," he said. "The stakes alone give me the willies. It's getting dark—let's go."

We did.

WE DIDN'T have a computer handy and the house phone wasn't an instrument that could be tied into the Center, so we did our operations research verbally over a few drinks. We decided we'd dig holes until the crane came, then—I wanted it this way and Bill went along—we'd haul up and erect one stone. I did want that. Then we'd finish the scut work of digging the other holes and carry the remaining seventy-five stones up one by one, erecting them as we did so. I wanted to do the sarsen circle first, saving the big trilithons for last—but if we did that we couldn't get the crane back outside when we'd finished. We decided to build two thirds of the sarsen circle, erect the trilithons within, then close it up. We could put up the heel stone any time.

So we dug holes until the crane arrived. The stakes disappeared, were replaced by rectangular holes

in the ground. I had thought this would be dull work and it was—until we had dug enough so the configuration reappeared, now in reverse, intaglio, more impressive, the cavities suggesting in their receptiveness the upward thrust of the monoliths to come.

Then came the crane—on a thirty-two-wheel trailer. I showed where they should put it at the north end of the field. I signed a piece of paper, ignored the crane until that trailer was out of there. Then we walked round it.

"You don't know how to work this, right?" Bill said, we circling the thing.

"Right," I said. "But we bright boys—we can learn, right?"

"Right. Big, ain't she?"

"Big. Go up the road with the boom low, though."

"Right. You want to sit up there in that cab, Tom, boy and start turning things on and off, moving levers this way and that?"

"Right," I said. We were, remember, masters of intricate computers and this crane was a tinkertoy. The total bank of controls and levers couldn't have represented more than a hundred bits of information, and we dealt every day with millions. "Right," I said, climbing into the cab.

"For Chrissake," Bill was howling, some five traumatic minutes later, "not that lever again, you baboon, the one on the right!

I had narrowly missed decapitating him with the boom and he had taken offense.

"All right, goddam, if you think you can do any better—be my guest."

I idled the deep-throated motor and clambered down to terra firma. Bill climbed up and assumed the operating position. It was a sight to see. Those massive hands fondled the controls like an organist looking for the lost chord but not pushing any keys down.

"It won't play unless you give it some input," I yelled.

Bill confidently thrust a lever forward. I darted out of the way in time—just—to avoid untimely sacrifice at the feet of caterpillar treads. Now we were both shook up. I'll skip the dialogue but let the record show that we mastered [illegible] inhuman devil. Not in five or [illegible]minutes, no, but in two or three hours. Without injury, too, except to our professional vanity, our presumed sense of the mastery of mechanisms. That came hard.

The stone nearest the road entrance was number four of the sarsen circle. We cabled it, got it up there—taking turns back-seat-driving the crane—and erected it. When the monolith was up, standing there alone, it was a sight. All those gaping holes in the ground, one now filled—that lonesome stone standing there on the plateau top of Round Hill, which had not seen such a thing before. Nor had we. Sobering. The theodolite said

we were right on the money, within half-inch tolerance.

And that was the way of that summer. There we were, two men without our women, and there were all those stones and a thing to be built and we built it. Not all of it, not that summer, but most of it. Some days we erected two of those monsters but usually just one. There were, of course, a few trips to Cambridge. I wasn't used to the absence of my tiny wife. Though her not being there brought a sense of freedom, I learned something of deprivation. In consequence I made a few trips to town despite the pull of the stones, the monument. These diversionary days came on pleasantly enough but with an underlying sense of mistaken identity and in the end I devoted the time I had before going back to work at Stonehenge—almost always with Bill's help.

We sweated and cursed over those stones, their meticulously determined placement. With one of us in the cab of the crane—we'd learned to handle the beast with a certain elan—the other at the theodolite, we spotted them to the nearest inch, mostly. Then we rammed fill around them, made a final alignment check and drove the crane down to the field to haul up the next one. Toward the end of August we'd put up more than two thirds of the sarsen circle and it was time to get to the big ones.

Now, what is found within the sarsen circle of a true Stonehenge is a horseshoe of trilithons. To build a trilithon you erect two monolithic uprights and place a massive lintel on top, no other stones touching. Then the monoliths aren't monoliths any more but you've got yourself a trilithon.

This awesome horseshoe has five trilithons, arranged with the open end toward the heel stone, off to the northeast. Their heights vary, ascending from the outer ends to the dominant central group.

Bill helped me put up the two outer ones, plus the western one next in, before he had to leave on missions of his own. He left, I could tell, with a mixture of relief and regret.

"You're still out of your mind," he said. "But so'm I. I'll help you finish it up on weekends."

We shook hands. He got into his battered Rover and drove off down the long driveway. There I was again, alone with my New Hampshire edition of Salisbury Plain. I had to get back to MIT, but I wanted to put the heel stone up first. It was doubly unique—it stood off on the slope of the hill outside all the rest of it and of all the stones it was the only one not dressed. The others were finished products but the heel stone was a natural boulder.

So I put it up, sweating back and forth from cab to theodolite, and then it was time to go back to

Cambridge. The construction outfit wanted the crane back. I told the man he could have it by the end of October but not before.

IT WAS weird going back to Cambridge, working in the lab again, teaching my two classes, living in my house by myself and always Round Hill in my mind. Every Friday I was on the road as soon as could be. By Saturday morning I was working the crane —thanking God I'd listened to Bill and that we'd dug the holes first. The leaves were falling all over the lawns. For once I couldn't be bothered and there they stayed. What my father would have thought! But he had never built a Stonehenge.

Bill helped me some weekends. But he had something going with one of the lab girls and when it came to putting up the last lintel I was alone on the summit of the now almost frightening hill.

I'd wondered about the curiosity of the locals. I hadn't wanted a lot of attention—not for the reasons which had caused my tiny wife to abandon the scene—but because I wanted this to be a private place. If Round Hill saw almost all of the horizon, then almost all of the horizon had Round Hill in view and I wondered about that. But this corner of the State was so isolated that my B.C. edifice attracted no interest whatever, as far as I could tell. There was, after all, no near view and the horizon was a long way off. Sooner or later the hunters might discover it but up to now I and it were in a world by ourselves.

It was almost dusk as I wrestled the ultimate stone into place, filling in the last gap in the lintels of the sarsen circle. Two weekends earlier I'd capped the giant uprights of the central and commanding trilithon. Now—with great delicacy, if I may say so—I lowered the last lintel into place, checked with the theodolite and rammed the fill home. For the last time I drove the now docile crane through the woods to the edge of the field. I walked back, then, to see this damn thing complete. I'd lived with it a long time but was only partly prepared for the impact. It was too much.

I wandered about inside that place while the sun went down and the hunter's moon came up. With, besides, a barred owl sending his uninvited eight-hoot cry into the night. You ever stood in a place like that? You bet your life you haven't. Forget not, friend, this wasn't an ancient ruin—interesting enough, and scary in its own way —this was something else again, just off the assembly line, complete, new, comely, ready to *go*. The first one in thirty-five hundred years.

I stayed there an hour or so before going down to the house. I left word with the construction

outfit they could pick up the crane. Next day I closed Round Hill for the winter.

III

CAMBRIDGE. I dreamed. Something had been coming up on Channel 2 I'd wanted to see—something about cybernetics a colleague was doing. Mid-November, and I'd been stay-up all hours trying to catch up. So five minutes before my colleague came on I went to sleep. I dreamed it was time for the program and there I was, head on pillow, watching the screen. Then—but weird—the video and audio swallowed themselves into the void and there was the raster all by itself, a different voice coming from the speaker.

"Thomas Gridley."

No question mark, no exclamation, just *Thomas Gridley*—a quiet statement of some basic fact of life, said like $E=mc^2$.

"Yes," I said. "Certainly." What the hell? I was Thomas Gridley. A dream is a dream, go up and down its alleys and see where it takes you. "Yes," I said again.

"Thomas Gridley," my television set said in my dream. There was no eerie glow from the tube, just the dead old raster and this voice coming from the speaker. "Thomas Gridley. You have done well."

"That's good," I answered. Should I say sir, your excellency, or what? This didn't look to be a guilt dream, and I was glad of that.

"Thomas Gridley." $x^2+y^2=$ . . . tone of voice like that. "The structure appears good. Excellent, perhaps. We thank you. You will be rewarded. The—er, trial run—will come soon."

His English was like mine, almost. I understood it all right but it seemed to come from a far place.

"Yes?"

"Before dawn on next midsummer day you will be at the place of what you call—Stonehenge." I'd planned to be there then, of course. Was I supposed to say something? "You will be there before the dawn of that day, Thomas Gridley. You will not forget."

"Not 'arf likely," I said and, having dreamed, wakened.

There was the video—there was my colleague saying silly and obvious things about cybernetics. I turned the switch and told myself I really should get to bed earlier. It didn't do to be so sleepy I couldn't stay awake waiting for a program to come on.

CONJURE up conjecture of a time. Would you believe June twenty-first?

I walked around the now hairy summit of Round Hill, telling myself I wasn't, of course, there because of a witless, unbidden dream I'd had more than six months ear-

lier and which I'd tried to forget. I simply wanted to see—and truly I did—if the sun honest-to-God would rise directly over the heel stone as I stood in the center of the sarsen circle and the horseshoe of trilithons, sighting through the entrance stones, waiting for the godhead to slice me to ribbons or bear me aloft in a chariot of strange device.

Neither of those things happened but the sun did eventually appear —just where it was supposed to. The upper limb flared into the dawn a few degrees north of the heel stone and the moment the disc cleared the horizon it stood precisely over the heel stone, dancing there in a blaze I couldn't look at. The morning was misty, dew all over everything. My feet were soaked through my sneakers and some splinter of me noted that and wished for warm dry socks, which at that moment were about a million light years away.

I wasn't sliced to ribbons nor borne aloft. I was merely presented with a moment to live with the rest of my life.

Something thrust me gently to the side of that exact center, and in that place appeared a—crystal is the simplest word but how do you describe a crystal phone booth? Conjure into your head something of that size, built of glowing blue-white slabs, yes, something you've never seen before, yet business-like, no nonsense about it, standing there like a spacebus ready to pull out as soon as the driver can close the door. All right?

From this structure, vehicle, emerged an entity who had to be, by the look of him, a Madison Avenue junior exec. Color him gray.

"Thomas Gridley," he says and there's no arguing with that.

You have the scene? This is the summit of Round Hill, a place I've grown up with, as have ancestors before me. By my own hand, with the help of Bill, now absent, I have here erected the second edition of Salisbury Plain and here I now stand in the presence of one whose suit might well be from Brooks Brothers but whose voice comes from a far place.

"Yes," I said.

"Call me—Harry," he said, consulting a timepiece on his wrist. He approached me and we touched skins. His wasn't cold, not hot, was like yours or mine. He walked and looked around my Stonehenge, cocking his eye this way and that. I was glad I'd taken the trouble to build it right. "Yes," said Harry, "if you hadn't done it right it wouldn't have—worked. You have done well, Thomas Gridley, and you will be rewarded. In due course." I followed him around the summit of Round Hill in that misty dawn. "It is good," Harry said. Again he consulted the instrument on his wrist.

"Look," I said. "I've been sur-

prised a few times in my life, but—"

"Yes," Harry interrupted. "Yes. But not like this. I understand. You have done your job well and are entitled to explanation—which you shall have. But just now there isn't much time. Three more of your minutes only."

"Will you kindly tell me—"

"Yes, certainly. But our time just now is limited—most severely." Placing his accent was like throwing a dart at the Milky Way. "I must say first—and most importantly—that you will be at this place three of your months and one day from now." The autumnal equinox, I thought. "Right," Harry said. "I must apologize for being brusque, but our time is running out. I must very shortly—leave."

I thought about the nondream I'd had back in November.

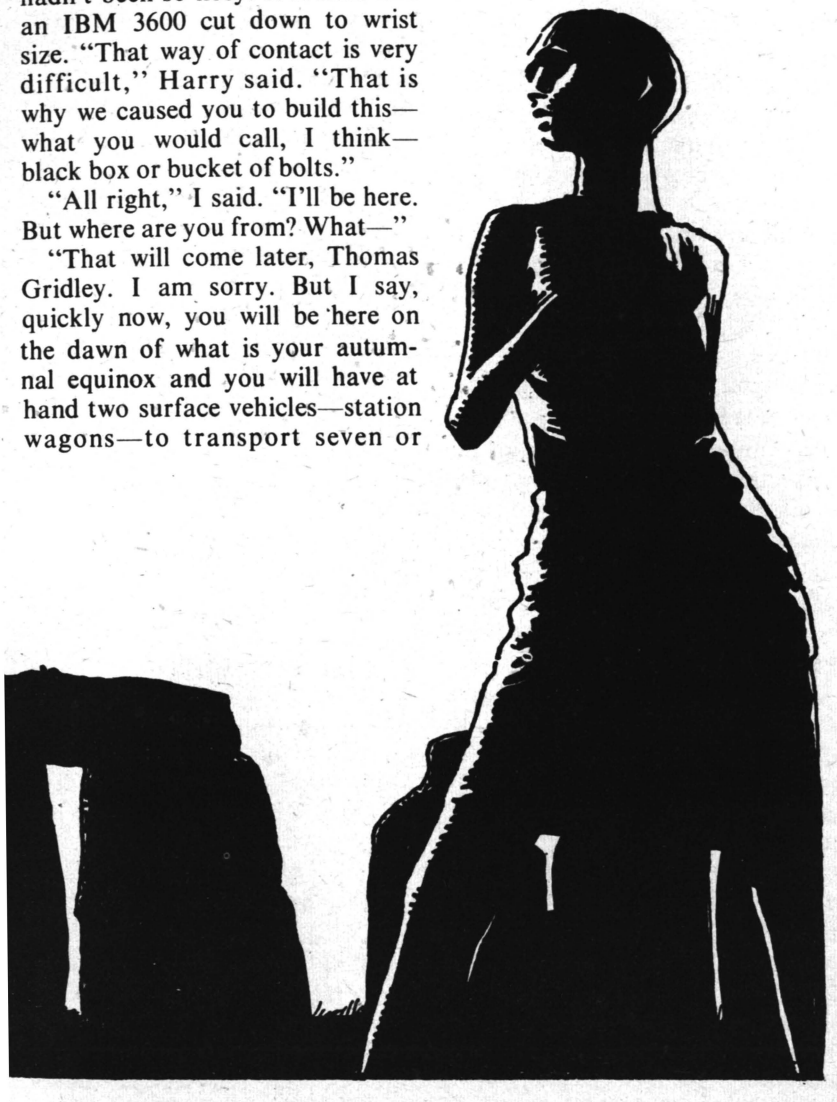
"But," I said, "you can be in touch with me whenever you want. What's the—"

"Yes, Thomas Gridley—but that is a very—expensive way to do it. This is better," Harry said. His inspection was apparently complete. He stood at the door of the crystal phone booth. He looked at the thing on his wrist again and I

craned my gaze at it. He held it so I could see and I almost wished I hadn't been so nosy. It looked like an IBM 3600 cut down to wrist size. "That way of contact is very difficult," Harry said. "That is why we caused you to build this—what you would call, I think—black box or bucket of bolts."

"All right," I said. "I'll be here. But where are you from? What—"

"That will come later, Thomas Gridley. I am sorry. But I say, quickly now, you will be here on the dawn of what is your autumnal equinox and you will have at hand two surface vehicles—station wagons—to transport seven or



eight of us from this place to other places."

"But—"

Harry slipped something into my hand.

"You will do it, Thomas Gridley." He stepped into the crystal, glancing again at that computer on his wrist. "Accept my apology. We owe you much and we are not an impolite people. Though we can do much, we are not omnipotent. We thank you, Thomas Gridley. We shall meet again at the appointed hour."

I sensed that his crystal was about to take off.

"I'll be here," I said again. "One question—" I indicated the Stonehenge with a sweep of my hand. "How does—"

"The trilithon lintels," Harry said. "They—focus the solar energy—only on certain days. You will be told later. Now I—"

. . . and I was alone on the summit of Round Hill. The lower limb of the sun was a few degrees above the horizon and had moved southward from the point where the heel stone marked the horizon. I walked around for a while, wondering whether to tell Bill—or anybody—what had happened. I didn't decide then, threw the whole ball of wax up in the air, walked down the road through the woods, then through the north field and back to the house.

Not until night did I remember that Harry had thrust something into my hand just before leaving. I retrieved it from my jacket pocket. It was a bundle of beat-up hundred-dollar bills. How had he arranged that? Anyway, he wanted two station wagons and was willing to pay for them.

Going to sleep at Round Hill that night, thinking back to the beginning of this caper, I realized with a start but also with a sense of puzzle pieces clicking into place, that this had begun when I'd bought that copy of *Out There* at Nini's Corner exactly a year ago. I wondered where my tiny ex-wife was and what she was up to. It seemed I'd gone a long way from there—from that time.

MIDSUMMER day to autumnal equinox. That's ninety one days and a few hours and that's a long time to wait. I'd plenty of work to do but my heart wasn't in it. I spent too much time looking for things to do to make the time go. None of these worked, so I went back to first principles—I studied my Stonehenge.

I chipped at some of the stones, the uprights. They were good Vermont granite, no doubt about it. Recalling Harry's final words, I took a ladder up there and banged away at the trilithon lintels, all five of them. Nothing. Nothing could I chip off, that is, with geologist's pick, nor with cold chisel and the

biggest hammer I could hold. They weren't Vermont granite, nor Vermont anything. They looked like granite but all resemblance ended there.

Fighting down a sense of sacrilege I set upon one of those lintels with a rented pneumatic hammer. Nothing. Abandoning brute force, I applied to each of those brooding stones a variety of sophisticated sensors and transducers. Nothing. I brooded some more and tried to pass the time.

I bought two baby-blue station wagons, kept them in the Round Hill parking space. Even those inoffensive automobiles gave me the treatment. Who was going where in those, to do what?

As all days must, those long ones ended, individually and collectively. Autumnal equinox. Night and day of equal length everywhere. Everywhere on earth, that is. A delicate arrangement, if you stop to think about it. And I stood in the center of my sarsen circle waiting for the sun to rise.

The first show of the solar disc was right on schedule. It rose, of course, far south of the place where the heel stone marked the horizon. I knew there was some difference of opinion among Stonehengologists as to whether the equinoxes, as well as the solstices, were consequential—well, I knew the sunrise horizon point at equinox was critical, as least as concerned those five center lintels —either that or no spacebus would appear this morning.

I wanted to make some observations of the sunrise horizon point in relation to those lintels but I knew there wouldn't be much time and I wanted another look at the phone booth, so I stood near the center of my trilithonic horseshoe, waiting. The sun cleared the horizon and there we were—there it was again. I had brought the station wagons up to the edge of the field and would have felt like an idiot child if the crystal hadn't come.

Harry emerged. I stepped forward. "Thomas Gridley," he said. "Good. The vehicles?"

I nodded toward the road through the wood.

"Good," he said again.

Behind him people—well, presumably people, people like Harry, were emerging from the crystal. Carrying bags and all, like a bunch of conventioneers getting out of the airport taxi.

There were nine of them, men and women, or should I say male and female. They looked at me curiously as they emerged. Be it understood that that space was really just about phone booth size—they couldn't all have been in there but they kept coming out. One came forward.

"Thomas," said Harry. "This is Catherine."

COLOR her in many colors, color her beautiful. Color her

All-American girl and color her plain. Splash her with the Milky Way, and say she grew up in the house next to yours in Dubuque.

I mumbled something. What do you say when you're introduced to Miss Universe for real? Our hands touching, her warm skin on mine.

Harry glanced at the sun, at the computer on his wrist.

"It is time. Catherine will tell you—many things," and he was into the crystal just before it disappeared.

Catherine disengaged her hand and confronted me with the group. She mentioned names. The eight nodded with great courtesy.

"The vehicles are near," Catherine said. "Let us go."

My intellectual clarity quotient wasn't exactly peaking at the moment, my computer being overloaded with input, but I had the wit to lead them to the two wagons waiting at the end of the road through the woods. I said the ignition keys were in the locks, the tanks were filled with gas and did they need anything.

"Thank you, Thomas Gridley," one of the men said. He then ignored me and indicated who should get into what vehicle. They divided up into two couples in each, stowed their luggage aboard and drove off. Down that dusty road through the field they went, into the driveway facing that early morning sun, then off and away.

Leaving Catherine with me.

"You're not going with them," I said, achieving some kind of statement of the year.

She stood at my side, Miss Universe, Miss Kansas, and agreed that it was so.

"But—what—"

"Yes, Thomas. We have much to speak of. But in the meantime, I'm hungry. We were so busy getting ready—even though we had so much notice. We could have—a breakfast?"

Yes, we could have a breakfast and we did. I wasn't exactly scared but I was in a state. I attended to that breakfast with a care Henri Soulé couldn't have faulted.

My mind was filled with questions about spacegates and extraterra but—sharing Catherine's breakfast, made with my own hand in my country kitchen—I felt like an adolescent on his first encounter. I was no adolescent, no, and encounters and confrontations were in my history but this was something else. Questions were in my mind, all right, and probably there were some in hers—but this was not the time. The others had gone off down the dusty driveway in the baby-blue wagons and Harry had returned to God knew where in the crystal phone booth. Catherine and I were at Round Hill alone. Would be for some time? How long? Three months? Anyway, this was not the time for questions, not that kind. This was the time to establish something

about us, expose some images of her and me upon an unseen film that might later produce a readable picture.

It took most of the day to show her around the place. She made appropriate remarks. We knew the tour was window dressing, getting to know you. I held her hand or arm now and again, going through the woods or up the Hill and each time I was twenty years back there.

IV

TOP of Round Hill, now, surrounded by monoliths, lintels, trilithons, the one and only operative Stonehenge.

"Catherine?"

"Yes?"

"You will—the others are gone—but you will stay with me for a while?"

"Yes."

"The others have a mission, missions, elsewhere? Right?" She nodded that sweet head. "Your mission is to stay with me?"

She nodded again. I was slowly beginning to wonder if I was missing something here. They had been so busy getting ready to do—what? Twinges of guilt in my mind? Questions multiplying in my head, rabbits in spring. Catherine sensed that.

She asked, "Can we swim in the pond?"

"Of course. Do you swim where you—" She was off and running.

At times I am indeed an idiot child, as then, when I wondered for a moment what she had in mind by way of bikini or whatever. I gave off running after her, watched her throw her clothes aside and dive into the pond, whose waters had not seen her like before. I joined her moments later. The water was cold but it was nice and we splashed around and swam and played. I went back, then, all the way through adolescence into something earlier, playing in a bathtub with a cousin of mine. I'd loved her with all of my four- or five-year-old heart.

The water was cold but the air was warm and we lay in the grass at the side of the pond and I left that bathtub once more behind me, shot through adolescence like a skyrocket and emerged—in due course—into a *now* of unfamiliar dimensions.

The dimensions were unfamiliar, yes, but they were agreeable—and that's another some kind of statement of the year.

I took Catherine that evening to a country roadside place. A nice one and she discovered she liked martinis. And Maine lobster. And there was so much to talk about that we didn't talk about anything, not anything important, not about the thousand questions in my head.

We talked some, later in bed. Having been that day all the way back into a bathtub with my five-

year-old girl cousin, thence through pubescence once more and then into the breach of a *now* whose parameters were as yet undetermined, it was not difficult to go back fifteen months to one of the last times I had had much to say to somebody sharing my, as they say, bed and board. Then I had asked my tiny wife what was wrong with having my own Stonehenge and that had led to the end of our attempt to maintain viable relationship. Now here I was, most improbably, with Cathy, brought here via that same Stonehenge I had discussed with my then wife—and gone off into the night, in righteous rage, to order from Novel Products. I could still hear the clang of the mail box slot.

I should have said, we talked a little, later in bed. By the time we got to talking much we were both ready for sleep. The whole thing was a dream anyway, it seemed to me. It seemed this girl by my side had been here forever but partly I knew she was from *Out There*—though she couldn't be more here. And there were all those questions.

"Catherine," I said. "Cathy?"

"Yes, Thomas?"

"You could call me Tom."

"I like Thomas."

"I like Cathy. Is that your real name or just for—here?"

We were drinking a nightcap.

"Just for here—but I like it." She yawned.

"We have three months?"

"Yes, Thomas." She came close. She was the girl next door I'd grown up with.

"Then—you go?"

Cathy didn't answer. She looked at me, turned and snuggled her back into my lap. She said she was sleepy.

"All right," I said. "Harry said you would tell me lots of things, bunches of things. Let's do just one tonight, all right?"

"All right."

"Where?"

"Where what, Thomas?"

"Tell you one thing—a woman is a woman no matter where she's

"Where are you from, Cathy? You, Harry, the others—where's home?"

"It doesn't matter," she said, stretching.

I got her point but I still wanted to know.

"Where?"

"What you call—the Pleiades. The third planet of—Maia."

"Oh." Silence for a time. "That's good," I said.

"Why, Thomas?"

"At least it's in the same galaxy."

"Yes." She laughed and yawned again. "Sleep—it is a gentle thing—"

"Beloved from pole to pole—"

Eventually we did sleep.

IN THE ordinary way three months can be a week or a year

—but this quarter of a year seemed more like a day or two. I met my commitments at the lab as best I could—which was not as difficult as might have been since Cathy had an interest and skills and understandings and ideas that made me wonder how much of her iceberg was showing. She was not an iceberg but what she showed in the lab posed a question: how much of her was beneath the surface? Once, introducing her as a visiting professor from Prague, I gave her one of my classes for a week. She was great. My students picketed for a return engagement. I let them have her for one more week, then told them the professor had been compelled to return to Prague. They booed, the unappreciative clods.

We managed to sneak a week at Martinique but mostly we lived and worked in Cambridge. Cathy answered a lot of my questions. We took care of most of them in one all-night session—after we had settled down a bit.

I had intimations of guilt and irresponsibility to deal with, so I went at those first. In or with what was I cooperating? Were Cathy's people goodies or baddies? Cathy was a goody, all right, but what were those other eight doing out there? I'd sprung the catch on what Pandora's box? Was this, for example, some kind of takeover thing?"

"No, Thomas. Oh, no."

"Then what? A missionary bit—bringing VD and Calvinism to the noble savage?"

My hackles were up a bit. She laughed, soothed me in seconds with consummate skill.

"We are not missionaries, Thomas. And you're not a savage, silly."

"Gee, thanks."

"Stop it."

Then she put together a story for me. Terra was a colony, a colony known to be in some disarray, a colony that had also gone sour earlier, millennia ago, gone from reasonably high estate back to the Stone Age. I had more or less expected this but still I was put down a bit. I had always thought of Earthmen going out there, doing the colonizing. So we're a backward colony. All right. Humility is a thing commendable, yes—but my supply was precarious.

"Not only—" Cathy put her hand on mine—"backward but wayward," she said.

That I bought without offense.

That other Stonehenge—on Salisbury Plain—that had been, a spacegate too? Yes. Cathy didn't know the *raison d'etre* for that one.

"That was long before my time," she said. "I'm glad this one wasn't."

WHY spacegates? Direct communication between *Maia Gamma* and the colonies was pos-

sible but it took time and was not easy. Where actual, physical space travel was not involved—as in the electromagnetic manipulation of the vacuum tube or transistor driving the voice coil in the speaker of my radio or TV—the problems were not beyond economic solution. But space travel itself, the long jump through the big black at a distance of (in our case) almost 500 light years, even with space warps and all, was costly. Hence the spacegate, hence Stonehenge. Why swim the Atlantic to say hello if you can pick up a phone and talk? I got the message.

"But," I said. We were sitting up in bed. She was cuter than anything. "But the five lintels, the Novel Products operation, must have—"

"Cost a lot. Yes. But now the Stonehenge is working. We can—though only four times a year—just walk from home to here." She blinked those lashes at me. "And you've made it so well it will probably work for hundreds of years. So it's a bargain."

"Cease and desist," I said, "from frivolity. You don't need to wave the lashes. Of course I made it well. That's the way I make—"

She pinched me and it took some time to get back on track—but I have said this was an all-night session.

The *Out There* magazine was a put-on, a gimmick? Yes. The only copy in existence, all arranged. So I had a collector's item. Back, then, to intimations of guilt and irresponsibility.

"So what are those eight doing out there?"

Not hard to explain, she said. Life on *Maia Gamma* had become dull. No worlds to conquer, no fun and games, no frontier. They had come to Terra looking for ideas, ways to liven things up back home.

"I will be damned," I said.

"What?"

"Advanced mother planet comes to the boondocks looking for kicks."

"Well—yes."

Simple as that.

"Well, we got lots going on," I said. "Race riots, Vietnam, famine, lots of stuff. We could export some of that."

"Don't be angry with me, Thomas Gridley." She hadn't called me that since we met. "It's not my fault."

I wasn't angry with Cathy, I don't think, but I wasn't enthralled by the picture.

"Wayward we are," I said. "Right. But mama planet is very advanced indeed and comes here looking for kicks to brighten the home scene. While lots of colonials starve, kill each other and all kinds of other things are fouled up. So why don't you spread some of the advancement around?"

"You are angry," she said. "I'll make us another drink." She did. "It's been tried. We've tried it and

you've tried it. It doesn't work. It doesn't. You know it as well as I."

"What?"

"Thomas. Five minutes ago you didn't want us being missionaries to the savages—five minutes ago. And what did your missionaries take to—Samoa, say? VD and Calvinism, as you said."

Touché, let's drop it. And I'm not mad any more." I showed her that was so. "So what do you, those eight, have in mind by way of kicks?"

"I don't know—they don't know. That's their problem, not mine. They're looking around, trying things, seeing what works. Grass, Las Vegas, acid, East Village, who knows?"

"Mama planet, highly advanced, comes to the boondocks to take stuff like that back?"

"It does seem silly, I know. But it's not my idea and life back home does seem dull." She looked at me thoughtfully. "I'm glad they brought me along—to stay with you. You're my problem."

So take me back with you, I started to say, but I was a coward.

To continue—Cathy and I weren't bored—right—but not because of any of the kick-type things they were looking for to take home. It was because of us. We wondered about that.

"I don't know," Cathy said, "maybe it's because you're from one world and I'm from another. I don't know."

We soon got onto other things.

"Why me, then? Why Thomas Gridley?"

She didn't know that either.

"But it was a good choice, the right one, wasn't it? The Stonehenge is there. You built it. Who else would have?"

"If the lintels are the only functioning parts of the device—why the sarsen circle?"

"Window dressing."

I began to get mad again—until I thought of that magnificent structure standing there on top of Round Hill. I forgave them the window dressing.

THE weeks went too fast. Every time I turned around, December twenty-first was staring over my shoulder. We were something, Cathy and I—we deserved to survive. A few days before rendezvous we were at Round Hill. There had been snow and I had put the plow onto the jeep to keep the road to Stonehenge open. We had plowed our way up and back, were having hot buttered rum in the kitchen.

I've said I was a coward and that is, alas, sometimes the case—though not always. I had been a coward in one important aspect with Cathy, though, and now it was time to summon up the blood. The matter had been implicit in many of our conversations, had been thrust somewhere into a far corner of the bed when we slept together, had hidden behind the

orange juice at breakfast, behind the twist of lemon in the martini at five. In the kitchen at Round Hill I summoned up the blood.

"Cathy," I said.

"Yes?"

I took a deep breath. "I've been thinking about this a long time and I've been afraid to bring it up. We're good for each other, right?" She nodded. "I'll make it simple. In a couple of days the spacebus comes and you go." She turned her head, looked out at the spruces and the snow. "Why can't you stay, or why can't I go with you? We should be together. We haven't talked about it but there's always been an unspoken implication or assumption that it's no go. Why?"

She turned to look at me, my Miss Universe from Dubuque.

"I cannot stay, Thomas. Much as I would want to."

Damn it to hell. She wanted to stay and that fractured me on all fracturable planes.

"Then—"

"Radiation," she said and shrugged. "Maia and Sol are similar suns but not identical. For us, three months here is about the limit. I must go back, Thomas."

"Then I'll go with you. If you want me. If our radiation is too much for you, I ought to be able to take yours like a breeze."

"I want you, Thomas. But it's not too much radiation—it's the wrong kind. Little differences in the spectrum. I don't understand it. You couldn't stay on Maia either."

"I could stay three months. Is your time like ours? Years, lifetime?"

"Close enough," Cathy said. I made more hot buttered rum. She helped me. It was good. "Yes. You could come for three months. Not this time." My eyebrows shot up. "It would have to be arranged, approved. But next time. If you wanted to. But—"

"But what?"

"It would be even more difficult then than now, wouldn't it? And now is bad enough. Unless—"

"Unless what?" I asked, not particularly liking the way my voice sounded.

Cathy evaded that. We kicked our hangup around a long time, through the rum, through dinner at the nice place by the roadside, through going to bed under the electric blanket with a fire in the fireplace. We finally got to sleep. I should have stayed awake. I had a lousy dream: my feet were in concrete in some blockhouse while Cathy, radiant as heaven, got into a distant elevator and rode up the side of some gantry, story after story, toward the passenger module of a vehicle that made Saturn V look like a bottle rocket held by a kid. The liftoff woke me. Cathy was still there and I sought warmth. But I didn't go back to sleep for a long time.

WE WALKED up toward the edge of the field where the station wagons would come. I carried Cathy's bag—she was all packed and ready to go. When I walked back down to the house I would be walking by myself.

The station wagons came about twenty minutes before sunrise. They unloaded a wild assortment of stuff they had to carry through the wood road to the Stonehenge. They had been to Vegas, all right. They had a one-armed bandit in their gear. But I didn't pay much attention to their cargo. I just stood there on top of the hill with Cathy.

Numbness has survival value at times and numb was how I felt. Spacebus due in—I looked at my watch, not Harry's computer but accurate enough—four minutes. Cathy suddenly gripped my hand, released it and left my side, spoke urgently to one of the men for almost a minute. They had some kind of argument. Then the man shrugged, opened one of the bags at his feet on the snowy ground. Cathy beckoned to me. I walked over.

"Take off your coat and jacket," she said. "Roll up your sleeve. Hurry."

This was a Cathy I hadn't seen before.

"What—"

"Now." she said. Tell you, a woman is a—

The man, whose Terran name was Fred, deftly wrapped a twentieth-century tourniquet around my upper arm and with an umpteenth-century device withdrew blood from a handy vein. No needle—but he got the blood all right.

"The pants down, Thomas, quickly."

I have said I was numb and she beat me to my pants. Fred applied a different device to my left testis, then socked both samples into his case and waited impatiently for the crystal booth. Doctors are the same all over too. I hitched up my trousers.

"Will you kindly tell me—"

"Only one minute left, Thomas. Don't count on anything, don't. But some genetic codes can be—modified. Some can't. Mine can't, not for the radiation. There's a chance yours can. I didn't want to talk about it. It's a long shot."

Then the booth was there, Harry fussing around, making them hurry. The eight shoved their stuff through the gate and Cathy had to go.

"I'll let you know," she said.

I SAID at the beginning of this *histoire* I'd tell you what I was going to do. Time now to redeem that pledge. All right, I'm going to go, that's what I'm going to do. I'm wandering around on top of Round Hill, waiting, and I won't be waiting long. Spring equinox, days and nights equal all over the

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THE FIFTH PLANET

LARRY EISENBERG

There are those who don't want you to know. Read this story—and you're a potential threat!

MY FIRST week of psychiatric residency at Piltdown Hospital was relatively uneventful. I had come there with some trepidation, for Piltdown had won the reputation hands down of being the most overcrowded mental institution in England. But the liberal use of the new tranquilizing drugs had quieted many of the most difficult patients and allowed others to be treated on an outpatient basis.

I had been hired personally by the director and owner of the hospital, Dr. Czento. My first interview was conducted on a rather friendly basis and he seemed impressed with my credentials.

"I am a wealthy man," he said at the end of the interview. "I am without children and near kin. I have my eye out for someone who might take over when I retire."

I smiled at this broad but gracious hint and I must admit that I did not take it too seriously. I picked up my letters of recommendation to return to my carrying case and accidentally knocked a fat portfolio off the desk of Dr. Czento. We both leaned forward to retrieve it and collided.

"I am sorry," I muttered, somewhat embarrassed at my clumsiness. Then I became aware that I had nicked my forehead on the corner of a pin in his lapel. It was a

beautifully formed white kid in a stylized wheat field of bright yellow enamel.

