WORLDS OF

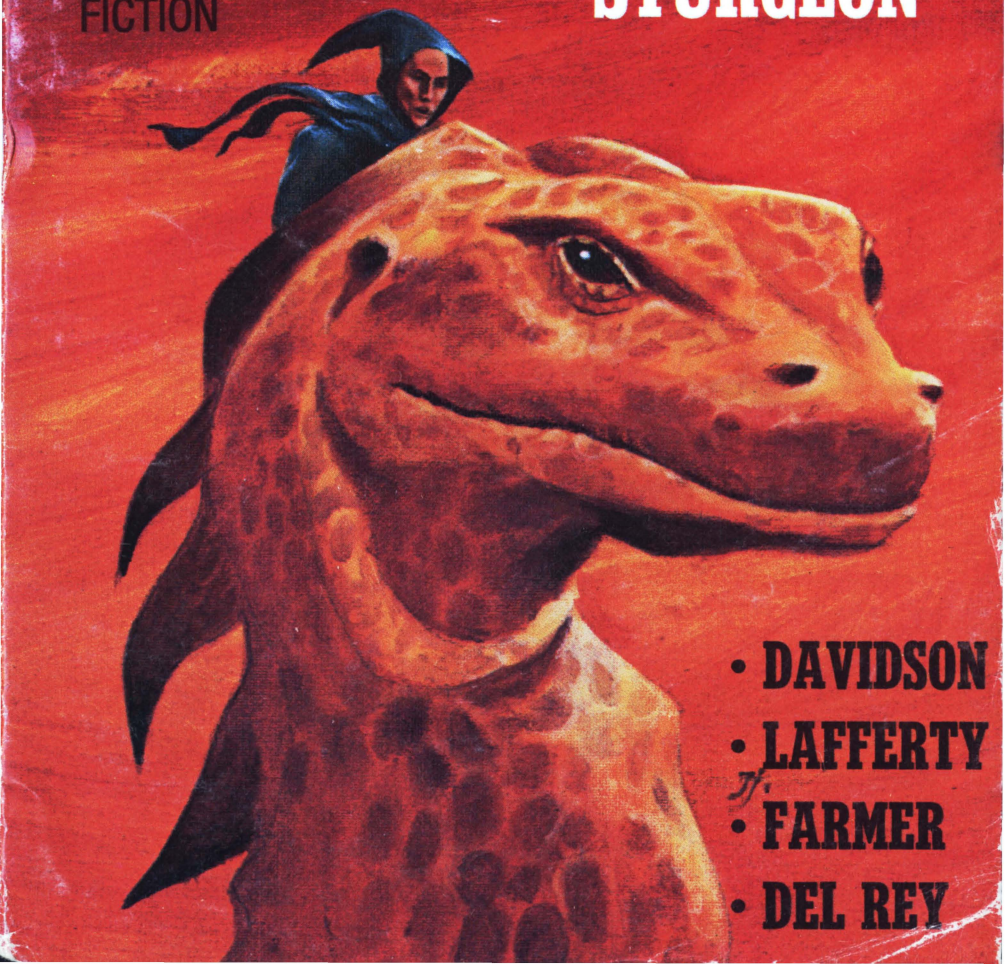
AUGUST 1971 • MAC 75¢ 16216 U.K. 25p.

if

SCIENCE FICTION

Occam's Scalpel

THEODORE STURGEON



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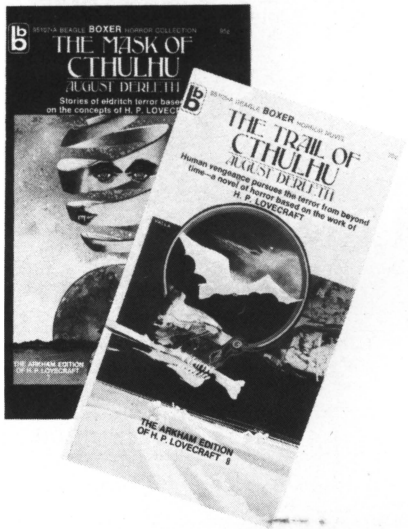


Lovecraft Lives!

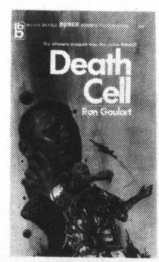
—mainly because the stories he wrote and the concepts he invented are too gripping to stop reading ...or to stop writing. The roster of writers who have carried on Lovecraft's characters and ideas is a *Who's Who* of fantasy greats—August Derleth, Robert Bloch, Frank Belknap Long, Colin Wilson, Clark Ashton Smith, Henry Kuttner.

Beagle's ARKHAM EDITIONS now include works by these authors as well as HPL—and this month's offering is a prime pair from Derleth, *The Mask of Cthulhu* and *The Trail of Cthulhu*—a story collection and a novel about hapless mortals' involvement with the terrifying beings from between the dimensions—Cthulhu, Hastur the Unspeakable, Ying, the amorphous flute-player, and the Goat with the Thousand Young.

And next month, we'll have what is probably Lovecraft's solidest novel, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward.*

Goulartifice

—a new noun, or Beaglism, to use as a label for Ron Goulart's acid zaniness and what the New York Times calls his "bleak but bracing humor." *Death Cell* is the first novel dealing with Jack Summer of *Muckrake,* the galactic newsmag—a first-rate Goulartifact.



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WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

ALL NEW STORIES

Cover by GAUGHAN, suggested by TO SEEK ANOTHER

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Mr. Jakobsson:

Having only recently acquired and read a complete Sherlock Holmes (Berkley), I was especially delighted by Slaves of Silver *in the March/April* If. *As I began the story, I thought I detected something familiar in Mr. Wolfe's fusty, late-nineteenth-century style. Not until Street began dissecting Dr. Westing's appearance and the implications thereof did I really catch on, though. Once I was wise to what Mr. Wolfe was doing, however, I found it difficult to keep a straight face until I had finished the story.*

Do you know if any more such works are or will be in the offing? I have always enjoyed Holmes and finding a modern Holmes quite excites me.

Eric C. Sanders
Grand Blank, Mich.

Are you there, Gene Wolfe?

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

I have just finished reading the two stories by T. J. Bass in your Nov-Dec and Jan-Feb issues and I am overwhelmed. Who is he? I have been reading sci-fi for years but have never run across him before. I hope you will have more stories by him in the future. Incidentally, both Galaxy *and* If *have become excellent magazines and I thank you for providing the intelligent SF reading public with consistently interesting and well-written stories. My one note of dissatisfaction is the exclusion of Vaughn Bode from* Galaxy's *pages. Why was this done and is there any possibility that he may be seen there once again?*

Michael L. Charters
7th Psychological Operations Battalion, APO SF 96349

T. J. Bass is a young pathologist who wrote his *If* First in 1968. Since then he has appeared in both *Galaxy* and *If*, always brilliantly. In answer to your last question: reader reaction did not encourage us to continue featuring a cartoon strip.