"You're bleeding," said Dr. Czento and despite my protests he insisted on cleaning the wound and covering it with a small bandaid.

"What a handsome pin you have," I said. "Is it an emblem of a psychiatric society?"

Dr. Czento's face took on an air of pride.

"Not quite," he said. "It's the insignia of a fairly distinguished group, the Tammuz Society. We dabble in real estate."

Before I left his office he had made me a firm offer and I accepted it. I went back to London and packed my bags, disposed of my flat and furniture and drove out to Piltdown in my battered Triomphe Six.

It had been agreed that I would undergo a kind of post-training analysis at the hands of Dr. Czento. The daily hour spent free-associating on his worn leather couch was fruitful but tedious and I would come away thoroughly exhausted. I liked his sense of humor and his direct manner, although I found him sometimes erratic, even unpredictable. Once I recounted a hideous dream in which I found myself in bed with Adolf Hitler.

Dr. Czento tugged at his short goatee and then muttered quietly, "Politics makes for strange bedfellows."

He urged me to visit about the hospital and become familiar with each of the patients and I set about the task quite methodically. Some were odd, some frightening, some quite pathetic but Stanley Pendleton was unique. I had heard of him long before I visited his room. He was the eccentric scion of a middle-class merchant family prominent in fine leather goods and claimed fluency in ten languages, including Sumerian.

Although he wasn't going to be my patient, I planned my visit with great care. I went to the files to examine his folder and, to my surprise, it wasn't there. The office secretary was no help and I reported the matter to Dr. Czento.

He shook his head and shrugged.

"The clerk misfiled it," he said wryly. "You'll manage without the folder."

I thought this answer was most peculiar but I didn't feel free to say so. I went directly to the second floor and knocked at Pendleton's door, waiting until the soft spoken, "Please come in," floated through the door.

WHEN I first entered Pendleton's room I was overwhelmed by the profusion of things covering the walls and the clutter of manuscripts and mechanical objects on, under and around his bed. Pendleton himself, a red-haired fellow with freckled complexion, waved me in with good humor.

I was quite nervous at first and pulled my pipe out of my breast pocket to give play to my hands. Pendleton smiled and his eyes moved for just a single moment to the sign high up on the north wall which forbade smoking. I stuffed the pipe back into my pocket. And then, for the first time, I noticed a most extraordinary piece of apparatus. In that curiously aware manner of his, Pendleton followed my gaze without seeming to.

"It is intriguing, isn't it?" he said.

He reached over and disentangled it from the surrounding clutter and handed it to me. I'm not much good with mechanical systems but even I could tell that it was a fantastically ingenious construction.

"What on earth is it?"

"An orrery," said Pendleton proudly. "One that I made myself. If you turn this handle here, each of these little fellows—which represent different planets—moves about the sun at the proper relative speed. The scale of sizes isn't correct but the distances and phases of orbits are. And I've left out the satellites. Otherwise it's quite accurate."

"Beautifully made," I said. "It must have taken you months to do."

"Two years," said Pendleton.

I had been counting the little planetary balls and there were ten. I wondered if it would be harmful to point out this error to Pendleton. And then I decided in the interest of honesty, I ought to.

"You've one planet too many," I said.

Pendleton's smile died.

"So you've noticed it, have you? Our great modern astronomers have no real notion of the origin of Ceres and the other two thousand asteroids between Mars and Jupiter. But I know."

I became somewhat tense. Clearly I had uncovered one of Pendleton's fixations and I had no desire at this first visit to push the matter.

"I'm sure you do," I said.

Pendleton seemed to grow very angry with me. His eyes flamed and the veins of his neck became distended.

"For God's sake, man," he snapped, "don't humor me. You don't believe a bit of it and you damned well know it. But I have unimpeachable sources that give firm proof of what I'm saying."

His brow furrowed.

"I oughtn't tell you," he muttered to himself. "I've tried to tell Czento and he thinks I'm delusional and won't listen. Still, I suppose one ought not to give up trying even if it touches on the elements of my supposed psychosis."

I assumed my most benign expression.

"I'll honor your trust, of course," I said.

He took the orrery out of my

hands and placed it back on the floor.

"TWO years ago," began Pendleton, "I received an urgent summons to the oil-soaked kingdom of Nahrum in the Middle East. It seemed that the Sheikh of Nahrum had come upon a clay tablet in early Sumerian which he wanted me to decipher and translate. As you may have heard, I am the world's foremost expert in Sumerian.

"I arrived in short order, not anticipating a stay of more than a few weeks. I was given the most lavish suite in the Sheikh's own palace, was washed and scented by a bevy of lovely women and brought to the Throne Room. The Sheikh himself was a small man with intense black eyes and a large curved nose that was the pride of his people. He told me that he was the direct descendant of Tammuz and related the prehistory of his peoples. It was clear that he took great delight in the milennia-old culture of Nahrum."

"Did you say Tammuz?" I asked.

He seemed annoyed at the interruption.

"An ancient divinity of the region," he said.

I decided not to pursue the point.

"After a while," Pendleton resumed his account, "the Sheikh got down to business. 'One of my people, a shepherd by trade,' said the Sheikh, 'came across the cave in the mountains to the north of Wadi-El-Zur. As you know, our climate is extremely dry and acts as an excellent preservative.'

" 'Sounds a good deal like the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls,' I said warily.

" 'That may be,' said the Sheikh quietly. 'But I have reason to believe that this tablet antedates the Scrolls by a thousand years.'

"I was skeptical, of course. And yet these words fired my imagination. The Sheikh clapped his hands and a large glass case was brought in by four servants who staggered under the load. At once my heart began to pound like a triphammer. The tablet was made of an unusual clay—like nothing I had seen before. But most exciting were the blocks of cuneiform letters. If the writing was Sumerian—it was a variety unknown to the world.

" 'What do you think of my tablet?' asked the Sheikh, pleased at my reaction.

" 'It's fascinating. But I have to examine it more closely before I can make accurate comments.'

" 'Certainly,' said the Sheikh. 'For the time being, the tablet is yours. I will be forced, of course, to post additional guards about your person but only as a precaution against the accidental loss of the tablet.'

" 'I shan't be offended,' I said.

"The Sheikh ran his fingers

through his thick black beard.

" 'If you can correctly translate the contents of this tablet,' he said, 'I am prepared to pay you the sum of five thousand British pounds.'

"It was a princely offer and I was taken aback but I made no comment. I took the tablet to my room and set about translating it. With all due modesty I must admit that the language itself was the least of my troubles. It seemed at first to be a precursor of one of the five known Sumerian dialects, although I now think it was not. Within four or five weeks I had worked it out almost in its entirety. But interpreting the contents was most baffling.

"At first it seemed that I had a scientific treatise on my hands, one concerned with astronomical matters of extraordinary sophistication. Although I knew the basic sciences, I was badly equipped for this material. I began painstakingly to work through the translation—believe me, I had the devil's own job working on the physics.

"I spent most of each evening and part of the night translating. In five months' time the work was complete and I read my translation to the Sheikh. He seemed annoyed and downright skeptical of what I told him. There were references to the astronomical observatory of Bahkrar, the legendary capital of Nahrum, which is now just a dirty pastoral village. Apparently the most careful and detailed astronomical observations were carried out there—all, of course, with the naked eye.

"I notice," said Pendleton, "that you're fighting to suppress a look of disbelief and I really don't blame you. It does sound like a made-up tale. But now comes the really startling part. It seems that the astronomers made their observations roughly one thousand years before the birth of Christ. They were terribly concerned because of perturbations taking place in the planetary orbits, not to mention those of the moon. There were also violent tidal fluctuations that could not be explained. And yet, coincident with these strange effects, it was noticed that the fifth planet had begun to dim, as if it were growing smaller with time.

"There were also references to the Lord of Life and Death and his dominion over all the heavens. The Sheikh seemed to grow increasingly annoyed with me and then, to my intense surprise, he had a second tablet brought out. The Sumerian was the same but the clay seemed less ancient. I studied this new material and found that the style had changed. There was a description of how the fifth planet was being removed from the skies and replaced with an enormously dense spheroid of the proper mass, orbital velocity, angular momentum and other physical properties."

At this point Pendleton suddenly broke off his narration.

"What happened next?" I asked encouragingly.

PENDLETON shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I had some difficulty with the next sections and the Sheikh flew into a rage. His dark skin turned white as the sands surrounding his palace. He muttered something about Tammuz, then jumped to his feet and shouted that I was an idiot, incompetent at translating Sumerian and that he would not give me a single penny, let alone my promised five thousand pounds."

"Normally I'm the mildest of men," said Pendleton. "But this insulting, callous behavior inflamed me. I struck the Sheikh right across his enormous nose, breaking it and staining his ceremonial robes with wine-dark blood. It was *lèse-majesté* and I knew that I was in the soup as soon as I'd done the deed. I was in danger of execution—perhaps with luck, a long prison term. Fortunately the Foreign Service intervened. The British government took me into custody after persuasion convinced the Sheikh that I should be transferred to Piltdown Hospital."

"But why Piltdown? Why a mental hospital?"

Pendleton smiled soberly.

"There was no other course, I was told. The Sheikh couldn't tolerate being struck without severe reprisal unless I was legally insane. Ergo, I was forced to accept the fiction of insanity. I was devilishly unhappy at first and kicked up quite a row. But I've been treated with a fair degree of freedom here and promised that I'd be released in two years. March thirtieth of the coming year is my departure date."

I must admit that the entire narrative had been delivered with such plausibility that almost anyone could have been taken in. I say almost because one of the cardinal phenomena in *paranoia* is the air of complete truth that often surrounds the tale. Nevertheless I felt impelled to ask one more question.

"Did you suggest any sort of explanation of who or what might be removing the fifth planet to the Sheikh?"

For the first time that afternoon Pendleton fell silent. He sat there quietly, the criss-crossed shadows of the window blinds slanting across his chest. For a long time he seemed uncertain of what to say.

"I did offer a theory," said Pendleton at last. "And since that time I've read and observed carefully right here at the hospital—and I'm fully convinced that my earlier conjectures were correct. But I'm afraid of antagonizing them again. Who knows what they would do to me?"

They?

A shiver of realization coursed up my spine, a sensation I had experienced before only during my childhood. The thread had begun to unravel as, in fact, it always does in situations of this sort.

"Come on," I said firmly. "Whom are you talking about? Surely you're perfectly safe here at Piltdown?"

"Am I?" He smoothed the folds in his checkered robe. "At any rate, I've nothing more to say."

It was clear that the dialogue was over and although I had another question or two to ask, I withdrew. I was in a state of high excitement, almost turmoil. I went at once to Dr. Czento's office to see if we might discuss the Pendleton story. I was elated to find that he was available to me.

As I detailed my visit to Pendleton and the story of the two tablets, Dr. Czento's lips twitched almost as though he were on the verge of a smile. And yet, paradoxically, I sensed a fierce inner tension within him. Then I noticed that he was not wearing his Tammuz pin.

"Perhaps I ought to write out my evaluation of the visit with Pendleton," I said, "so that you can read it at your leisure."

"No," said Dr. Czento firmly. "I do not wish a written report."

"Pendleton says that he's to be released on March thirtieth, next."

Dr. Czento shook his head.

"I have talked to Pendleton many times. He is severely paranoid, delusional. In short he's as mad as they come with a severe and unpredictable temper. Perhaps he will be released. His family is wealthy, influential. If they insist on getting him released on their own responsibility there's nothing I can do."

"I suppose not," I said.

I realized from the way Dr. Czento bent over his papers that he wanted me to leave.

I SOUGHT out other patients during the days that followed. But I couldn't fully concentrate on what I was doing. Mr. Turner, an elderly, senile country squire with a bulbous nose and pronounced anti-Semitic tendencies loved to browse through the psychiatric literature. He gave me a nasty turn one day when he suggested that Jews were prone to hebephrenia. I was able to weather that remark but I still couldn't get my mind off Pendleton and his orrery.

Our library was rich in popular scientific works and I selected one on modern astronomy. The chapter on the origin of the solar system was amusing because I noted that many authorities conjectured that Ceres and her sister asteroids were fragments of what had once been a fifth planet. How simple if that were the basis of Pendleton's obsession. Later, during my morning sessions with Dr. Czento, I

found myself alluding now and then to the orrery.

Dr. Czento, to my surprise, was suddenly hard put to throttle his anger.

"I must say," he began testily, "that you are showing an obsessive interest in this case. I suggest that you drop it at once. I believe that in some subtle way, you are actually using it as a form of unconscious resistance to me by identifying yourself with this patient."

And I was shocked at how nearly right he was. But what in Dr. Czento was I resisting?

DURING the following week Dr. Czento was in London, attending an International Psychiatric Congress and it occurred to me that perhaps the time was ripe to end my preoccupation with Pendleton. If only I could pursue my questioning a bit further. I tussled a while with the ethics of the matter. And then I decided to hell with them.

I found Pendleton in his room, the clutter considerably reduced.

"I'm getting ready to leave, you see," he told me, his face aglow with pleasure.

"I'm very happy for you," I said soberly. "I haven't forgotten our conversation and I wish you had completed your story for me."

"But I did," said Pendleton warily.

"Not really. You never did tell me how your fifth planet came to be in its current fragmented state."

Pendleton looked at me directly as though he wanted to peer into and beyond my eyes.

"Can I really trust you?"

I exploded.

"Good God—if you can't trust a British psychiatrist, whom can you trust?"

He smiled wryly.

"I wish you were right," he said. "The fact is, I'm willing to tell you. But I'm afraid it might do you more harm than good."

"I'll chance it."

He shrugged.

"I believe that whoever was removing the fifth planet bungled the job. The result was the fragmenting we now see in the heavens. I daresay there were other terrible effects here on Earth—earthquakes, perhaps a flood."

"Why were you afraid to tell me this?"

He bent over and picked up his orrery, cranking its handle and sending the ten little balls about his model sun.

"There are those who don't want you to know," he said. "And now, whether you like it or not, you're no longer a spectator. You're a potential threat. I don't know why. I can't really tell you what it's all about. But if in a tiny recess of your mind you believe my story—take care."

It was finally clear to me that I had really played the fool. Perhaps, as Dr. Czento had suggested,

my involvement was psychiatric defiance. The story was bizarre but classical in its veiled hints of villains and threats. I blushed for shame, just thinking about my gullibility.

ON DR. CZENTO'S return a gala modern art festival was held at Piltdown. Many unusual paintings and bizarre sculptures, some fashioned by patients, were exhibited. Dr. Czento, who personally supervised the entire affair, had an artist flown in from Paris. He created the most amazing painting by firing real bullets into bladders of paint that were suspended over a canvas. The *pièce de résistance* was a wonderful machine, aglitter with shining gears and motor-driven axe blades, which was set into motion by pushing a button and thereupon proceeded to demolish itself in a grinding clatter of metal in the acrid smoke of short-circuited wires. Dr. Czento clapped his hands with delight. I looked about for Pendleton but, reclusive as ever, he hadn't even bothered to come to the show.

The following day Pendleton was found dead in his room. There was no sign of violence and, indeed, it seemed to be a clear case heart failure. Dr. Czento himself signed the papers certifying cause of death. Pendleton's father came out to get the body. He was a tall, lean man, looking a good deal like his son. His eyes were swollen when he stopped by to see me.

"My son wrote about you. He thought you were a good sort. He wanted you to have this if anything happened to him."

He thrust the orrery into my hands. I was at a loss for something appropriate to say.

"I liked your son," I finally managed.

"He was a good lad," said Mr. Pendleton. "We were planning on taking him home shortly. How long it would last we couldn't tell. As you probably know, he has been in mental institutions many times before."

"Yes, I know," I lied.

But I hadn't known and I wondered why Dr. Czento hadn't told me.

Dr. Czento accompanied Mr. Pendleton to the railroad station. I walked about the grounds, carrying the orrery with me but unable to look at it. Then, on some mad whim, I decided to get my hands on Pendleton's file. I went to Dr. Czento's secretary and told her that, before leaving for the station, he had asked me to look at Pendleton's case history.

She seemed genuinely preplexed.

"But I don't know where that file is," she said. "I believe that Dr. Czento keeps it locked up in his office. You'll simply have to wait until he returns."

I couldn't. At lunch time, when she had left the office, I opened

Dr. Czento's door with a flat plastic pocket calendar. The drawn blinds and the musty odor of stale cigar smoke lent a rather otherworldly character to the room but I shook off my apprehensions and went poking about. The door lock had been simple but the desk drawers were beyond my amateur burglar skills. There was an elegant walnut cabinet between the picture windows. I walked over to it and, without much hope, slipped my calendar between the doors. There was a faint click and the doors fell open. But all I saw was an exquisite set of wine glasses and a decanter three quarters full with what looked and smelled like tawny port. I had lifted the stopper and the bouquet made my mouth water. As I started to replace the stopper I thought I heard a noise outside the office and the decanter shot out of my agitated hands, falling to the carpet. My luck was mixed. The decanter was unbroken but the carpet was stained and all of the port was gone. I went to the door and peered out but saw no one. I hastily went to Dr. Czento's desk, gathered up facial tissues and sponged up as much of the mess as I could.

What followed had nightmarish aspects. I knew that within moments either Dr. Czento or his secretary might return. I ran to my room, dug out my own prize bottle of tawny port and raced back to Dr. Czento's office. I poured the port back into the decanter up to what seemed the right level, moved a waste basket over the sticky residue on the carpet, closed the cabinet and just avoided running into the secretary.

THE afternoon went badly. I could focus on nothing. I had botched things in the most clumsy manner and had still learned nothing about Pendleton's background.

The next morning I tried to get out of my analytic session but Dr. Czento would have none of it. I lay uncomfortably on the didactic couch, unable to say a word. After several moments Dr. Czento spoke to me.

"Are you still thinking of Pendleton?" he asked softly.

"I am," I admitted and then everything burst out of me.

I told him of my last meeting with Pendleton, the remarks of Pendleton's father and the suspicions that had been aroused in my mind by Pendleton's death. But I couldn't bring myself to tell him how I had searched his office.

Dr. Czento sighed. He got up and walked to one of his windows and looked out through a small opening in the blinds. Then he turned around and looked at me.

"Get up off the couch," he said. "No more therapy today."

"I'm concerned about you," he said as I came forward to take a seat beside his desk. "I've begun to think of you as my eventual suc-

cessor. Your flair for this field is undeniable. But you've become obsessive about poor Pendleton."

"His death shocked me terribly," I said. "Besides, there was a persuasive quality to his delusions."

"Nonsense," said Dr. Czento. "Pendleton was as psychotic as they come. His father told you how often he has been in hospitals. Besides, you've only to look at his files."

He reached down and unlocked one of his desk drawers, withdrawing a folder. He selected a sheaf of documents and pushed them toward me. I went through each one carefully.

"You see what his previous medical history was?" said Dr. Czento. "He was constantly in and out of psychotic episodes. He had two years at Roundtree, three at Five Crossings and so on."

"Yes," I said. "It's all here. But might I look at the rest of his folder?"

"You still have doubts?"

Dr. Czento sighed and passed the folder to me. Then he stood up, walked to his cabinet and inserted a small silver key in the lock. I was terrified that he would discover what had happened but he didn't appear to notice the faint dark patch on the rug. When the doors swung open he removed the decanter and two glasses.

"Come, have some of my port," he said and it was clear that he earnestly wanted my friendship. I reached forward and took the glass of golden wine. It went down like the delight I knew it was.

"Marvelous stuff, isn't it?" said Dr. Czento. As yet he hadn't sipped from his own glass and I held my breath. "Go ahead," he said. "Read the rest of Pendleton's folder."

He refilled my glass. I drank and read on through the numerous sheets. One was an official piece of stationery of the Kingdom of Nahrum. Dr. Czento saw me stiffen.

"There's no contradiction," he said, "in noting that a man was mad and still agreeing that he might stumble on a kernel of truth."

He withdrew his wallet and carefully fished out the enameled pin with the white kid.

"You asked me once about the Tammuz Society," he said. "Do you know anything about it?"

"I don't know about the society," I said. "But I have read about Tammuz. He was a Sumerian god of agriculture and flocks, wasn't he?"

Dr. Czento chuckled.

"You might put it that way. I tend to see him as the first divinity of real estate."

I read on in the folder. There was a detailed official account of Pendleton's visit to Nahrum.

"Then Pendleton did do a translation for the Sheikh," I muttered.

"After a fashion," said Dr. Czento. "Pendleton was not really an expert in Sumerian. He was rather spotty in his knowledge despite his pretense to the contrary. Only his father's intervention kept him in Eton. I grant you, the Sheikh did lie to him. He knew what was on the first tablet and was only testing Pendleton's skill at translating Sumerian. When Pendleton botched the job he became justifiably outraged. Being unstable, Pendleton did hit the Shiekh and break his royal nose."

DR. CZENTO took out one of his elegant, slim Havana cigars and cut away the tip. He lit up and sent clouds of aromatic smoke in my direction.

"The Sheikh," he said, "considers himself an actual descendant of the god Tammuz and the first tablet contains his title to all of the heavenly bodies as well as the account Pendleton mentioned. The second tablet told how the fifth planet was accidentally destroyed by extraterrestrial bunglers."

"What a lot of nonsense," I said.

Dr. Czento's smile died away.

"Not at all," he said. "At the end of the second tablet was a statement giving permission to this same extraterrestrial group, the Sentients, to dismantle Mars. The agreement is made with the Tammuz Society of which the Sheikh is a director. But he violated his trust, just to find out whether he was getting his proper share of the gold."

"Gold?"

"Mars is rich in gold," said Dr. Czento. "The metal itself is not useful and any advanced society would much rather have the radioactive ores in which it abounds. If those who hold title to Mars allow a second party to remove said ores, provided they deliver the gold as payment, who could blame them?"

"Ridiculous," I said. "How could men claim to own a planet?"

"Is it less ridiculous for men to claim ownership of a mountain?" said Dr. Czento.

I shook my head.

"Is anything wrong?" asked Dr. Czento. He did not wait for an answer but went on. "The Sentients botched the job some three thousand years ago. They lost their finest scientists and most advanced spaceships when the fifth planet disintegrated. They gave up their exploration in our Solar system and went elsewhere. But now they've exhausted other sources and have been forced to come back for another try. Fortunately their technology is vastly improved and when Mars is replaced, bit by bit, with an ultradense core of inert material, there is little danger of mishap."

"How did the Sentients contact your society?"

"Reports of space vehicles land-

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TIME PIECE

JOE HALDEMAN

Live fast and you live forever.
But what do you do with the time?

THEY say you've got a fifty-fifty chance every time you go out. That makes it one chance in eight that you'll live to see your third furlough—the one I'm on now.

Somehow the odds don't keep people from trying to join. Even though not one in a thousand gets through the years of training and examination there's no shortage of cannon fodder. And that's what

we are. The most expensive, best trained cannon fodder in the history of warfare. Human history, anyhow—who can speak for the enemy?

I don't even call them snails any more. And the thought of them doesn't trigger that instant flash of revulsion, hate, kill-fever—the psyconditioning wore off years ago and they didn't renew it. They've stopped doing it to new recruits—no percentage in berserkers. I was a wild one the first couple of trips, though.

Strange world I've come back to. Gets stranger every time, of course. Even sitting here in a bogus twenty-first-century bar, where everyone speaks Basic and there's real wood on the walls and peaceful holograms instead of plugins and music made by men.

But it leaks through. I don't pay by card, let alone by coin. The credit register monitors my alpha waves and communicates with the bank every time I order a drink. And, in case I've become addicted to more modern vices, there's a feelie matrix—(modified to look like an old-fashioned visiphone booth)—where I can have my brain stimulated directly. Thanks but no thanks—always get this picture of dirty hands inside my skull, kneading, rubbing. Like when you get too close to the enemy and they open a hole in your mind and you go spinning down and down and never reach the bottom till you die. I almost got too close last time.

WE WERE on a three-man reconnaissance patrol, bound for a hellish little planet circling the red giant Antares. Now red giant stars don't form planets in the natural course of things, so we had ignored Antares. We control most of the space around it, so why waste time in idle exploration? But the enemy had detected this little planet—God knows how—and about ten years after they landed there we monitored their presence—gravity waves from the ships' braking—and my team was assigned the reconnaissance. Three men against many enemy. But we weren't supposed to fight if we could help it—just take a look around, record what we saw and leave a message beacon on our way back, about a light-year out from Antares. Theoretically the troopship following us by a month will pick up the information and use it to put together a battle plan. Actually, three more recon patrols precede the troopship at one-week intervals; insurance against the high probability that any one patrol will be caught and destroyed. As the first team in, we had a pretty good chance of success but the ones to follow would be in trouble if we didn't get back out. We'd be past caring, of course. The enemy doesn't take prisoners.

We came out of lightspeed close to Antares, so the bulk of the star would mask our braking disturbance, and inserted the ship in a hyperbolic orbit that would get us to the planet—Anomaly, we were calling it—in about twenty hours.

"Anomaly must be tropical over most of its surface." Fred Sykes, nominally the navigator, was talking to himself and at the two of us while he analyzed the observational date rolling out of the ship's computer. "No axial tilt to speak of. Looks like they've got a big outpost near the equator, lots of electromagnetic noise there. Figures—the goddamn snails like it hot. We requisitioned hot weather gear, didn't we, Pancho?"

Pancho, that's me. "No, Fred, all we got is parkas and snowshoes." My full name is Francisco Jesus Mario Juan-José Hugo de Naranja and I outrank Fred, so he should at least call me Francisco. But I've never pressed the point. Pancho it is. Fred looked up from his figures and the rookie, Paul Spiegel, almost dropped the pistol he was cleaning.

"But why—" Paul was staring. "We knew the planet was probably earthlike if the enemy wanted it. Are we gonna have to go tromping around in spacesuits?"

"No, Paul, our esteemed leader and supply clerk is being sarcastic again." Fred turned back to his computer. "Explain, Pancho."

"No, that's all right." Paul reddened a bit and also went back to his job. "I remember you complaining about having to take the standard survival issue."

"Well, I was right then and I'm doubly right now. We've got parkas back there—and snowshoes and a complete terranorm environment recirculator—and everything else we could possibly need to walk around in comfort on every planet known to man—*Dios*! That issue masses over a metric ton, more than a bevawatt laser. A laser we could use but crampons and pith helmets and elephant guns—"

Paul looked up again. "Elephant guns?" He was kind of a freak about weapons.

"Yeah."

"That's a gun that shoots ele- -ts?"

-ht. An elephant gun shoots elephants."

"Is that some new kind of ammunition?"

I sighed, I really sighed. You'd think I'd get used to this after twelve years—or four hundred—in the service.

"No, kid, elephants were animals, big gray wrinkled animals with horns. You used an elephant gun to shoot at them.

"When I was a kid in Rioplex, back in the twenty-first, we had an elephant in the zoo—used to go down in the summer and feed him synthos through the bars. He had a long nose like a fat tail."

"What planet were they from?"

IT WENT on like that for a while. It was Paul's first trip out and he hadn't yet gotten used to the idea that most of his compatriots were genuine antiques, preserved by the natural process of relativity. At lightspeed you age imperceptibly, while the universe's calendar adds a year for every light-year you travel. Seems like cheating. But it catches up with you eventually.

We hit the atmosphere of Anomaly at an oblique angle and came in passive, like a natural meteor, until we got to a position where we were reasonably safe from detection—(just above the south polar sea)—then blasted briefly to slow down and splash. Then we spent a few hours in slow flight at sea level, sneaking up on the settlement.

It appeared to be the only enemy camp on the whole planet, which was typical. Strange for a spacefaring, aggressive race to be so uncurious about planetary environments but they always seemed to settle in one place and simply expand radially. And they do expand—their reproduction rate makes rabbits look sick. Starting from one colony they can fill a world in two hundred years. After that they control their population by infantiphage and stellar migration.

We landed about a hundred kilometers from the edge of their colony, around local midnight. While we were outside, setting up the espionage monitors. The ship camouflaged itself to match the surrounding jungle optically, thermally, magnetically and so forth —we were careful not to get too far from the ship; it can be a bit hard to find even when you know where to look.

The monitors were to be fed information from flea-sized flying robots, each with a special purpose, and it would take several hours for them to wing into the city. We posted a one-man guard, one-hour shifts; the other two inside the ship until the monitors started clicking. But they never started.

Being senior, I took the first watch. A spooky hour, the jungle ...ing dark little noises all around—but nothing happened. Fred stood the next hour, while I put on the deepsleep helmet. Figured I'd need the sleep—once data started coming in, I'd have to be alert for about forty hours. We could all sleep for a week once we got off Anomaly and hit lightspeed.

Getting yanked out of deepsleep is like an ice-water douche to the brain. The black nothing dissolved and there was Fred a foot away from my face, yelling my name over and over. As soon as he saw my eyes open he ran for the open lock, priming his laser on the way

(definitely against regulations, could hole the hull that way—I started to say something but couldn't form the words). Anyhow, what were we doing in free fall? And how could Fred run across the deck like that while we were in free fall?

Then my mind started coming back into focus and I could analyze the sinking, spinning sensation —not free-fall vertigo at all but what we used to call snail-fever. The enemy was very near. Crackling combat sounds drifted in from outdoors.

I SAT up on the cot and tried to sort everything out and get going. After long seconds my arms and legs got the idea. I struggled up and staggered to the weapons cabinet. Both the lasers were gone and the only heavy weapon left was a grenade launcher. I lifted it from the rack and made my way to the lock.

Had I been thinking straight I would've just sealed the lock and blasted—the presence in my mind was so strong that I should have known there were too many enemy, too close, for us to stand and fight. But no one can think while his brain is being curdled that way. I fought the urge just to let go and fall down that hole in my mind and slid along the wall to the airlock. By the time I got there my teeth were chattering uncontrollably and my face was wet with tears.

Looking out, I saw a smoldering gray lump that must have been Paul. Fred was screaming like a madman, fanning the laser on full over a 180-degree arc. There couldn't have been anything alive in front of him—the jungle was a lurid curtain of fire—but a bolt lanced in from behind and Fred dissolved in a pink spray of blood and flesh.

I saw them then, moving fast for snails, shambling in over thick brush toward the ship. Through the swirling fog in my brain I realized that all they could see was the light pouring through the open lock and me silhouetted in front. I tried to raise the launcher but couldn't—there were too many, less than a hundred meters away, and the inky whirlpool in my mind just got bigger and bigger and I could feel myself slipping into it.

The first bolt missed me, hit the ship and it shuddered, ringing like a huge cathedral bell. The second one didn't miss. It took off my left hand just above the wrist, roasting what remained of my left arm. In a spastic lurch I jerked up the launcher and yanked the trigger, holding it down while dozens of microton grenades popped out and danced their blinding way up to and across the enemy's ragged line. Dazzled, blind, I stepped back and stumbled over the med-robot, which had smelled blood and was

eager to do its duty. On top of the machine was a switch that some clown had labeled Emergency Exit. I slapped it and as the lock clanged shut the atomic engines muttered—growled—screamed into life and a ten-gravity hand slid me across the blood-slick deck and slammed me back against the rear-wall padding. I felt ribs crack and something in my neck snapped. As the world squeezed away I knew I was a dead man but it was better to die in a bed of pain than to just fall and fall.

I WOKE to the less-than-tender ministrations of the med-robot, who had bound the stump of my left arm and was wrapping my chest in plastiseal. My body from forehead to shins ached from radiation burns, earned by facing the grenades' bursts. The nonexistent hand seemed to writhe in painful, impossible contortions. But numbing anaesthetic kept the pain at a bearable distance and there was an empty space in my mind where the snail-fever had been. A gentle hum told me we were at lightspeed—things could have been one flaming hell of a lot worse. Fred and Paul were gone but that just moved them from the small roster of live friends to the long list of dead ones.

A warning light on the control panel was blinking stroboscopically. We were getting near the hole—excuse me, "relativistic discontinuity—" and the computer had to know where I wanted to go. You go in one hole at lightspeed and you'll come out of some other hole. Which hole you pop out of depends on your angle of approach. Since they say that only about one per cent of the holes are charted—if you go in at any old angle you're likely to wind up in Podunk, on the other side of the galaxy, with no ticket back.

I just let the light blink, though. If it doesn't get any response from the crew the ship programs itself automatically to go to Heaven, the hospital world, which was fine with me. They cure what ails you and then set you loose with a compatible soldier of the opposite sex, for an extended vacation on that beautiful world. Someone once told me that there were over a hundred worlds named Hell—but there's only one Heaven. Clean and pretty from the tropical seas to the subpolar pine forests. Like Earth, before we strangled it.

A bell had been ringing all the time I'd been conscious, but I didn't notice it until it stopped. That meant the information capsule had been jettisoned, for what little it was worth. Planetary information, very few espionage-type data; just a tape for the battle. Be rough for the next recon patrol.

I fell asleep knowing I'd wake up on the other side of the hole, bound for Heaven.

I PICK up my drink—an old-fashioned old-fashioned—with my new left hand. The glass should feel right, slick but slightly tacky with the cold-water sweat, fine ridges molded into the plastic. But there's something missing, hard to describe, a memory stored in your fingertips that a new growth has to learn all over again. It's a strange feeling but in a way it seems to fit with this crazy Earth, where I sit in my alcoholic time capsule and, if I squint with my mind, can almost believe I'm back in the twenty-first.

I pay for the nostalgia—wood and natural food, human bartender and waitress who are also linguists, it all comes dear—but I can afford it if anyone can. Compound interest, of course. Over four centuries have passed on Earth since I first went off to the war and my salary's been deposited at the Chase-Manhattan Credit Union ever since. They're glad to do it—when I die they keep the interest and the principal reverts to the government. Heirs? I had one illegitimate son—conceived on my first furlough—and when I last saw his gravestone, the words on it had washed away to barely legible dimples.

But I'm still a young man. At lightspeed you age imperceptibly while the universe winds down outside and the time you spend going from hole to hole is almost incalculably small. I've spent most of the past half-millennium at lightspeed, the rest of the time usually convalescing from battle. My records show that I've logged a trifle under one year in actual combat. Not bad for 438 years' pay. Since I first lifted off I've aged twelve years by my biological calendar. Complicated, isn't it—next month I'll be thirty, 456 years after my date of birth.

But one week before my birthday, I've got to decide whether to try my luck for the fourth trip out, or just collect my money and retire. No choice, really. I've got to go back.

It's something they didn't emphasize when I joined up, back in 2088—maybe it wasn't so obvious back then, the war only decades old—but they can't hide it nowadays. Too many old vets wandering around like animated museum pieces.

I could cash in my chips and live in luxury for another hundred years. But it would get mighty lonely. Can't talk to anybody on Earth but other vets and people who've gone to the trouble to learn Basic.

Everyone in space speaks Basic. You can't lift off until you've become fluent. Otherwise, how could you take orders from a fellow who should have been food for worms centuries before your grandfather was born? Especially since language melted down into one Language.

I'm tone-deaf. Can't speak or understand Language, where one word has ten or fifteen different meanings, depending on pitch. To me it sounds like puppydogs yapping. Same words over and over—no sense.

Of course, when I first lived on Earth there were all sorts of languages, not just one Language. I spoke Spanish—still do when I can find some other old codger who remembers—and learned English—that was before they called it Basic—in military training. Learned it damn well, too. If I wasn't tone-deaf I'd crack Language and maybe I'd settle down.

MAYBE not. The people are so strange and it's not just the Language. Mindplugs and homosex and voluntary suicide. Walking around with nothing on but paint and powder. We had Fullerdomes when I was a kid—but you didn't have to live under one. Now if you take a walk out in the country for a breath of fresh air, you'll drop dead before you can exhale.

My mind keeps dragging me back to Heaven. I'd retire in a minute if I could spend my remaining century there. Can't, of course—only soldiers allowed in space. And the only way a soldier gets to Heaven is the hard way.

I've been there three times—once more and I'll set a record. That's motivation of a sort, I suppose. Also, in the unlikely event that I should live another five years, I'll get a commission and a desk job if I live through my term as a field officer. Doesn't happen too often—but there aren't too many desk jobs that people can handle better than cyborgs.

That's another alternative. If my body gets too garbaged for regeneration and they can save enough of my brain, I could spend the rest of eternity hooked up to a computer, as a cyborg. The only one I've ever talked to seemed to be happy.

I once had an African partner, named N'gai. He taught me how to play O'wari, a game older than manoply or even chess. We sat in this very bar—or the identical one that was in its place two hundred years ago—and he tried to impress on my non-Zenoriented mind just how significant this game was to men in our position.

You start out with forty-eight smooth little pebbles, four in each one of the twelve depressions that make up the game board. Then you take turns, scooping the pebbles out of one hole and distributing them one-at-a-time in holes to the left. If you dropped your last pebble in a hole where your opponent had only one or two, why, you got to take those pebbles off the board. Sounds exciting, doesn't it?

But N'gai sat there in a cloud of

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EQUALS FOUR

PIERS ANTHONY

Dillingham's assistant had to be land-going, esthetic, competent, free and female—more than less!

"DOCTOR, you need an assistant," Oyster said. He had retracted almost entirely into his shell for an executive snooze but the ubiquitous translators picked up his watery mumble and spewed it out full-volume in English.

An assistant? Dillingham had already come to that conclusion. He sat behind a towering mound of paperwork, unable properly to attend to his duties as Assistant Director of the School of Prosthodontics, Galactic University of Dentistry. In fact, he could not always remember his official title correctly, with so much else cluttering his mind. At any moment he could be shot off on some simple assignment that invariably turned out to be murderously complex in detail. He felt edgy.

Actually, no paper was involved. But computerized busywork and multilingual red tape amounted to the same thing. Every tiny plastic card of the thousands on his desk represented some problem of some student that he had to rectify in some manner. Yes, he needed help on the interminable details of his office. He had had no assistant since leaving Earth so precipitously and unexpectedly and he had never fully adapted to that lack. He wished he could take a mid-session snooze, as Oyster was doing now.

Oyster was the Director of the School of Prosthodontics, a position Dillingham would eventually assume—if he didn't first suffer an intellectual breakdown. Oyster's assistant was Miss Tarantula, a marvel of arachnid efficiency. In the office or the operatory, at the University or in the field, her eight arms seemed to tie up every loose thread before it appeared. It was because of her that Oyster's desk was clear and Dillingham realized jealously that if he had an assistant even half as competent his own desk would soon be relieved of its burden. Yet she tended to make him nervous, despite his efforts to repress his Earthly prejudices. She was not really a man-sized spider.

Oyster poked an antenna out of his shell.

"Set up a series of interviews for a prospective assistant," he said to her. "Land-going, esthetic, competent, unattached, female—"

"The first is waiting in the anteroom," Miss Tarantula said. That was the way she was—anticipatory. "If Dr. Dillingham cares to interview her now—"

"But there's no point in merely talking with her," Dillingham protested. "I have field assignments as well as office routine. I have to know how she functions in a variety of situations, particularly under stress. If—"

"Naturally," Miss Tarantula said. "You are scheduled to make a promotional tour of planet Hobgoblin today. She will accompany you on a trial basis."

"But that's not a stress situation. A routine visit—"

"The director also wishes you to investigate certain complaints of a sensitive nature."

SO NOW it came out. The reason for his edginess. Debating points with Miss Tarantula was futile. The slightest twitch of her hairy front leg brought the web tight. And Oyster was no slouch at making things routinely impossible—he seemed to feel that this was good practice for the Directorship. Certain complaints of a sensitive nature? That meant that half a misstep could result in a lynching.

Well, he thought, glancing at the tremendous metal man standing immobile in the corner, a lynching was the last thing he had to fear. This huge robot, the Jann, would blast apart anything like that. Literally. The Jann's meticulous guardianship was not entirely welcome but was a fact of Dillingham's new life. If there were trouble on Hobgoblin, all that would suffer would be the troublemakers. Plus Dillingham's professional reputation and that of the University. The very reputations his tour was supposed to enhance.

He felt a headache coming on. "All right. Brief her and—"

"All taken care of, Doctor," Miss Tarantula said.

Naturally. It was not that she was helping Dillingham—she was hardly concerned with bipedal mammals—it was that her boss had made a directive and she was being efficient.

The door opened. A grotesque mound of warty blubber slid into the office. It drifted to rest before Dillingham, smelling of castor oil. A black orifice gaped.

"So pleased to meet you, Doctor D," the translator said. "I am Miss Porkfat, your trial-basis assistant."

Esthetic, competent, female . . .

Dillingham had no doubt that by the standards of her own species Miss Porkfat was all of these. And he could not afford to question any of it, lest he betray an un-University prejudice of taste.

"Very good, Miss P," he said. "Please arrange passage for three to Planet Hobgoblin and notify the authorities there of our itinerary."

"Three, Doctor?" Her voice, audible just beneath the translation, was pleasantly modulated, at least.

"Three. The Jann will be coming along."

She extruded a snaillike eyestalk. The orb focused on the shining robot. A quiver started there and traveled down her body before it damped out.

"Yes, Doctor."

She oozed over to a private-line translator, asked for interplanetary and began making the arrangements.

Grade A, so far, Dillingham thought as Oyster woke and smiled benignly from inside his shell. The Jann robots were supposed to have become extinct several thousand years ago but their terrible reputation lingered on in galactic folklore. Miss Porkfat had excellent presence if her only reaction to the sight of a functioning Jann was one eyeball-quiver.

But still she reminded him of infected slug-meat.

THE Hobgoblins were surly creatures—short, big-headed, flat-footed, ugly by humanoid standards.

"What's that Jann doing here?" the customs official demanded in a whine that even the translator caught. "We don't allow sentient robots on our planet."

"He has to travel with me," Dillingham said. The truth was too complicated to explain.

The official gestured to the guards.

"Put this tin in the cooler."

The squat troopers advanced on the huge metal creature. Dillingham saw trouble coming but was powerless to circumvent it. The Jann was as deadly a sentient as the galaxy had ever known and had sworn to protect Dillingham for fifty years. To do that, he had to stay close. Evidently the inhabitants of this planet had little respect for past reputations or they would never have gone near the Jann.

The uniformed goblins took hold of the Jann's arms. They were barely able to reach up that far and looked like squat children beside a stern parent. They tugged.

That was all. The Jann did not budge or take overt note of them. Fortunately.

Dillingham and Miss Porkfat, having completed their business at customs, left. The Jann followed, nonchalantly dragging along the two guards. After a while they let go.

So much for protocol. Dillingham sighed with relief that the robot had not lost his metal temper.

The Hobgoblin office of Dentistry was imposing enough, externally. But inside the fine large building were distressingly backward facilities. This planet still used mechanical drills, X-rays and needle-injected anesthetics. A harried goblin technician galloped up.

"What do you want? We don't allow visitors in here. Particularly aliens."

"This is the representative from the University of Dentistry," Miss Porkfat said dulcetly. The nearest translator was down the hall a distance, so conversation was remote. "On a promotional tour. Your office was informed."

"I don't need any offworld tub of lard to tell me of what we've been informed. Come back next week. We're busy now."

Miss Porkfat turned to Dillingham, her eyestalk quivering again.

"They prefer that we return next week, Doctor D."

Something about the exchange rankled. "I heard, Miss P. But this was cleared with the authorities before we arrived and my schedule does not permit a postponement."

"It will have to be today," she informed the technician.

"Go fry your posterior."

"I really think—"

"I'll handle it, Miss P," Dillingham said, his ire rising. He was not a temperamental man but his position did not allow him to tolerate much insolence. Miss Porkfat was being gentle when she should have been firm.

"You don't have confidence in me," she protested, beginning to quiver all over.

"It isn't that, Miss P—"

"Why should he, blubbertub?" the goblin demanded.

"I'm only trying to—" she began, turning pink. On her, this was impressive.

"Of course," Dillingham said diplomatically. "But in this case—"

"*Will* you creeps get out of here?"

"No!" Dillingham shouted at the ugly face.

Miss Porkfat began to dissolve. Literally.

"I think this position is unsuitable for you, Miss P," Dillingham said with as much compassion as he was able to muster in the circumstance. "If you wish to return to the University and seek an on-campus placement—"

She sucked herself together somewhat. "Thank you, Doctor D."

"Good riddance, stinky," the goblin said.

Dillingham walked hautily by him, though privately he suspected that the goblin was right. This was no job for an assistant who melted in the face of conflict with abrasive personalities.

"Watch where you're going, stupid," the goblin yelled. "I said no visitors. I'll clobber you—"

THAT was his mistake. The Jann, silent until now, boomed into animation.

"None but I shall do him die—forty-nine years, five months, thirteen days hence, Earthtime," it proclaimed.

By the time the words ceased reverberating the goblin was gone, thoroughly cowed.

A non-native was waiting in the next alcove. Willowy, sweet-smelling, with a cluster of slender blue tentacles and four soft purple eyes —quite esthetic, in a surrealistic way.

"Doctor Dillingham? I was sent by the University to assist you on a trial basis. I am Miss Anemone."

So Miss Tarantula had anticipated his problem with Miss Porkfat. Such comprehension was frightening.

"Very good," he said. Then, thinking ahead: "This is a Jann. He's traveling with us."

"I observed him. A handsome specimen. I hadn't been aware they made robots of that caliber anymore."

No loss of control there! Dillingham glanced down the hall.

"And approaching us is another native technician."

The Hobgoblin wore a badge of rank that distinguished him as an entity of moderate authority.

"No visitors permitted. Leave at once."

Miss Anemone braced him squarely. "This is the Assistant Director of the University School of—"

"Don't waste my time with your ridiculous apologies," the goblin said brusquely. "Just get out."

"If you will check our approved itinerary—"

"One side, sea-spook." The goblin shouldered by her, intent on Dillingham. He did not get far. "Ouch!"

"Oh dear me, I'm so sorry," she said solicitously. "Did my spines hurt you? I hope you will report to the infirmary right away. I certainly wouldn't want the toxin to get into your system."

She led the way on down the hall while the goblin rushed off, rubbing his shoulder.

So far, so good. Miss Anemone was not unduly sensitive to abuse or helpless before it.

They arrived at the main demonstration room. Here the wonders of modern Hobgoblian dentistry were displayed—quaint metal restorations, classic plastic dentures, primitive color X-ray photographs. Dillingham viewed them politely, then approached the goblin in charge and began his presentation.

"I believe the University can enhance aspects of your procedure—"

"Who asked it to?"

Dillingham was not free to mention the several tourists who had complained to the University. That was the sensitive part of his tour. The described symptoms had been vague and diverse, so that no consistent pattern had developed and no complainer had actually reported for a University recheck. Thus there was no solid evidence that Hobgoblian dentistry was at fault—just a statistical suspicion.

The kind of thing that had to be investigated unobtrusively, for planet Hobgoblin was sensitive about alien criticism.

"Perhaps a demonstration of technique—" he suggested.

"Oh, so the marvelous University desk jockey wishes to show the outworld peons how to practice—"

Dillingham ignored this. "We might take a look at some of your problem patients. Naturally, if I can demonstrate the advantages of University training—"

"Training, schmaining! If we

had your finances we could afford a multi-species dontic analyzer, too, and have instant diagnosis of every—"

"You are correct in your implication that the analyzer is one of our more important diagnostic tools. But since it is far too expensive for the average facility we stress the raw ability of the individual dentist using local equipment. It is the talent that remains after the—"

But the goblin did not let him repeat the maxim he had learned so forcefully from Oyster.

"You claim you can use my equipment—and do a better job than I can?"

Since courtesy did not seem to accomplish much here, Dillingham abandoned it. Unwisely.

"Yes. And so could any University graduate."

The goblin swelled with rage—then made an unholy smile.

"You're on, Doc."

HE WAS, indeed, on. In half an hour Dillingham was ensconced in a model unit set up on a stage in an amphitheater. Miss Anemone had a desk a few paces away and the Jann had a separate booth where he could watch for Dillingham's safety without obstructing the view of the audience. Goblin spectators, every one a trained dentist, filled the hall.

This was more than Dillingham had bargained for, and he made a mental note never again to speak precipitously. Meanwhile he had to follow through. Somehow things always did become complicated. He was almost getting used to it.

"The prosthodontic genius from Galactic U will now demonstrate how to handle a problem case," the dental chief announced grandly. "Pay close attention, so you can learn how stupid you are."

Almost every grotesque little face mirrored the chief's resentment. No doubt of it—University prestige was on the line. Dillingham could, in fact, be eased out of the very University position he was in training for. The goblins were striking, not at him but at his career—a blow the Jann would not foil. All because of one intemperate remark.

The first patient mounted the stage—a vaguely equine quadruped with colorful, birdlike plumage.

Miss Anemone intercepted it. "May I have your name and planet of origin, please?"

"Horsefeathers of Clovenhoof," the creature neighed, showing tremendous yellow teeth.

"Please describe your complaint."

"My teeth hurt."

A murmur of nasty appreciation rose from the audience. Hobgoblin's finest practitioners were present and Dillingham was sure that every one of them had had this problem—the unspecific re-

sponse. Miss Anemone, of course, would not let it stand at that. She would question the patient gently but firmly, clarifying and isolating his symptoms until she had a fair notion of his real complaint. A major part of the duties of a galactic dental assistant was to get the facts straight before the patient ever saw the dentist, thereby promoting office efficiency.

"Doctor Dillingham will see you now," she said.

A chorous of chuckles and a few hoots came from the audience. They knew she had goofed and he could not afford to correct her now. To do so would only make matters worse. He would have to question the patient himself—and make sure never to get into such a situation again with an unfamiliar assistant.

The fault probably was not hers. Some dentists preferred to handle virtually everything themselves and some assistants were trained to honor the practice. Probably she would have questioned the patient further had he asked her to do so. But Dillingham was far too busy to break in an assistant in all the little ways that were sure to turn up.

Miss Anemone would not do.

Horsefeathers ambled over and bestrode the dental chair, opening his long large mouth. His breath was not sweet.

"Can you localize the area of sensitivity?" Dillingham inquired, beginning a routine check with the probe.

"Huh?"

"Where does it hurt?"

"They all hurt. It changes," Horsefeathers said.

Another appreciative goblin chuckle. Dillingham began to fear that they had thrown him a chronic complainer—one who would object no matter how well off his teeth were.

"I see you have had extensive prosthodontic restoration," Dillingham observed. Indeed, the mouth was a mass of gold.

"Huh?"

"Lot of work done on you."

"Yes. All right here on Hobgoblin. Lousy job."

Silence from the gallery. Dillingham suppressed a smile.

"On the contrary. My visual inspection suggests that this work is quite competent. However, I shall take X-rays to be sure there is no underlying problem." He tapped a tooth, finding it firm. "Miss Anemone—"

Another evil gallery chuckle. He looked up.

Miss Anemone was gone. A man-sized centipede occupied her desk.

"I am Miss Thousandlegs, your new assistant. Miss Anemone was called away."

In the middle of a demonstration? Miss Tarantula was becoming too efficient. How had she known?

HE ALSO noted with surprise that the Jann was gone. The booth was empty and there was no familiar glint of robot metal. But he was sure the huge creature was in the vicinity—and would be for the next forty-nine-plus years.

All he said was: "Please take a full set of X-rays on this patient."

Miss Thousandlegs rippled over, elevated her forepart and positioned machine and plates. She was good at it, he had to admit, considering that she had probably only had experience with such equipment in some class on Antique Apparatus. In a moment she had the pictures.

He almost gaped. "Root canal therapy on every tooth—"

"They were pretty far gone," Horsefeathers admitted.

They must have been. Root canal therapy was only called for when the central nerve of the tooth became contaminated. Then this nerve had to be removed and silver or guttapercha or some galactic equivalent substituted, so that no further decay could occur. The process was an expensive one but it generally saved the tooth. The tooth was insensitive thereafter, of course—without its nerve it could not feel temperature, pressure or pain.

"I see no evidence of decay," Dillingham said, inspecting the X-rays carefully.

"They still hurt," Horsefeathers said stoutly.

With no nerves at all, they hurt. Dillingham controlled a sigh, knowing the dentists of Hobgoblin were enjoying this hugely.

"Do you wish me to check the occlusion?" Miss Thousandlegs inquired.

Bless her!

"By all means."

She brought a wax plate and had the patient bite down on it so that his teeth imprinted the material in a horseshoe pattern, above and below. She studied this.

"Serious malocclusion, Doctor," she announced.

Dillingham could tell by the silence around him that the goblins had forgotten to make this test—just as he himself had almost forgotten in his preoccupation with the impression he was making. Miss Thousandlegs had saved him. It was beginning to look as though he had found his assistant.

"This will not hurt," he told Horsefeathers as he prepared his rotary unit. "In fact, I will not have to use any anesthetic. I am merely going to grind down some of the surfaces a little. To adjust the occlusion, so that your teeth will meet properly when you bite."

"But it doesn't hurt where I bite! It hurts deep inside!"

"This is typical," Dillingham assured him. "You see, when the occlusion is imperfect—when your teeth meet unevenly—unatural stress is placed on certain sections of the jaw. While this effect is too

small for you to notice ordinarily, it continues to irritate the peridontal membrane—the lining surrounding the roots of your teeth—crushing and bruising it. This lining is tough, for it is there to cushion the impact of constant chewing—but under abnormal stress it eventually becomes inflamed. And then you hurt—deep inside."

Horsefeathers gazed at him in wonder. "I never knew that."

"Perhaps your dentist did not feel this was necessary for you to know," Dillingham said gently. "Many patients are not interested in such technical details."

Until they hurt, he thought wryly.

The silence of the hall as he worked suggested that his point had been made. It was always best to let the patient know as much as feasible about his condition. An ignorant patient could be a difficult one. Horsefeathers had not been an idle complainer—he had really had pain, though the cause was subtle and slow to develop.

He finished and flushed the polished surfaces.

"Expectorate, please."

"Huh?"

"Spit." The translator was being too literal, rendering a complex word in English into a complex equivalent in Clovenhoofian. He would have to tone down his language.

"It will be a while before the inflammation subsides," he warned Horsefeathers. "But there should be a steady improvement now—until you feel no pain at all."

The patient looked dubious.

"It'll still hurt?"

"The membrane has to heal. When you break a leg you don't expect it to be good as new the moment the vet sets it, do you?"

Horsefeathers thought about that. He looked at his leg. He smiled.

"Thank you, thank you, Doctor," he said at last. "I'm so glad you came here." He trotted off, limping a little before remembering that it was his mouth that hurt.

Another patient mounted the stage. This was a native Hobgoblin. Dillingham knew that meant trouble. He had counted his dental chickens too soon.

"May I have your name, sir?" Miss Thousandlegs inquired.

"Go fly a kite."

True to form, Dillingham thought.

"How do you spell that, please?"

Dillingham liked her better all the time. Spelling via translator was devious and suspect but she had fielded the insult nicely.

"G-O," the goblin spelled. "F-L-Y. The A is an initial for Algernon. Last name is K-I-T-E."

Dillingham reminded himself not to jump to conclusions.

"And what is your problem?"

Miss Thousandlegs inquired.

"This tooth—it squishes. Sometimes."

"May I look at it?"

"You're not the dentist, bugface."

"Nevertheless, I may be able to narrow down the possibilities and save both you and Dr. Dillingham trouble."

Grudgingly he let her look.

"Another restoration," she murmured. "Tooth appears to be healthy."

"It's not healthy, stupid. It squishes. Sometimes."

"Could you show me?"

G.F.A. Kite bit down, almost nipping several of her hair-fine legs.

"Nope. It's not squishing right now. But it does. Sometimes."

"I'll take an X-ray," she said.

She did.

"When do I see the damn dentist?"

"In just a moment. Let me check your occlusion first." She checked. "You may see him now."

She accompanied the patient to Dillingham's operatory.

"X-ray shows nothing but the tooth is mobile," she said. "The occlusion is slightly off."

Kite made a face. "I heard that about Horsefeathers. But mine is only one tooth and it doesn't hurt, it squishes. Sometimes."

"Nevertheless, occlusion seems the likely culprit," Miss Thousandlegs said. "Two plus two equals four."

Dillingham agreed with her but felt she was going too far. She was not merely getting the facts—she was diagnosing and advising the patient, normally the dentist's prerogative.

He checked the teeth. They were similar to human dentures and most had been restored metallically. All were solid, including the squisher, except for that trace mobility his assistant had noted. He inspected the X-ray photograph. She was correct there too: the only shadows in the picture conformed to the restorative work present. It had to be the occlusion again.

He made the necessary adjustments. But one thing nagged him—the occlusion was only marginally skew. Presuming that this condition had developed only recently, the described symptom was too sharp, too localized.

Two plus two might equal four—but so did one plus three. And the goblin audience was suspiciously silent.

He took the probe and checked around the tooth again. It remained firm and the gum line was stable. He looked at the X-ray once more. The metal of the restoration shadowed it, one projection extending along the distal surface adjacent to the next tooth. No trouble there.

Two plus two . . .

Interesting coincidence that the Hobgoblin chief should send him two occlusion problems in a row. He would have expected something more devious.

HE POKED the tip of the probe between the two teeth, verifying that the metal of each restoration touched there. The space was narrow; there was no way he could reach it except by forcing the wire point down, causing the patient momentary discomfort.

Kite yelped.

The probe broke through into something soft.

"Equals four," Dillingham said.

He had found the trouble—a thin cavity just under the metal, concealed from direct view by its location and the overhanging restoration. Its shadow in the X-ray was hidden by the configuration of metal itself. Truly an invisible deterioration—that squished. Sometimes.

Miss Thousandlegs had almost led him astray by her too-ready diagnosis. Had he corrected the occlusion and sent the patient home the decay could have continued for months.

Two plus two did equal four. But that was not the whole truth—and the goblin dental chief must have known it—setting the University representative up with a valid occlusion case first. Then the seeming occlusion—a trap.

"Anesthetic," Dillingham said.

Miss Thousandlegs brought the loaded needle. He injected the flinching patient. It had been so long since he had used anything this primitive that he had forgotten to apply a surface anesthetic before giving the shot—and his assitant hadn't reminded him. Not her fault. She simply was not familiar with his procedures, his little lapses.

He readied the drill.

"Vacuum," he said.

Miss Thousandlegs applied the vacuum, sucking the saliva and moisture from the water-cooled drill.

"Other side," he murmured, as her instrument obstructed his view. He began cutting away the overhang of the tooth.

He finished and removed the drill.

"Mallet," he said, picking up the chisel.

She held it up but his hand missed contact. The mallet bounced off his fingers and fell to the floor. The goblins guffawed.

Again—not her fault, he reminded himself. She was not adjusted to his movements. But the accident was embarrassing.

He knocked off the metal crown, exposing the decay. He fished for the gold chunk before the patient could choke on it—and banged into one of his assistant's insectlike arms. She had been reaching for it too.

Dillingham stopped. Miss Thousandlegs was competent and cooperative—but it just wasn't working out. He could not operate effectively with her.

"Miss—" he started. And blinked. Miss Thousandlegs was gone. She had been replaced by a humanoid biped.

HE WAS tired of this long-distance sleight-of-hand. Miss Tarantula might enjoy tugging on interplanetary thread and changing his assistants in mid operation but he did not.

"Vacuum," he said abruptly, taking up the drill again.

Assistant number four, the biped, applied the vacuum. Her arms terminated in quintuple, jointed digits that pinched together to hold the tube. He had seen more effective appendages for this work but at least she did not get in his way or obstruct his vision.

He finished his excavation.

"Hydrocolloid," he snapped.

She already had the metal form and cold water ready for the hydrocolloid impression. He made the cast without difficulty and she took it away. He put a temporary covering over the tooth.

"A new restoration will have to be made," he told Kite. "I have prepared the tooth and taken an impression but it will be some time before the restoration is ready. Your local prosthodontists are perfectly capable of doing it and I commend you to their services. You were quite correct about your problem and fortunately we have diagnosed it in time to save the tooth."

"Doctor," the new assistant said.

"What?" He was tired, and there was something strange about the way she spoke.

"Will you check the other restorations now?"

"The other—" He paused. "You're right. A good restoration does not go wrong without cause. I'll have to have a look."

It was a dismal prospect but he could not risk the same kind of oversight the local dentists had made.

He hammered off the adjacent cap. It came off easily—too easily. He scraped at the exposed cement.

"Soft," he muttered. "No wonder there was trouble."

The goblin chief was about to be snared in his own prosthodontic trap.

The assistant took the gold cap and cleaned out the debris. Dillingham hammered at the next restoration. This one was stiffer but finally came off. The binding cement was similarly soft.

"Brother!" he muttered. "They must all be defective. The cement is deteriorating. Real trouble coming up."

"Now just a moment," a voice objected. It was the chief dentist of

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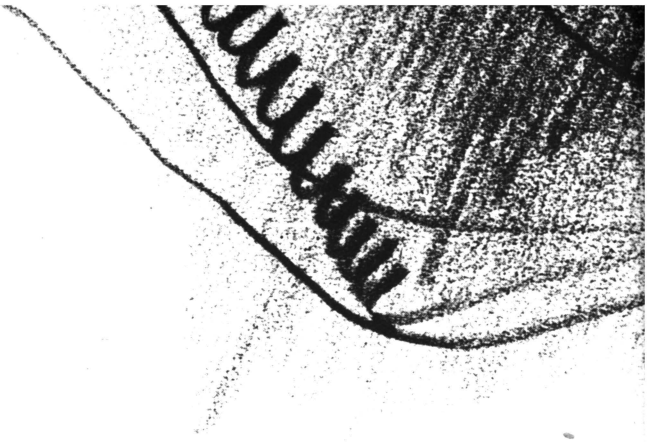

THE COMMU-NICAT-ION MACHINE

LEE HARDING

In mind-to-mind communication among men, honesty can be the worst policy!

BEDFORD should have known better. But he had been working for so long away from the social mainstream of the world that his sense of values had become confused. And when he had concluded his momentous work he could think of only one other person who would appreciate at once the significance of what he had accomplished. His name was Stephen Thorpe. He was a poet and—in this devious and unquiet age—and an old and trusted friend.

He could not bring himself to call upon a representative of a government he had long since ceased to believe in and he was loath to deal directly with the popular press which had so maligned his activities over the last decade. But the desire to share his discovery with someone was overpowering. He had lived so long in his solitary tower waiting for this moment and now that it had arrived it cried out for a witness.

Perhaps one of the more tolerant of his former colleagues might have condescended to visit him and —in his own time—watched him demonstrate his miraculous device. But Bedford couldn't wait—and besides, he wanted nothing more to do with them. Only an artist of Thorpe's caliber could be allowed to experience this discovery before it was bestowed upon a weak and desperate world. So he hurried downstairs in a fever of excitment and telephoned his old friend.

THORPE was tired. He had only just returned from a strenuous northern tour, a successful and highly lucrative excursion which had culminated that afternoon with an exhausting open-air recital. Now, more than anything else, he desired peace and a little quiet and time to prepare himself for the ordeal of his homecoming. His publicity department had arranged a wild party for later that evening and he was not looking forward to it. He loathed the simpering affectations of the people who considered themselves his peers.

He was surprised and intrigued to hear from Bedford. Arthur Bedford had slipped from his thoughts, along with many other embarrassing memories which would have been out of place in the mind of Earth's leading poet and thinker. Success had a way of gobbling up old friendships.

He was momentarily irritated with Bedford's use of his old name but made no comment. The telephone Bedford was using was old-fashioned and apparently lacked video circuits—Thorpe stared at the blank screen and found himself curious about how Bedford looked these days. Too, he had hoped to escape at least some of the dreary party ahead of him.

Bedford wanted to see him now —this evening. This instant. *Please, Stephen, for old time's sake. I owe it to you* . . . Thorpe actually smiled at that. *What can we possibly owe each other?*

But he could not ignore the urgent supplication in Bedford's voice. He loved to feel needed and success seemed to have abstracted his relationships with other people to such an extent that he sometimes longed for the deeper attachments of another time.

"All right, Arthur," he said. "I'll be right over."

He dressed quickly. With his mind on the forthcoming party—he would see Bedford first—he chose a black velvet evening suit and matching cape—the one with the breathtaking emerald-green lining. His accessories were a loose white shirt with a magnificent ruffle around the neck, pointed black shoes and a wide-brimmed black felt hat.

Satisfied with his appearence, he selected an elegant swagger-stick from his ornate collection and sauntered quietly off into the night, leaving his twin Jaguars caged and delighting in the anonymity of his nocturnal venture.

The cane was important. More than a complement to the rest of his attire, it was also an extremely useful defense mechanism: a built-in powerpack delivered quite a jolt of electricity to the jeweled tip. It had served on numerous occasions to fend off the unwanted attentions of overenthusiastic admirers—and enemies. Public idols in this godless age were often subject to bad treatment and the law permitted him to carry discreet discouragement with him wherever he went. And it was comforting to realize one had such a stylish defense.

The address Bedford had given him was only a few miles from his hotel, in one of the older and less fashionable areas of the diseased city. He found his way without difficulty but as he moved deeper into the slums he began to feel some qualms—perhaps even a small measure of guilt. And when he finally stopped outside the gaunt and decrepit tenement his old friend lodged in he felt a twinge of regret.

The building could not be very far short off being condemned. Arthur Bedford must have fallen just about as far as anyone could possibly fall in the false economic structure of his time. Thorpe leaned forward and pressed the jeweled tip of his cane against an archaic electrical buzzer located on one side of the door. He kept his weight against it for some time, until he could identify the weak signal he had generated moving fitfully through the great house. Then he stepped back to wait.

He studied his reflection in the grimy glass panel of the door. He looked younger than his forty-seven years. As a youth he had been blessed with the noble, aesthetic features of his calling and the soft passage of years and the simple demands of his sedentary occupation had allowed only a pouch or two of excessive flesh to mar his well-publicized and handsome face—and even these unwanted medals of middle-age provided him with the semblance of maturity and wisdom necessary to his portrait as the Poet Laureate of swinging Britain.

He waited for what seemed an inordinate amount of time before

he detected distant scuffling sounds from somewhere inside the building; sounds that suggested the passage of some weary body down an ancient, creaking staircase.

God—this entire area should have been razed a decade ago . . .

A WEAK light came on inside and cast a wan glow through the dirty glass panel, erasing Thorpe's image. The door swung open and the guarded face of Arthur Bedford peered out.

For a moment Thorpe was caught off his cultivated guard. He hadn't expected the years to have extracted such a cruel toll from his old friend. Bedford's features had always tended towards heaviness—now they had become almost obese. Swollen bags of flesh hung under each watery eye and a lower lip so full and cracked that it projected out like some creaking verandah over his several chins was the next most prominent feature. Several weeks' untidy stubble stood out from Bedford's pale flesh and a few scraps of hair were carelessly smeared over his scalp. Deep lines of fatigue—and despair—had been etched into this miserable face and, for some reason he could not fathom, Thorpe felt—for a moment—wretchedly awkward and unwise.

Bedford stared, blinking away the years in the half-light.

He said, "Stephen—"

The word hung over a slience and carried a wealth of meaning. But to Thorpe, poet, it was suddenly the currency of a distant time and another age—it disturbed him to remember some things.

"I'm so glad so glad you could come." Bedford was almost shaking. They looked at each other. And there should have been time for their meeting to become inbued with some sense of occasion—time for them to have remained in a trance-like state while they studied the many changes which time had rung down upon them—but Bedford's private demon drove him on hurriedly. "Come in. Come in—"

He opened the door wide and Thorpe stepped inside.

The place stank. A musty amalgam of old papers, discarded food containers and unwashed flesh. Thorpe's educated nose twitched with disgust.

"This way."

He followed Bedford up the creaking staircase.

Was that shambling figure ahead of him really Arthur Bedford? That creature hinged forward from the waist in an arthritic stoop? Could time—and a hostile society—really do this to a man? And how unkind of life to remind him they were contemporaries. Perhaps, after all, he should have stayed at his hotel and rested up for a while—and then gone to his reception—instead of coming here; he wasn't in the proper mood for old-fashioned reminiscences. Still,

he had come. He was here. Some common courtesy was called for.

Bedford paused on the landing. He looked around at his visitor and gestured vaguely towards the open door in front of them. His expression was apologetic.

"It's been—been a long time," he wheezed. The climb upstairs had all but exhausted him. "But it's good to see you again, Stephen."

His thoughtless use of Thorpe's discarded given name again upset the poet. He had chosen his new name with great care and it annoyed him to have it sullied by any perfunctory reference to its uninspired predecessor.

But his anger quickly cooled. He was reminded that there had once been a life for them together, long before Virgil Thorpe had begun to impress a fickle and foolish public.

Bedford was a scientist—a reasonable grasp of the arts had always eluded him. He was groping and inarticulate—he looked for truth deep in the abstract realms of physics and mathematics and considered art a preoccupation of the emotionally self-indulgent.

That had been the essence of their ultimate incompatability, the reason behind their final disillusionment with each other. They had each sought the same goal—but from different viewpoints—and in the painful process of remembering some of these things his wrath was curbed and he found he could distill a small measure of charity toward this frail, lonely creature he had once called friend—and more.

"Yes," he agreed, "it has been a long time."

He followed Bedford into the brightly lit room.

IT WAS more like the main room of a warehouse than a place where a man could retreat from the rigors of an unfriendly society. Benches were piled high with a bewildering variety of electronic apparatus—the floor between was a refuse heap of discarded hardboard boxes and a confused tangle of varicolored wire weeds. A battered armchair had been pushed into a far corner of the room by all this activity—there it faced the dead vacant mouth of a fuel fire and a tattered accumulation of books and magazines, piled high into ricketty wooden shelving already pulled out of shape by its burden. The air stank of solder and shorted electrical connections.

It was a hostile environment. Science had always baffled Thorpe. He had a totally intuitive mind and had never mastered the complexities and the subtleties of scientific thought—he had been a poor scholar but an ambitious soul, so perhaps it was inevitable that he should have gravitated toward the arts while Bedford pursued his private internal vision.

The poet could only marvel at

the meaning of so much technological bric-a-brac. Of course, Bedford had always been an inveterate tinkerer and had assured himself of a steady income years earlier when he had evolved a number of very clever patents. Obviously he had continued some side research —and along the way he might even have picked up one or two gullible aristocrats willing to finance his schemes. Admittedly, his press had been disastrous in recent years but there were probably still enough simple-minded sponsors of ratbaggery left in the world to provide Bedford with a small measure of monetary assistance. He had always been devious at getting what he wanted, Thorpe mused, and it was obvious that this was one gift he had not yet frittered away.

Otherwise I wouldn't be here now . . .

The public was a malleable monster shaped by taste and style. It had elevated Virgil Thorpe from obscurity and made him the most fashionable figure of his age: a performing poet. And while he had come so close to godhood Bedford had been driven—by the very nature of his obsessions and the questionable areas of his investigations—into becoming a recluse. Organized science had ostracized him—the public lionized Thorpe. It was a strange balance—and the deficit seemed to belong to the prematurely aged scientist.

Bedford kicked aside the remains of several packages and gestured toward the tattered armchair in the corner.

"Sit down, Stephen, sit down" The poet did as he was bidden, his lip curling a little in disgust when he noticed the deep layer of dust on the furniture. "I—I'll get you something to drink."

Bedford struggled with the sliding doors of a shelf cupboard. His hands were as inarticulate and fumbling as his clumsy speech with its unfinished sentences and wearisome pauses. Thorpe took off his luxurious cape and folded it carefully before placing it over the back of the chair. He sat leaning slightly forward so as not to crease it. His eyes followed Bedford's movements with wry amusement.

"Would you—would you fancy a little port?" The look of guilt and self-reproach in the scientist's face was a sure indication that he had nothing else to offer.

Thorpe nodded graciously and accepted the small tumbler and the dark, almost viscous fluid it contained.

Bedford's hands were shaking. There was a wild look of enthusiasm in his eyes the poet found difficult to correlate with the other, older image he carried in his mind.

"You can't imagine," Bedford went on, "you can't really understand how—how very good it is to see you again, Stephen."

Thorpe winced at the repetition of his old name. The touch of their fingers—for one brief moment when he had taken the glass of

port—had reminded him of something they had once thought permanent but which had sundered like everything else in the unwanted past.

His own hands were well cared for. His skin was pale but it was cleansed regularly with the proper oils. His nails were well shaped and polished to perfection by the best man in London. Bedford's hands were repugnant—they were old and ugly, the fingers cracked and unwashed and disgusting dark sediment was buried underneath the broken nails. It galled Thorpe to recall that he had once found those same hands attractive.