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

I feel that Mr. Zabel's definition of science fiction as given in his letter (March-April '71) is merely an impersonal extention of the one Heinlein proposed in 1952. His definition (then) was that sf is "fiction about things that have not happened." This is really a description of virtually all fiction from Joyce on out. By inserting a qualifying factor on the "probability" of a story's event I like to think I have narrowed the scope to our genre.

As to your comment that a story's "probability" depends on the writer's handling of events—I can not agree. The handling of story events may give them a semblance of probability they do not deserve—but an objective

analysis will reveal the actual likelihood of a plot. I believe that it is the author's choice of events, and this alone, that determines a story's "probability" (not "plausiblity," which means ability to convince). For instance, I don't consider Fail Safe *to be sf because the possibility of commitment to a nuclear war due to a burned-out fuse is all too likely. On the other hand, an attempt by aliens to cause a nuclear war by bombardment from the moon (as in Isaac Asimov's* Gentle Vultures) *is a much less likely event and so is sf. There, of course, is the essential weakness of my catchphrase—probability is relative. Still, I do not consider the point a fault—merely a weakness.*

As to what sf does, says or means, I can only answer for myself. I believe that any sf work can say whatever the author wishes it to, but what it does is explore change. Almost every piece of sf from Ralph 124C41+ *through* The High Crusade to Dune *explores the one certainty—change—and its effect on people and society. This, to me, is what sf means—that change is certain, is occurring and is the single greatest factor in our lives. However dimly, sf explores the one truth that mainstream fiction ignores—that this too shall pass.*

Please print my full address

pH Vogel
1091 St. Anthony
London, Ont.
Canada

Hail Jakobsson!

I see Vogel has found in your letter column a new outlet for his theses. His definition is, as usual, an idea taken much too seriously with Heinlein, Panshin, with semantics dragged into shore up his position. I just read his latest letter (Before he mailed it?—Ed) and I see he is going to expound his "philosophy" of science fiction to you, too.

In the interest of balance (all us Canucks aren't idiot geniuses) I'll throw in my definition. I believe it's a paraphrase of a Heinlein character's definition of common sense and it goes like this:

Science fiction is fiction that states that what did not happen yesterday will not necessarily not happen to morrow.

(Vogel says the foregoing is an unresolvable triple negative which is the sort of thing he delights in.)

Take Vogel's two examples. Fail Safe *is about blown fuses which are as old as electric lights.* Gentle Vultures *deals with aliens which would be something new in history. So by my definition* Gentle Vultures *is science fiction and* Fail Safe *is not.*

You may print my full address.

Aloysius Cupay
2 Lloyd Manor Cr.
London, Ontario

I agree—*Fail Safe* is about the dangers of a blown fuse. Please, guys, don't you two blow yours, both talking at once. But let's hear more, even at the risk of overloading circuits.

—JAKOBSSON

I

JOE TRILLING had a funny way of making a living. It was a good living, but of course he didn't make anything like the bundle he could have in the city. On the other hand he lived in the mountains a half mile away from a picturesque village in clean air and piney-birchy woods along with lots of mountain laurel and he was his own boss. There wasn't much competition for what he did; he had his wife and kids around all the time and more orders than he could fill. He was one of the night people and after the family had gone to bed he could work quietly and uninterruptedly. He was happy as a clam.

One night—very early morning, really—he was interrupted. *Bup-bup, bup, bup.* Knock at the window, two shorts, two longs, He froze, he whirled, for he knew that knock. He hadn't heard it for years but it had been a part of his life since he was born. He saw the face outside and filled his lungs for a

OCCAM'S SCALPEL

THEODORE STURGEON

Convince a winner that he's a loser—and you may save mankind!

whoop that would have roused them at the fire station on the village green, but then he saw the finger on the lips and let the air out. The finger beckoned and Joe Trilling whirled again, turned down a flame, read a gauge, made a note, threw a switch and joyfully but silently dove for the outside door. He slid out, closed it carefully, peered into the dark.

"Karl?"

"Shh."

There he was, edge of the woods. Joe Trilling went there and, whispering because Karl had asked for it, they hit each other, cursed, called each other the filthiest possible names. It would not be easy to explain this to an extra-terrestrial; it isn't necessarily a human thing to do. It's a cultural thing. It means, I want to touch you, it means I love you; but they were men and brothers, so they hit each other's arms and shoulders and swore despicable oaths and insults, until at last even those words wouldn't do and they stood in the shadows, holding each

others' biceps and grinning and drilling into each other with eyes. Then Karl Trilling moved his head sidewards toward the road and they walked away from the house.

"I don't want Hazel to hear us talking," Karl said. "I don't want her or anyone to know I was here. How is she?"

"Beautiful. Aren't you going to see her at all—or the kids?"

"Yes but not this trip. There's the car. We can talk there. I really am afraid of that bastard."

"Ah," said Joe. "How is the great man?"

"Po'ly," said Karl. "But we're talking about two different bastards. The great man is only the richest man in the world, but I'm not afraid of him, especially now. I'm talking about Cleveland Wheeler."

"Who's Cleveland Wheeler?"

THEY got into the car. "It's a rental," said Karl. "Matter of fact, it's the second rental. I got out of the executive jet and took a company car and rented another—and then this. Reasonably sure it's not bugged. That's one kind of answer to your question, who's Cleve Wheeler. Other answers would be the man behind the throne. Next in line. Multifaceted genius. Killer shark."

"Next in line," said Joe, responding to the only clause that made any sense. "The old man is sinking?"

"Officially—and an official secret—his hemoglobin reading is four. That mean anything to you, Doctor?"

"Sure does, Doctor. Malnutritive anemia, if other rumors I hear are true. Richest man in the world—dying of starvation."

"And old age—and stubbornness—and obsession. You want to hear about Wheeler?"

"Tell me."

"Mister lucky. Born with everything. Greek coin profile. Michaelangelo muscles. Discovered early by a bright-eyed elementary school principal, sent to a private school, used to go straight to the teachers' lounge in the morning and say what he'd been reading or thinking about. Then they'd tell off a teacher to work with him or go out with him or whatever. High school at twelve, varsity track, basketball, football and high-diving—three letters for each—yes, he graduated in three years, *summa cum*. Read all the textbooks at the beginning of each term, never cracked them again. More than anything else he had the habit of success.

"College, the same thing: turned sixteen in his first semester, just ate everything up. Very popular. Graduated at the top again, of course."

Joe Trilling, who had slogged through college and medical school like a hodcarrier, grunted envious-

ly. "I've seen one or two like that. Everybody marvels, nobody sees how easy it was for them."

Karl shook his head. "Wasn't quite like that with Cleve Wheeler. If anything was easy for him it was because of the nature of his equipment. He was like a four-hundred horsepower car moving in sixty-horsepower traffic. When his muscles were called on he used them, I mean really put it down to the floor. A very willing guy. Well—he had his choice of jobs—hell, choice of careers. He went into an architectural firm that could use his math, administrative ability, public presence, knowledge of materials, art. Gravitated right to the top, got a partnership. Picked up a doctorate on the side while he was doing it. Married extremely well."

"Mister Lucky," Joe said.

"MISTER LUCKY, yeah. Listen. Wheeler became a partner and he did his work and he knew his stuff—everything he could learn or understand. Learning and understanding are not enough to cope with some things like greed or unexpected stupidity or accident or sheer bad breaks. Two of the other partners got into a deal I won't bother you with—a high-rise apartment complex in the wrong place for the wrong residents and land acquired the wrong way. Wheeler saw it coming, called them in and talked it over. They said yes-yes and went right ahead and did what they wanted anyway—something that Wheeler never in the world expected. The one thing high capability and straight morals and a good education doesn't give you is the end of innocence. Cleve Wheeler was an innocent.

"Well, it happened, the disaster that Cleve had predicted, but it happened far worse. Things like that, when they surface, have a way of exposing a lot of other concealed rot. The firm collapsed. Cleve Wheeler had never failed at anything in his whole life. It was the one thing he had no practice in dealing with. Anyone with the most rudimentary intelligence would have seen that this was the time to walk away—lie down, even. Cut his losses. But I don't think these things even occurred to him."

Karl Trilling laughed suddenly. "In one of Philip Wylie's novels is a tremendous description of a forest fire and how the animals run away from it, the foxes and the rabbits running shoulder to shoulder, the owls flying in the daytime to get ahead of the flames. Then there's this beetle, lumbering along on the ground. The beetle comes to a burned patch, the edge of twenty acres of hell. It stops, it wiggles its feelers, it turns to the side and begins to walk around the

fire—" He laughed again. "That's the special thing Cleveland Wheeler has, you see, under all that muscle and brain and brilliance. If he had to—and were a beetle—he wouldn't turn back and he wouldn't quit. If all he could do was walk around it, he'd start walking."

"What happened?" asked Joe.

"He hung on. He used everything he had. He used his brains and his personality and his reputation and all his worldly goods. He also borrowed and promised—and he worked. Oh, he worked. Well, he kept the firm. He cleaned out the rot and built it all up again from the inside, strong and straight this time. But it cost.

"It cost him time—all the hours of every day but the four or so he used for sleeping. And just about when he had it leveled off and starting up, it cost him his wife."

"You said he'd married well."

"He'd married what you marry when you're a young block-buster on top of everything and going higher. She was a nice enough girl, I suppose, and maybe you can't blame her, but she was no more used to failure than he was. Only he could walk around it. He could rent a room and ride the bus. She just didn't know how—and of course with women like that there's always the discarded swain somewhere in the wings."

"How did he take that?"

"Hard. He'd married the way he played ball or took examinations—with everything he had. It did something to him. All this did things to him, I suppose, but that was the biggest chunk of it.

"He didn't let it stop him. He didn't let anything stop him. He went on until all the bills were paid—every cent. All the interest. He kept at it until the net worth was exactly what it had been before his ex-partners had begun to eat out the core. Then he gave it away. Gave it away! Sold all right and title to his interest for a dollar."

"Finally cracked, hm?"

Karl Trilling looked at his brother scornfully. "Cracked. Matter of definition, isn't it? Cleve Wheeler's goal was zero—can you understand that? What is success anyhow? Isn't it making up your mind what you're going to do and then doing it, all the way?"

"In that case," said his brother quietly, "suicide is success."

KARL gave him a long penetrating look. "Right," he said, and thought about it a moment.

"Anyhow," Joe asked, "why zero?"

"I did a lot of research on Cleve Wheeler, but I couldn't get inside his head. I don't know. But I can guess. He meant to owe no man anything. I don't know how he felt about the company he saved, but I

can imagine. The man he became—was becoming—wouldn't want to owe it one damned thing. I'd say he just wanted out—but on his own terms, which included leaving nothing behind to work on him."

"Okay," said Joe.

Karl Trilling thought, *The nice thing about old Joe is that he'll wait. All these years apart with hardly any communication beyond birthday cards—and not always that—and here he is, just as if we were still together every day. I wouldn't be here if it weren't important; I wouldn't be telling him all this unless he needed to know; he wouldn't need any of it unless he was going to help. All that unsaid—I don't have to ask him a damn thing. What am I interrupting in his life? What am I going to interrupt? I won't have to worry about that. He'll take care of it.*

He said, "I'm glad I came here, Joe."

Joe said, "That's all right," which meant all the things Karl had been thinking. Karl grinned and hit him on the shoulder and went on talking.

"Wheeler dropped out. It's not easy to map his trail for that period. It pops up all over. He lived in at least three communes—maybe more, but those three were a mess when he came and a model when he left. He started businesses—all things that had never happened before, like a supermarket with no shelves, no canned music, no games or stamps, just neat stacks of open cases, where the customer took what he wanted and marked it according to the card posted by the case, with a marker hanging on a string. Eggs and frozen meat and fish and the like, and local produce were priced a flat two percent over wholesale. People were honest because they could never be sure the checkout counter didn't know the prices of everything—besides, to cheat on the prices listed would have been just too embarrassing. With nothing but a big empty warehouse for overhead and no employees spending thousands of man hours marking individual items, the prices beat any discount house that ever lived. He sold that one, too, and moved on. He started a line of organic baby foods without preservatives, franchised it and moved on again. He developed a plastic container that would burn without polluting and patented it and sold the patent."

"I've heard of that one. Haven't seen it around, though."

"Maybe you will," Karl said in a guarded tone. "Maybe you will. Anyway, he had a CPA in Pasadena handling details, and just did his thing all over. I never heard of a failure in anything he tried."

"Sounds like a junior edition of

the great man himself, your honored boss."

"You're not the only one who realized that. The boss may be a ding-a-ling in many ways, but nobody ever faulted his business sense. He has always had his tentacles out for wandering pieces of very special manpower. For all I know he had drawn a bead on Cleveland Wheeler years back. I wouldn't doubt that he'd made offers from time to time, only during that period Cleve Wheeler wasn't about to go to work for anyone that big. His whole pattern is to run things his way, and you don't do that in an established empire."

"Heir apparent," said Joe, reminding him of something he had said earlier.

"Right," nodded Karl. "I knew you'd begin to get the idea before I was finished."

"But finish," said Joe.

"RIGHT. Now what I'm going to tell you, I just want you to know. I don't expect you to understand it or what it means or what it has all done to Cleve Wheeler. I need your help, and you can't really help me unless you know the whole story."

"Shoot."

Karl Trilling shot: "Wheeler found a girl. Her name was Clara Prieta and her folks came from Sonora. She was bright as hell—in her way, I suppose, as bright as Cleve, though with a tenth of his schooling—and pretty as well, and it was Cleve she wanted, not what he might get for her. She fell for him when he had nothing—when he really wanted nothing. They were a daily, hourly joy to each other. I guess that was about the time he started building this business and that, making something again. He bought a little house and a car. He bought two cars, one for her. I don't think she wanted it, but he couldn't do enough—he was always looking for more things to do for her. They went out for an evening to some friends' house, she from shopping, he from whatever it was he was working on then, so they had both cars. He followed her on the way home and had to watch her lose control and spin out. She died in his arms."