BEDFORD downed his drink in a single long gulp. He licked his lips appreciatively.

"Damn fine wine."

Thorpe made no comment. The wine was foul. He took a long sip, intending to despatch the noxious potion as quickly as possible and to forget the flavor. He coughed and mopped his pencil-thin moustache with an initialed green silk handkerchief.

"You said something on the phone," he tactfully reminded. "about some marvelous machine you've been working on."

Bedford gave him a curious look. "A machine, did you say? Well, I suppose it is—partly. But to describe it properly . . . . yes, I have made an apparatus—and it is true that it has certain, ah, mechanical parts. But that, my dear Stephen, is only the beginning."

"Where is it, then?" Thorpe asked.

"Ah, you must be patient—patient."

Bedford seemed to have performed some miraculous feat of physical regeneration—he now stood straighter. His hands clasped behind his back, and his eyes were focused dead ahead upon some private infinity. Thorpe was his audience and he was oblivious to everything other than the revelation he had prepared.

"To think," he went on, "after all these years—" He uncoupled his hands and described some awkward, ambiguous diagram in the air. Thorpe supposed it was a gesture meant to indicate the difficulties of his guest but made no comment. He put his glass aside. The port really was undrinkable.

"After all these years," Bedford repeated. "But now it is done. Finished. And the world will never be the same. Stephen, I will tell you what I have here. I have a—call it a machine, if you must—but a machine that will revolutionize communications."

The poet sniffed his impatience. "I thought we had enough of those gadgets already. Radios, videos, telephones, masers, lasers and—"

"No, no, no. Nothing like that. Not like that—at all. Something vastly different."

"Then for God's sake what is

it?" Thorpe snapped irritably.

"Stephen, be patient. Think—think a little. All our disturbances, all of our wars and our intolerances—they spring from one source: our inability to understand each other. We each live out our lives as prisoners in solitary towers, communicating with each other with signs that never—somehow—manage to mean the same thing to any of us. How can we ever hope—expect—to accept another person's point of view, to comprehend matters alien to our own way of thinking when we are bound—bound, Stephen—by the awful tyranny of words?"

A sudden finger lunged in the poet's direction. "You. You've been—very successful, haven't you? Poetry. Poetry is—or was—a communication with an intellectual elite. But it wasn't they who made this world what it is—that was left to the mindless jargon of politicians and power fetishists. And you, Stephen—you and your kind have reduced your art to the level of mass entertainment. You are no longer communicating on that level—that level to which you once—aspired. You have become—a performer. And a very popular one, no doubt. But as a communicator you were finished years ago. Once they got their claws into you, elevated you, lionized you and made you what you are. But do they ever really listen, Stephen, and if they ever did—would they hear anything? Not that it matters any more, of course. My machine will make your words as obsolete as last year's poem. I will bring an end to this intolerable confusion of mind and purpose which words have created and—and crippled our intellectual promise. I will bring down Babel and restore man to himself! I will bring about a new millennium!

THE poet was shaking with anger. The megalomaniacal quality that had saturated the terminal portion of Bedford's tirade was distressing. He had listened with growing impatience while his ex-friend had hurled insults at his craft and his calling and he was not prepared to accept much more. The fool had gone too far. Was it for this that he had been called—to suffer humiliation and let his emotions be toyed with?

"Look here, Arthur—"

When Bedford saw he was prepared to rise out of his chair he tempered his galloping enthusiasm and motioned the poet to remain seated.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Stephen, if I've offended you. But think—think what all this will mean—what total communication will mean. No more misunderstanding. Mind will comprehend mind without having to pass through the clumsy medium of words. We will have—we will have global peace at last! Oh,

there's so much to work out, so much to consider—"

"You could begin by showing me this thing," Thorpe suggested, his anger tempered to a reasonable pique. "What is it?"

Bedford brightened and moved forward toward the cluttered bench nearest the chair.

"Come over here. I'll show you."

Feeling a trifle foolish, Thorpe stood up and followed him across the room.

Bedford gestured proudly at a cumbersome gadget that looked no different, to the poet's untrained eye, from any other piece in the overcrowded room.

"There it is," he said. "The precursor of the new millennium for mankind."

It was roughly the size and shape of a radio transmitter. The array of dials and meters meant nothing to Thorpe. The circular window in the center could be likened to a small video tube or the face of an oscilloscope screen, depending on your information. There was space along the bottom of the machine for all sorts of plug-in connections and what looked like two sets of complicated headphones housed in cumbersome headpieces, like the top section of a lunarsuit.

"Is that all?" he asked. The whole box and tricks could have been fitted into a four-by-three container without any difficulty.

Bedford laughed. The sound was a short, almost hysterical squeak.

"Well, what did you expect?" He leaned forward and threw a couple of switches eagerly. The machine hummed. "We'll see how it works, eh? I suppose you're wondering why I haven't called in the press? Well, I didn't want to. Tell me, Stephen—do you find it strange that after—after all these years I should remember you? And how we felt so strongly about the lack of proper communication in the world? Well, I wanted you to be here tonight to witness what I have done. To be—to be the first person to witness the enormity of what I have achieved—to have you understand."

Of course this could not be strictly true, Thorpe thought cynically. Bedford would have tried out his machine—probably to have seen his subjects run terrified from the house. It was unlikely that he would have had access to sophisticated test subjects under his present living conditions.

Bedford tapped the machine affectionately. "Of course, this is only a prototype. Actual production models will be much smaller. People will have to wear them, you see, and—perhaps I'd better explain some of the theory behind all this before I demonstrate?"

"Please," Thorpe insisted, "spare me the details. I have to attend a function in a short while. If you want to show me how this

thing works—for God's sake get it going. I can't hang around here all night."

ANY calculated cruelty in these words was lost on the scientist.

"Forgive me. I had forgotten your impatience with figures. Here—let me show you—" He picked up one of the head-pieces and rested it carefully over his scalp. He made a few minor seating adjustments and tested one or two connections. he smiled. "You see? Quite comfortable." He gestured to Thorpe to put on the companion unit. "You'll get used to it very quickly."

Gingerly the poet settled the complex headpiece over his head. Bedford came closer and made the necessary adjustments and then stepped back.

"There. Now—now to begin. I think perhaps—perhaps we had better both sit down."

The cables connecting them to the machine on the bench were long enough to permit Thorpe to return to his chair, and for Bedford to perch himself on an upturned wooden packing case. A distance of roughly nine feet seperated them from each other and from the machine.

Bedford gestured to the small black control box spliced into the cables and resting in his lap. "I'll tell you a bit more about that in a minute," he said. "But first, a little explanation of what to expect. You could call it—and they probably will—'assisted telepathic contact.' A.T.C.—now that's a good one for the press to boot around, isn't it? Well, why should I care? They won't be in business much longer."

"Assisted what?"

"Now don't get excited." The scientist waved a solicitous hand. "And don't go jumping into any of the popular misconceptions. Telepathy, as such has always been a fiction. The human mind just isn't powerful enough to broadcast and receive messages over a distance. But that it does broadcast has been established: all my little machine does is boost this infinitesimal current so that it will bridge the awesome distance between one mind and another. Just how far will have to be established with further experimentation. This is only the beginning, Stephen."

The poet continued to regard the set-up dubiously. He scarcely knew what to think. Either Bedford was crazy or he had discovered some vital new principle and if he had . . .

"Get on with it," he snapped, his irritation beginning to get the better of his polished courtesy. "I'm still waiting to see what you have."

"Precisely." Bedford tested the volume control and nodded happily. His eyes became a triumphant. "I wanted you here, Stephen, to witness the death of words—"

The circular screen Thorpe had likened to an oscilloscope came alive with dancing green patterns. They were beautiful. The theory of science might have baffled him but the visible and end products sometimes awed him—and such was the case as he stared at these enigmatic wiggles.

"You are observing my thoughts," Bedford pointed out. "Not the electrical rhythm of my brain, you understand, but the actual message of my thoughts."

But the poet could only stare and wonder. Was he being conned or genuinely mystified?

"If you want to know what I'm thinking, Stephen, you only have to bring your mind into rapport with mine. To do this you will need to adjust that red volume control very carefully, otherwise the full power of telepathic contact, might prove overwhelming. Advance it slowly."

Thorpe hesitated. He looked down at the volume control nestling against his left arm. He took a deep breath, moved his other hand across and advanced the red knob a judicious notch.

Nothing happened.

Bedford was studying him keenly. He motioned with his head to continue advancing the volume.

Thorpe moved it a notch higher.

And another.

AT FIRST he was only conscious of a faint susurrus of sound in his mind that might have been some small residue of background noise from the machine itself. And then he realized that it was less a sound than something else.

His scalp prickled. A nervous tic he had forgotten years before invaded his left cheek, making it dance uncomfortably just below his eye. There was a strangeness about this rapport with a machine he found disturbing but curiosity—and Bedford's earnest insistence—forced him to follow through.

A notch higher and there was still no perceptible difference. Was Bedford playing him for a fool?

Angrily he twisted the dial an incautious three stages further.

And found it.

The rustling mental static cleared. His mind was illuminated as if by a searchlight. He became filled with rapture. Someone—it had to be Bedford—was smiling at him from over a vast distance.

There could be no question about it: he had made contact with another mind. He had no reason to doubt—every atom of his body agreed—and at his fingertips was the means of intensifying this incredible rapport.

What was it, really?

Bedford's mind?

Soul?

Spirit?

Definitely something unique—the seat of personality and identity. For the first time in his life the

poet was conscious of what it was like to have somebody else's thoughts creeping through his mind and he grew hungry for a fuller experience.

Threshold was not enough. He passed beyond this meeting place of pure thought—where atoms rustled soundlessly together and the human mind began—and advanced the volume control as far as it would go.

The impact was tremendous. He was engulfed in a psychic flood, and when it cleared he found himself possessed of a serenity which had eluded him through all of his previous adult life.

Bedford had not been lying. His machine really did work. From now on it would be possible for each human mind to communicate directly with another—the race would be absolved of the drudgery of words and all the mendacity that had accompanied oral communication. And Arthur Bedford had made all this possible.

Thorpe had thought—long ago—that he had known Bedford better than anyone else and perhaps he had. But now he could see how grossly mistaken he had been, that it was impossible—or rather, had been impossible—for anyone really to know another. Now he understood Bedford's passion for enlightenment—out of his loneliness and his desperation at the loss of their friendship which he, Virgil Thorpe, had engineered, had come something as meaningful as this.

The shame of his callous disposal of their friendship sickened him. But he felt the scientist's compassion engulf him and soothe away the jagged teeth of his guilt.

It is over. It is past. Let us forget and see what the future holds.

Their minds locked, embraced and they looked out. Thorpe's mind had been quiescent and dumb underneath the great tide of Bedford's accomplishment—now it soared and was united, was one and equal—it reached out and marveled at this annexation of souls and they looked forward with one identity at what the future held.

They saw a world stripped of the crutch of language. They saw a world where universal understanding was the accepted norm and where lies had been driven out and peace reigned forever, where evil had ceased to exist because no mind could harbor it. They saw the human race linked together as one great intellect. They saw an end to wars, to grubby competition and all the psychological ills which had crippled mankind.

This was Arthur Bedford's vision. And it seemed too good to be true. If everyone understood everyone else Earth would be a paradise.

But wait a moment.

What is this dark beast I see?

It asked a question.

If individual motives, desires

and ambitions were understood, then . . .

What motives?

What desires?

What ambitions?

The vision did not seem so beautiful now. Thorpe's mind projected its own visions—the artist's struggle for his soul, his individuality apart from the mass mind.

You cannot take this from us—there is not one of us who is not in some small way a child of art. As murderers we became men and as artists the abiding conscience of mankind. You cannot allow this to happen, Arthur. Don't you understand . . .

But of course he did—understanding was what the machine was for. With an abruptness that was almost surgical in its shock the rapport was cut off.

For a while a dark sludge shifted uneasily around in Thorpe's dulled mind, waiting for words to give terrible weight to his fear when he found time to speak.

THEY looked at each other through. Bedford's hands and face were soaked with sweat. Thorpe's left cheek twitched crazily. He levered the headpiece away and struggled to his feet. Bedford raised his palsied hands and pushed his own headpiece aside but he did not get up. He remained crouched on the packing case as if he had been struck down by something too big to grasp.

"Arthur—you must destroy this thing," Thorpe said. There was no demand in his words, only a simple statement of fact. "And your papers—everything connected with this foul thing. Now—at once—before either of us have time to think. It's too monstrous to let—"

Bedford raised his head. His ancient cheeks were wet now with tears and his face looked ashen.

"Destroy it? How can you say such a thing? The years—the work—the pain—"

He seemed to have left his mind somewhere where it was still being attacked by the awful monsters the poet had dreamed up.

What motives?

What desires?

What ambitions?

"Stephen—I can't. Not this. It's [illegible]n my life's work. I can't [illegible] for nothing—for less than nothing. Think of what it will mean to the world—an end to all the disasters that have plagued us since the beginning of time. A fresh chance. A new beginning—without lies—without wars—with hope, Stephen—hope!"

"But it will mean an end to everything—can't you see that? To art, to literature, to music, to drama, to all the heirs of art! All the things that have made us something more than animals, the things that have made us great. An end to all individual aspiration—can't you see that, too?"

But Bedford could not.

The communication machine sat between them, motionless and unmoved, watching this little drama, unwanted now and the very sum of all the inconsistencies of the world wrapped up in one miraculous piece of engineering.

"Then you would have us suffer?" Bedford asked quietly, as though his mind were already made up. "Suffer all of the things I can dispell?"

"Yes—don't you see, it's our only salvation?"

Thorpe was shouting now. "We must destroy your machine to save the soul of mankind—"

"Are you sure, Stephen? Or just for the protection of your own fragile ego?

"You're mad, Arthur. You must be. Some day we will save ourselves, Arthur. We will race of the things you ... but that will be when he have attained an emotional and intellectual maturity necessary for the sort of society you hold ideal, not because some clever little machine has made it possible to accommodate our minds as they are now—feeble and primitive and not even half formed."

Bedford rose. A look of grim determination had come over him.

"No, Stephen. My machine will liberate us now—while there is still time."

"No. It will debase man. Not all minds are equal—you must know that—and your machine has the potential to dilute individual intelligence down to a common and unimaginative norm. You're blind, Arthur. But more than that—you're a fool, a fool actually to think you have done something worthwhile."

Bedford stood mute, like some terrible statue, his face drained of all life. His silence incensed Thorpe. The poet screamed something incoherent, pushed past him and grappled with the communication machine. With one great heave he pushed it off the bench and it crashed loudly to the floor.

The case shattered easily. It was only a jury-rigged test model and its insides broke up under the rain of smaller instruments that Thorpe brought down on it with maniacal frenzy.

He stamped on the headpieces and hammered and ground them under his heel. He screamed abuse at Bedford, at science, at God and at everything else he had learned to hate.

BEDFORD snapped out of his trance.

"No, no! Stop that—stop—"

Thorpe paid no attention but went on with his destructive orgy. He had to kill it, eradicate it, destroyitdestroyitdestroyit . . .

Don't, Stephen, please—don't do it—"

The statue moved and suppli-

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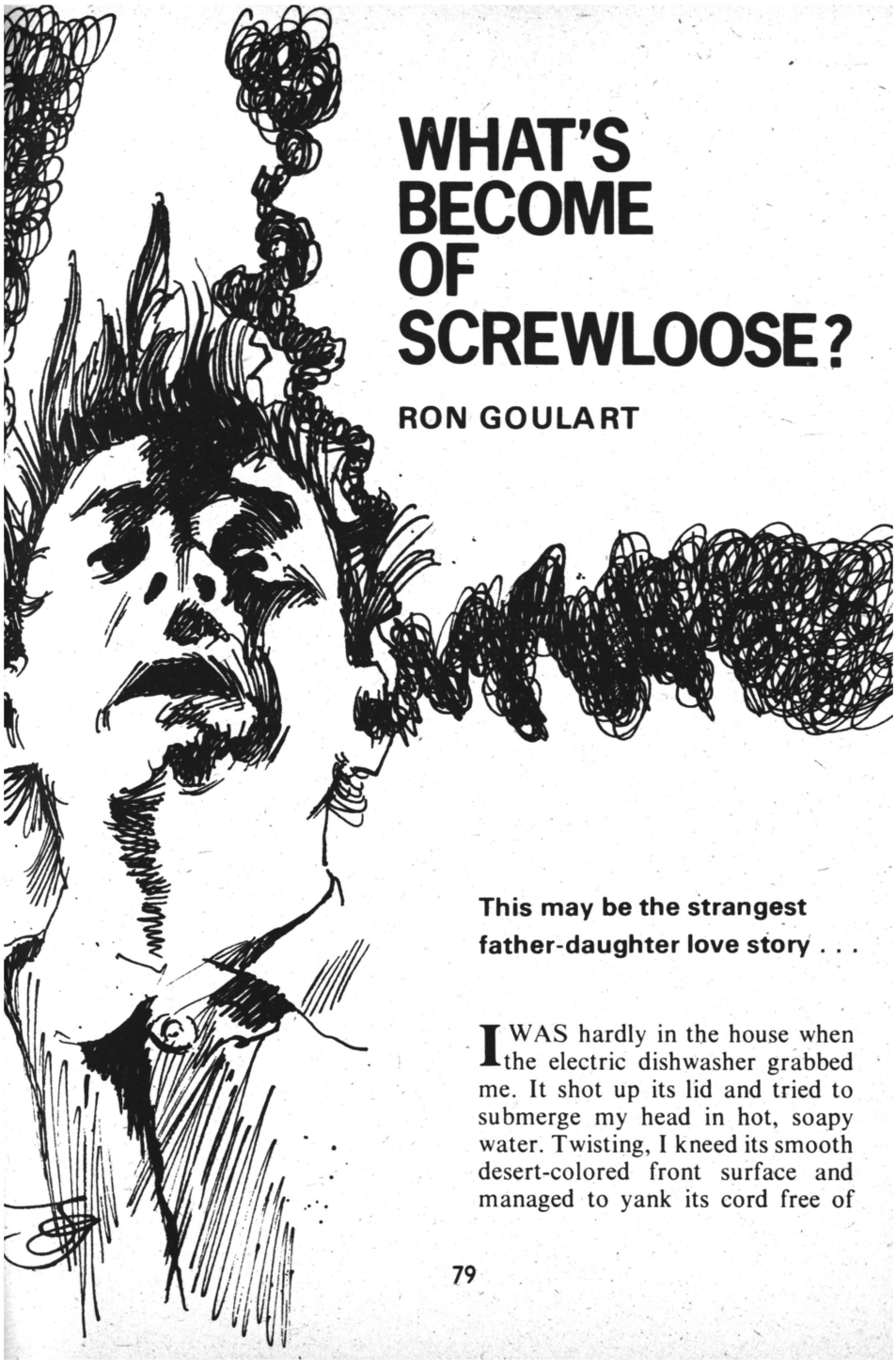

WHAT'S BECOME OF SCREWLOOSE?

RON GOULART

This may be the strangest father-daughter love story . . .

I WAS hardly in the house when the electric dishwasher grabbed me. It shot up its lid and tried to submerge my head in hot, soapy water. Twisting, I kneed its smooth desert-colored front surface and managed to yank its cord free of

the kitchen wall plug. The machine kept working, pumping scalding water at me, clutching at my shoulders with some kind of wiry tentacles. I grunted, snapped its arms off me for a second. I spun the heavy machine away from me. I dodged it, hopping across the afternoon-bright parquet of the kitchen.

The dishwasher came rolling after me, tentacles outstretched. I grabbed up a blowmold kitchen stool and thrust it at the machine's running wheels. The dishwasher tripped, fell over on its side and splashed sudsy water all around. I ran for the sundeck, my right hand reaching up under my jacket toward my holster.

Upright again, the dishwasher was rolling my way on its little wheels. Behind me was the Pacific Ocean, about three hundred feet straight down. I drew out my laser and waited, aiming.

Soapy water had splashed out here on the bright black topping of the wide deck and as the dishwasher came humming from the kitchen into the sunlight it took a skid. Its arms clutched air, flapped, and it whirled wildly past me. It hit the redwood rail and went right on through, falling toward the ocean, followed by splintered wood. After the giant splash came big bubbles.

Three white gulls came skimming in low over the water. They danced a second or two over the last of the bubbles and then soared up into the clear sky. I hung up my laser and went carefully back into the beach cottage.

The stove looked like it could be nasty in a fight but apparently it wasn't gimmicked. Nothing else in Mary Redland's empty beach house came for me.

In the beam-ceilinged living room the phone on the missing girl's marble-top coffee table began to buzz. I watched it, approaching it from the side. It looked to be only a phone and I decided to answer it.

"Tom," said the lank dark young man who appeared on the saucer-sized viewscreen, "is she there?"

"No, Oliver," I told him. "At least I don't think so. I just arrived."

I glanced toward the view window. It showed a quiet ocean.

"Tom, you look distracted," said Oliver Bentancourt.

I finally caught sight of the dishwasher swimming out to sea. Doing a fair Australian crawl with those unexpected arms.

"I was looking at the dishwasher," I said.

"How's that going to help us find out where Mary's been for the last two days?"

I sat on the paisley-patterned sofa and said, "This dishwasher is out in the Pacific, swimming."

"Oh, you mean some guy who works in a restaurant. Who is he?"

"No, I mean an appliance,

square squatty thing about half my size," I said.

I took another look at the bright ocean. The machine was quite far out now and had switched to a rapid backstroke.

"How can it swim?"

"It has little arms," I said.

Bentancourt rubbed a lean hand over his eyes. "I guess you're not kidding, Tom. I don't know. Maybe it's because of her late father that she's got an odd machine there. I don't know. Mary is—well, she isn't like anyone I've known before. I really didn't want to consult your agency, you know. But since you and I have been friends since catechism class days I figured you wouldn't be working for Stanley Pope unless he was okay. Where is Mary?"

"Easy, now. We'll find her. Stanley Pope specializes in cases that are a little eccentric."

"I don't want to use the police," said Bentancourt. "You know—because Mary has a pretty unhappy medical record. Well, psychological record rather. She's still in therapy. The police aren't too understanding."

"Right."

"I've called her friends, such as they are. I even tried to see if anybody was still at the old family place." He hid his eyes again for a moment. "She's not there? I mean, she didn't take something again?"

"No," I said, though I wasn't yet certain.

"Okay," said Bentancourt. "I'll call you tonight."

He nodded, smiled quickly and faded from the screen.

The dishwasher was only a speck now, a desert-colored dot heading for the horizon. I rubbed my chin, then scratched my chest with both hands. I went all through the three-room beach house and Mary Redland was not there. Nothing I found told me where she might be.

POPE was out on his court, playing tennis with a robot. I sat down in one of the wrought-iron benches ringing the green clay. Down through the trees and housetops I could see a flock of sailboats on Sausalito's piece of the bay.

"I'm perfecting my serve," Pope called to me.

He flung a fuzzy white ball straight up, kept his eye on it, whapped it over the net.

"You're using a badminton racket," I pointed out.

The robot was shaped like a water heater and had four arms. It rolled after the tennis ball and sucked it up off the court with a little nozzle.

Pope blinked. Wrinkles ran up his high forehead and were lost in his tight curly black hair.

"Huh?"

New rings joined those under his wide, circled eyes.

"Badminton racket." I inclined my head in its direction.

He scrutinized the racket, nodded.

"I must have left the tennis racket in the copter."

"Copter?"

"I was test-flying a new copter." He waved at the robot. "Game's over."

"I thought you gave up on copters."

"They have a tendency to crash," he said, "into the Golden Gate Bridge."

"When you're piloting."

"Anyway, I decided to give copters one more chance."

"And?"

"This one crashed into the Golden Gate Bridge."

I noticed the robot was speeding toward the tennis net.

"Your robot thinks he just lost the game."

"Huh?"

"He's going to jump over the net and congratulate you."

Pope turned. He was a lean, middle-sized man, nearly as dark as I am.

"Don't," he yelled as the robot leaped up into the air.

The tennis-playing machine didn't quite clear the net. It tumbled over front first with a clang, scattering tennis balls.

"Gadgets," said Pope. He ran to the fallen robot and helped it up. "I had a chance to inherit a hundred acres of soy beans in the San Joaquin Valley, Tom. Instead I surrounded myself with gadgets."

"Sorry, sorry," said the robot, feeling itself for damages with all its hands.

Pope left the machine and came over on the grass with me.

"What about this missing girl—Mary Redman?"

"Redland."

"I worry about all these gadgets the way some people worry about pets. I get nervous and concerned when they fall down." He blinked again and new rings appeared around his eyes. "What do I take at six o'clock?"

I reached a bottle of blue spansules out of my jacket pocket.

"Two of these."

"Well, I probably would have worried about soy beans, too." Pope shook two spansules into his palm, frowned. "Except soy beans don't fall down as much. Any trace of the girl?"

"No," I said. "But her dishwashing machine tried to kill me."

He swallowed, rubbed his forefinger along the side of his beaked nose.

"Huh? Give me all the details."

I described what had happened. Absently Pope undid his white tennis shorts and let them drop.

"I should have gone over there with you. Why didn't I?"

"You had to go to San Francisco, remember."

"Oh, yes. One of my former wives is after more alimony. The second one, right?"

"No, the third," I said. "Why

are you taking off your clothes?"

"Changing for dinner."

"You're still outside."

"Huh?" Pope bent and retrieved the fallen shorts, tucked them under his arm with his badminton racket. "I had a chance to go into the fishmeal business once. There's a lot less pressure in the fishmeal business than in the private investigation field. Right?"

"I haven't seen any statistics." We continued across his slightly overgrown two-acre backyard, moving in the direction of Pope's big transplanted Victorian house. "What did that homicidal dishwasher remind you of? You did a particular kind of reaction take when I mentioned it."

"Huh?" Pope stroked his nose. "Something I can't quite remember. But it ties in with this Mary Redland business." He stopped walking. "I really like the odd cases, Tom. Most of what we do know is simple electronic stuff. Bugging, counter-bugging, siphoning of computer information. Back when you were still in school someplace there were more odd things to work on. Her father."

"Mary Redland's father?"

"Right. He was a servomechanism tycoon, wasn't he?"

"That and teaching machines," I said. "My friend Bentancourt says Mary didn't talk much about her father. He died a year or so ago, in an autosonic jet crash. I know the few times I met her she didn't want to talk about the past at all."

"This name that your friend told us scared her, upset her—what was it?"

"Screwloose," I told him.

"Right. A nickname for somebody maybe. Your friend hasn't any notions?"

"Nothing new since he first consulted us."

"Mary Redland was in a therapy group over in Frisco, right. How long?"

"Three months. And, according to Bentancourt, she mentioned the name Screwloose during a session at this Dollfuss Center. He wasn't in the group with her but she told him about it afterwards. Because it scared her. A silly name but she was unsettled. Apparently that was all she was able to remember, just the name or whatever it is. Screwloose. Bentancourt figures maybe she remembered something else day before yesterday. Maybe that's why she took off."

"Why should she be remembering things?" asked Pope as we climbed the wide wooden back stairs of his vast rococo white house. "Did Bentancourt say she'd lost her memory at some point?"

"No, but she's had a breakdown or two and there seem to be certain things she has had trouble recalling."

"Slender girl, isn't she?"

"He showed you her picture."

"I know. Willowy, tall. Blonde," said Pope. "Thin women tend to be

twitchy. My second wife was."

"Third," I said. "Your second wife was a plump redhead with dimples."

Pope sighed. We were in the kitchen.

"Maybe I should have stayed with her and taken up soy beans, huh? Go to the Dollfuss Center and sit in on that group therapy session. Mary Redland was going every Tuesday and Thursday night at eight, wasn't she?"

"Yes. There's a session tonight. You figure she may show up there, even though she's been out of view for two days?"

"No. I want you to find out what reminded her of Screwloose."

He nodded at his refrigerator and it opened and handed him a cold bottle of ale.

POPE gestured uphill at the houseboat after I'd given him a verbal report on my visit to the group therapy session the night before.

"We'll go up to Past after breakfast. Did I order orange juice?"

We were under a metal umbrella out on a plank shelf over the edge of the Bay, at a restaurant called The Ruins Of Tiburon Tommy's.

"Tomato," I said. I removed a pill from a box I carried in my left trouser pocket and put it on the edge of his soycafe saucer. "I'm sorry I didn't turn up anything on Screwloose. Why Past?"

"Something," said Pope. He noticed a plate of plankton griddle cakes in front of him on the table. "I like to use Evelynski to supplement my memory sometimes."

"Didn't they indict Evelynski for siphoning classified information out of the California State Credit Computer?"

"They couldn't. No evidence."

"I thought they had evidence."

"Evelynski managed to siphon off all that, too." Pope was wearing a buff overall suit today. He rubbed his palms on his knees and the material gave off a purring sound. "Go back on what you told me last night. At the therapy session you said one of the group talked about Mary. He said something about how her late father had paid a lot of attention to her, especially to her education?"

"Yes, a big jovial pink guy in his middle forties. His name is Chuck Mogul," I answered. "When I asked him if he knew her he said he'd only read about her family a lot in the society columns. Years ago. Dr. Dollfuss is an admirer of yours—otherwise they probably wouldn't have let me sit in. He mentioned your eclectic mind."

"Right." Pope looked once more at the pancakes, then stood. "Let's go up and consult Evelynski."

Past is a private research organization. When all the houseboats were cleared out of the waters

around Sausalito Cosmo Evelynski had one moved to a lot in the low rolling hills of Tiburon. The big red-and-white boat served now as the top floor of his archives, with ten more floors sunk down into the hillside.

Evelynski's office was in the living room of the old houseboat and we found him there dropping punch cards into an electric wastebasket. The basket would chew up a card, making a lopsided growling sound. Then it would spew the fragments back out at Evelynski.

Evelynski was sitting on a low wicker stool, a confetti of shreds on the hardwood floor around him.

"On the fritz," he said.

He was a tall man in his low forties, short-haired and mildly rustic.

Pope took a seat on a plaid ottoman. The rings around his eyes were flickering. "About twenty years ago," he said, "something like four men who were all prominent in the servomechanism field died. I've been trying to remember the details."

"Hello, Tom," Evelynski said to me. He kicked the wastebasket away with his left foot. "You're thinking about a murder case, Stanley?"

Pope said, "It's not on record as such. All four of these guys died in a six-month period, all in accidents. They were, though nothing much was made of it as I recall, the chief competitors of what's his name. Donald B. Redland. Mary Redland's father."

"Redland of United/Tech?" Evelynski stood up and crossed to a dumbwaiter in the wall.

Pope nodded. "In one of these accidental deaths there was something—something about an eyewitness. A little boy nobody believed. He claimed he'd seen a soft-drink machine push the victim off the edge of a bluff in Muir Woods someplace. A foggy day, nobody else saw anything."

"The dishwasher," I said.

"Reminded me," said Pope.

Evelynski opened the door to the shaft and yelled, "Freak Accidents. Also Redland, Donald Bascomb. Muir Woods, vicinity, accidents. Servomech industry, obits. Anything else you can think of." He let the small white door flap shut. "I've dug down two more floors since you guys were here last."

"Did you fix that computer who would only take requests given in classical Greek?" asked Pope.

"He just outgrew it. He was new then and showing off. You know, the runt in the pack." Evelynski made his way around the circular room and stood next to the mouth of a metal chute. Far down under us a faint fluttering whir had started. In another thirty seconds file folders, tape reels, punch cards, loose clippings and glossy photos poured out into Evelynski's arms.

"Here," he said and dropped the pile of material on Pope's lap.

Three newspaper clippings fell in the process. I reached them off the hook rug and glanced at them. The headline on the largest clipping, a half page with photo, read: "Peninsula Girl Has A Special Sort of Teacher." The girl, six then, was Mary Redland and her special tutor was an android teacher especially designed by her father, Donald B. Redland, and built under his supervision at United/Tech in nearby Sunnyvale. The story said Mary liked the teaching robot "an awful lot" and the family nickname for him was Professor Screwloose. There was a picture of Mary and the android in a bright playroom. I held the clipping out to Pope.

"Here's Screwloose," I said.

"Oh, so?" He took the clipping.

"Also Chuck Mogul," I added.

"You're getting slipshod, Tom," said Pope. "One of the six people you spent two hours with last night is an android and you didn't tumble to it."

"Nope," I admitted. "He's got a lot of believability. He struck me as a phony—but a human phony."

Pope tapped the photo. "This was taken at the Redland place down on the Peninsula, wasn't it?"

"That's right," I said. "The estate's been empty since Redland was killed. Nobody's living there. But supposedly it's still guarded by a lot of Redland's mechanisms."

"Huh?" said Pope. He rolled up the piece of newspaper and rubbed it across the tip of his sharp nose. "I wonder if Mary Redland's gone there. What she's trying to remember has to do with this damn android and probably with that old house."

"I'd better drive over there and check," I said.

"After we go through the rest of this stuff, yes," said Pope. "Stop at my place and gather up some tools for jobbing the burglar alarms. We have something or other for stunning robots, don't we?"

"Yes. Do you want to come along this time?"

"No, I want to call on Chuck Mogul," said Pope. "You said Dollfuss records show him with a San Francisco address?"

"Yes, Telegraph Hill." I wrote the address on a memo slip.

"I want to ask him why he's no longer Screwloose," said Pope.

NOTHING was working at the Redland estate. I'd parked my land car three hundred yeards beyond the front stone wall, in the shadows of a grove of black oaks. The day was ending early and a prickly mist was tumbling out of the darkening sky as I walked carefully toward the front gates. The gates were twice my height and twisted into patterns of Rs and grape leaves. The gate was the kind that gave off an alarm ring if touched and an electric wire netting grew up to six inches above the high thick stone wall. Flood-

lights had been aimed at the cleared ground on the visitor's side of the gate and just on the other side of the wrought iron a black police dog crouched, fangs bared.

But none of it was working. The floodlights weren't on, the robot dog was silent and there was no life in his vinyl eyes. The gates had swung open a few feet. I'd been prepared to try to gimmick the alarm system and pick any locks I ran into. I had a brown nearleather attache case under my arm. I didn't need it. I walked through the gates.

The mist fell and rolled, thickening. Far away, back on the highway, a diesel truck groaned by. Passing the mechanical watch dog, I brushed against him and he fell over sideways. I could see the shape of the house now, a quarter of a mile away. Cupolas and spires and weather cocks jabbing free of the mist. The main house was three stories, twenty-five rooms. A six-car garage with chauffeur's suite, a copter hangar and two small guest houses were supposed to be beyond and behind the main house.

The grass had been recently cut. It had a damp fresh-cropped smell. The trees, hundreds of birches and willows and pines, were less cared for. Approaching the house, I saw an android sprawled in the brush. He was a gardening robot and he seemed to have fallen from a ladder while pruning. He was broken and beginning to rust. His bent hand still clutched a pair of shears, orange now from exposure.

There was only darkness in the main house. I went around it, listening. I crossed a stable yard and saw light. A fluttering unsteady glow coming from a cottage deep among willows. I went toward that.

A metal plate screwed to the cottage said: Miss Mary Redland/Her Playhouse. I knocked. The motion of my knocking pushed the door open. Inside the small room was Mary. She was sitting in a low wooden chair, her legs bent up and tightly together. On a child-size desk beside her stood a kerosene lantern, sooty smoke fluming up from it.

"Hello, Mary," I said.

She looked up, nodded, smiled faintly and briefly.

"Hello, Tom."

"This is where you've been?"

"Most of the time," Her prettiness seemed to come and go on her face, wavering like the lantern light. "I guess Ollie hired you to come looking for me."

"That's right." I took a lopsided sofa chair for a seat. There were shelves climbing the walls, cluttered with toys. Simple stuffed toys and complex mechanical ones. Below the shelves were teaching machines and film viewers, spools of history and math piled atop them.

"Somebody is always and con-

tinually looking after me," said Mary. "Since always." She locked her slim hands over one knee. "I remembered some things and I came back here to think about them. To reflect, more or less."

I watched her in silence.

"They never," said Mary, "thought I'd remember. And I didn't, actually, quite remember for a long time. Then I began to."

I stayed quiet.

"Fifteen. No, twenty. Twenty years almost," said Mary. "When I was about six years old. My father and one other man who worked for him. They're both dead now. I suppose that's funny. Twenty years ago they killed four people."