"Oh, Jesus."

"Mister Lucky. Listen: a week later he turned a corner downtown and found himself looking at a bank robbery. He caught a stray bullet—grazed the back of his neck. He had seven months to lie still and think about things. When he got out he was told his business manager had embezzled everything and headed south with his secretary. Everything."

"What did he do?"

"Went to work and paid his hospital bill."

They sat in the car in the dark for a long time, until Joe said,

"Was he paralyzed, there in the hospital?"

"For nearly five months."

"Wonder what he thought about."

Karl Trilling said, "I can imagine what he thought about. What I can't imagine is what he decided. What he concluded. What he determined to be. Damn it, there are no accurate words for it. We all do the best we can with what we've got, or try to. Or should. He *did*—and with the best possible material to start out with. He played it straight; he worked hard; he was honest and lawful and fair; he was fit; he was bright. He came out of the hospital with those last two qualities intact. God alone knows what's happened to the rest of it."

"So he went to work for the old man."

"He did—and somehow that frightens me. It was as if all his qualifications were not enough to suit both of them until these things happened to him—until they made him become what he is."

"And what is that?"

"There isn't a short answer to that, Joe. The old man has become a modern myth. Nobody ever sees him. Nobody can predict what he's going to do or why. Cleveland Wheeler stepped into his shadow and disappeared almost as completely as the boss. There are very few things you can say for certain. The boss has always been a recluse and in the ten years Cleve Wheeler has been with him he has become more so. It's been business as usual with him, of course—which means the constantly unusual—long periods of quiet, and then these spectacular unexpected wheelings and dealings. You assume that the old man dreams these things up and some high-powered genius on his staff gets them done. But it could be the genius that instigates the moves—who can know? Only the people closest to him—Wheeler, Epstein, me. And I don't know."

"But Epstein died."

Karl Trilling nodded in the dark. "Epstein died. Which leaves only Wheeler to watch the store. I'm the old man's personal physician, not Wheeler's, and there's no guarantee that I ever will be Wheeler's."

JOE Trilling recrossed his legs and leaned back, looking out into the whispering dark. "It begins to take shape," he murmured. "The old man's on the way out, you very well might be and there's nobody to take over but this Wheeler."

"Yes, and I don't know what he is or what he'll do. I do know he will command more power than any single human being on Earth. He'll have so much that he'll be above any kind of cupidity that you or I could imagine—you or I can't think in that order of magnitude.

But you see, he's a man who, you might say, has had it proved to him that being good and smart and strong and honest doesn't particularly pay off. Where will he go with all this? And hypothesizing that he's been making more and more of the decisions lately, and extrapolating from that—where is he going? All you can be sure of is that he will succeed in anything he tries. That is his habit."

"What does he want? Isn't that what you're trying to figure out? What would a man like that want, if he knew he could get it?"

"I knew I'd come to the right place," said Karl almost happily. "That's it exactly. As for me, I have all I need now and there are plenty of other places I could go. I wish Epstein were still around, but he's dead and cremated."

"Cremated?"

"That's right—you wouldn't know about that. Old man's instructions. I handled it myself. You've heard of the hot and cold private swimming pools—but I bet you never heard of a man with his own private crematorium in the second sub-basement."

Joe threw up his hands. "I guess if you can reach into your pocket and pull out two billion real dollars, you can have anything you want. By the way—was that legal?"

"Like you said—if you have two billion. Actually, the county medical examiner was present and signed the papers. And he'll be there when the old man pushes off too—it's all in the final instructions. Hey—wait, I don't want to cast any aspersions on the M.E. He wasn't bought. He did a very competent examination on Epstein."

"Okay—we know what to expect when the time comes. It's afterward you're worried about."

"Right. What has the old man—I'm speaking of the corporate old man now—what has he been doing all along? What has he been doing in the last ten years, since he got Wheeler—and is it any different from what he was doing before? How much of this difference, if any, is more Wheeler than boss? That's all we have to go on, Joe, and from it we have to extrapolate what Wheeler's going to do with the biggest private economic force this world has ever known."

"Let's talk about that," said Joe, beginning to smile.

Karl Trilling knew the signs, so he began to smile a little, too. They talked about it.

II

THE crematorium in the second sub-basement was purely functional, as if all concessions to sentiment and ritual had been made elsewhere, or canceled. The latter most accurately described what

had happened when at last, at long long last, the old man died. Everything was done precisely according to his instructions immediately after he was certifiably dead and before any public announcements were made—right up to and including the moment when the square mouth of the furnace opened with a startling clang, a blare of heat, a flare of light—the hue the old-time blacksmiths called straw color. The simple coffin slid rapidly in, small flames exploding into being on its corners, and the door banged shut. It took a moment for the eyes to adjust to the bare room, the empty greased track, the closed door. It took the same moment for the conditioners to whisk away the sudden smell of scorched soft pine.

The medical examiner leaned over the small table and signed his name twice. Karl Trilling and Cleveland Wheeler did the same. The M.E. tore off copies and folded them and put them away in his breast pocket. He looked at the closed square iron door, opened his mouth, closed it again and shrugged. He held out his hand.

"Good night, Doctor."

"Good night, Doctor. Rugosi's outside—he'll show you out."

The M.E. shook hands wordlessly with Cleveland Wheeler and left.

"I know just what he's feeling," Karl said. "Something ought to be said. Something memorable—end of an era. Like 'One small step for man—' "

Cleveland Wheeler smiled the bright smile of the college hero, fifteen years after—a little less wide, a little less even, a great deal less in the eyes. He said in the voice that commanded, whatever he said, "If you think you're quoting the first words from an astronaut on the moon, you're not. What he said was from the ladder, when he poked his boot down. He said, 'It's some kind of soft stuff. I can kick it around with my foot.' I've always liked that much better. It was real, it wasn't rehearsed or memorized or thought out and it had to do with that moment and the next. The M.E. said good night and you told him the chauffeur was waiting outside. I like that better than anything anyone could say. I think he would, too," Wheeler added, barely gesturing, with a very strong, slightly cleft chin, toward the hot black door.

"But he wasn't exactly human."

"So they say." Wheeler half smiled and, even as he turned away, Karl could sense himself tuned out, the room itself become of secondary importance—the next thing Wheeler was to do, and the next and the one after, becoming more real than the here and now.

Karl put a fast end to that.

He said levelly, "I meant what I just said, Wheeler."

It couldn't have been the words, which by themselves might have elicited another half-smile and a forgetting. It was the tone, and perhaps the "Wheeler." There is a ritual about these things. To those few on his own level, and those on the level below, he was Cleve. Below that he was mister to his face and Wheeler behind his back. No one of his peers would call him mister unless it was meant as the herald of an insult; no one of his peers or immediate underlings would call him Wheeler at all, ever. Whatever the component, it removed Cleveland Wheeler's hand from the knob and turned him. His face was completely alert and interested. "You'd best tell me what you mean, Doctor."