"Rivals," I said. "People your father couldn't buy out?"

"His ambition was to become much bigger. He did, too," said Mary. "They, my father and the other man, came up with a fine and simple idea. Not something that would seem simple to me or possibly to you—only to them. He could have kept trying to deal with them financially, buy them. Except this new idea was simpler and not as expensive. So they figured out how to adapt some of their fine machines and mechanisms. Adapt them to kill people. Not in any obvious ways, though. To push them out of windows or arrange accidents. There's a funny side to that, too, being killed by your refrigerator or your color TV console."

I nodded.

"I met one of those machines."

"Yes, I guess a few of them are still around," she said, "to keep an eye on me. I gave up trying to avoid all the mechanisms dad thought should keep track of me. You probably saw it in that beach house dad bought for me."

"That's right."

Mary said, "The problem was, the problem was I walked in."

"On a killing?"

She shook her head. "No, on the planning of one. They were very thorough. They made charts and diagrams. Maybe that's how you should kill people, carefully and with a good deal of thought and deliberation. I walked in. It was up there at the big house. In dad's den, which was supposed to be private. I didn't always pay attention to that kind of restriction then. I was six and they'd not bothered to lock the door this one time. I walked in, very silent. Dad was at his long wide work table, drafting table, and they were talking. I listened for a long while until they noticed me." The mist was thick at the little room's leaded windows. "At first they—dad especially—tried to convince me I hadn't heard anything or that it was just a game. The problem was, you see, they went right ahead and killed the man. So I asked about it." She stood and wandered to the low black-and-gray machines. "This is where they did it."

"They worked to make you forget?"

"Yes," said Mary finally. "It used to be called—what was it? Brainwashing? It wasn't going to hurt, dad promised. Seems to me—it seems to me it took weeks to do. They used these machines and some others." She paused and took a sharp inward breath. "And my tutor. I had an android. A nice affable robot who taught me and read stories and was nice. I called him Professor Screwloose. I don't know why, something dad said once is where I got the name I think. He helped them do it and after that he was gone, sent someplace else. For years I forgot, didn't remember. Except it started trying to come back. You know, I had some problems. Yes. I went into therapy finally and I really began to remember." She turned to me. "He was there, though I didn't realize it at first."

"Screwloose," I said.

"Yes," she said. "Calling himself Chuck Mogul and passing for human. I guess dad had programed him to keep watch on me. Even with dad gone, nobody turned poor Screwloose off. He's still hanging around, watching after me. Protecting me. I suppose he's anxious to keep me from remembering, even though it doesn't make much difference now."

"YOU paint me as not too nice a guy," said Chuck Mogul. He came into the cottage grinning. There was a black pistol in his believable right hand. "Gee, Mary. We have meant nothing but good for you."

She leaned against the black machines.

"It's all over, Professor Screwloose."

"No, I don't feel that," said the android. "Gosh, your dad, god bless him and keep him, set me up swell, Mary. With funds and a nice place on Telegraph Hill in San Francisco. All I have to do, as long as I live, is look after you. Not only to keep you from thinking about some unpleasant things that might have happened when you were a cute little tossle-headed kid. No, I'm dedicated to seeing to it you have a calm, pleasant life always."

"Good Christ," said the girl. "My father was enough. I don't want any more sweet concern. I'm me now, full grown—and I don't want you."

"Gosh, Mary," said Screwloose. "Don't talk like that. I'm always going to be around. I'm—gee—I'm made that way, honey."

"You shouldn't have," I said, "gotten so close. Shouldn't have gone to the therapy sessions."

The android agreed. "I debated a lot about that. Gosh, but I was worried. About what she might blurt out there in front of the others. So I took a risk, pulled a few strings and got in the same group with her. No, I have to admit that

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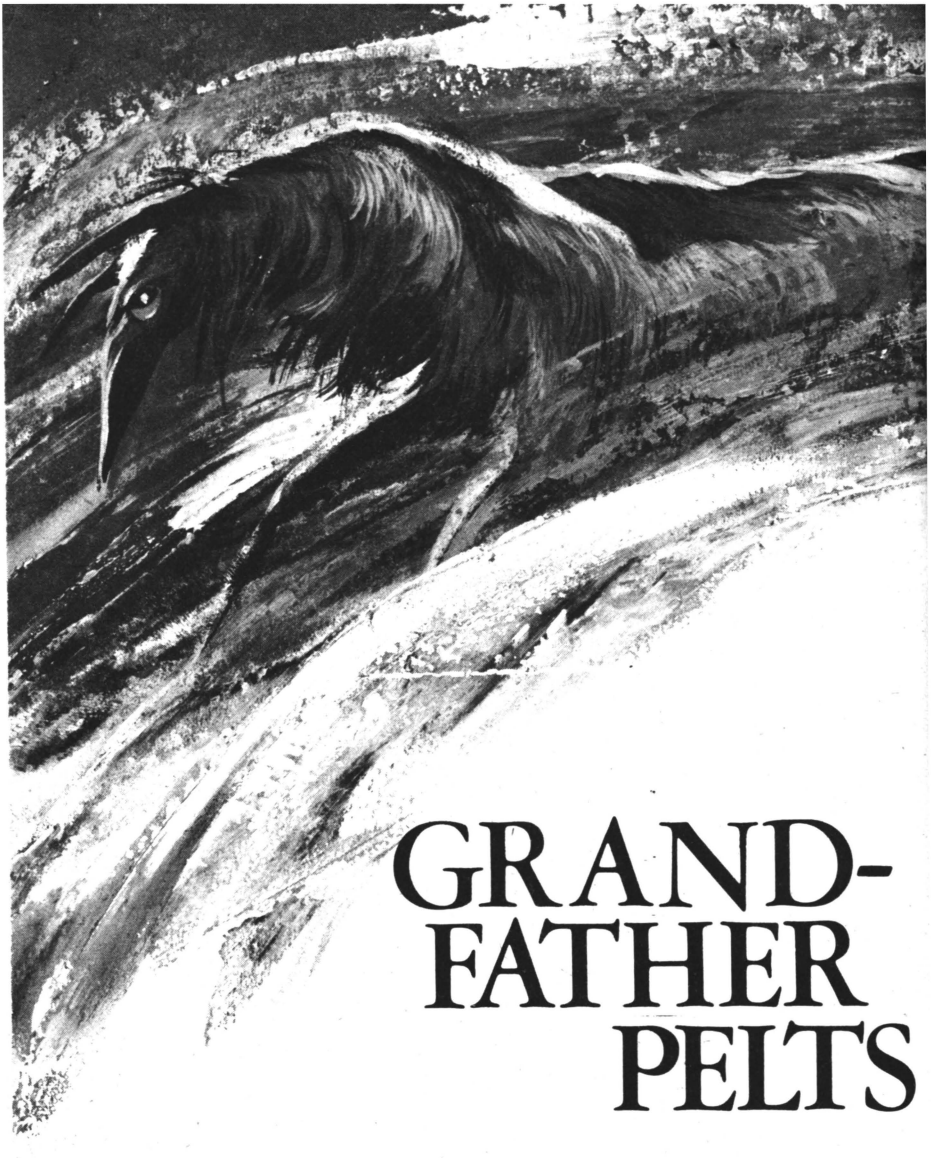
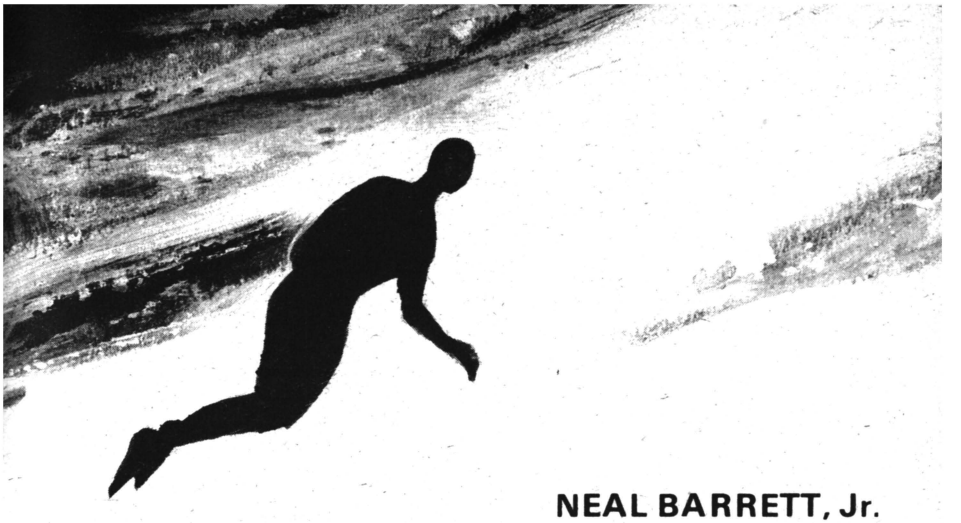


GRAND-FATHER PELTS



NEAL BARRETT, Jr.

The generation gap was a grim reality—but Klaywelder never suspected its longevity!

KLAYWELDER landed the *Glory B* as gently as babys' breath. The gravitics held a quarter-inch above the ground as the big engines hummed down the scale and sighed.

Klaywelder sighed with them. Then, without a glance outside, he pulled himself up quickly from the pilot's couch and walked the few feet to his quarters. At the foot of his bunk he carefully pressed his right thumb against a particular spot on the bulkhead. The deck beneath him shuddered and screeched in protest as its atoms were harshly realigned. The metal surrounding his cargo was now unmetal—a horrid molecular mess with all the spectographic purity of scrambled eggs.

Klaywelder nodded with satisfaction. No one, not even Klaywelder himself, could open it now—only the peculiar little character on Filo who had installed the thing could wrench it back to normal without melting down the ship.

Klaywelder strolled back to the cabin and stuffed his pipe with Guubi weed. The first puff made him gag. He scowled and knocked the bowl out on the deck. Earth tobacco, he promised himself, would be first on his list. And with what he had in the hold he could well afford the best, this time.

He glanced through the port at

the rolling, sage-green hills and whipped-cream skies. Last stop, Pharalell IV, and then home—and more credits than even he had ever dreamed of.

Klaywelder's smug contentment turned to mild annoyance. The domed entryport at the edge of the field looked like an ugly pink hive—and now, out of that hive swarmed three angry silver hornets, making their way for the *Glory B*.

As the hornets drew closer they turned into glittering speedsters. Klaywelder spotted the tiny Federation emblems on their sides. Two of the speedsters carried customs guards with dark rifles bouncing off their backs. The third held the short, stocky frame of Arto Frank.

Klaywelder bit his lip. He hadn't seen Arto in six years—and Arto was the last person he'd hoped to run into on Pharalell IV.

Klaywelder dropped to the ground and closed the port behind him. Frank burned rubber inches from his boots.

"Uhuh. I thought so." Arto Frank eyed him grimly. "What do you want here, Klaywelder?" He didn't wait for an answer. His head jerked to one side and motioned the other speedsters. "Mac, Artie—seal the ship."

The guards braced kickstands and moved forward.

"Hold it," warned Klaywelder. The guards looked at each other, then at Frank. Klaywelder backed against the hull and pointedly pressed a bright stud at his belt. Frank watched him from narrowed eyes.

Klaywelder folded his arms.

"I just wanted to get this whole little scene down on film, Arto. All right, now tell 'em."

Frank showed the barest instant of hesitation. Klaywelder smiled to himself. He reached into his tunic and tossed Frank a neat blue packet. Frank caught the object without looking at it.

"Travel Clearance," said Klaywelder. "Ship's Registry, Ownership Certificate, Parole Papers and Federation Tourist Visa."

"Tourist Visa," Frank repeated and looked at him without expression. Then he turned his head and nodded slightly at the two guards. They pressed their speedsters to life and roared off across the field.

"You can turn off the gimmicks now," said Frank. "If you had them on in the first place."

"I did," said Klaywelder. He pressed another stud. "I'm not under arrest, then?"

"No." Frank faced Klaywelder squarely. "You're not under arrest. What you're under is a thirty-two-hour surveillance until you break atmosphere."

"That's harrassment—"

"You can forget the guardhouse law, Klaywelder," Frank said flatly. "Just remember this. As Federation Customs Officer on Phar-

alell Four I can arrest you if you break the law here, lock you up, seal your ship or send you right back to Barrion for breaking parole. I'll do that, Klaywelder, if you so much as step on the grass. Understood?"

Klaywelder nodded.

"Just to set the record straight," Frank added quietly, "I know why you're here. I've even got a fair idea where you've been." He glanced up at the ship's dark hull. "I can smell contraband fur, Klaywelder—behind eighteen inches of titanium. I'm sure you have a nice hoard in there. I'm just as sure you could turn the whole cache into carbon before I could get a Search & Seizure."

Frank shook his head. "I wouldn't go to the trouble. Just remember—" he poked a menacing finger at Klaywelder—"you're not dealing with animals here. The Pharalellians are intelligent beings under Federation protection. You lay one hand on a Pharalell pelt—"

"Arto!" Klaywelder let an expression of shock cross his face.

"Uhuh. Sure." Frank stared at him distastefully. "I forgot. You're a tourist. Just don't you forget, Klaywelder."

With a final look of disdain, he mounted his speedster and disappeared across the blue tarmac.

THROUGH long years on the outer fringes of the law—and somewhat beyond—Klaywelder had learned to maintain an outer calm in spite of inner feelings. It was difficult to hold onto that control now.

Difficult? It was all he could do to keep from shouting, jumping up and down, turning handsprings. Arto Frank was right, of course. There was indeed a lovely cache of furs beneath the metallic fruitcake of his deck—heavy, cobalt-blue Rhinofox from Claxin, incredibly fine Sapphurs from Ebbinode and fifty-thousand rare microfurs from Deserexx—inch-long platinum pelts from the tiny minkmice, who conveniently welded themselves together in death to form long, silky stoles.

And all those goodies looked like so much boar bristle next to what he was seeing now.

He strolled beneath the feathery, sage-blue trees in the central plaza of Ochassh, the town nearest Pharalell's sole spaceport. He felt a little like an ant at a convention of beetles. The Pharalellians were roughly the size of teenage elephants but there was nothing remotely elephantine about them. They strolled gracefully and majestically about the plaza—four long legs moving in rhythm with shorter forearms hanging from shoulder height. If a prize Afghan were mated with an oversized anteater, Klaywelder decided, their progeny might look something like a Pharalellian.

But Klaywelder only absently noted these minor characteristics —for covering those great bodies from head to toe was the most indescribably glorious fur he had ever seen. It was finer than a spider's gossamer strands. It had the sheen of a lovely woman's hair by moonlight, the sparkle of a dew-covered leaf in early morn, just touched by the sun. And it came in blacker than jet, in breathtaking amber, in fleeting cream—and in every other shade he could imagine. Knowing his special customers as he did, Klaywelder was sure each pelt—just to be ultra-conservative— Klaywelder gave up.

Counting credits in stacks that high made him dizzy.

He played tourist for the rest of the afternoon. He bought examples of carved *Dinii* wood, a favorite Pharalell souvenir. He sent half a dozen postcards to people he had never heard of and ignored Arto Frank's man, who had not been more than twenty yards behind him all day.

At sundown, he walked back to the ship, had a leisurely meal and fell into a peaceful sleep. His dreams were so erotic and furry he almost blushed passing the mirror on the way in to breakfast.

Klaywelder had managed to stay out of jail more often than he'd been forced to stay in. He was sure, in his own mind, this was because he took his work seriously and went about each job with a surgeon's care. He had learned a lot about Pharalellians before landing on the planet. He knew they were extremely religious, exhaustingly polite and unbelievably naive. All three qualities placed them in an almost textbook Category AAA—which meant they were rigidly protected by Federation edict against people like Klaywelder.

On the other hand, the Pharalellians' own mores and manners tied Arto Frank's hands very nicely. Frank could in no way warn the Pharalellians against him. Discourtesy to any living creature—and that included bad-mouthing fur thieves—was a most extreme no-no. Frank, then, could not make a move until and if Klaywelder stepped out of line.

And that Klaywelder wasn't about to do—certainly not in any way discernible to Arto Frank.

IT WAS the largest house on the square—large even by Pharalellian standards. Sun-washed white stone flowed into subtle pastels of pink and green. A high, ornate metal gate graced a vine-covered entryway.

The big Pharalellian moved sedately out of his doorway and into the street. Klaywelder faultlessly allowed himself to be crowded off the stone walk. He flailed his arms wildly, then collapsed in a horrible heap. He lay there unmoving, his head cocked ominously against the curb.

The Pharalellian stiffened, then cringed visibly.

"Siim shave me!" it cried. "What have I done?"

Klaywelder moaned. The Pharalellian swooped down and laid a beautifully furry hand across his brow. "I am Steressh-shi," it said gently. "You will call me Garii, please. It is a name reserved for intimate friends who have known me at least forty seasons. You have by my discourtesy earned the right to use it. Are you hurt badly?"

Klaywelder sat up and blinked. "I'm all right. I think." He shook his head. Then his eyes widened. "Oh, no—"

Garii stiffened. "You are injured, then?"

"No, it's not that." Klaywelder began frantically searching the street around him. "My physical body is of no consequence. Not when my spiritual well-being is threatened."

Garii's eyes quivered under his furry brow. "Your—spiritual—"

"Yes." Klaywelder nodded. "I can't seem to find my pouch. It was here—I wear it around my neck on a silver chain—"

The Pharalellian bent down to join the search. "This pouch—it is important to you?"

Klaywelder sighed. "It is only my ticket into Paradise, nothing more."

Garii sucked in a deep breath. "It contains the nail parings of my father and his fathers before him," Klaywelder explained somberly. "As I am the ninth son of the ninth virgin, the pouch containing the male spirits of my family is naturally in my trust."

"Yes, naturally." Garii was openly trembling now. "Our ways are strikingly similar."

"You noticed that?" Klaywelder peered under a loose bit of paving. "Actually, that's why I've been so anxious to visit Pharalell Four. I truly believe my people have a strong spiritual kinship with yours."

"Oh, yes—indeed!" Tears rolled down Garii's eyes, staining his silvery pelt a light cobalt blue. "And I, through gross stupidity, have banned your soul from the Thousand Rooms of Infinite Pleasure!"

"It's nothing, really," said Klaywelder.

Garii swept great hands to his face and moaned.

"If you will permit me I shall begin Atonement by tearing out my visual organs. It is a small thing—but a start—"

"No, please," said Klaywelder. "Ah—there's my pouch. It was under your foot all the time."

Garii stifled another moan. "Now I have trod upon your fathers. Visual organs alone will not suffice."

"No problem," Klaywelder said easily. "They're found." He hooked the pouch around his neck. "That's what's important."

The Pharalellian gently helped him to his feet. "You must enter my house, now. I have much indebtedness to overcome."

"Oh, no." Klaywelder yawned absently. "I wouldn't consider disturbing you."

Garii's mouth opened in horror. "I could not blame you for refusing. I have no right to ask. Still —" he faced Klaywelder with pleading eyes— "I beg you not to leave me with no chance of Atonement."

Klaywelder watched the sun form fascinating whorls of color on Garii's fur. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Arto Frank's man frowning in puzzlement at the edge of the plaza.

"All right," he said finally. "If you really insist."

"My gratitude is unbounded, sir."

Klaywelder shrugged. "You can call me Klay."

GARII insisted Klaywelder spend the remainder of his stay on Pharalell IV in his home. Klaywelder declined and the Pharalellian nearly removed his visual organs again before it was explained that Klaywelder could not possible spend nights outside his ship since his ancestral altars were located there and could not be moved.

Garii understood. But during the daylight hours Klay must allow his host the opportunity to work at full Atonement. That, Klaywelder agreed, seemed fair enough.

Klaywelder was not about to spend a night away from the *Glory B*. Not that Arto Frank could possibly do any damage there but Klaywelder did not intend to give him the chance. Besides that, he wanted Frank to establish a normal Klaywelder day-night pattern in his mind.

AT SUNSET on the third day Frank pulled up beside him on the narrow road from Ochassh to the spaceport.

Klaywelder greeted him with a slightly lopsided grin. He was more than a little high—mentally and physically. Wine had flowed freely at the party, and Garii made certain his guest-of-honor's cup was never empty. Every swallow, it seemed, was a step closer to full Atonement.

There was more. Klaywelder was dizzy from mingling with the twenty or thirty Pharalellians assembled to meet him. Each one's pelt was more magnificent and multi-hued than any he had imagined before he came to Pharalell IV.

Frank studied him.

"You're going ahead with it, aren't you?" he said finally. "I can read it all over you." He shook his head. "Klaywelder—"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Klaywelder. "I'm

up to my ears in Pharalellian wine at the moment, Arto. My host—Steresah-shi, to you—I can't reveal his intimate name to strangers but—"

Frank's speedster jerked ahead abruptly, wheeled to block Klaywelder's path.

"Listen," Frank said darkly, "I know what it's all about. I've known since the minute you set down here. You can't pull it off. Don't even try, Klaywelder—"

Klaywelder sighed. "I sense deep spiritual conflicts within you, Arto. At evening devotions I shall ask my ancestors to bring peace to your troubled soul."

Frank made a pointed remark about Klaywelder's ancestors and their relation to Klaywelder himself. Then he left in a cloud of dust and disappeared down the road.

"AS FURTHER proof of my Atonement, Klay, and because I consider you a spiritual brother whose devotion transcends the boundaries between us, I hope you will allow me one more privilege."

"Only ask," said Klaywelder.

"You have noticed the great door at the end of my quarters?"

"I may have," said Klaywelder, who had noticed little else since he had become Garii's guest.

"That door leads to the Shrine of my Ancestors," said Garii. "I would be honored if you would accompany me there."

Klaywelder lowered his eyes to hide his excitement.

"The toenails of my fathers are pleased, Garii."

His heart pounded against his chest. His research on Pharalellian religion had been very specific about ancestral shrines.

Garii pulled a lavish key from the depths of his silvery fur. He inserted the key in the great door and something clicked. The massive panel swung open.

Klaywelder held back a gasp. The room was as big as an auditorium. Dark, somber columns arched from the walls and met high above in a domed ceiling. A single shaft of sunlight fell from a high pane, giving the great vault an aura of eternal twilight.

Nearly a hundred candles set in dark red glass circled the walls—and spread carefully over the stone floor before each candle was a magnificent golden pelt.

Golden. .

Klaywelder could hardly believe his eyes. If living Pharalell pelts were indescribable—what could you say about these?

"It is our belief," Garii said reverently, "that the degree of virtue attained by a Pharalellian is later reflected in the tone of his pelt. I am most pleased that my fathers and their fathers are all of respectable hues."

You can say that again. . .

Garii led him silently about the room and Klaywelder noted that a

small earthen pot of wine and a clay dish of fruit had been placed before each glowing candle.

"That is a part of my duty," Garii explained proudly. "As the reigning male in my family, I have been accorded this privilege. Each day I bring fresh offerings of reverence." He lowered his big head. "To do so brings great honor to me and my house."

Garii laid a gentle hand on Klay's arm. "Come, my friend—now I would show you Shastalian, greatest of my ancestors."

Klaywelder followed past long rows of gleaming, golden pelts. Finally Garii stopped. "There—" he pointed—"Shastalian, grandfather of grandfathers. A saintly creature and the most famed of all Pharalellians."

Klaywelder wanted to cry. He could hardly bear to hold his eyes on the rippling sea of gold at his feet. He was here—this close to it. A planet's ransom and then some in one glorious pelt.

Not that it really mattered but he wished briefly that he had been a little more imaginative about his own 'religion.' Somehow ancestral nail parings just didn't quite cut it next to Shastalian.

"You see, Klay," Garii explained solemnly, "we consider the Pharalellian body to be unimportant. We are held within its bonds only a little while—but Eternal Life resides in the Pelt. When we are fortunate enough to move into that Loftier Plane the troubles, cares and Atonements of this existence are left in the poor vessel we term the body. Your beliefs are similar, I think."

"Oh, yes," Klaywelder said absently, "very similar, Garii."

"When the time comes for one of us to pass on to that Higher Existence he is taken to a most sacred place. You have seen the large building on the other side of the plaza? The one trimmed in black and gold?"

Klaywelder nodded.

"That is *Fakash-il Shrai*. It means Abode of the Skinners."

Klaywelder swallowed. He looked up at Garii.

"The—skinners?"

"Yes. It is a most dedicated profession. Skinners are chosen from among only the highest and worthiest of clans. Since the body of a Pharalellian is never seen without his pelt the Skinner candidates are blinded at birth, of course."

"Of course," said Klaywelder. He decided this was one phase of Pharalellian religion he could have done without.

"They are very skilled members of the Priesthood," Garii went on. "They must be, since it is a delicate thing to transfer the living soul from the body to the Pelt."

Klaywelder stiffened. "The—living soul? You mean—"

"Certainly," said Garii. "There must be breath still in the body

when the Skinners begin their task." He spread his hands. "Or else the soul would not go on to Eternal life, would it?"

Klaywelder felt a cold chill creep up the back of his neck. He wondered how many Pharalellian ancients, at that last moment, looked up at the sharp blade and blinded eyes of the faithful Skinners—and decided they weren't quite ready for Eternal Life as a golden rug.

"You seem far away, my friend." Garii's voice held puzzlement.

Klaywelder cleared his throat. "I—was, Garii. I'm so overwhelmed by what I've seen, by what you've told me—I fear I lapsed into meditation for a moment. I hope you'll forgive me."

Garii sighed happily.

"Don't apologize, Klay. To think that you have actually experienced the feelings I have known here myself." He stared gravely at Klaywelder. "Might I presume that my Atonement is now complete?"

Klaywelder glanced once more at the great golden pelt of Shastalian, grandfather of grandfathers.

Damn thing must weigh a good four or five hundred pounds. Still.

"Yes, Garii," he said finally. "I'd say that just about does it."

KLAYWELDER eased through the lower hatch of the *Glory B* and flattened himself against the cold concrete below the ship. It was long past the middle hour of Pharalell's night. The light in Arto Frank's dome had winked out some time before but Klaywelder had waited patiently in the darkened cabin.

Even in the Blacsuit, he felt as conspicuous as a blazing beacon crawling on his belly across the broad field. The skintight garment ate every photon of available light—still, he imagined Frank's cold eyes cutting a blinding swath through the darkness.

He was sure radar had his ship bracketed to the ground. If *Glory B's* hull rose as much as a half-inch or the power level of her engines suddenly changed—every alarm in the area would scream itself into a blue hemorrhage. He was banking on the fact that Arto Frank would be expecting a ship to leave the field—not a man. And he prayed silently to his ancestors' mythical toenails that Pharalell was too small a post to include body sensors as standard equipment.

At the rear of Garii's house, he pulled a small gravitic unit from under his Blacsuit and attached it to his belt. On half power he lifted himself over the high wall, then pulled himself smoothly along, inches above the clay shingles, and up the arching dome.

With a suction attached to the single pane, he lifted the glass out easily with quick use of his cutter.

Then, slowly, he lowered the grav's dial to one. Weight returned and pressed him against the tiles. He removed the unit and hinged a thin, sloping metal wedge to its base, forcing the wedge into its "load" position against a heavy spring.

Finally he poked a shielded flash through the dome's hole, let a thin smile crease his lips. There it was —dazzlingly bright even in the dim shaft of light. Shastalian.

Klaywelder bit his lip.

Here comes the tricky part . . .

He placed the grav unit just inside the edge of the dome, then flipped his remote until he was sure the unit's weight had been sufficiently reduced to hold itself. When he was certain, he increased the weight and watched it slowly descend to the floor.

It touched bottom a good eighteen feet from Shastalian. Klaywelder wiped sweat from his brow. The unit had no horizontal control. The trick was quickly to raise the unit a few feet, shut off its power, let it fall, then raise it again before it hit the floor—and repeat the procedure until he could get the thing moving in a series of parabolic arcs toward Shastalian.

Klaywelder took a deep breath. The first time his hand trembled and the unit fell nearly to the floor. He tried again. He was getting the hang of the thing now, and the unit was moving in slow, graceful arcs—luckily, in the general direction of the Shastalian pelt.

Ten feet. Fifteen. Seventeen—now.

Klaywelder gently halted the unit and lowered it to the floor. His heart pounded against his chest. He was only inches from the pelt—he didn't dare press his luck further. Wiping his brow once more, he twisted the remote to full weight, pressing the unit below hard against the floor.

Click!

Klaywelder winced. The noise seemed to echo off the stone walls —was much louder than he had expected. But—it was done. The spring-loaded wedge, set off by the unit's weight, whipped a thin steel tongue under the edge of the pelt. By raising the unit inches at a time, Klaywelder slowly wormed the wedge under the heavy fur, caterpillar style.

He glanced at the horizon. A thin line of pink was edging the low hills to the east. He turned away and concentrated on the problem below. There was no more time—the unit was nearly under the center of the pelt and it would have to do. He closed his eyes and turned the dial to full power.

Shastalian lifted slowly off the floor and rose toward the ceiling, a shadowy golden ghost in the dim shaft of his light. The pelt nuzzled up against the top of the dome only yards away. Klaywelder ex-

tended a thin metal tube to the right length and gaffed Shastalian as he would a giant, furry fish.

He had one more moment of panic when the pelt stuck in the dome's narrow hole. Then he was home free. Klaywelder touched the pelt for the first time. A chill ran through his whole body. There was absolutely no way to compare Shastalian to anything.

BRACING himself and his prize, he pressed a small wafer to his throat and mouthed a single sub-vocal command. A few miles away, a relay clicked in *Glory B's* computers. Silent engines whined into life. And at the same time, alarms hooted and moaned across the field and bright beams stabbed angrily into the sky.

Glory B rose swiftly from the spaceport in a low, ground-hugging curve, homing in on Klaywelder. For a moment blue strings of heat spat at her from the field. They halted abruptly. At that angle, Frank would soon have been sizzling the roofs off Pharalell homes and buildings.

Klaywelder grinned. The ship streaked over the outskirts of Ochassh and came to a hovering stop three feet above him. He let the grav unit lift Shastalian into the port, then pulled himself up. The port snapped shut and Klaywelder bounded to the control cabin. He threw himself into the command seat and slapped one hand full across the board.

Glory B lunged upward in teeth-shattering acceleration. Blue fire spiderwebbed against the hull for a brief moment. Then Pharalell IV shrank to a bright green globe against blackness.

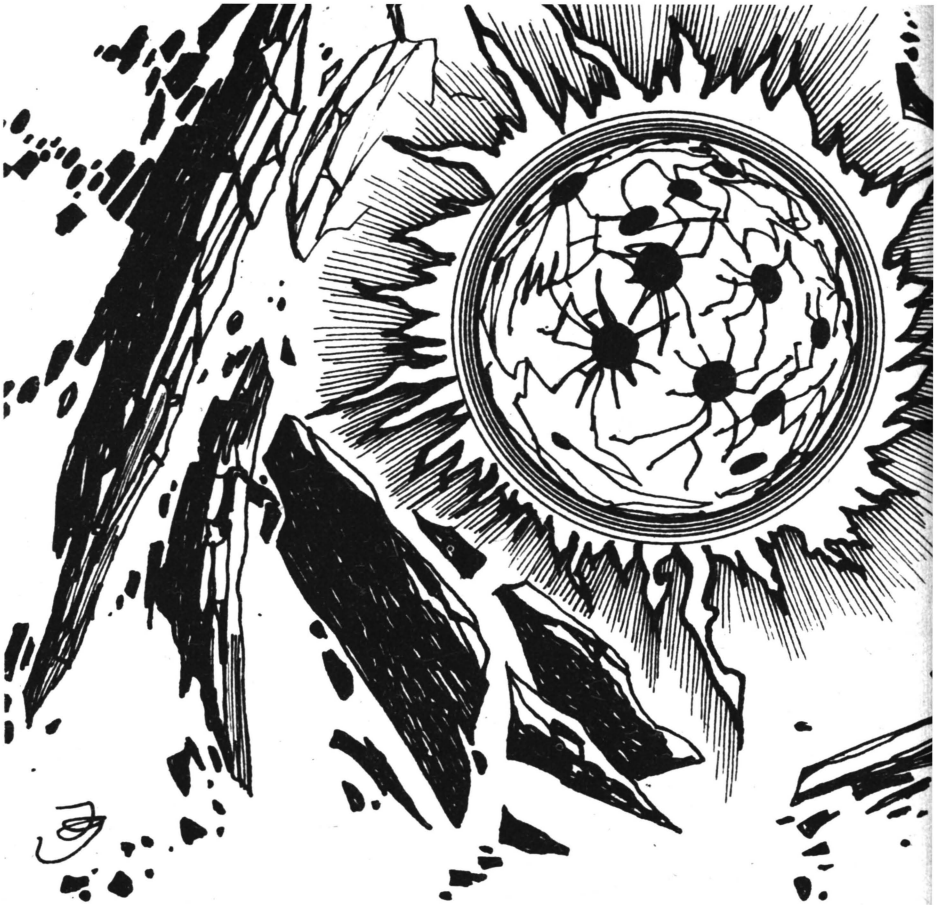
FEDERATION ships would already be on Red Alert—but space was terrifyingly vast and the patrols were spread pitifuly thin. He would be long gone when they finally got to where he was supposed to be. A quick stop on Filo to open the scrambled hold, then a first-class plastjob for himself—a good one, this time, from eyes to toes—and then Earth.

He broke out his last sixteen-ounce steak from the locker and topped it with a bottle of Pharalellian wine. In comfortable lethargy he strolled toward his quarters, stopping by the entry port to gaze once more at Shastalian. He would have liked to have spread the big pelt out to its full length but there was no place in the ship nearly large enough to accommodate the great golden fur.

Stretched out on his bunk, Klaywelder thought about Arto Frank and grinned tiredly. Poor Arto. He was, though, genuinely sorry about Garii. Garii was all right. He hoped Shastalian's loss didn't hit him too hard.

Still, he reasoned with Klaywelder logic, Garii had lots of

(Please turn to page 158)



WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

For many moons, almost as many as there are over his planet, Shoogar, the local magician-in-residence, has been predicting disaster. It arrives, quite suddenly, in the person of As-a Shade-of-Purple-Gray—Purple, for short—a practicing sorcerer from a land far beyond the dust clouds who sets his flying nest down in Shoogar's district.

Not only does Purple fail to observe the usual amenities required between a visiting magician and his host, but he roams the countryside with little regard for the sensibilities of the local gods. Shoogar and his skeptical friend Lant, fearing that the gods will wreak divine retribution on the land, order Purple to cease his activities. Purple pays little heed.

Then Shoogar insists that the intruding magician teach him some

THE MISSPELLED MAGICIAN

DAVID GERROLD and LARRY NIVEN

CONCLUSION

Illustrated by Jack Gaughan and Tim Kirk

of his more ingenious tricks—not least his magnificent flying spell. Purple tries to explain that his "magic" (the only word the speaker-spell can find to translate Purple's designation for his tricks) is based on the laws of nature and that Shoogar must be patient and study long and hard in order to master such legerdemain.

Shoogar is not to be appeased with that study-now-spell-later nonsense. He and Lant go off to perform the customary rites preparatory to invoking powerful curses.

Standing on the banks of the pond where the flying nest rests, Shoogar casts enough spells to destroy the nest and put an end to that meddling magician forever.

Satisfied that he has defended his honor, Shoogar turns to see Purple standing, unhurt and unimpressed, on the other bank.

Foiled again....

VI

HE STOOD there, his devices floating behind. Every eye was on him. His hands were on his hips as he looked thoughtfully down at his nest. How long had he been standing there?

"Fascinating," he said. And he started briskly down the slope. His devices followed.

The nest sat like a great egg in the middle of the river. Water backed up behind it, flowed in great torrents past its bulging flank, splashed angrily up and over the trampled shore. Angry mud creatures clambered over its dull black surface, scratching determinedly at the spell designs. Gobbets of mud and bloody fur streaked its sides—but still the spells of Shoogar were visible, almost arrogantly upright.

That made me uneasy. My eyes searched for the dents in the stranger's ruined nest, the dents surely put there by the horns of the rams. I couldn't find them.

Purple strode straight down the slope and into the water. Not a droplet of mud stuck to those peculiar boots of his—in contrast to Shoogar's legs and mine, which were mud to the hip. A pair of mud-skunks attacked the magician as he entered the water. Purple ignored them and they couldn't seem to get a grip on his boots.