Karl said, "I'll do better than that. Come." Without gestures, suggestions or explanations he walked to the left rear of the room, leaving it up to Wheeler to decide whether or not to follow. Wheeler followed.

IN THE corner Karl rounded on him. "If you ever say anything about this to anyone—even me—when we leave here, I'll just deny it. If you ever get in here again, you won't find anything to back up your story." He took a complex four-inch blade of machined stainless steel from his belt and slid it between the big masonry blocks. Silently, massively, the course of blocks in the corner began to move upward. Looking up at them in the dim light from the narrow corridor they revealed, anyone could see that they were real blocks and that to get through them without that key and the precise knowledge of where to put it would be a long-term project.

Again Karl proceeded without looking around, leaving go, no-go as a matter for Wheeler to decide. Wheeler followed. Karl heard his footsteps behind him and noticed with pleasure and something like admiration that when the heavy blocks whooshed down and seated themselves solidly behind them, Wheeler may have looked over his shoulder but did not pause.

"You've noticed we're alongside the furnace," Karl said, like a guided-tour bus driver. "And now, behind it."

He stood aside to let Wheeler pass him and see the small room.

It was just large enough for the tracks which protruded from the back of the furnace and a little standing space on each side. On the far side was a small table with a black suitcase standing on it. On the track stood the coffin, its corners carboned, its top and sides wet and slightly steaming.

"Sorry to have to close that stone gate that way," Karl said matter-of-factly. "I don't expect anyone down here at all, but I wouldn't want to explain any of

this to persons other than yourself."

Wheeler was staring at the coffin. He seemed perfectly composed, but it was a seeming. Karl was quite aware of what it was costing him.

Wheeler said, "I wish you'd explain it to *me*." And he laughed. It was the first time Karl had ever seen this man do anything badly.

"I will. I am." He clicked open the suitcase and laid it open and flat on the little table. There was a glisten of chrome and steel and small vials in little pockets. The first tool he removed was a screwdriver. "No need to use screws when you're cremating 'em," he said cheerfully and placed the tip under one corner of the lid. He struck the handle smartly with the heel of one hand and the lid popped loose. "Stand this up against the wall behind you, will you?"

Silently Cleveland Wheeler did as he was told. It gave him something to do with his muscles; it gave him the chance to turn his head away for a moment; it gave him a chance to think—and it gave Karl the opportunity for a quick glance at his steady countenance.

He's a mensch, Karl thought. *He really is . . .*

Wheeler set up the lid neatly and carefully and they stood, one on each side, looking down into the coffin.

"He—got a lot older," Wheeler said at last.

"You haven't seen him recently."

"Here and in there," said the executive, "I've spent more time in the same room with him during the past month than I have in the last eight, nine years. Still, it was a matter of minutes, each time."

Karl nodded understandingly. "I'd heard that. Phone calls, any time of the day or night, and then those long silences two days, three, not calling out, not having anyone in—"

"Are you going to tell me about the phony oven?"

"Oven? Furnace? It's not a phony at all. When we've finished here it'll do the job, all right."

"Then why the theatricals?"

"That was for the M.E. Those papers he signed are in sort of a never-never country just now. When we slide this back in and turn on the heat they'll become as legal as he thinks they are."

"Then why—"

"BECAUSE there are some things you have to know." Karl reached into the coffin and unfolded the gnarled hands. They came apart reluctantly and he pressed them down at the sides of the body. He unbuttoned the jacket, laid it back, unbuttoned the shirt, unzipped the trousers. When he had finished with this he looked up and found Wheeler's

sharp gaze, not on the old man's corpse, but on him.

"I have the feeling," said Cleveland Wheeler, "that I have never seen you before."

Silently Karl Trilling responded: *But you do now.* And, *Thanks, Joey. You were dead right.* Joe had known the answer to that one plaguing question, *How should I act?*

Talk just the way he talks, Joe had said. *Be what he is, the whole time...*

Be what he is. A man without illusions (they don't work) and without hope (who needs it?) who has the unbreakable habit of succeeding. And who can say it's a nice day in such a way that everyone around snaps to attention and says: *Yes, SIR!*

"You've been busy," Karl responded shortly. He took off his jacket, folded it and put it on the table beside the kit. He put on surgeon's gloves and slipped the sterile sleeve off a new scalpel. "Some people scream and faint the first time they watch a dissection."

Wheeler smiled thinly. "I don't scream and faint." But it was not lost on Karl Trilling that only then, at the last possible moment, did Wheeler actually view the old man's body. When he did he neither screamed nor fainted; he uttered an astonished grunt.

"Thought that would surprise you," Karl said easily. "In case you were wondering, though, he really was a male. The species seems to be oviparous. Mammals too, but it has to be oviparous. I'd sure like a look at a female. That isn't a vagina. It's a cloaca."

"Until this moment," said Wheeler in a hypnotized voice, "I thought that 'not human' remark of yours was a figure of speech."

"No, you didn't," Karl responded shortly.

Leaving the words to hang in the air, as words will if a speaker has the wit to isolate them with wedges of silence, he deftly slit the corpse from the sternum to the pubic symphysis. For the first-time viewer this was always the difficult moment. It's hard not to realize viscerally that the cadaver does not feel anything and will not protest. Nerve-alive to Wheeler, Karl looked for a gasp or a shudder; Wheeler merely held his breath.

"We could spend hours—weeks, I imagine, going into the details," Karl said, deftly making a transverse incision in the ensiform area, almost around to the trapezoid on each side, "but this is the thing I wanted you to see." Grasping the flesh at the juncture of the cross he had cut, on the left side, he pulled upward and to the left. The cutaneous layers came away easily, with the fat under them. They were not pinkish, but an off-white lavendar shade. Now the muscular striations over the ribs

were in view. "If you'd palpated the old man's chest," he said, demonstrating on the right side, "you'd have felt what seemed to be normal human ribs. But look at this."

With a few deft strokes he separated the muscle fibers from the bone on a mid-costal area about four inches square, and scraped. A rib emerged and, as he widened the area and scraped between it and the next one, it became clear that the ribs were joined by a thin flexible layer of bone or chitin.

"It's like baleen—whalebone," said Karl. "See this?" He sectioned out a piece, flexed it.

"My God."

III

"NOW look at this." Karl took surgical sheers from the kit, snipped through the sternum right up to the clavicle and then across the lower margin of the ribs. Slipping his fingers under them, he pulled upward. With a dull snap the entire ribcage opened like a door, exposing the lung.

The lung was not pink, nor the liverish-browish-black of a smoker, but yellow—the clear bright yellow of pure sulfur.

"His metabolism," Karl said, straightening up at last and flexing the tension out of his shoulders, "is fantastic. Or was. He lived on oxygen, same as us, but he broke it out of carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and trioxide and carbon dioxide mostly. I'm not saying he could—I mean he had to. When he was forced to breathe what we call clean air, he could take just so much of it and then had to duck out and find a few breaths of his own atmosphere. When he was younger he could take it for hours at a time, but as the years went by he had to spend more and more time in the kind of smog he could breathe. Those long disappearances of his, and that reclusiveness—they weren't as kinky as people supposed."

Wheeler made a gesture toward the corpse. "But—what is he? Where—"

"I can't tell you. Except for a good deal of medical and biochemical details, you now know as much as I do. Somehow, somewhere, he arrived. He came, he saw, he began to make his moves. Look at this."

He opened the other side of the chest and then broke the sternum up and away. He pointed. The lung tissue was not in two discreet parts, but extended across the median line. "One lung, all the way across, though it has these two lobes. The kidneys and gonads show the same right-left fusion."

"I'll take your word for it," said Wheeler a little hoarsely. "Damn it, what *is* it?"

"A featherless biped, as Plato

once described homo sap. *I* don't know what it is. I just know *that* it is—and I thought you ought to know. That's all."

"But you've seen one before. That's obvious."

"Sure. Epstein."

"Epstein?"

"Sure. The old man had to have a go-between—someone who could, without suspicion, spend long hours with him and hours away. The old man could do a lot over the phone, but not everything. Epstein was, you might say, a right arm that could hold its breath a little longer than he could. It got to him in the end, though, and he died of it."

"Why didn't you say something long before this?"

"First of all, I value my own skin. I could say reputation, but skin is the word. I signed a contract as his personal physician because he needed a personal physician—another bit of window-dressing. But I did precious little doctoring—except over the phone—and nine-tenths of that was, I realized quite recently, purely diversionary. Even a doctor, I suppose, can be a trusting soul. One or the other would call and give a set of symptoms and I'd cautiously suggest and prescribe. Then I'd get another call that the patient was improving and that was that. Why, I even got specimens—blood, urine, stools—and did the pathology on them and never realized that they were from the same source as what the medical examiner checked out and signed for."

"What do you mean, same source?"

Karl shrugged. "He could get anything he wanted—anything."

"Then—what the M.E. examined wasn't—" he waved a hand at the casket.

"OF COURSE not. That's why the crematorium has a back door. There's a little pocket sleight-of-hand trick you can buy for fifty cents that operates the same way. This body here was inside the furnace. The ringer—a look-alike that came from God knows where; I swear to you I don't—was lying out there waiting for the M.E. When the button was pushed the fires started up and that coffin slid in—pushing this one out and at the same time drenching it with water as it came through. While we've been in here, the human body is turning to ashes. My personal private secret instructions, both for Epstein and for the boss, were to wait until I was certain I was alone and then come in here after an hour and push the second button, which would slide this one back into the fire. I was to do no investigations, ask no questions, make no reports. It came through as logi-

cal but not reasonable, like so many of his orders." He laughed suddenly. "Do you know why the old man—and Epstein too, for that matter, in case you never noticed—wouldn't shake hands with anyone?"

"I presumed it was because he had an obsession with germs."

"It was because his normal body temperature was a hundred and seven."

Wheeler touched one of his own hands with the other and said nothing.

When Karl felt that the wedge of silence was thick enough he asked lightly, "Well, boss, where do we go from here?"

Cleveland Wheeler turned away from the corpse and to Karl slowly, as if diverting his mind with an effort.

"What did you call me?"

"Figure of speech," said Karl and smiled. "Actually, I'm working for the company—and that's you. I'm under orders, which have been finally and completely discharged when I push that button—I have no others. So it really is up to you."

Wheeler's eyes fell again to the corpse. "You mean about him? This? What we should do?"

"That, yes. Whether to burn it up and forget it—or call in top management and an echelon of scientists. Or scare the living hell out of everyone on Earth by phoning the papers. Sure, that has to be decided, but I was thinking on a much wider spectrum than that."

"Such as—"

Karl gestured toward the box with his head. "What was he doing here, anyway? What has he done? What was he trying to do?"

"You'd better go on," said Wheeler; and for the very first time said something in a way that suggested diffidence. "You've had a while to think about all this, I—" and almost helplessly, he spread his hands.

"I can understand that," Karl said gently. "Up to now I've been coming on like a hired lecturer and I know it. I'm not going to embarrass you with personalities except to say that you've absorbed all this with less buckling of the knees than anyone in the world I could think of."

"RIGHT. Well, there's a simple technique you learn in elementary algebra. It has to do with the construction of graphs. You place a dot on the graph where known data put it. You get more data, you put down another dot and then a third. With just three dots—of course, the more the better, but it can be done with three—you can connect them and establish a curve. This curve has certain characteristics and it's fair to extend the curve a little farther with the assumption that

later data will bear you out."

"Extrapolation."

"Extrapolation. X axis, the fortunes of our late boss. Y axis, time. The curve is his fortunes—that is to say, his influence."

"Pretty tall graph."

"Over thirty years."

"Still pretty tall."

"All right," said Karl. "Now, over the same thirty years, another curve: change in the environment." He held up a hand. "I'm not going to read you a treatise on ecology. Let's be more objective than that. Let's just say changes. Okay: a measurable rise in the mean temperature because of CO_2 and the greenhouse effect. Draw the curve. Incidence of heavy metals, mercury and lithium, in organic tissue. Draw a curve. Likewise chlorinated hydrocarbons, hypertrophy of algae due to phosphates, incidence of coronaries . . . All right, let's superimpose all these curves on the same graph."

"I see what you're getting at. But you have to be careful with that kind of statistics game. Like, the increase of traffic fatalities coincides with the increased use of aluminum cans and plastic-tipped baby pins."

"Right. I don't think I'm falling into that trap. I just want to find reasonable answers to a couple of otherwise unreasonable situations. One is this: if the changes occurring in our planet are the result of mere carelessness—a more or less random thing, carelessness—then how come nobody is being careless in a way that benefits the environment? Strike that. I promised, no ecology lessons. Rephrase: how come all these carelessnesses promote a change and not a preservation?

"Next question: What is the direction of the change? You've seen speculative writing about 'terraforming'—altering other planets to make them habitable by humans. Suppose an effort were being made to change this planet to suit someone else? Suppose they wanted more water and were willing to melt the polar caps by the greenhouse effect? Increase the oxides of sulfur, eliminate certain marine forms from plankton to whales? Reduce the population by increases in lung cancer, emphysema, heart attacks and even war?"

BOTH men found themselves looking down at the sleeping face in the coffin. Karl said softly, "Look what he was into—petrochemicals, fossil fuels, food processing, advertising, all the things that made the changes or helped the changers—"

"You're not blaming him for all of it."

"Certainly not. He found willing helpers by the million."

"You don't think he was trying to change a whole planet just so he could be comfortable in it."

"No, I don't think so—and that's the central point I have to make. I don't know if there are any more around like him and Epstein, but I can suppose this: if the changes now going on keep on—and accelerate—then we can expect them."