He stood under the bulge of the nest and we waited for his scream of fury.

Carefully, with a small, edged tool, he began scraping off bits of Shoogar's curse-signs and putting them into small transparent containers. His mindless speakerspell continued to translate his ramblings.

"Fascinating—the power of these fluids-secreted-for-the-control-of-bodily-functions is like nothing I've ever seen before. I wonder if these effects could be produced artificially?"

Twice he sniffed at what he had scraped off and twice muttered a word the speakerspell did not translate. When he finished, he dipped his hands in the river to wash them, incidentally offending Filfo-mar, the usually gentle river god.

Purple turned to the door of his nest. It was flush with the curved wall but outlined in orange to make it visible. He punched at a square pattern of bumps on the nest. The door slid open and Purple disappeared inside.

We waited. Would he continue to occupy his nest, living in the middle of our defiled river?

The flying nest hummed and rose twenty feet into the air.

I screamed with the rest, a wordless scream of rage. The nest turned in an instant from black to silver. It must have become terribly slippery, for every particle of mud and blood and potion

from Shoogar's spell slid down the sides, formed a glob hanging from the bottom of the nest, and dropped in a lump into the river.

The nest again turned black. It moved horizontally across the land and dropped gently to the ground—just a few yards west of where it had stood an hour ago. Only now it rested at the edge of a region of churned mud, where the rams and mud creatures had fought to destroy it.

I could see Shoogar sag where he stood. I feared for my village and for Shoogar's sanity and my own. If even Shoogar could not defend us from the mad magician we were all doomed.

An angry rumble came from the villagers as Purple emerged.

Purple frowned and said, "I wish I knew what's gotten you people so angry."

Somebody threw a spear at him.

I couldn't blame the lad. No sound, no pattern of mere words, could properly have answered the magician. But the young man, enraged beyond sanity, had hurled his bone spear at the stranger's back—and worst of all, without a blessing!

It sruck Purple hard in the back and bounced off to the side without penetrating. Purple toppled, not like a man, but like a statue. I had the irrational conviction that for a single instant Purple had become as hard as stone.

But the instant was over. Immediately he was climbing to his feet. The spear, of course, had done no harm at all. One cannot attack a magician with an unblessed spear. The boy would have to be brought before the Council of Elders.

If the village survived that long.

THE suns rose together, the blue sun silhouetted off-center within the other's great fuzzy-edged and crimson disc.

I woke at noon. The evacuation was already well underway. My wives and spratlings had already done a good deal of the packing, though the fear of disturbing my sleep had slowed them somewhat. Under my supervision and the necessary discipline the rest of the preparations progressed quickly. Even so, we were very nearly the last family to leave the village. The lower rim of the red sun was already nearing the mountains when I dropped behind the procession of my wives to tarry at Shoogar's nest.

Shoogar looked tired but curiously determined. His eyes were alive and dancing and his fingers moved with a life of their own, weaving spell knots into a leather strap. I knew better than to speak to him while he was in the midst of a duel.

For though no formal declaration had yet been made by Purple, this was a duel. Perhaps Purple

thought that, as long as no duel was declared, Shoogar would sit peacefully by and allow him to continue with his duel-mongering actions.

But I knew Shoogar better than that. The fierce glow burning in his eyes confirmed what I—and all of the rest of the villagers—already knew. Shoogar would not rest until there was one less magician in the village.

I hurried after my wives. Burdened as we were, we would be traveling well into the night. I had even removed the hobbles from my women so they could travel faster. It would not do to underestimate the seriousness of the situation.

We had reached our destination by the time the moons were overhead. Most of the families of the villagers were settled on the steppes to the north, a series of long sloping rises that overlooked the river and the cluster of giant trees that bordered the place we had left.

The encampment was a sprawling place of lean-tos and tents, smoky campfires and shrill women, milling groups of men and boys. Already scavengers were rooting busily underfoot and even before we had selected a campsite many of my own spratlings had melted away into the bustle.

Although it was already well into the night, few slept. The eerie glow of the moons gave us a twilight of neither red nor blue but ghostly gray—a strange half-real quality for the waiting time before the next step of the duel. An almost festive air pervaded the settlement.

From somewhere in the bachelor's section came the brawling chant of a game of rolling bones and an occasional cry of triumph as one of the players scored a particularly difficult pass. It does not take much to please the lower classes.

AN UNPLEASANT surprise awaited us in the morning.

Hinc and I were standing at the edge of the encampment, looking down the slope toward the village, discussing the forthcoming duel, when we heard a distant sound like a single cough from Elcin's throat.

We looked down to see a tremendous plume of black smoke wafting through the village treetops.

"Look," said Hinc. "Shoogar has started already."

"No." I shook my head. "I think he is only warming up. That looked like a preparation spell more than anything else. Something to get the attention of the gods."

"Pretty fierce attention-getter," noted Hinc.

I nodded. "It's going to be a pretty fierce duel. I wonder if we

should move again? Farther back."

"If we are not already out of range, Lant, we haven't time to get out of range," said Hinc. "Even at a dead run. And even if you are right you could never persuade the others. They are too tired."

He was right, of course, but before I could speak we were interrupted by a crowd of frightened women running hysterically through the encampment as fast as their hobbled legs would carry them. They were screaming Purple's name.

I caught up with and cuffed my number-three wife to attention.

"What is the matter with you?" I demanded.

"It's the mad magician. He's trying to talk to the women—"

"The mad magician—here?"

"He brought his nest to the spring where we wash—and he's trying to talk to us. He wants to know why we moved."

Had the man no self-respect at all? Talking to women? Even from the mad magician I found this hard to believe. I strode purposefully through the crowd, now milling nervously about, women comforting other hysterical women, men interrogating their wives, sprats crying for attention.

As I moved toward the spring some of the men caught up with and followed along behind me. They were muttering nervously. It was as the women had said. Purple had brought his nest to a spot just above the encampment, near the spring the women had chosen for washing. The great black egg-shape was closed and the magician was nowhere to be seen.

The others waited only long enough to see that the women had spoken the truth. Then they turned and fled quickly back to the settlement.

Hinc and I exchanged a wordless glance. Why had Purple followed us? Was he fleeing from his duel? I had never heard of such a thing before. What did he want of the villagers?

I circled the nest warily. It looked much as it had on the fearful night when I first saw it. I crept closer. There, lightly pressed into the dust, were the imprints of Purple's strange shaped boots. But where was Purple now?

Suddenly, that booming hollow voice. "Lant—just the person I was hoping to see."

This was too much for Hinc. He turned and disappeared down the slope after the others. I ached to join him but I had to find out what the magician was up to.

The door to the nest slid open and Purple stepped out, his strange paunchy shape oddly disquieting. He had a fearful grin on his face and advanced toward me as if I were an old friend. His speakerspell drifted along behind.

"Lant," he said, moving closer. "Perhaps you can tell me—why have you people moved your village? The other spot was so much nicer."

I looked at him curiously. Could it be that he did not know of the duel? Was it possible for anyone to be that naive? Well, so much the better—his ignorance was Shoogar's asset. I certainly would not tell him. Why should a layman be concerned with the affairs of magicians? I didn't want to get involved.

"Yes," I said, "the other spot was nicer."

"Then why do you not stay there?"

"We hope to return soon," I said. "After the time of the conjunction."

I pointed to the sky where the suns were setting together. Ouells's blue-white point near the bottom of Virn's crimson disc.

"Oh, yes," Purple nodded. "Very impressive." Turning, he gazed admiringly at the ground behind him, "And it makes the shadows very pretty, too."

"Very pretty—"

I stopped in mid-sentence. Sharp and blue the suns were, each with a bloody fringe—constant reminder that the time of terror was upon us. Was the man fearless or foolish? I shut up.

"Very pretty," Purple repeated. "Very, very pretty. Well, I will remain here with you and your people. If I can be of any assistance—"

Something within me shriveled and died. "You—you're going to stay here?"

"Yes, I think so. I'll go back to the village when you people do. This will give me a chance to test the mountain area for a day or so."

"Oh," I said.

He seemed to lose interest in me then, turned and went back to his nest. I waited to see how he caused the door to slide open. I had been puzzling about it since I had first seen him do the trick. There was a pattern of bumps in the surface of the nest wall. Apparently this had something to do with the opening of the nest, for he tapped at these in a quick precise pattern.

I presumed that the pattern must have been the spell to open the door but he activated it too quickly for me to see and memorize it. He stepped inside. The door slid shut and he was gone.

Dejectedly I trudged back to the encampment—or what was left of the encampment.

Already the villagers were fleeing from their makeshift homes. Men were hastily packing travel kits—women were calling for spratlings. Children and dogs ran excitedly through the crowd, kicking up dust, chickens and scavengers.

Panic-stricken families were al-

ready moving across the steppes, upslope, downslope, sideways, anywhere, just as long as it was away from Purple, the magician who brought disaster with him.

My own wives were standing about nervously, waiting for me. Numbers one and two were trying to comfort number three, who was most upset.

"He kept trying to talk to me—He kept trying to talk to me—"

"It wasn't your fault," I told her. "You will not be beaten for his trespass. You did right to run."

My words had an immediate calming effect on the distraught woman, more so than all the stroking and soothing of the other two wives, once more proving that only a man can know how to handle the unusual situation.

"Pick up your packs," I told them. "We must be on our way."

"On our way?" questioned one. "But we just got here."

"We must move again," I said. "Before this area is blasted. The mad magician's animal manners have blinded you to the true danger. Shoogar will follow Purple up here. Now pick up your packs or I will beat all three of you."

They did as I bade them—but with no small amount of grumbling. Even though I thought to remove their hobbles so as to speed the journey, they grumbled—and for once they had cause. For a day and a half we had fled the site of the coming duel. Purple had easily, thoughtlessly nullified that effort with only a few moments of flight.

Within an hour the encampment was deserted. As we moved down the hill I thought I saw Purple moving like a lost soul through the hastily erected lean-to shelters.

VII

WE were the only family to return to the village. Where the others had fled I did not know. Probably south, away from the whole region. They had likely lost all interest in watching the duel even from a distance. Now they wanted only to save their skins.

We approached the village warily in the fading daylight. The blue sun winked out behind the edge of the world, leaving only the great bulge of the red. The mists rising off the distant swamps took fire from the glow. It was as if the whole western edge of the world were aflame. I could almost smell the burning of it, a smell of disaster on the evening wind.

I left my wives at the nest and headed toward Shoogar's. As I made my way through the village I could see the many effects of his spellcasting. Here and there some of our proudest housetrees lay on their sides, as if they had been blasted out of the ground by great forces. Others seemed to have withered and died where they stood.

Here and there a nest lay on the

ground, shattered walls laying it open to the elements. Everywhere were great patches of dying vegetation. The scavenger animals were gone. There were no sounds of nightbirds. Except for my wives, myself and, of course, Shoogar, the village was empty. And dead.

Even if Shoogar won the duel no one would ever be able to return to this village. Nor would anyone want to. Its stability had been permanently destroyed.

All was silent and brooding.

The dead grass crunched under my feet as I approached Shoogar's nest. I knocked cautiously on the wall.

When he appeared I gasped in horror. Shoogar had gone gray and haggard. New circles had appeared under his eyes and his skin was discolored here and there with angry red patches as if he had been caught too close to one of his own spells.

But what startled me most was that Shoogar had shaved off all of his fur. He was totally naked and hairless—a frightening caricature of the mad magician.

He greeted me with a wan smile, grateful for my company. I began to lay out the ritual supper for him. It is traditional that on the night before a duel, the men of the village serve a meal of faith to their patron warlock. But the others had fled, so that duty had fallen on me alone.

I stood silently by and waited, serving him at each gesture or grunt. It was not much of a meal but it was the best I could prepare under such circumstances. Shoogar seemed not to mind. He ate slowly, savoring every bite. He looked tired and his hands trembled as he moved. But he ate heartily.

By the time he laid aside his bone food-stabber the red sun had long disappeared from the west. The moons had not yet appeared. He moved slowly. But whether from satiation or exhaustion was impossible to tell.

"Where are the others?" he asked.

"They've fled." I explained what happened. Shoogar listened carefully, occasionally picking at some previously overlooked morsel in the bowls before him.

"I did not expect the stranger to move," he muttered. "It is a bad thing—but clever. Now I must alter my spell to account for this new factor. You say he tried to talk to the women?" He bit into a fruit.

I nodded. "My number-three wife."

Shoogar spat out seeds in disgust. "The man must have no taste. If one were going to lower oneself to talk to women—one should at least choose the woman of a worthy rival."

"You have no women," I pointed out.

"It is still an insult to me."

"Perhaps he does not know any better. Remember, he said that the ways of his homeland are very different from ours."

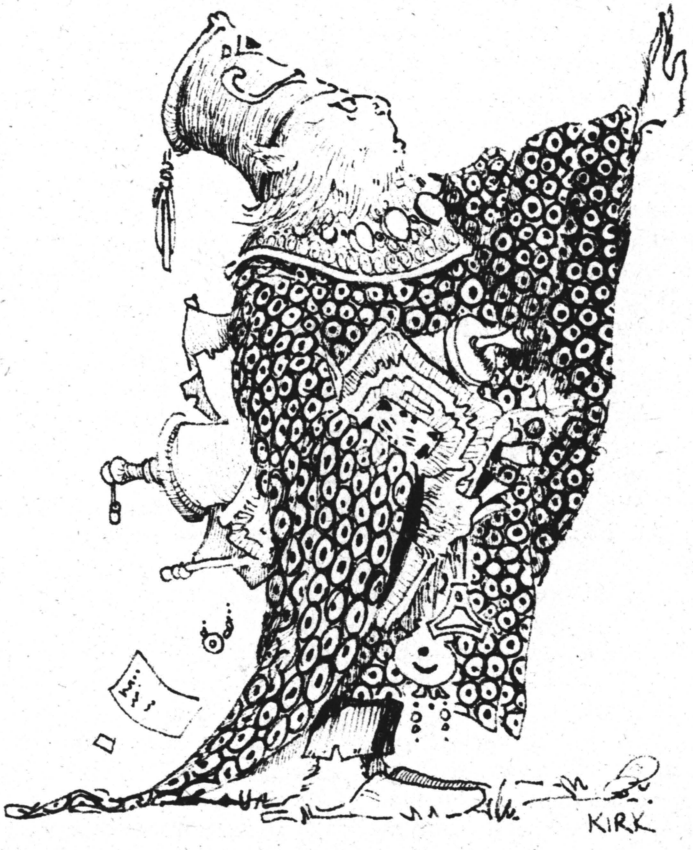
"Ignorance could be the excuse for his bad manners," Shoogar grumbled, "but only madness could explain the man's trespasses against common sense."

"It is said that a madman possesses the strength of ten."

Shoogar gave me a look. "I know what is said. Most of the time it is I who said it first."

We sat in silence.

After a while I asked, "What do you think will happen on the morrow?"



"There will be a duel. One will win, one will lose."

"But who?"

"If it were possible to tell who will win—there would be no need for duels."

Again we sat in silence. This was the first time Shoogar had referred to the duel with any indication of doubt. Always before he had expressed confidence in his own abilities and skepticism for the powers of Purple. But now he would not even venture to say what the outcome of the duel would be. I feared for my friend.

"Lant," he said abruptly. "I will need your help."

I looked up startled. "Me? But I know nothing of magic. You have told me countless times that I am a fool. Is it wise to risk such an important undertaking in the hands of a—"

"Shut up, Lant," he said softly. I shut. "All you have to do is help me transport my spell-casting equipment up the mountain to Purple's nest. We will need two bicycles or some pack animals. I cannot carry it all myself."

I breathed easier. "Oh, well, in that case—"

We were on our way within the hour.

IT WAS close to dawn when we reached the site of the encampment. The deserted lean-tos and shelters stood bleak and empty in the night, like some fearful city of the dead. I found myself trembling.

We rode through it wordlessly, finally parking our bicycles on the slope just below the spring. We could hear it babbling carelessly in the dark.

Taking care to keep as quiet as possible, we edged forward, up the hill. I held my breath till we topped the rise, let it out in a *whoosh*. Yes, the nest was still there.

I believe I would have cried bitter tears had it been gone. I am sure that to have lost his enemy would have killed Shoogar. The frustration would have been too much.

We crept back to the deserted encampment, there to wait the coming of dawn. I ached for a chance to sleep but Shoogar gave me a potion to keep me awake. To keep him company, he said. He began laying out his equipment, organizing and sorting.

"If I can only take him by surprise," he muttered. He paused to oil a metal knife. "And if only there were some way to draw him away from his nest—"

"That's not needed," I blurted. "He will probably leave it by himself. He is testing again. He said this when I spoke to him. He wants to test the mountain."

"This is a bit of good fortune. I hope that he tests the mountain the same way that he tested the village—for when he tested the village he was gone from his nest almost the entire day."

"What if he doesn't? What if he returns before the curse is finished?"

"Let us hope he does not."

"Can't you do something?"

Shoogar paused, thought for a moment, then rummaged in his kit. He produced a small leather pouch of dust and another of herbs. "Here, go and spread this dust around the outside of his nest. It is very fine dust; It will float in the air for hours. If he breathes any of it, it will produce a very strong yearning in him. He will not return until that yearning is satisfied."

"But what about me?"

"When you finish with the dust you will take half of those herbs and chew them well. Swallow them —when they turn bitter in your mouth but not until they turn bitter. Bring the rest of the herbs back to me, so I may chew them. They will make us both immune to the power of the dust."

I nodded, then crept up the hill and did as I was instructed. When I brought the two leather pouches back to Shoogar he was just laying out the last of his equipment. One swollen pouch he handled most carefully.

"Powdered magician's hair," he explained.

I did not blame him for handling it carefully. He had sacrificed much to produce it—his squat and shaven body trembled with the cold.

Abruptly a troubled look crossed his face. "I am sure that Purple's power is in some way connected with his nest. I must get into it somehow. That is the only part of my curse that I am in doubt about. I must get into that nest."

I said, "Today—I mean, yesterday (for dawn was fast approaching)—I was able to get close enough to Purple to observe him working his doorspell—" I explained I had seen a pattern of bumps on the nest wall. Purple had tapped at them in a certain way and the door had slid open.

Shoogar listened carefully. "Obviously the order in which he touches the bumps is the way the spell is controlled. Think, Lant. Which bumps did he touch?"

"That I did not see."

Shoogar cursed, "Then why bother to tell me how to open the door if you do not know? Lant, you are a fool."

"I am sorry—but it happened so quickly. If I could only remember—"

"Lant," Shoogar asked, "have you ever been placed under the spell of the open mind?"

I shook my head.

"It is a spell of great power. It can be used to make you remember things that you think you have forgotten."

"Uh, is it dangerous?"

"No more so than any other spell."

"Well," I said, picking up my

bicycle. "Good luck with your duel, Shoogar. I will see you when it is—"

"Lant," he said evenly. "If you take one more step downslope I will work your name into the curse along with Purple's."

I laid the bicycle down again.

SHOOGAR said, "Don't be fearful. I will do my best to protect you. Suddenly you have become a very important part of this duel. The knowledge locked up in your mind may make the difference between success and failure."

"But, Shoogar, I am a fool. You have told me that too many times for it to be otherwise. I admit it. I am a fool. You could not be wrong in your judgment of my character. What good could I be to you?"

"Lant," said Shoogar, "you are not a fool. Believe me. Sometimes in my quickness of temper I have made rash statements. But I have only the greatest respect for your judgement, Lant. You are not a fool."

"Oh, but I am," I insisted.

"You are not," Shoogar said. "Besides, it does not take any great mental prowess to remember something as simple as you have described. Even an idiot such as you could do it."

"Oh, but I will only be in your way, Shoogar. Please let me return to my family—"

"And have the other men of the village think you a coward?"

"It would be small burden to bear—"

Shoogar snapped, "No friend of mine shall wear the brand of coward. You will stay here with me, Lant. And you should be grateful that I care so much for you as a friend."

He turned again to the equipment laid out upon the ground. I sighed in resignation and sat down to wait. Dawn was already seeping into the east.

Shoogar turned back to me. "Your part in this will be easy, Lant. There is no reason to fear."

"But the danger—"

"There will be no danger if you follow my instructions exactly as I give them to you."

"I will follow your instructions."

"Good. There can be no room for error. Even the tiniest mistake could cost us both our lives."

"But you just said there would be no danger."

"Not if you follow instructions. Most of the hard work has already been done. Don't forget, I had to construct the equations—I had to prepare the ingredients and stabilize the symbology necessary to make the various incantations and potions work. All you have to do is help me place them in the proper place at the proper time."

"I thought all I had to do was help you open the nest—"

"Of course. But if you are go-

ing to be there anyway, you might as well help me with the rest."

"Oh," I said.

"And whatever you do, you must not try to speak to me. This is very important. When the suns rise we shall begin—and once we begin I must not be distracted at all. Except as is necessary to the curse I will not speak. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"Good. Now listen. There is one more thing. A very important thing. It has nothing to do with the curse, Lant, but for your own protection you must be exceedingly careful not to lesnerize."

"Lesnerize?" I asked. "What is lesnerize?"

But he did not explain. He pointed instead to the east. Day had seeped over the hills. Shoogar fell to his knees and began chanting to the suns.

The curse had begun.

VIII

THE first step was a ritual cleansing. Then came the sanctification, the prayer for forgiveness, to the suns, Ouells and Virn, and to the moons, all eleven of them—now in the configuration of Eccar the Man, who had served the gods so well that he had been elevated to godhood himself.

Other prayers were offered to the river god, the wind god, the gods of violence and magic—and, of course, to Elcin, the thunder god. We offered sacrifice to all of them, and sought their blessings in the endeavors to come. We prayed that they would blame the stranger and not us for the affronts about to be done to them.

Then we cleansed ourselves again.

We gathered up the spellcasting equipment and crept up the slope to where the mad magician's nest waited. Behind and below us the mist thinned as the two moons rose higher. We could see for miles.

We topped the rise slowly. Slightly below us, on the other side, was the black egg of Purple's nest, waiting grim and brooding in the silent morning. It was closed, but was it deserted?

I wanted to ask Shoogar what the nest step was, but his last instruction made me fear even to breathe without being told. Shoogar must have sensed my indecision.

He said, "Now we wait."

The suns rose higher in the sky. The last of the mists disappeared from the land. And the egg sat silent on the steppes. The only sound was the gurgling of the spring.

Abruptly the door of the nest slid open and Purple emerged. He stretched slowly, took a deep breath, let it out with a sigh. I wondered if the yearning dust was still floating in the air. If so, Purple had just filled his lungs with it. He showed no reaction as he

closed the door of his nest behind him. If the dust was working it was very subtle.

We held our breaths as he began to climb up the slope of the hills. Shortly he disappeared over the top of one and we were alone with the nest. Shoogar scrambled eagerly for it. I followed in his wake, not quite as eager.

Shoogar surveyed the nest carefully. He strode around it three times, finally coming to a stop in front of the oval outline that was the door.

This first important step was the crucial one. Shoogar positioned me in the exact spot I had occupied when I saw Purple open his nest. Then he began to cast the spell of the open mind. He brought out a device of glass and held it before my eyes, commanding me to look into it.

I WONDERED if the strain of the past three days had been too much for my friend. I saw no answers within the device of glass. But I did as he said and looked into it. He began chanting at me softly, slowly, in that deep and croaking voice of his. I tried to concentrate on the sound but the crystal thing kept flickering light into my eyes.

Nor could I focus my sight upon the thing. It seemed to fade in and out of existence even as Shoogar held it. I tried to follow where it went when it disappeared but could not. The sound of his chanting wove in and out with the flashes of light and all of it together seemed to be whirling and twirling, churning and turning and. . . the world was. . .

Abruptly I was wide awake.

Nothing had happened. Had the spell of the open mind failed?

It must have. I remembered nothing. I opened my mouth to speak but Shoogar stopped me.

"You did fine, Lant. Just fine."

I wondered what he was talking about but he was once more fussing with his equipment. His manner was confident, almost cheerful. He found what he was looking for, a piece of chalk, and proceeded to draw a rune about the square pattern of bumps beside the door. Only once did he speak to me.

"You told me almost all of what I need to know, Lant. Almost all. The rest I will fathom for myself."

I shrugged and sat down to watch. Obviously he knew what he was doing.

He sat cross-legged before the door and began chanting, working himself into a trance. He sat motionless on that patch of ground before the door, the only sounds his thin reedy chant and the gushing of the spring.

The suns crept up the sky, Ouells glowing like a blue-white diamond at Virn's fading edge. So much to do, so little time! How long would Purple be gone? Could

we complete the spell in that time?

Shoogar sat silent and unmoving. His eyes were glazed. Occasionally he would give a little grunt.

Could Purple throw red fire at a man?

At last, when I had begun to fear that Shoogar would never speak again, he rose, stepped to that pattern of bumps and touched four of them in a particular pattern.

Nothing happened.

Shoogar repeated the touch.

Still nothing happened.

Shoogar shrugged and returned to his place. Again he went into his trance. This time, after an even greater wait, he approached that door even more cautiously. Once more he tapped out a pattern on the bumps—the same four, but a different order.

Nothing happened again.

Shoogar sighed and returned to his squatting position. I began to fear that we might spend the whole day just gaining entry to Purple's nest and have no time left for the cursing. Indeed, I had almost given up all hope of ever completing the task before us when Shoogar rose again. He approached the nest slowly, looked at the bumps for a long time, then touched four of them in a carefully precise manner.

And the door to the nest slid open.

SHOOGAR allowed himself a smile—but only a small one. There was still much to do.

Quickly we gathered up the equipment and moved into Purple's nest.

The walls themselves glowed with an odd-colored light—bright and yellow, it made my eyes see colors that were not there. Slowly, as my vision sorted itself out, I began to see that this nest was furnished like no other nest I had ever seen. All around were tiny glowing eyes, raised knobs and more bumps like those in the pattern outside the door.

In the center was a zig-zag piece of padded furniture, a fit couch for a demon. Set into the nest wall just ahead of this were a series of flat plates like windows but infinitely more transparent—like hardened air. Indeed, the whole nest showed workmanship finer than I had ever seen.

Shoogar peered carefully at the flat plates like windows. Some showed images of the areas around the nest. Others held odd patterns in colored light, carefully drawn lines and curves—obviously the demon's runes. Shoogar indicated one of these.

"Do you still think he does not use magic?" he asked me—then, remembering his own injunction against unnecessary chatter, silenced himself.

Apparently it was not a very strong injunction, for Shoogar had been muttering back and forth all morning. Perhaps he had only

warned me against speaking because he feared I would distract him. Well, he need not have worried; I have too much respect for Shoogar's abilities to question him in the middle of a spell. I opened my mouth to tell him so but he cut me off.

Next to the padded thing was a plant, a vegetable well suited for the interior of this nest. It, too, was of a type I had never seen. It was the shape of a white rose but its color—the leaves were a brilliant shade of—could such a color be green? I could not believe my eyes. Green is a dull color, almost black; but here it seemed to glow as brightly as any shade of red or blue. I touched the plant, expecting it to be as delicate as any I was familiar with; but here too I received a shock, for the leaves were as stiff and hard as an uncured hide. What a strange world Purple must come from, I found myself thinking—abruptly, realized that I had fallen into a trap. Obviously this was some plant that ordinarily would have been familiar to me. Purple had simply cursed it.

I turned my attention away, began to look for a door leading to the area above. There was none. Apparently the nest included only this one compartment. The rest of its huge interior must be all spell devices. Shoogar had been right all along.

Shoogar had spread his travel kit and his equipment on the floor and was methodically organizing the materials he would use first. It was as if he cursed flying nests every day. Abruptly he paused, put a finger into the stubble on his chin and scratched. He began to examine a piece of parchment he took from his cloak—a checklist.

"Yes," he decided after a brief pause. He pulled out the metal knife that I had seen before. "We will begin by defiling the metal."

He spat on the knife, then began to carve runes into the surface of the floor. Or tried to. The knife would not penetrate. Frowning, Shoogar pressed harder. The tip of the knife broke. Then the blade snapped in half.

Shoogar returned the pieces of the knife to his travel kit without comment and looked at his checklist again. This time he pulled out a pouch of reddish powder, the dust of rust. He emptied a bit of it into his hands and blew. A smoky red cloud filled the room. I coughed and he threw me an angry glance.

A whirring sound started somewhere. Then a wind blew through the nest, plucking at my hair and clothing. I looked around in fear—could Purple have trapped the wind god? Even as I looked for traces of such a thing, the reddish dust in the air thinned. Shortly the wind stopped, and the dust was gone with it. There was not even a fine red layer on any of the polished surfaces. Odd.

Still Shoogar was undismayed. He consulted his list again.

Abruptly he produced a ball of fire from under his robe. Then another and another, throwing them. They struck the interior of the nest, sending up acrid sparks and oily smoke.

THERE was a hissing sound—and jets of water spat from apertures in the ceiling. They aimed themselves straight at the fireballs, drenched them to ash in seconds. And then, as Shoogar produced a last fireball from under his robe, they all turned on Shoogar.

When the water went off Shoogar turned his hand over and allowed the drenched fireball to drop stickily to the floor. Dripping, he held up his sodden checklist and consulted it again. Water dripped from it onto the floor, then drained away into places we knew not.

I felt my hopes draining away with the water. Shoogar had begun three separate attempts—and all of them had failed. The stranger's magic was much too strong. We were doomed even before we had begun.

"Ah, yes—" said Shoogar. "It goes well."

I doubted my ears. I dared a question, "Well?"

"Obviously, Lant, you have not been paying attention. The nest is equipped with very efficient protective spells. I had to find out what they were, so that I could nullify them. Now let us curse."

Shoogar began by inscribing runes on all the surfaces of the nest, floors, walls ceiling, the back of the oddly shaped couch, the panels of knobs, everything. He called upon Fineline, the god of engineers and architects, to blast this nest with a spell of deformity to make it crack and shatter.

Onto each of the sacred signs, inscribed with chalk instead of knife, he dripped small portions of several different potions. As they combined they began to smoke and sputter. "Waters of fire, burn and boil," Shoogar urged them. We watched as the fluid ate holes into the runes and surface below.

Beautiful. Blasphemy is the heart of a good curse.

Next he began to fill the ship with dust. Apparently he wanted to overload the spell of the protective wind, for he blew great clouds of the red dust of rust. The whirring started up immediately but Shoogar kept blowing.

"Well, don't just stand there, you goat—help me."

With my help we were able to keep great swirling clouds of rust swirling and churning throughout the entire compartment. The dust of rust is a symbol of time, sacred to several gods at once: Brad of the past, Kronk of the future and Po who causes the decay of all things.

When we had run out of the dust of rust, Shoogar continued with a fine white powder. It looked like the grindings of bone.

"Aim for those wind pockets," said Shoogar, pointing at a square, screened-over opening.

Eyes streaming, coughing vigorously, I did so. Once Shoogar hurled a fireball at the screen, where it stuck. Water jetted briefly, splashing through the screen. Some of the grindings gathered around the water droplets. Presently the whirring became uneven, threatened to stop.

"Cover your nose and mouth, Lant. I do not want you to breathe any of this." He pulled out a fat leather pouch. I put a cloth across the lower half of my face and watched as he produced a thick double handful of powdered magician's hair.

With a care born of great sacrifice he aimed cautiously and blew a great sneeze of it toward the wind pockets. Within a moment, it was gone.

The whirring sound labored—the wind seemed to be dying. Suddenly both stopped.

"Good, Lant. Now get the pots." Shoogar was beaming with triumph. I pulled my kit from its place by the wall and produced a collection of six pottery containers, each with a close-fitting lid.

"Good," said Shoogar again. He began to place them carefully around the interior of Purple's nest. Into each he put a sputtering ball of fire, then closed the lid on it.

There were tiny holes in the lid of each pot—to allow the fire-god to breathe but too tiny to allow entrance of the water. The liquid jets arched out but, unable to reach the flames directly, they continued playing over the pots and over everything else.

Shoogar watched to see where the water was draining, began pouring defiled water and other viscous syrups into the drain holes. Once he paused to add a generous handful of the white dust bone grindings. As it swirled down into the drain, the mixture seemed to thicken ominously.

Shortly it seemed as if the drains were not working as efficiently as they had at first. The water was gathering in pools on the floor. The odious smell of the defiled water mixed with the hot, steamy, smoky air. I thought I would retch. But no matter, the defiled water would certainly anger Filfomar, the river god.

By now, Filfo-mar and N'veen, the god of the tides would be engaged in their ancient tug-of-war. Only this time they would be tugging not at the waters of the world, but at opposite sides of the black nest. The more water that poured into the cabin, the stronger grew their powers—and the more vicious their battle.

By the time the water jets

stopped hissing, we were several inches deep in water and Shoogar and I were both dripping wet. But not chilly. The nest was steaming hot and growing hotter. Shoogar shucked off his robe and I followed suit.

My eyes were watering and I was still coughing up dust from my lungs. I pointed this out to Shoogar.

He said, "Stop complaining. Nobody ever said a curse was easy. There's more to come yet."

Indeed, we had only begun.

Now Shoogar turned his attention to the various panels and plates that lined the interior. There were a great many knobs and bumps. Many of these came in sets of eight, each labeled with a different symbol. One we recognized—a triangle, the symbol of Eccar the Man.

Could it be that some of Purple's spells were based on the symbol of Eccar? If that were so, could Shoogar use that fact as a wedge, his lever with which to unbalance the rest of the spells of Purple's nest?

Shoogar pursed his lips thoughtfully, scratched at his stubbly chin. "Push the bumps, Lant. Wherever you see the symbol of the triangle, push the bumps—we will activate all of Purple's Eccar spells and dissipate their power."

WE MOVED through that compartment, looking high and low for the knobs and bumps. The knobs could all be twisted so that the triangle would appear at the top and the bumps could all be depressed. There were blank knobs also—with a little experimentation Shoogar found that these could be turned in such a way that tiny slivers of metal behind layers of glass would move and point to triangles etched there.

Several times strange things happened, but Shoogar cautioned me to ignore them. Once, one of the flat mirror-like plates glowed with an unearthly light and images appeared on it—images of the village, images of people we knew, images of Hinc and Ang and Pilg. I stared in fascinated horror—and then Shoogar nullified the spell by painting over it with a thick gray potion that obscured the image entirely.

"I told you not to look," he reproved me.

We continued. Eventually we had turned every device in that nest to the symbol of the triangle.

We began the next phase of the curse.

The pots had begun to cool, so Shoogar replenished them. Already the metal where they sat was too hot to touch, and portions of other devices had begun to crack.

Now Shoogar began painting his thick gray paint over everything. First he nullified all the image windows. Then he painted all of the dials over—and all of the bumps.

Only the gods would know what symbols had been activated. In almost no time the interior of that nest was entirely gray. Klarther, the god of the skies and seas, would be furious. Fol, the god of distortion, would be chortling. Thus had Shoogar brought them to battle with each other over the black nest.

Shoogar began to sketch new runes into the painted surfaces, oblivious of their relation to the runes beneath. Where the upper and under surface conflicted the gods would engage in random battle. Always, when he could, Shoogar worked the name of Elcin, the thunder god, into the runes.

Into a crevice between two of the surfaces of knobs and bumps, Shoogar pushed the narrow point of a sword-wand and called on Pull'nissin, the god of duels. Calling on Hitch, the god of birds, he broke eggs into three apertures. They sizzled angrily where they slid down—for Shoogar was using the egg-shape image of the nest against itself. He continued chanting, calling on Musk-Watz and Blok, the god of violence; and at one point he even cast a rune defiling Tis'turzhin, the god of love, for love turned to hate can be the mightiest force of all.

Shoogar consulted his checklist again and produced a container of dormant sting things and another of fungusoids and leeches. He brought forth things with barbs and things with claws and began scattering them about. Torpid though they were, some tried to attack us; but we were careful to place them where they were not immediately dangerous. And we had had the forethought to wear our thickest boots and gloves—the fanged creatures could not cut through.

As he called on Sp'nee, ruler of slime, Shoogar spread great viscous gobs of goo into cracks and crannies between the boards of knobs and bumps. The air was already unbreathable with heat and damp but the boards were far hotter. In places Shoogar's gray ointment had blackened and cracked. The surface beneath glowed red with heat and gave forth a stench that one could hardly bear. Eggs sizzled and smoked in places we could not see.