Wheeler said, "So what would you like to do? Mobilize the world against the invader?"

"Nothing like that. I think I'd slowly and quietly reverse the changes. If this planet is normally unsuitable to them, then I'd keep it so. I don't think they'd have to be driven back. I think they just wouldn't come."

"Or they'd try some other way."

"I don't think so," said Karl. "Because they tried this one. If they thought they could do it with fleets of spaceships and super-zap guns, they'd be doing it. No—this is their way and if it doesn't work, they can try somewhere else."

Wheeler began pulling thoughtfully at his lip. Karl said softly, "All it would take is someone who knew what he was doing, who could command enough clout and who had the wit to make it pay. They might even arrange a man's life—to get the kind of man they need."

And before Wheeler could answer, Karl took up his scalpel.

"I want you to do something for me," he said sharply in a new, commanding tone—actually, Wheeler's own. "I want you to do it because I've done it and I'll be damned if I want to be the only man in the world who has."

Leaning over the head of the casket, he made an incision along the hairline from temple to temple. Then, bracing his elbows against the edge of the box and steadying one hand with the other, he drew the scalpel straight down the center of the forehead and down on to the nose, splitting it exactly in two. Down he went through the upper lip and then the lower, around the point of the chin and under it to the throat. Then he stood up.

"Put your hands on his cheeks," he ordered. Wheeler frowned briefly (how long had it been since anyone had spoken to him that way?), hesitated then did as he was told.

"Now press your hands together and down."

The incision widened slightly under the pressure, then abruptly the flesh gave and the entire skin of the face slipped off. The unexpected lack of resistance brought Wheeler's hands to the bottom of the coffin and he found himself face to face, inches away, with the corpse.

Like the lungs and kidneys, the eyes—eye?—passed the median, very slightly reduced at the center. The pupil was oval, its long axis

transverse. The skin was pale lavendar with yellow vessels and in place of a nose was a thread-fringed hole. The mouth was circular, the teeth not quite radially placed; there was little chin.

Without moving, Wheeler closed his eyes, held them shut for one second, two, and then courageously opened them again. Karl whipped around the end of the coffin and got an arm around Wheeler's chest. Wheeler leaned on it heavily for a moment, then stood up quickly and brushed the arm away.

"You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did," said Karl. "Would you want to be the only man in the world who'd gone through that—with nobody to tell it to?"

And after all, Wheeler could laugh. When he had finished he said, "Push that button."

"Hand me that cover."

Most obediently Cleveland Wheeler brought the coffin lid and they placed it.

Karl pushed the button and they watched the coffin slide into the square of flame. Then they left.

JOE TRILLING had a funny way of making a living. It was a good living, but of course he didn't make anything like the bundle he could have made in the city. On the other hand, he lived in the mountains a half-mile away from a picturesque village, in clean air and piney-birchy woods along with lots of mountain laurel and he was his own boss. There wasn't much competition for what he did.

What he did was to make simulacra of medical specimens, mostly for the armed forces, although he had plenty of orders from medical schools, film producers and an occasional individual, no questions asked. He could make a model of anything inside, affixed to or penetrating a body or any part of it. He could make models to be looked at, models to be felt, smelled and palpated. He could give you gangrene that stunk or dewy thyroids with real dew on them. He could make one-of-a-kind or he could set up a production line. Dr. Joe Trilling was, to put it briefly, the best there was at what he did.

"The clincher," Karl told him (in much more relaxed circumstances than their previous ones; daytime now, with beer), "the real clincher was the face bit. God, Joe, that was a beautiful piece of work."

"Just nuts and bolts. The beautiful part was your idea—his hands on it."

"How do you mean?"

"I've been thinking back to that," Joe said. "I don't think you yourself realize how brilliant a stroke that was. It's all very well to set up a show for the guy, but to make him put his hands as well as his eyes and brains on it—that

was the stroke of genius. It's like—well, I can remember when I was a kid coming home from school and putting my hand on a fence rail and somebody had spat on it." He displayed his hand, shook it. "All these years I can remember how that felt. All these years couldn't wear it away, all those scrubbings couldn't wash it away. It's more than a cerebral or psychic thing, Karl—more than the memory of an episode. I think there's a kind of memory mechanism in the cells themselves, especially on the hands, that can be invoked. What I'm getting to is that no matter how long he lives, Cleve Wheeler is going to feel that skin slip under his palms and that is going to bring him nose to nose with that face. No, you're the genius, not me."

"Na. You knew what you were doing. I didn't."

"Hell you didn't." Joe leaned far back in his lawn chaise—so far he could hold up his beer and look at the sun through it from the underside. Watching the receding bubbles defy perspective (because they swell as they rise), he murmured, "Karl?"

"Yuh."

"Ever hear of Occam's Razor?"

"Um. Long time back. Philosophical principle. Or logic or something. Let's see. Given an effect and a choice of possible causes, the simplest cause is always the one most likely to be true. Is that it?"

"Not too close, but close enough," said Joe Trilling lazily. "Hm. You're the one who used to proclaim that logic is sufficient unto itself and need have nothing to do with truth."

"I still proclaim it."

"Okay. Now, you and I know that human greed and carelessness are quite enough all by themselves to wreck this planet. We didn't think that was enough for the likes of Cleve Wheeler, who can really do something about it, so we constructed him a smog-breathing extra-terrestrial. I mean, he hadn't done anything about saving the world for our reasons, so we gave him a whizzer of a reason if his own. Right out of our heads."

"Dictated by all available factors. Yes. What are you getting at, Joe?"

"Oh—just that our complicated hoax is simple, really, in the sense that it brought everything down to a single cause. Occam's Razor slices things down to simplest causes. Single causes have a fair chance of being right."

Karl put down his beer with a bump. "I never thought of that. I've been too busy to think of that. *Suppose we were right*?"

They looked at each other, shaken.

At last Karl said, "What do we look for now, Joe—space ships?" •

TO SEEK ANOTHER

JAMES A. GOTAAS

The secret of the alien form was the terror it caused!

THE village looked peaceful from the hill road, a scattering of houses and fields well within the congestion code limits. I knew it fairly well, merely as a community I had passed through on my rounds. It was typical of Sarus. Sarus is officially HLRC 42379 IVa, which just means it's the fourth planet of a main sequence star with planets, and that Sarus itself is moonless. But aside from that, enough like Old Terra to cause restless people to settle here, despite our 1.08 gravity. The extra .08 isn't much, of course, but Sarus was settled during the Third Expansion Wave out from Old Terra and they were choosy then.

Anyway, in the n generations since then, the Sarans had adapted to the additional gravity, the slightly higher radiation background and the beautiful climate. I say n,

because nobody has really bothered to count. They have been too busy building paradise. And succeeding at least as well as any other human world. Within limits that must be kept.

Which is why I'm here. Funny, even though I was born on Novterra, I can almost look at Sarus as home. Which is the proper outlook for a Seeker, if he doesn't carry it to emotional extremes. I don't. And when I do get carried away, some task comes up that requires a Seeker. And most of these are still humanly bad enough to give me back my perspective.