And always Shoogar continued to call upon Elcin. The God of Thunder. The God of Fear.

"Elcin, oh, Elcin! Come down, oh, great and tiny God of lightning and loud noises! Come down from your mountain, oh, Elcin. Come down from your mountain and strike down this infidel who dares to profame the sacred name of your magic."

It seemed as if we had been working for days. Shoogar continued to hang his webs of pain and to paint his runes of despair.

The swimming, heated compartment crawled with fuzz balls and

stingers, crabs and krakens and leeches. Somewhere something was burning and oily smoke seeped up the walls. I choked on the rotting air and blinked the tears from my eyes.

It was a masterpiece.

IX

I FOLLOWED Shoogar out of the nest eagerly. The dry grass crunched under my feet as I dropped to the ground. It seemed as if we had spent days in that Shoogar-generated hell.

I was amazed to find that it was still day. The double sunlight washed the world with a reassuring familiarity. The trees and plants and grass still had their familiar dull black hues.

My head swam in the cool clear air—waves of dizziness swept over me. Even so, it was I who had to help Shoogar to walk. I had only observed the curse. Shoogar had executed it and it had taken its toll of his strength. We moved unevenly down the slope. Our shadows wavered before us, fringed with red and blue edges. As the curse had ended, so had the conjunction. Once more the suns were separate.

It seemed a miracle that Purple had not interrupted us but it was still only mid-afternoon. We had finished with time to spare.

We collapsed behind a clump of bushes. The unfouled air was like strong quaff and I was drunk on it. We lay under the familiar black leaves, taking deep heaving breaths.

After a while I rolled over on my side and looked at Shoogar, "When does it begin?"

He didn't answer and for a moment I thought he had fallen asleep. It would not have surprised me. The exertions of the past days had left him pale and haggard. His eyes were red and rimmed with deep circles when he opened them. He sighed.

"I don't know, Lant. I don't know . . . perhaps I forgot something."

I sat up and looked uneasily at the black nest. It waited there in a hollow between two hills, its door invitingly open. Its door!

"Shoogar!" I cried. "The door! We left it open!"

He sat up suddenly, stared horrified across the hill.

"Can we close it?" I asked.

"It must need another spell for that," said Shoogar. "And we don't have it."

"Couldn't you--"

"Couldn't I what?" he demanded. "Make up a door-closing spell? Not for that nest, I couldn't. I'd have to know what activates the door-opening spell first."

"But I saw you open the door."

"Lant, you are a fool. I know how to use the spell—but I do not know why it works as it does. You saw what trouble I had with the light device. No, Lant—unless you know something else about the

way that door works—and I know you don't, for I peered into your mind—it's going to stay open."

"But the curse—"

He cut me off with a gesture. "I don't know—it must be waiting. It needs something to activate it, probably the closing of the door. Without that—" He shrugged, let the sentence trail off into silence.

The suns crept westward, the blue now visibly ahead of the red. I peered uneasily across the hill. How long would that curse wait before it went bad? Only the gods could help us if this, the greatest of Shoogar's spells, were to go foul—and if it did go foul there would be no gods left who could help us. They would all be against us.

SLOWLY the shadows lengthened—the chill of the dying day crept across the world while Shoogar and I stood helplessly by. The black nest waited, grim and forbidding. Yellow light poured from its door.

The world waited. We waited. The nest waited.

The curse waited.

And then, abruptly, a sound. Footsteps crunching up the side of the hill. We dropped down behind the bush.

Purple came into view seconds later, striding up over the rise—I wondered if he had satisfied his yearning—then down the slope toward his waiting nest. He could not see the open door from his direction of approach.

He rounded the curve of the nest wall and stopped. Then he stepped hurriedly forward and peered within. For the first time we saw Purple react to Shoogar's magic. He screamed like a hunting bansheebat.

No doubt a translation would have been most instructive but the speakerspell was silent. Purple clambered into the door. The jamb caught him across the forehead, knocking the glass appurtenances from his nose. We heard his voice from inside the nest—great anguished cries, hardly recognizable.

Occasional words would come from the speakerspell, booming across the hollow: "My god in—how did they get in? Stung me! Get off my foot, you son of—why isn't the pest-killer working?"

"The sting things are giving him trouble," I whispered.

"God-damned sting things!" Purple's booming voice corrected me.

"But the sting things are not the spell, Lant," Shoogar hissed. "They would sting whether they were part of the curse or not."

Shoogar was right. The curse had not yet been activated. Anguished, I tore at my fur. What were the gods waiting for? Would they wait so long that Purple would have time to nullify the elements of the spell and turn it back on Shoogar?

More words came hurtling across the slope: "Eggs! Eggs?"

"At least you have ruined his composure," I whispered to Shoogar. "That's a beginning."

"Not enough. The gods should be tripping over each other in their eagerness to destroy him. It must be the door. It must be! Lant, I fear—"

His voice stopped. I felt ice melting along my spine.

"Savages—" Boomed Purple's voice. "Primitive savages. This damned gray paint—where the hell is the—incest, lovemaking, illegitimate, compound incest, excrement excrement excrement, oral-genital contact, rectums, castration, diseases passed by lovemaking, primitive anal lovechildren! I'll kill the lovemaking offspring of dogs! I'll burn this lovemaking world down to bedrock!"

Purple may have been incoherent but he certainly sounded sincere. I readied myself to run. I could see him moving about within the nest. He was stabbing furiously at the various bumps and depressions that we had painted over. Savagely Purple twisted the knobs, one after another, attempting to nullify Shoogar's spells.

"And as for that fur-covered animal, Shoogar—"

The heavy curved door slid shut and cut off Purple's last howl.

A GENTLE breeze tugged at the leaves, the bushes and the cuffs of our robes. The shadows had lengthened until they stretched eastward into darkness.

The blue sun twinkled and vanished, leaving only the bloated disc of the red. Below us the hills lay like folds of crumpled red cloth. All was deathly silent.

Slowly Shoogar and I crept out of our hiding place. The black nest sat quietly in its depression. The door, closed now, was only an orange oval outlined on its smooth featureless surface.

We edged forward, curiously, cautiously.

"Has it begun yet?" I whispered.

"Shut up, you fool. Every god must be listening."

We moved closer. The black egg waited, motionless. Shoogar put his ear to its surface and listened.

Abruptly the egg rose noiselessly into the air, throwing Shoogar back. I threw myself flat on the ground, began praying for forgiveness.

"Oh, gods of the world, I cast myself upon your mercy. I plead to you. Please, do not let me—"

"Shut up, Lant. Do you want to foul the spell?"

I lifted my head cautiously. Shoogar was standing, hands on hips, staring up into the red twilight. The black nest hung unmoving and patient a few feet above his head.

I climbed wearily to my feet. As a curse, this spell was turning out to be a dull bore.

"What is it doing?" I asked.

Shoogar didn't answer.

Abruptly the nest turned from black to silver and began sinking back toward the ground as gently as it had risen. The red dusk glinted across its surface with the color of blood.

We stepped back as it touched the ground. It continued sinking downward without so much as slowing. Now, at last, there was sound, a churning crunching mutter of rock being forced aside. The nest moved downward, inexorably. The rocks screeched with the sound of its passage.

In moments it was gone.

The crackle of rock sank to a distant mutter, then died away entirely. Dazed, I walked to the rubbled edge of the hole. Darkness swallowed the bottom of it, though an occasional distant rumble of movement could be felt.

I became aware of Shoogar standing beside me.

"Brilliant," I said and I never meant anything more. "It's gone, Shoogar. Completely, totally gone. Disappeared into the ground. The world has swallowed it up as if it never existed. And—" I gasped breathlessly—"and there were no side effects at all."

Shoogar harrumphed modestly. He bent to pick up the glass appurtenances which had fallen from Purple's nose. He pocketed them absent-mindedly.

"It was nothing," he said.

"But, Shoogar—no side effects. I wouldn't have believed you could do it—I wouldn't have believed anyone could do it. Why didn't you tell us you were planning this? We wouldn't have had to leave the village."

"Best to be safe," Shoogar mumbled. He must have been dazed by his triumph. "You see, I wasn't sure. What with the tidal equations acting to pull the nest down instead of—and with Eccar the Man tending to—well, it was highly unusual—experimental, you might say. I—"

The whole mountain shook under us.

I landed jarringly on my belly, looking downslope. Two hundred feet below the black nest erupted out of the hillside.

It was screaming with an unholy sound. We had hurt it terribly. The egg wailed its pain, a rising, falling note, piercingly loud even as it moved away from the mountain.

Some weird side effect had pulverized the very substance of the hill beneath us, turning it to sliding dirt and pebbles. The entire slope was sliding, shifting, carrying us majestically downward. Stunned, we made no move to save ourselves, nor was there anything we could have done had we had the presence of mind. We watched the black nest. Even as we slid, we could see it, a glinting speck of red brightness, shrieking into the south.

The sliding mountain came to a stop. Whether from caprice or Shoogar's magic, it had not buried us. We had been fortunate enough to be standing at the top of the affected area. Now I found myself on my belly, deep in soft dirt. Shoogar was several yards away.

I climbed to my knees. The black nest was no more than a dot above the horizon—rising and dwindling, rising and dwindling. It was going almost straight up when my eyes lost it.

I scrambled down the slope to Shoogar, each step creating tiny echoes of the bigger slide.

"Is it over?" I asked, helping him to his feet.

Shoogar brushed ineffectually at his robe. "I think not." He peered into the south. "There are too many gods who have not yet spoken."

We were ankle deep in the newly pulverized dirt and would have to walk softly, lest the slope be jarred loose again. We began to work our way down cautiously.

"How long must we wait for the curse to complete its workings?" I asked.

Shoogar shrugged. "I cannot guess. We called heavily on many gods. Lant, I suggest you return to the village now. Your wives and children will be waiting."

"I would stay here with you until the curse is complete."

Shoogar frowned thoughtfully.

"Lant, the black nest will probably return to attack the one who injured it. I dare not return to the village until that danger is past—and I would not want you here with me when that happens." He put his hand on my shoulder, "Thank you, Lant. I appreciate all you have done. Now—go."

I nodded. I did not want to leave him. But I knew that this had to be. Shoogar was not just saying good night; he was saying goodbye. Until he knew for sure that the black nest had been destroyed he could not return.

Dejectedly I turned and trudged down the slope. I did not want him to see the tears welling in my eyes.

X

The village was as I had left it. Silent, deserted and bearing the scars of Shoogar's preparations.

I had been fortunate to find one of my bicycles halfway down the hill. Now I parked it beneath my own nest. Miraculously, both bicycle and nest were undamaged.

My number-one wife was curled up on the floor, sleeping, when I hoisted myself into the nest. She awoke at the swaying of the structure and rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

"Where are the others?" I asked. "Two and Three and the spratlings?"

She shook her head. "They fled when Purple came to the village this morning."

I was aghast.

"Purple came to the village?"

She nodded.

I seized her by the shoulders. "You must tell me what he did. Did he curse Shoogar's nest? Did he—"

"No, it was nothing like that. He just walked around for a while."

"The fire device? Did he use the fire device?"

"No. He wanted something else."

"What was it, woman?"

"I cannot say if I understood right, my husband. He did not have his speakerspell with him. We had to use gestures."

"Well, what did he want?"

"He wanted to do the family-making thing. I think."

"And you let him?"

She lowered her eyes. "I thought it would help Shoogar's part of the duel if the mad magician were distracted for a while."

"But how could you? He is not a guest of ours. I should beat—"

"I am sorry, my husband. I thought it would help." She cringed before my upraised hand. "And you did not beat number three when Purple talked to her."

She was right. I lowered my hand. It would not be fair to beat one and not the other.

"He is built most strangely, my husband. He is almost completely without hair, except for—"

"I do not want to hear about it," I said. "Is that all that you did?"

She nodded.

"And then he left the village?"

Again she nodded.

"He did not touch anything? Take anything?"

She shook her head.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank the gods for small favors. The situation could have been very bad. Fortunately you say nothing was damaged." Gratefully I lowered myself to the floor. I had not realized how weary I was. "You may serve me a meal."

She did so, wordlessly. I had taken two bites when abruptly from overhead came a weird kind of shrieking whistle.

It was a sound of disaster, of emergency and panic. I dropped out of the nest and ran for the clearing. Through the treetops I could see—

The flying nest! It had returned to the village. It was no longer silver. Now, it was yellow with heat. It hurtled across the sky, circled and returned for another shrieking pass.

Shoogar's words flashed across my mind.

. . . the black nest will probably return to attack the one who injured it . . .

Could the nest have confused me with Shoogar? I stood in the central clearing, too panicked to move.

It stopped jarringly a few yards above the treetops, as if it had hit a soft wall. Its door was missing, ripped away. The opening showed black against the orange glow of what could only be super-heated metal.

The empty opening turned, questing. I imagined eyes in the blackness behind the doorway. I waited for them to find me.

The nest turned faster.

Suddenly it was spinning. All details blurred and vanished—the surface seemed a liquid red-orange. I heard the drone of it rising and I covered my ears. A wind swept through the trees.

As it spun the nest was carrying the air with it. Great gusts rushed through the village with a rising shriek, different from the agony-shriek of the nest but terrifying all the same. A great whirlpool of wind formed the nest at its center. I clung to the trunk of one of the nearby house-trees.

Was Musk-Watz attacking the stranger's nest? Or was the nest attacking the village? The wind roared through the trees, through the leaves and branches and nests —it tried to pluck me from where I clung tightly to one of the root-limbs. I wrapped my arms and legs about the branch and buried my face in the bark. Leaves, bark, bits of wood sprayed me. It went on and on and on.

After a while I became aware that the sound was lessening. I raised my head. The wind was dying.

Not a tree in the village carried a leaf. Every nest had been knocked to the ground. Many had been shattered against the trunks of their host-trees. Others lay yards from where they should have fallen.

PURPLE'S great black egg, still spinning, had moved southward toward the river. It was above the new course of the rushing waters when it began to drop. Filfo-mar, angry and implacable, was pulling the black nest down to destruction.

I had to see. I followed the nest, unmindful of possible danger. I had to know if Purple's nest was truly being destroyed.

The nest was spinning ferociously, as if it were trying to escape the power of the river god. When it touched the water a great cloud of steam burst into the air. At the same time the river and its muddy banks all rose up in one huge wave of earth and water. It blackened the sky, covered the moons—I tried to run—it splashed across the world in one vast wave. A scream forced itself out of my throat as the rushing water swept me back through the village. Filth and mud flooded my mouth, my nostrils.

Abruptly I was struck a jarring blow from behind, found myself caught between two limbs of a tree. Water rained down in fat

drops and mud in stinging gobs.

The water began to recede, flowing back toward the river in a great mud-streaking wave. Churning debris was left in its wake.

Shoogar had miscalculated. The nest had not returned to attack him. Even now I could see that of the village nothing was left. Just a few blackened trees, naked against the night.

I lowered myself from the branch. My back twinged warningly and I wondered if I had cracked a rib. I limped toward the river. If I were destined to die I would first know the fate of my enemy.

Black mud squelched beneath my feet as I plodded. The bare trees dripped muddy goo. It was as if the whole world were uninhabitable, drowned in a rain of earth and water. It was tricky going—often the viscous mess beneath my feet hid shards of debris. I was lucky not to have slashed open my foot. I slipped and fell several times. Here and there fish or mud creatures flopped in dying agony.

Under the shadowless light of seven of the moons, I began to cross the old course of the river. The mud and the smooth wet rocks all worked to slow me. Probably they saved my life. I had forgotten that one god had not yet spoken.

I cursed as I balanced on the slippery surfaces. The nest lay ahead. In its spinning, it had churned a great dish-shaped cavity for itself. As I topped the lip of that cavity, I saw the nest, black again and lying in shallow silvery water. Its spin had stopped and—finally, finally—it was no longer upright.

It rested on its side with water pouring into the hollow around it, flooding into the doorway. Garish light reflected in that opening and across the surface of the water.

No doubt that final tilt of the egg was the work of the god of engineers. Perhaps in his last moments Purple had finally believed in the power of Shoogar's magic. I worked my way closer, eyes open for one glimpse of the mad magician's body. Nothing could be left alive within that nest.

I was not one quarter of the way down when the interior of the nest began to sparkle and flash. This was not the steady yellow which had lit the compartment earlier. This was a sick, sputtering sparkle, the color of lightning. I paused, unsure. The sparkling grew more intense. I could hear crackling sounds and the hiss of water turning to steam. I began to inch my way back up the mud slope. The nest was still dangerously alive.

The blue flashing grew brighter behind me—and then a thick puff of black smoke erupted from the gaping door. I reached the mud lip of the churned-out saucer none too soon and dropped behind it. Cautiously I raised my head.

The nest was making great

flushing sounds. Water jetted from holes in its sides but more water poured into the open door. Soon I noticed something else. It was beginning to glow again. Dull red, bright yellow, incandescent white. Waves of heat rolled outward. I had to keep ducking down behind the lip of the bowl. Mud boiled around the nest.

Purple's egg rotated itself upright—and sank.

It sank ponderously and majestically into water obviously too shallow for it. The water closed over it, boiling. Great angry bursts of steam came exploding up through the bubbling water. Light showed through the steam, dimming, brightening.

The nest seemed to pause, as if wondering what to do next.

It decided.

IT LEAPED upward—up and out of the pond. It rose in a steep arc, glowing white, paused at the apex and fell back. It landed right in the middle of the village. Instantly it bounced, leaving a clutch of burning trees behind it. A hot wind fanned my face.

The nest had forgotten how to fly. Now it moved by bouncing and it glowed with a terrible heat. Each time it struck it would give off an enormous spark and the land would burn. But only momentarily—the village was too much a swamp to support a fire.

And still the nest was bouncing. As it left the village, other patches of flame were spreading. They led in a straight line toward the mountains where Shoogar waited.

The nest bounced uphill like a ball in reverse. I could see it, a glowing white speck moving erratically up the mountainside. Ultimately it disappeared behind a ridge.

The wind followed it, crackling with the presence of the one god who had not yet spoken—then it, too, faded. A semblance of calm crept over the landscape, the only sound the dripping of the water from the trees, the branches.

I stood up and looked off across the black mud to where a pillar of greasy smoke still rose from the center of the village. Brushing at the mud which permeated my clothing, I wondered if my first wife had survived. I would regret it very much if she had not. She was a good woman, obedient and almost as strong as a pack animal.

It occurred to me then which god had not yet spoken.

I sat down.

There was a slow and deathly silence now. Only the crackle of the mud, the hiss of water trickling into pits of melted rock disturbed the night. The wind died to nothing. The last of the moons was dropping toward the west. Darkness would soon be creeping across the land. It would not be safe to be about.

Could Shoogar have been mis-

taken in this one aspect? After all, *He* was an unpredictable god, known to have fits of pique—and yet, also known to have failed when most expected to perform. Perhaps the experimental nature of Shoogar's spell had not been enough to arouse him.

Behind me the sky began to hint at deep blue instead of black. I stood, cursing the stiff cold weight off my clothes.

An eye-searing flash of light filled the entire world.

My eyes clenched in pain. But in the after-image, burned into my skull, I saw a great ball of fire, like one of Shoogar's but magnified to the size of a mountain. Then my eyes could open, and I saw a great rising mass of flaming cloud, a toadstool of red-lit fury—fiery smoke standing up behind the mountains, reaching, ever-reaching into the sky.

I was slammed backward, slapped rolling across the mud as if struck by a giant sledgehammer made of air. And the sound—oh, the sound—my ears seemed to cry with the pain of a sound so great.

The sound of Musk-Watz earlier sweeping through the village had been only a whisper compared to this. It was as if Ouells himself had come to ground and clapped his mighty hands together. In the sudden howling wind, the clapping sound mutated into a continuous rumbling thunder that rolled up and down the hills. It grumbled and rumbled, grumbled and rumbled across the world. It echoed and re-echoed in a never-ending wave. I'm sure I continued to hear it long after it had actually died away. That great bass roar went on and on and on. Small rocks began to fall from the sky.

Elcin had spoken.

I FOUND my wife huddled in the crotch of two branches, beneath an uprooted tree.

"Are you all right?" I asked, helping her to her feet.

She nodded.

"Good. Then find some bandage and tape up my ribs. I am in pain."

"Yes, my husband." She began dutifully to tug at her skirt.

I recognized it as one of her favorites. I put out my hand.

"No. Do not tear that. Find something else. That is all you have left in the world. Keep it intact."

She looked up at me, grateful tears flooding her eyes.

"Yes, my husband" She paused and I knew she wanted to say something else but feared.

"Go on," I urged.

She fell to her knees, unmindful of the mud, and clasped fiercely at my hands.

"Oh, my husband, I feared so for your safety. My heart is filled with such gladness at the sight of you—I cannot bear it. I could not endure the thought of life without you."

She kissed my hands, buried her face against my waist. I stroked the fur on the top of her head, mud-smeared though it was. It did not matter—we were both soaked through.

"It's all right," I murmured gently.

"Oh, tell me it is, tell me. Tell me that the danger is over, that all is right with the world again."

"Stand up, woman," I said. She did. "I have lost everything. My nest is gone and my tree has been uprooted. I know not where any of my children are, nor where my other wives have fled. I have nothing. Only the clothes I am wearing. But I am still not a poor man."

She looked at me, brown eyes wide with wonder.

"No, I am not. I still have one woman, a good woman." I looked into her eyes, wide and glowing with love. "A woman with a strong back and a willingness to work. And it is enough. I can rebuild. Now, go and find that bandage. My ribs ache with the pain of standing."

"Oh, yes, my husband. Yes." She began moving cautiously across the mud covered landscape. I lowered myself carefully to the ground. To rest. To sleep.

BEFORE leaving the village we searched through the mud to see if anything of value remained intact. We found little. I had hoped to recover my bicycle but it had been smashed under a falling tree. I ached to see that finely carved machine crushed to sodden pulp. Truly, I had been right when I had said that we had nothing but the clothes on our backs.

We stood in the ruins of the village and surveyed the disaster.

"What will we do, my husband?"

"We will move on," I said to her. "There is nothing left for us here." I turned and looked at the distant green prairie. "There." I pointed. "We will go south. Probably most of the others will have had the same thought."

She nodded in acquiescence and shouldered her tiny pack. Painfully we started the long trek.

The suns were high in the sky when we saw a single tiny figure on a bicycle hurrying to catch up to us. Something was familiar about it—no, it couldn't be.

But it was.

"Shoogar—you're alive—"

He shot me a look, climbed off the bicycle.

"Of course, I'm alive, Lant. What did you think?" He paused, looked at the dried mud caked on our clothes. "What happened to you?"

"We were in the village. We saw the end of Purple's nest. But it headed toward the mountains to die. We thought that—"

"Nonsense, Lant. I *won* the duel. Only the loser gets killed. I saw

(Please turn to page 145)

DARK, DARK, THE DEAD STAR

GEORGE ZEBROWSKI and JACK DANN

He had fled the dead star.
But would his mind follow?

IN THE darkness his thoughts ran on, seeming to belong to no one, turning back on themselves, rubbing against each other, bidding him to remember but with no success.

After only a little while life begins to accumulate like shellfish on a coral reef and a man begins to understand that if just one of few things were to be taken from him, then—he'd have to live with the memory, the stain all over his insides and it would never go away. If it happens more than once you begin to look for an out—but the outs are few and well guarded.

"Why doesn't he wake up, doctor?"

If I could die for only a little while, he thought.

"I wish I knew. Where is the mind anyway? Is it just the physical, spatial organ called the brain?"

"Doctor, you're not paid to speculate."

"A patient like this is always a slap in the face."

"I'm sorry, Doctor."

I'm never going to die, he thought. After a little while the weight of living breaks you up into little pieces that the waves wash clean and take back with them into the sea.

My ocean, my wings. For a time I lived as a man but I died and my corpse lies strangely rotting in the hold of a green ship I cannot find. Other corpses are there but determined to rot no further from their present state.

There is no sun on my ocean, only a blue haze and no land of any kind. And the sea is filled with fleeing fear and rotting plants that come up from the shallow bottom. Once I saw a giant eel poke its head above the warm brine, but I could not fear it. My black wings keep me safe, he thought.

Where is my green ship, lost for ages now? Racing low over the water I sometimes think it is only a foot long and I might have missed it a thousand times. I open my great bill and scoop up the dead worms that float near the surface . . .

Once a dripping noise woke me in the night. I fell to the floor, into the center of the room where the pool of stuff had gathered. It was a black liquid and when I touched it the stuff stuck to my fingers. I looked up at the ceiling. There didn't seem to be any more on the way. It made me very angry because I knew there was more and it was holding back just to annoy me . . .

"Perhaps he's trying to get back to what happened to him, and when he makes his peace with that, maybe he'll waken."

"How long will it take, Doctor?"

"For him, probably an epoch—

and for us there is no way to tell. Was he a good man?"

"He was a good man, Doctor."

HE REMEMBERED a voice saying, "There are faint red stars close to the earth whose primarily infrared radiations are mostly absorbed by our atmosphere. No picture of the universe can be complete without them. The Farside Lunar radio telescope thinks it has located one—and only two light-years away. Our new stardrive works and this will be its third test. Of course you will conduct scientific observations, take photographs, etc. But if all goes well, we will be ready to take larger hops out into the galaxy. Good luck, gentlemen."

The voice did not sound convincing, he thought. He could not remember who the speaker had been —and where?

He thought, the universe—all space—consists of the convolutions of some monstrous brain and I a phantom am set adrift in its passages. Strange thoughts drift within me, whispering that I am a dream. And at the moment when I am closest to the truth darkness veils everything from me. Speak, memory, he commanded but the darkness was again complete, inscrutable.

Suddenly there were stars in the darkness, cold unblinking stars, a billion of them all around him. He saw the fused mass of beryllium that had once been his ship. The ship tumbled and turned endlessly, a crumpled toy among the stars and he, a pale gray figure, floated near the wreck. He saw himself, a small suited mannikin with six hours of air stored to support its organic component. He felt sweat running down his back. His faceplate was fogged up—the dials on the inside of his suit glowed dimly. Gradually the faceplate cleared, and he estimated that he was orbiting his dead ship once every minute.

He remembered the explosion. It was still a splotch of light etched onto his brain as if he'd been shot full in the face with a laser. The stardrive generators had gone, a one-in-a-million chance. By all theoretical models such an explosion would turn local space inside out and scatter anything caught in it throughout creation, a variable scatter across space and time. He had been outside taking three-dimensional shots of the dim red star when it happened. Suddenly the ship had turned blindingly white. The camera had been pushed out of his grip, the safety line had snapped and then a chunk of something had hit him in the middle. Maybe he had been lucky nothing had penetrated his suit. Impossible to tell good from bad, curse from blessing. Nothing he had ever known, guessed or been told was holding still.

He looked at his transmitter

dial. It was faithfully sending out the distress call—three laser pulses into space every five seconds.

To his right the red star glowed dimly. He knew that somewhere the star had a dark companion, a chunk of dead rock. If he and the ship were still anywhere near their previous course, they would pass very near to it. He knew what it would look like. The body would reflect almost no light—he would notice it only by its capacity to blot out the starfields.

He touched the small control box on his left shoulder and the small suit jets spun him around three hundred and sixty degrees. No dark body was anywhere in sight. He gave his jets a touch and stopped spinning. The stars stilled again in his vision.

Silence, save for the sound of breathing, a metronome of rushing air keeping time in a timeless place. He tapped his helmet with his glove It was a relief to hear the contact. He looked at his oxygen meter. Its glow was dull inside his helmet. He had to twist his neck into an uncomfortable position to see it properly.

Oxygen: 5 hr. 22 m.

He closed his eyes and tried to control his breathing. He inhaled and counted to ten. He might be able to add twenty minutes to his life this way. But what did it matter? They would never find him, a tiny fragment among the stars. Better to have been in the ship—no memories, no waiting, just a flash and oblivion.

Oxygen: 4 hr. 16 m.

The warm glow of the tranquilizer surrounded him and he slept. The horizon of the alien land in front of him was crimson. The sands reflected the bursting flames. And the tiger. Slowly tracking, back and forth. Waiting. For him.

He awoke remembering. The tranquilizer made him sick and he vomited a little. The faceplate fogged and smeared. He couldn't see the stars.

His scream hung inside the suit and couldn't get out. He swatted at the control box with his glove. The wreck receded suddenly and he was spinning. Slowly he managed to control the spin. He took another pill.

He felt the numbness slowly spreading through his body. He swam, a god in his bath, smiling. Control. Sleep.

He awoke. Ahead of him a great mass obscured the stars. It was the red star's planet, a dark wanderer waiting for his corpse. He strained to see if the dark mass reflected any of the red star's light but there was no light, only the dim circular outline against the starfield. Once this dying star had been strong enough to warm whole worlds. He turned himself to look at the wreck. It was a small, darkly silver patch of metal to his right and for an instant he thought he could reach

out and then hold it in his hand.

Oxygen: 3 hr. 10 m.

When the wreck suddenly seemed to be obscuring stars more rapidly he knew that the dark planet was pulling them both in. He looked at the huge mass, a large black circle taking up almost a quarter of the sky. It looks like a neatly cut hole in space, he thought. I'm going to plow right into it and then the ship right on top of me. If I last long enough to experience it. And then he thought he could feel his forward motion, as the dark body grew larger in front of him. He pushed his suit controls and made a complete turn for observational purposes. At the end of his turn he saw the cluster of smaller dark bodies, bits of small debris circling the dim red sun.

Oxygen: 2 hr. 2 m.

The dark mass now covered a third of the sky. He looked down at a dark floor covered with sparkling diamonds. For a moment he thought they would blur into a sheet of light, but his eyes focused and the diamonds remained distinct. A bit of dust scratched across his faceplate, a cue that enabled him to imagine his terrifying speed.

Oxygen: 45 m.

Where had all the time gone? Suddenly he had to remember the good things in his life. He remembered her cool, smooth skin, her warm lips and long black hair. He would never kiss her again—she would never be open to him, quivering with excitement. He would never see the child she would have. There was no longer a future, love, old age, only a lonely death in a dark place at the ends of the universe. He wouldn't even know if he would hit the dark planet or circle it forever.

Oxygen: 05 m.

It was getting harder to breathe. The dark planet now took up half the sky. He had once pressed a fly to death with a paperweight. He had always known that it would get back at him. He looked toward his fused ship. It was tumbling wildly end over end. A piece broke off and passed a dozen feet to his right.

Oxygen— Empty

The air became heavy and hot very suddenly. He turned the cooling unit to high. At least the bad air would be cool for a while. The tiger sprang at him from the dune and he fired and missed. It tore at his chest, opened it and seized his heart in its teeth. He screamed and watched the cat run off with it, chewing as it ran. The sun was hot on his open flesh. It burned. Momentarily a cool wind blew through his open chest. Then the abrasive sand got inside and stirred around in his lungs, forced its way down into his stomach and bowels. It ripped through his guts like a razor. The muscles in his calves tight-

ened and turned to stone, refusing to relax. His arms stiffened and he couldn't move them. A demon was walking around in his head, beating against his temples, trying to get out, reaching down into his spine and twisting. Dark, dark, the dead star, the demon whispered and refused to let him go.

He felt his eyes bulge out of their sockets. Helen! he tried to shout, but no sound came from his throat. I love you! The thought wouldn't come out of his head. It was stuck there, frozen. He had just run out of reality, the blank end of a reel of tape, all hiss and noise, running on into nowhere. He turned his radio up full blast. There was nothing on the wave spectrum but the mindless seething between the stars.

"When the ship's lifeboat found him he was like this," the doctor said. "And he didn't come out of it all during the eight month journey home under auxiliary ion power. His two crewmates had to feed him intravenously and he lost a lot of weight."

BEYOND death was only the soft water and he sank into it. Liquid rushed about his limbs. It flowed through his veins, nourishing his poisoned body, filling him with a great peace. He withdrew into the silence somewhere near oblivion. He thought of the dead portions of his body, hair, nails and skin, and of how gradually the living slipped into the nonliving.

"He's developing a body fever," the doctor said as he looked at the diagnostic screen. "We're going to have to break it quickly." The woman sitting next to the bed leaned forward and looked at her husband's face. He seemed to be sleeping. She looked for some change but his face remained a mask.

He was choking in the hot sand. Each grain burned him in turn and something grasped him by the head and twisted him in the sand as if he were a stick. The grains were abrasive and cut into him like broken glass. Suddenly the sand became cool and wet, enfolding him in its firm, damp comfort. Gradually his mind realized what had happened—it came to him slowly. As a man wakens on a spring morning, he saw the way back.

And he knew now that the green ship was no more, that the tiger did not make off with his heart and he knew that somehow he was alive, somewhere. He reached out with love toward the great mind that ruled the cosmos and gave thanks.

When the fever's edge softened and turned his sickness to sleep he dreamed of fair women with golden hair and small breasts; he saw their firm bodies lying upon green grass. He slept.

"Doctor, he blinked."

At once he knew she was sitting next to him. She had called him back. The mind is everywhere, he thought. The brain lives in a spatio-temporal realm but the mind comes from elsewhere to stay only a short while, an exile from a greater community.

He felt the light coming into his closed eyes, felt it moving along his optic nerve to his brain—he wondered what kind of eye his brain must have to interpret such a signal? Then he understood that the brain's eye was only a window and through that window watched the mind's eye, the final interpreter, the arbiter of meaning. Its way was a special way of seeing, the way that made sense of everything that came through from a hostile universe of which it was a part.

He thought, the mind develops its perceptual powers through experiential analogy with sense data during life. Lacking sense data the mind spins out symbolic representations of the imperfectly perceived events going on around the locus of the brain in space. For him the loss of life, of Helen, would have been purposeless and unbearable, so, at the stress point where another man might have given up, his mind-matrix had flared up like a nova, a quantum jump to an unprecedented level of awareness and strength. The resulting field had enveloped the physical organ that was the brain and had preserved it from the decay that should have resulted when his oxygen ran out. This was the life-force that guided biological reproduction—the mechanism that made life immortal while the individuals and even species perished; in his case it had preserved an individual. The force of his life-affirmation, the horror of death, the force of his will, had found for him the counter entropic force of all intelligent life and had preserved him until the others had found him floating in the darkness.

But the gain was permanent. He could see, truly for the first time, as no man had seen before. Space was no obstacle; he could feel the emotions of those around him—especially Helen's. They were as prominent as the corona of the sun during eclipse; he understood the darkness that covered her face. Slowly the darkness was passing from her face, revealing to him the light of her rising hope.

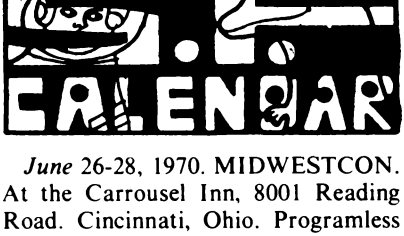
He knew that this door of perception would now always be open to him. In the darkness of the dead star it had given him the meaning of his situation through the vision of the dreams. My ocean, my wings. He knew what they meant.

With the thought came the full realization that he was alive, now more than ever. He remembered the torment of the ghostly worlds and knew that the terrible fear of death at the moment when his

tanks had run out had driven him there—into the arms of sirens. The fountain of life behind his dream of fair women had saved him and he knew what would happen now. He knew she was waiting for him like a ministering angel, listening and watching for a sign of life. An angel made for a man.

"Helen—"

He said goodbye to the dark worlds within and opened his eyes to the bright light of day coming in through the window. ●



June 26-28, 1970. MIDWESTCON. At the Carrousel Inn, 8001 Reading Road. Cincinnati, Ohio. Programless Relaxacon. Banquet. For information: Lou Tabakow, 3953 St. Johns Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45236.

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July 3-5, 1970. WESTERCON XXIII. Will be held in Santa Barbara, California. Guest-of-Honor: Jack Williamson; Fan Guest-of-Honor: Rick Sneary. Memberships: $3.00 through June 22; $5.00 at the door. For information: Westercon XXIII. Box 4456, Downey, California 90241.

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July 17-19, 1970. PgHLANGE. At Chatham Center Motor Lodge, Center Avenue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Guest-of-Honor: Harlan Ellison; GoH Emeritus: Robert Silverberg. Features: Panels, parties, movies, banquet. Membership: $2.00 in advance; $2.50 at the door. For information: Suzanne Tompkins, 5830 Bartlett Street, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15213.

August 14-16, 1970. AGACON 70. Memberships: Supporting, $1.50; Attending $2.50. For information: AGACON 70, Box 10885, Atlanta, Georgia 30310.

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August 21-23, 1970. TORONTO FAN FAIR. At the King Edward Sheraton Hotel, Toronto, Canada. Guests-of-Honor: Anne McCaffrey, Isaac Asimov. Membership: $2.00 in advance. For information: Peter Gill, 18 Glen Manor Drive, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

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August 21-24, 1970. 28th WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION: HEICON INTERNATIONAL. In Heidelberg, West Germany. The accent of this con will be an international one, with fans and pros coming from all over the world. Guest-of-Honor: Robert Silverberg (USA), Ted Tubb (England) and Dr. Herbert W. Franke (Germany). Memberships: $2.50 (supporting membership, receive all progress reports), $4.00 (attending); after December 31, $4.00, $6.00. For information and registration: HEICON 70, 6272 Niedernhausen, West Germany. Make all checks payable to Mrs. Molly Auler.

(Continued from page 42)

ing are a commonplace," said Dr. Czento. "Most are spurious but a few are accurate. One such genuine landing took place on the sands of Nahrum. The British advisor to the Sheikh, a dear friend of mine, knew of the Sheikh's tablet and his claim to the planets. Acting with brilliant acuity, he set up the Tammuz Society, showed the tablet to our Sentient visitors and established agreement to the validity of our claim. The second tablet is our formal contract. What could have been a more suitable language than Sumerian?"

"Are these Sentients simpletons?" I said. "Are they gulled by a quaint artifact of ancient times? Surely there's more to your deal than that? The dismantling and replacement of Mars, no matter what you say, is a treacherous job and a potential disaster if the slightest error occurs. They failed before? Why not now?"

"They won't fail," said Dr. Czento. "You've no idea how brilliant they are."

"And when the effects of the substitution begin—with earthquakes, tidal waves and God-knows-what—the hullabaloo here on Earth will be a fearsome thing. Someone will have to placate our scientists, our politicians, the great masses of people."

"The Tammuz Society is made up of selected heads of state, Nobel laureates and distinguished businessmen," said Dr. Czento. "They are men influential in all areas of society."

"Then that's what your payment is for," I said. "Not for the Shiekh's tablet."

Dr. Czento's fingers began to tremble.

"Did you kill Pendleton?"

"You're as delusional as he was," said Dr. Czento. "He died of natural causes. You saw the death certificate."

"Which you signed."

"As a student," said Dr. Czento, "I played around with the properties of chloral hydrate. In moderate amounts it was a useful depressant of the central nervous system, although it caused nausea in some patients. I reduced chloral hydrate to a new form, almost tasteless, colorless and rather delayed in its insidious effects. It is a deadly but passionless killer and is almost impossible to detect on autopsy. I was sorry to be compelled to offer it to you."

"You want me dead?"

"Very reluctantly," said Dr. Czento. "You've drunk two glasses of it, so you're rather on borrowed time. I dare say that you've already lost all sensation in your feet. Perhaps, even now, you can't raise your arms."

Dr. Czento was s small man in his sixties and by no means athlet-

ic. Still, he was tough and wiry. But for some reason, after I got up and took violent hold of him, he offered little resistance. His eyes were wide and unbelieving all through the time I bound and gagged him. There was the same stunned look on his face as I telephoned to London and asked for a National Security officer to come out at once.

I was terribly relieved when he finally arrived, almost two hours later. I tried to describe everything as precisely as I could and in complete detail until I noticed the white kid on the enameled pin in his lapel. ●

TIME PIECE

(Continued from page 50)

bhang-smoke and mumbled about the game and how it was just like the big game we were playing, and every time he took a pebble off the board he called it by name. And some of the names I didn't know but a lot of them were on my long list.

And he talked about how we were like the pieces in this simple game—how some went off the board after the first couple of moves, and some hopped from place to place all through the game and came out unscathed and some just sat in one place all the time until they got zapped from out of nowhere.

After a while I started hitting the bhang myself and we abandoned the metaphor in a spirit of mutual intoxication.

And I've been thinking about that night for six years, or two hundred, and I think that N'gai—his soul find Buddha—was wrong. The game isn't all that complex.

Because in O'wari, either person can win.

The snails populate ten planets for every one we destroy.

Solitaire, anyone? ●

THE MISSPELLED MAGICIAN

(Continued from page 134)

when the black nest returned. It attacked the village instead of coming up into the mountains after me. If it was going to destroy the village anyway, there was no longer any reason for me to stay up in the hills. So I dug out the other bicycle."

"The nest must have just missed you."

Shoogar nodded. "I saw it coming. When it finished with the village—only then did it go for the mountains. Only I was no longer there."

"Shoogar, that's brilliant!"

He shrugged modestly, brushed a speck of dirt from the sleeve of his robe.

"It was nothing. I had planned so."

There was nothing more to say. We watched as he mounted the bicycle again, once more began pedaling toward the south. I felt proud to know him. ●

WHAT'S BECOME OF SCREWLOOSE?

(Continued from page 89)

little plan didn't work so good."

"Seeing you again helped me remember," said Mary.

"Well," said Screwloose, "no long-range harm done. We only have to fix up your mind again, Mary, and you'll forget all this nasty stuff. Your dad taught me how. I can do it."

"No," said the girl.

I asked, "Me, too?"

Screwloose replied, "No, you we'll have to kill in some accidental looking way. I was hoping you'd get drowned at Stinson Beach. I only just tonight figured Mary might have come back here for sentimental reasons. Had I thought of it earlier I would have beat you to it. Again, gee, there's no real harm done. I know all kinds of easy ways to kill people."

The playhouse door opened quietly again and Pope dived in. He held a cross-shaped tire iron. His first swing knocked Screwloose's pistol away. Pope's next two blows were to the android's head and they caused him to fall back with an outflung jerking.

"Gosh," said the android.

He began a slow tumble down to the floor. He was making loud whirring sounds and oily smoke came from his nostrils and mouth.

"The reason I was a little late," said Pope. "I bumped into some landcars on the highway. It was a produce truck full of synthetic tangerines actually. I'd been trailing Screwloose since he left his place in Frisco. I lost him after the colli-

sion but figured he'd head here. I picked him up again at the gates. None of the alarms are working, by the way."

"I turned everything off," said Mary, leaving the area of the teaching machines. "I don't like all that stuff much."

"You just happen to be carrying a tire iron?" I asked Pope.

"Actually," he said, rings forming around his wide eyes, "I had a flat tire, too. After one of the truck drivers kicked my car. That's what threw my timing a bit off."

"Your timing was fine," I said.

"This is Mary Redland, huh?" Pope asked, nodding at the girl. "You've been here hiding out?"

"Not hiding out—thinking, trying to remember. I wanted to remember everything. I wanted to remember what they had done to me," said the girl. "But I'm still not sure why they did it."

"Because we loved you," said Screwloose. His head began to come apart. ●

HUE AND CRY

(Continued from page 2)

Ejler Jakobsson? It turns out that he's just the most innovative editor in SF today. Thank God you've gotten rid of those ghastly beasts on the covers of If! *Thank God you're starting to publish a little* adult *fiction! (And I don't mean sex, either.)* The Region Between *and* The Last Night of the Festival *are brilliantly presented, and even fine stories, too. But how much better as* total *visual experiences beyond just the words of them! Jack did a great job and I hope like hell that he does more. Good layouts like that* really *turn me on; good show, man!*

Anyhow, I am much much pleased with the direction that you're heading your mags. Bless you, sir, bless you.

Harold G. Corwin, Jr.
Edwards AFB, Calif. 93523

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

I want to add my voice to the commendations you have received for at last showing John W. Campbell that there is objection in the science-fiction world to his increasingly racist editorials.

I suppose that there have been strong opinions for and against Vaughn Bodé's strip. There is rather more violence in it than I care for, but in a world that includes the wars in Vietnam, Laos, Biafra, and the Middle East, it's difficult to get very excited about a Bodé drawing.

Sincerely yours,
John Boardman
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

I just picked up the April issue of If *and read* Ride a Tin Can. *Mr. Lafferty is completely and incurably insane.*

Sincerely,
Scott Edelstein

Reading Room

BY LESTER DEL REY

I HAVE been accused by some of my fellow writers of being overly fond of schmaltz in my reaction to some of the books reviewed here in the past. With strong exception to that "overly," I plead guilty to liking schmaltz and I make no apologies for it. But as a connoisseur of schmaltz, I am of necessity strongly opposed to the kitsch too often associated with it.

Maybe a few quick definitions are in order. *Schmaltz* is a German-Yiddish word that means grease or butter; in the arts, it's the grease the artist uses to make his bread—or more solid material—go down easily. It is, in fact, the appeal to the reader's emotional response. *Kitsch* is garbage, trash, or any showy junk. Its use indicates a dishonesty, or an appeal to false emotionalism, snobbery, bad taste, etc. Where schmaltz is probably an exaggeration of a real emotion, kitsch is either a distortion or the use of unreal emotional responses.

Almost all romantic fiction is essentially schmaltz; it has to be, since a sane view of it indicates our lovers can very well live without each other, no matter how much the feeling engendered in the reader is made to overlook this. Nevertheless, the emotional state of the lovers is based on reality and only exaggerated to make it seem more interesting. On the other hand, the stuff in too many confession magazines and the old teen-age love-pulps was pure kitsch; almost nobody is as idiotic as the heroines—and if anyone were, she couldn't have achieved the ending falsely grafted onto the story. Most grand opera is also kitsch, though justified by the musical overlay. And, of course, the stuff called "camp"

recently and appreciated at great effort by the phoney sophisticates had to be pure kitsch.

Most of the best writers among the older practitioners of science fiction smoothed their plots with an admixture of schmaltz. And when it was that, without degenerating into kitsch, it was a lot more effective than a mere recital of the story events would have been.

POUL ANDERSON has written some really superbly schmaltzy stories. His Nicholas van Rijn was in the purest vein in the original novel; no man was ever exactly like him, yet the basic elements of his character were drawn from life. The old hero-villain obviously delighted the readers and Anderson has done a whole series of stories using him since then.

Unfortunately, the latest doesn't have the oomph of the earlier ones. Anderson's *Satan's World* (Doubleday, $4.95) has a generally ingenious situation and what might have been a good set of aliens and alienated humans to provide the menance. David Falkayn and his partners consult the giant computer of Serendipity, Inc.—a very nice use of information as a medium of exchange—to learn they have information of more danger than apparent value. This brings their boss, old van Rijn, into things, and the plot tangles busily thereafter.

It's ingenious and the basic action is fine. But somehow, the pitcher seems to have been to the well too often. Van Rijn is as clever as ever, but the tough, hard core of the man is lost somewhere under the mere cleverness and surface mannerisms. It never degenerates to kitsch, but it becomes ineffectual schmaltz, with the grease too obvious. And since the only use for schmaltz is its effect, it's hard to take when it doesn't produce.

Clifford Simak is another master of the difficult trick of getting just the right and subtle blend of schmaltz and solid story material. Few writers can blend background, suspense and just the right touch of emotional appeal as well as he usually manages. His recent *Out of their Minds* (Putnam, $4.95), however, has lost the touch, judging by my response.

The basic idea is really fantasy. All the beliefs that man has accumulated in his superstitions throughout the ages have somehow fed into—well, call it another dimension or plane—and this energy has been creating the very things men have imagined. Now the myth-creatures are beginning to break through and trying to take over Earth. It isn't too bad a situation. And in the early section, when his car is menaced by a dinosaur and when he isn't sure how his friend was killed in a collision where the other car disappeared, it begins to build up good suspense.

But then the kitchen sink gets dragged in. He not only catches sea monsters and is chased by werewolves, but he meets Snuffy Smith and the comic-book world. He and a girl get trapped in a child's fairyland where he meets the devil; and he is cast back into the Civil War, where he spends a good bit of time.

When he gets out of that he finds the world has been overtly attacked by the devil, who has stopped all electric apparatus from working. The devil expects him to be a go-between in negotiations with the President, and . . .

It's simply too much, laid on too thickly. Myth-creation has run rampant. Goblins and werewolves were enough. But when we are asked to believe that men have believed in comic book characters and such for long enough and deeply enough to have turned them into myth-creatures at least as real as the devil, we boggle a bit. And when the civil war gets dragged in as a myth, it is too thick; true, our history does become somewhat of a myth in time; but only a small percentage of the total world population knows enough or cares enough to feed much creative data into the myth-world. Paul Bunyon would certainly be more likely than Pickett as a myth-figure.

One form of kitsch results when the means used are excessive to a major degree for the effects needed. And here, I'm sorry to say the means are excessively excessive and the control of those means seems to have flown out the window. It's not pathetic kitsch (the trash of *pathos*, or untrammeled emotionalism), but its uncontrolled use of piling one thing on another is almost as bad.

ALMOST all sword-and-sorcery, fantasy or science fiction, tends to be somewhat schmaltzy. Howard's Conan was wonderful implicit schmaltz most of the time. (Implicit because Howard rather understated the emotional response of his hero—but still schmaltz because the romantic fix of his hero created such reactions on the part of the reader.) Most deliberate attempts to imitate Conan have been purest kitsch, of course. But the mixture of brawling and sorcery still offers a great field.

Marion Zimmer Bradley has been mining this field rather well. Her latest, *The Winds of Darkover* (Ace Double, 75¢), is the seventh novel in the Darkover series. Here we have a world where the ancient inhabitants had substituted sorcery for science—or call it *psi*, if you like; no difference. And there are pools of psychic power, or nexus-collections, which act as the old gods were supposed to act.

It is essentially formula-fiction, of course. Our hero is an Earthman stationed on Darkover in the

little Earth enclave. He loses his job because his mind is sometimes taken over by a ruler of a Dark-over demesne. He is kicked out on a mission to help other natives, and his mind is more and more usurped until he becomes the ruler. Meantime, the ruler's sister must hie forth on her own mission to contact him and awake with him the power of one of the old and dangerous goddesses.

The good of the story is that Bradley has made the formula her own; it works as she wants it to. For those who join me in enjoying the schmaltz of good entertainment fiction, it's to be recommended.

The other half of the double volume is *The Anything Tree*, by John Rackham. The tree here is apparently the ruler of a planet, and it has a rather limited mind but a great power to control growth; it can grow almost anything a man can ask of it—and it can even alter his growth, or cause adaptations in his cells.

The conflict comes when the powerful but uniquely innocent tree first contacts minds of evil.

It isn't a story I'd recommend too strongly by itself, but it makes rather good reading. What more can be asked from a book frankly meant to be entertaining?

Return to the Stars, by Edmond Hamilton (Lancer, 75¢), is a long-delayed sequel to his *Star Kings*. John Gordon, whose mind was transferred to that of a Prince of the far future who had to save the great Star Kingdom, is returned to that future in his own body this time, where he must meet in his own form the Princess he loved in another man's body.

The basic situation here is ripe for all the schmaltz one could desire. Yet there is considerable control exercised—as there has been in most of Hamilton's later material. No man has a longer history of writing the formula adventure story with all its inherent schmaltz than Hamilton; but the fact that he is still happily active after all these years is due to the skill with which he always treated his material.

There is none of the tender reunion that would be so easily mixed with bathos. Instead, our lovely princess properly finds it hard to accept this man whom she never met in physical form before, and his attempt to understand is clouded by the fact that to him he is really no different. Nor does he immediately take over the saving of the Star Kingdom again; the menace this time is out of his hands at first—because he's simply a friend of the great King, not being in the body of a Prince whose commands must be obeyed.

It isn't the best of Hamilton's recent work; the job of going back and trying to recapture a world and attitude after having left it for years is a difficult one. And the limits he has imposed on himself in

treating Gordon's abilities within reason make it harder to buckle a fine swash. But he does come up with a fine "villain" whose complexity was not fully revealed in the original story and who has all the charm we could want.

It's fun to read, particularly if you've wondered whether Gordon could ever get back to his Princess.

REX GORDON's *The Yellow Fraction* (Ace, 60¢) seems at first to be based on a fairly standard situation. Men have colonized Arcon. Now, a few hundred years later, they find that the planet is at best marginally suitable for men. Certain factors in the ecology of Arcon have made senility and death the common lot by the age of forty and there is a risk that this lack of time for the individuals will make it impossible to maintain a civilization.

But meantime they have destroyed their original spaceship, and their technology seems unable to build another. Politics has entered, too. The group who opposed settling Arcon and who later wanted to leave for another world are known as the Yellows and are considered the Enemy by the Blues and Greens. Arcon is actually ruled by a Security system designed supposedly to weed out dangerous Yellows.

Len Thomas is kicked out of school for advocating what is termed Yellow policies. And then he discovers apparently that Security system is actually in the hands of the Yellows and that he is to be part of a small group sent to be trained for a voyage to another star in a spaceship being secretly built.

However, the formula is being turned on its head by this time, and it becomes obvious to the reader that things are not at all as Thomas is first led to believe. Under all this, there is a rather ingenious set of political struggles and a well-worked-out solution to the problem of Darkover.

Unfortunately, the writing is sometimes a little clumsy and the characters are less developed than the better-handled plotting deserves. Gordon could use a good deal of careful editing and some detailed editorial advice; he shows more than enough promise here to deserve such attention.

This is a case where there is comparatively little schmaltz—and where some could have been used most profitably. The love relation of Thomas and a girl being sent with him and the relations of the entire group deserve more emotional development. They are put in a damned good situation, but the dryness with which it is handed to us gives little more than a report of the events.

The smaller bits, away from the group around Thomas, indicate that Gordon can sometimes capture the emotional feeling of the

situation, and this makes it doubly unfortunate that some of the main events within the group going on the ship are handed to us with so little real emotional color.

It's a somewhat annoying treatment of an interesting idea, but on balance the virtues are greater than the defects.

QUITE another judgment must be made on *A Piece of Resistance*, by Clive Egleton (Coward-McCann, $5.95). This is not advertised on the jacket as science fiction, nor is it properly. Instead, it's one of those novels that takes place in the future simply because it can't be squeezed into the present. Yet, since the publishers felt it should be sent to science-fiction reviewers and since it is built up as a novel about the future, I feel it should be covered here.

The basic situation is that England has been conquered by Russia and is now occupied. There are collaborators and an underground, here represented by Garnett. The basic situation is standard spy stuff. The Russians have captured a resistance fighter who has information that can destroy the underground. Garnett is sent to free him (or probably to kill him, if necessary) before he can Reveal All.

And from there on it's pure kitsch—about as dishonest a use of the situation as is possible. There is almost no sign of any real reason for the underground. In reading the book, there is a violently stated anti-Russian anti-communist attitude and a constant iteration of how bad things are. But we see very little of that. The Russians we meet seem in only vague control, and we see very little of what they are doing; true, they seem to capture and be willing to shoot people who kill their people, but the rest of England goes on without any great evidence of the change. In fact, except for one mention, there seems almost no evidence of the war that was great enough to conquer the country, despite its having involved atomic weapons. What America is doing or thinking, or what political changes have ocurred in the rest of the world, is left uncovered.

There is the standard woman who may or may not be a double agent. And there is the equally standard encounter at a critical moment with a Russian patrol, which gives a chance to show how easily the (rather mild) Russian is bamboozled. But aside from some moments during the unbelievable attack on the prison where our captive is kept, most of the events are stated as being laden with drama and danger—but lack any real conviction of either.

This attempt to lay a standard spy thriller in the future is hard to justify. It would have been a lot better laid in East Germany or some such place, and with an honest attention to background. This

is as false to me as the attempt to graft sexy romances onto science fiction was back in the late thirties. That was such obvious kitsch that it failed completely on the stands.

I can only hope that this will fail as badly, before we get a flood of science-fiction spy thrillers by men who know nothing of science-fiction technique.

However, having had some experience with the reviewing of books in most of our papers and magazines outside the science-fiction field, I'd hesitate to bet that it wouldn't receive raves in most of the book columns.

There is no reason for any science-fiction reader to bother with this, in any event. ●

THE COMMUNICATION MACHINE *(Continued from page 78)*

cated at his feet. Thorpe brushed it aside and stormed across the room for his cape and his cane. His job was done and he had to get out of this palace of horrors.

But the statue followed, a whimpering thing that crawled after him and tugged at the embroidered edges of his cape. Cracked hands reached up to him and implored—they brought a memory of a more ancient touch that so enraged Thorpe that he yelled abuse and brought his jewel cane down upon that dreadful image.

And again.

And again.

And again.

With each blow the red ruin of Bedford's face increased. Thorpe's grip on the cane held down the triggering device imbedded in the handle and the stricken figure on the floor was thrown into a convulsions like those of a freshly speared fish. It whimpered and screamed and jumped about like a demented marionette.

And died.

With all his weight behind it Thorpe drove the cane into Bedford's fat belly and held it there like a rapier, while the power threw the battered body into its final post mortem agonies. Thorpe's mind had snapped. Like a man possessed he hurried around the room, tumbling rubbish and papers into piles and igniting them with his pocket lighter. When several fires were roaring through the room he hurried downstairs and threw open the first door he came to.

It was some sort of study. He ripped opened drawers and spilled papers out onto the moth-eaten carpet. He dragged them over to where filthy drapes hung from one window and set the whole lot

ablaze. He smashed an old chair and used the legs for torches and carried them around the great deserted house, downstairs and up, setting on fire everything he could reach.

He felt sick and dizzy but he knew he had to finish what he had started. He must remove all traces of what had happened in this house—Bedford, his machine, and everything connected with it.

Everything.

The furniture was old and burned well. In no time at all the ancient timber house would become an inferno. He started to leave and flames reached out to him.

With a dumb sort of comprehension he realized that he had trapped himself. Smoke rose up in great billowing clouds to engulf him; fierce gusts of flame roared to possess him.

He was suffocating. He moved forward like a drunken figure in a dream through the inferno of hatred he had created. He fell. Like a tumbling rag doll he fell down the rotten stairs that had already begun to cave in under the burden of the flames, down into the hideous dark smoke. His body came to rest somewhere in the hallway and he coughed impotently.

He would die. There was no escape. He could not move. His legs seemed to have been broken by the fall. Well, so be it. Perhaps it was better this way. To have lived out a life knowing what he knew—and then he remembered Bedford's evil genius and death was no longer a pain.

Fire was good—it cleansed. He would die a martyr's death. What more could a poet ask?

A great torrent of foam surged through what was left of the front door and covered him completely. Dimly he could here voices and the familiar howl of a fire siren. And he smiled, for he knew they were too late. The fire roared defiance at his rescuers—but the oceans of foam pushed it back—back—and anxious hands searched for and found him, carried him to safety.

The last thing he saw was the roof of the old house collapsing into a great shower of sparks and he closed his eyes and was content. They hustled him into an ambulence and rushed him to the nearest hospital.

FOR several days his escape was given front-page publicity—publicity that worked in well with the forthcoming Betjeman Prize Tourney, which he was a hot favorite to win. When he was well enough he sat up in bed and scribbled verse frantically and with a new sense of purpose quite foreign to his temperament. He could not know that he was possessed by a terrible demon in the shape of a fear that time might, at any moment, reel to a stop.

A week was enough time for the

police to sift the evidence of the fire and work over Bedford's charred remains. A warrant was summarily issued and Thorpe was removed to a police hospital while the crown prepared its case. But all this hardly mattered to him. He still scribbled incessantly.

His trial was mercifully brief. He sat tense and uncommunicative throughout the proceedings and his counsel, defeated by his unwillingness to testify, was reduced to making a plea of temporary insanity and throwing him on the mercy of the court. The plea was accepted—the case was closed. Thorpe was transferred to a secluded institution where he continued to churn out reams of incomprehensible poems—his mind still held in thrall by what he had found in Bedford's machine, knowing what he knows and wondering how long it will be before somebody else starts fiddling around with Bedford's ideas—and knowing there is nothing he can do about it.

For the rest of his natural life. ●

EQUALS FOUR

(Continued from page 63)

Hobgoblin. "I did that work myself. There is nothing wrong with it."

Dillingham glanced at him tiredly. So this was a personal matter with the goblin now. An excellent opportunity to embarrass the chief before his entire planet, to torpedo his prestige.

He was tempted. The chief had tried to trick him, and the audience had been thirsty for his blood right along. He could get even with the whole species of Hobgoblin and make its dentistry the laughing stock of the galaxy.

He saw that the Jann was back in his booth. That made it safe: he could tell off the planet with impunity—the huge robot would vaporize anyone who dared to attack him. There would be blood and carnage and flame—

Dillingham shook himself. What was he thinking of? He was here to make friends for the University, not to incite riot. He truly needed an assistant if his nerves were this tight. Someone to cool him off.

"The work is excellent," he said. "I could not do better myself. The cement is defective. Give it time and every restoration will come loose. This entire mouth will have to be redone. And every case where you used this type of cement. They all are suspect."

The goblin dentist looked. He pried off another cap and saw the condition of the underlying ce-

ment. He sagged, confidence gone.

"You're right, Doctor. It was a new variety—not time-tested—but most highly recommended. We used it on our special patients—tourists, visitors, persons of note—"

"Not your fault," Dillingham said graciously, suddenly seeing the answer to those vague off-planet complaints. "Perhaps there is some quality of the local environment that affects the cement as it is being applied. The University will be happy to run tests for you. It's a shame to have work this good be undermined by something this small."

"Doctor," the goblin said with surprising politeness, "you have made your point. University training is beneficial. We shall act accordingly."

Somehow this did not seem to be the proper time to confess that he had almost missed the key cavity—or that only the timely reminder by his bipedal assistant had prompted him to perform the routine check that had led to the major discovery.

His assistant—she had been perfect. She had worked correctly and right without intruding. This was the one he wanted to keep.

"What is your name and planet?" he asked her as he finished his preparations on the patient.

"Miss Galland—Earth," she said.

"Very good, Miss Galland of Earth. I want you to—" He stopped. He had suddenly realized what was strange about her voice. She wasn't speaking through the translator. "Earth?"

"Yes, Doctor," she said as she cleaned up the patient's ugly face.

Dillingham straightened up and looked directly at her for the first time. She was a young, esthetic, female human being.

"Judy!" he exclaimed, amazed. "Judy Galland—"

"I thought you'd never notice, Doctor," she said smiling. "We always worked well together."

"What are you doing here?"

"Why, I'm assisting you. I thought you knew."

"I mean—I left you on Earth, back when—"

She smiled again. "That's a long story, Doctor. Let's just say that I needed a position and there was an opening. After that matters became complicated. Deep space and all that. Frankly, your robot rescued me from an unfortunate situation."

"The Jann brought you? But he was supposed to be protecting me! I thought Miss Taran—"

"None but I shall do thee die," the Jann boomed from his booth, startling them both and causing a ripple of dismay to pass through the massed goblins. "But thy skein will be too brief without a proper assistant. I perceived thou couldst not endure even forty years in thy solitary condition."

Judy guided the patient out of the chair. "So you see, Doctor, two plus two—"

"Equals four." He grabbed her by the arm. "Come on—let's get out of here before Miss Tarantula sends Number Five. I'll settle for Four."

"And a married man is far more likely to live to ninety-two," the Jann observed, rising grandly from the booth.

Fortunately Dr. Dillingham was not listening. But the goblin audience certainly was and catcalls resounded. ●

SECOND-HAND STONEHENGE *(Continued from page 29)*

earth—a delicate arrangement, if you stop to think about it. Three months since Cathy stepped into that spacebus on a frosty morning.

I'd brooded around the house at Round Hill for three days after they'd left, never out of range of a radio or TV. By the end of the third day I was cursing the universe again, reassessing, drinking too much.

"Thomas?" Oh, that lovely voice from a far space. The Pleiades?

"Thomas—" I was instantly sober, then immediately stoned again but with a different intoxication.

"Cathy."

"It's all right, Thomas. Your—genetic code—is all right. It can be modified." I'm standing there, stunned. "It took some doing to arrange it, Thomas. We've only done it a few times in our whole history. But you can come back—you can come here with me if you still want to, Thomas."

She knew bloody well I still wanted to but a woman is a woman no matter where she's from. Yes, I wanted to.

"Don't be silly," I said.

MIT would have to survive without me.

We said some other things then and she promised to see me in March.

May I say that in the following weeks I took care of myself with megalomanic care? I didn't cross a street against a light. I drove as little as possible and I took vitamin pills. I brushed my teeth. I didn't look at the girls in the Square and I refused to fly in aircraft. The Pleiades, *si*—La Guardia, no.

The Stonehenge isn't for sale. Harry and his people need it. They may be using it for a long time. I

almost said we'll be using it. Anyway, it will stay here on Round Hill.

I'll come back from time to time, of course, to look around, see what's happening. We'll have to come either for a few minutes or for three months. Cathy said we could come back for three months every two years. That will be great but we'll be spending most of our time out there.

The spacebus is due now.

Here it is. Cathy, my lovely girl, is the first one out. There are others—who will stay for three months. The station wagons are here again but someone else will be taking over the Round Hill end of the operation. I'm going. We'll be back now and again.

Harry consulted his computer and told us to get aboard.

We did. ●

GRANDFATHER PELTS

(Continued from page 101)

pelts—while he had only one. Klaywelder turned over and closed his eyes.

—and came fully awake. The luminous dial over his bunk said he had slept only a short hour. His senses were fuzzy from the strong Pharalellian wine. He cocked his head and listened. Nothing. He shrugged and turned over—then sat up stiffly.

There it was again. Unfamiliar.

He set his feet on the floor and something heavy draped over his ankles and wrapped softly about his calves. Klaywelder gasped and jerked away. The firm grip held, tightened, and he yelled as he was pulled to the floor.

Klaywelder fought savagely. He kicked, pummeled with his fists. His blows were muffled in thick, warm fur, as damp leather tightened about his waist and inched up across his chest.

He screamed and cursed himself and Garii and the universe until his throat was raw. And in some last, coherent corner of his mind he wondered if anyone else knew Pharalellians didn't believe in a life after death—and didn't need to.

As thick golden fur covered his face he saw a quick bright picture of dark earthen cups on a smooth stone floor—small offerings of reverence for those who had passed on to Eternal Life. ●

S-5

THE MIDWICH CUCKOOS by John Wyndham. For an entire day, a small rural village in England loses contact with the outside world. Soon after, all the women, married or not become pregnant, eventually giving birth to remarkable golden-eyed children who exhibit a strange kind of sinisterism. They are dangerous and Midwich must make the ultimate decision—if the children survive, then mankind must join the dinosaur among Nature's discards. A gripping account of man's fight for survival.

189 pp. List Price...$4.50 Discount Price...$4.05

S-6

THE SPACE MERCHANTS by Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth. Two major advertising agencies are fighting for the Venus account—nothing less than total control of the Venus economy and markets will do. It is completely unimportant that Venus is a harsh, barren, uninhabited planet. According to the mentality of Mitchell Courtenay of Fowler Schocken Associates, the trick is to persuade colonists to go to Venus, and once there, they will have to survive as best they can. One of the most savage and devastating attacks on modern consumer society and the advertising agents who are its high priests, *The Space Merchants* is uncomfortably prophetic.

158 pp. List Price...$4.50 Discount Price...$4.05

S-7

BRAIN WAVE by Poul Anderson. Imagine, some mysterious space force that inhibits the world's intelligence. But suddenly, it's gone and overnight the intellect of every living creature is trebled. What are the consequences of such instant genius? These are the problems confronting Archie Brock, former near moron; Peter Corinth, physicist; and his no-longer dumb wife. This provocative and absorbing book explores the ultimate problem of such a situation—in a world free of the difficulties that has plagued mankind throughout history, what is man to do with his time?

164 pp. List Price...$4.50 Discount Price...$4.05

S-8A

OPUS 100 by Isaac Asimov. An event—a special Asimov book...America's foremost science writer, takes you on a personalized guided tour of his first 99 books. This, his 100th book, is an anthology of works selected by the author himself. It is a journey which acquaints the reader with a writer considered to be a genius, who delights in every aspect of life and has the capacity to make any subject he writes about both understandable and entertaining. Reviewers customarily greet Asimov publications with such adjectives as "brilliant," "engrossing," "powerful," and "sparkling." *Opus 100* is no exception.

318 pp. List Price...$5.95 Discount Price...$5.36

S-9

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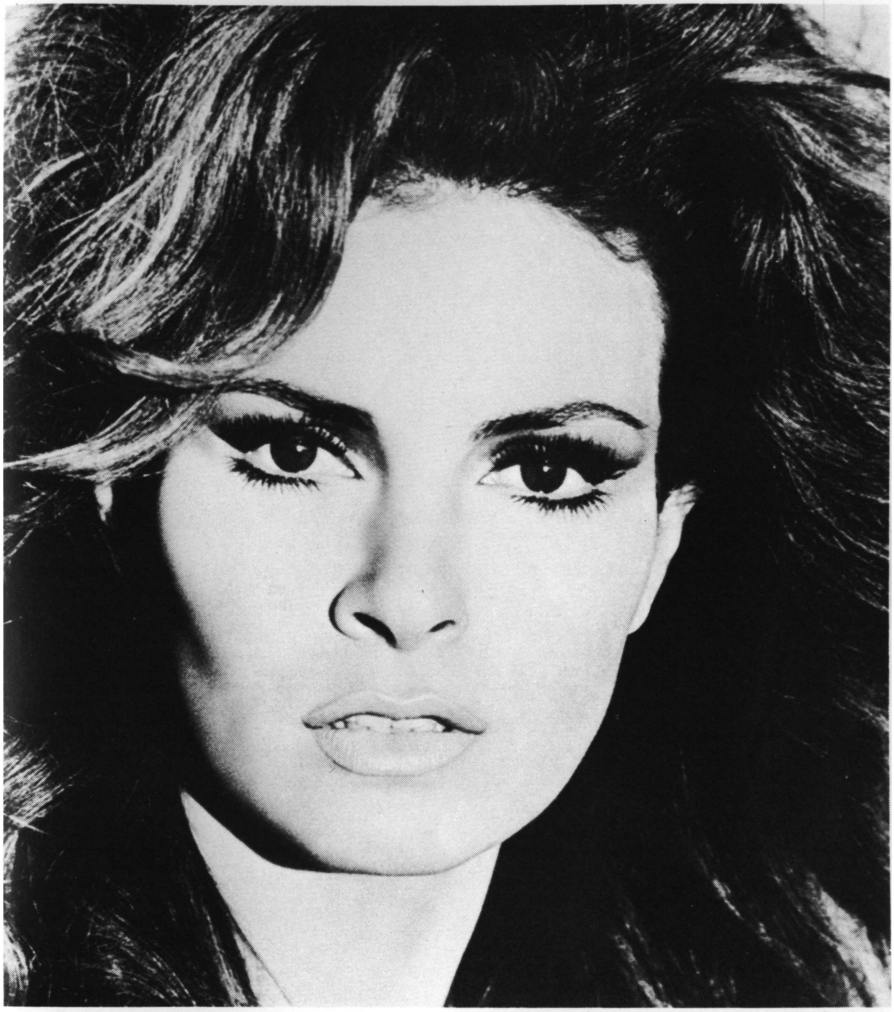

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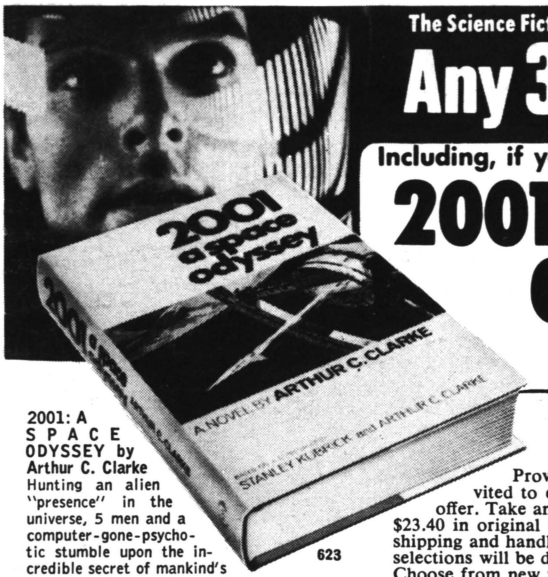

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