Such as a murdered Warranter.

I reined in before the stone tower with the bright blue pennant, swung off my adjusted horse. Freida was riding my shoulder as usual, her tail curled up around my left ear. The man who came out to greet me gave her a casual glance, then returned his gaze to my gray uniform.

"Seeker?"

"Of course," I responded. "Healer MacDonald?"

The other nodded. "I have been waiting for you. The Warranter's body is in stasis and I have performed the tasks you required of me." He pursed his lips. "Murder, quite definitely. With a hunt thrower, left in. It was a ceremonial thrower, an heirloom."

"You recognize the pattern?"

"Yes. But there is something else I must tell you. The thrower belonged to Freeman Delver. And he—"

"What, Healer?" I could sense the trouble he was having.

"He is dead. Suicide."

"How long ago?" I demanded, suddenly getting that cold lump spreading through the pit of my stomach, a premonition of trouble to come.

"This morning. About two hours after the death of the Warranter."

"You're sure it was suicide?"

He nodded. "It was done with a neural massager. Set to overload. It was fused into his hand, and the activation stud had his pore patterns on it."

It was a suddenly different scene from the one I'd expected. "You have his body?"

"Inside," the Healer answered, nodding.

"Are you sure Delver murdered the Warranter?"

"I am now. We found the Warranter's stock in his pouch." He sounded sure of himself.

"I want to see it."

He nodded, turned back in, waving to me to follow.

A SEEKER isn't a detective, except by accident. He is just a man trained to handle difficulties. And when a man is murdered most villages consider that a difficulty. I could only recall one other that I'd handled. A simple crime of

passion. But this one was adding up to lunacy. Which is out of place in the order of paradise, even a human paradise.

We passed through the outer hall into the Healer's tech chamber. It wasn't comparable to a med center in a major city, but it was adequate for the needs here and more than an uninformed person might expect to find in a small village. The Healer waved some viewlights on, pointed out the stasis beds that held the bodies of the Warranter and Freeman Delver. I looked at them, the Warranter's lanky form clad in blue, with a stain of blood above the heart; the freeman's stocky body, contorted with the frozen after-effects of neural overload. Not a pleasant way to die.

"Any ideas, Healer? You knew Delver." I was groping, just trying to gain time to compose myself. I didn't see death every day.

"Yes," and there was a curious eagerness in his voice. "Delver longed to visit the starports, go out from there to the stars. He spoke of it often, revealed his longing to everyone." The other shook his head. "Longing? Nay, some called it lust. An indecent lust, Seeker."

"How much was taken?"

"Six thousand credits. It is in the pouch," he added, motioning at a purse that lay at the base of the stasis bed.

Freida jumped off my shoulder, padded over to the open pouch. I looked back at the Healer.

"Was that everything the Warranter had?"

The man shrugged. "We would not know. It was the Warranter's private affair."

Of course, that was natural. A warranter was officially a public servant, authorized to make loans, issue travel and identification documents and perform various other minor tasks. He drew his funds from the people of his village, but it was part of the nature of his impartiality that none except he and his sector superior were actually aware of the total amount he had available for his people. But that amount, 6,000 credits, was a bit large.

"Six thousand credits in ready funds? A very prosperous community."

The Healer flushed. "We pay our tithes, Seeker," he said snappishly.

I smiled. "No criticism intended, Freeman MacDonald. It was rather a compliment." He nodded his acceptance of the apology. "As for your theory, that *is* enough to buy passage anywhere, with credits left over. But why suicide then? The freeman could hardly have guessed that a Seeker would be so close."

MacDonald shrugged. "Repentance. He realized once the pas-

sion was past that he could not accept the future he had plotted. And with murder already done, his own death was the easiest way."

I nodded, not allowing my doubt to appear on the surface. But penance by suicide seemed unlikely on the part of someone who had the capability to murder an innocent Warranter in the first place. Freida mewed and I leaned down to allow her to regain her perch.

"Aye, six thousand," she whispered into my ear. Freida's also an adjusted animal. AIQ estimated at nearly 100. Vocal abilities also added. Her tail pointed out a lump of fur that lay huddled at the foot of the Warranter's stasis bed. I stepped closer, recognized it. An adjusted cat, similar to Freida. And stunned with something. I looked back at MacDonald.

"Is that cat the Warranter's?"

"Aye. It wouldn't leave his form and was setting up a racket. So I mercifully stunned it." If my hunch was right the merciful act was directed more at the Healer's comfort, but that was a minor factor.

"Can you wake it?"

"Of course. But why? It'll just start the wail again."

Smiling humorlessly, I said, "I'll suffer it, Healer. Now." My patience was growing thin. Mumbling to himself, the Healer grabbed a syringe, moved over to the cat. Jabbing the needle into the side of the animal, he shot a dose of drugs into it. After a few seconds it started to move slowly, abruptly shook itself and started to howl. The Healer smiled with satisfaction.

I IGNORED him, stooped down over the cat. Freida hissed something at it and the other animal shut up. I gathered it into my hands, brought it near my face. "Speech, little one?" I asked gently. The cat stared back fearfully, but refused the offer. I nodded at Freida and she hissed some more, communicating in that strange tongue that is neither human lingua nor natural catspeech, but the mingling of both. It took a few minutes and I realized the original conditioning had held well. The cat would not easily betray its master. But finally Freida convinced it.

"Aye, milord?" it squeaked.

"Did you see your master die?" wondering as I asked if the cat had the intellect to handle the concepts involved.

"Aye, to my sorrow, milord. My life for his, if I had the chance, milord. But no!" I could recognize from long contact with Freida that the cat was close to hysteria.

"Who, little one? The man who lies here beside your master?"

The animal turned to stare, fi-

nally trembled. "Aye, milord."

I switched tack. "Did you help your master?"

"Aye," the cat responded eagerly. "Much did Grayfur help master. I was his memory."

And that was the explanation for a simple Warranter's owning an adjusted animal. The cat was a bio-comp specialty, capable of handling all the Warranter's bookkeeping in its special brain. But that also made things simpler. "Grayfur, how much did your master have now?"

"How much? Forbidden!"

The response was not entirely dictated by loyalty; the cat was probably programed to respond to certain combinations of words that I didn't know. But the answer I wanted could be reached without them.

"Not to me," I said gently. "How much, Grayfur?"

The cat seemed to ponder the idea and Freida hissed at it once more. Then, it all but nodded.

"Fifteen thousand credits free, twenty thousand in storage." The figures rolled out of the cat, and I laughed at the incongruity. But then it hit me.

"Fifteen thousand credits free? Is Grayfur sure?"

The cat seemed astonished. "Grayfur never failed master. Am right."

I let the cat jump to the floor, motioned for Freida to join it, then turned to MacDonald. "Was there any left at the Warranter's house?"

"No," he answered abruptly. I realized he was taken aback by the adjusted cat. He probably had known of them, but never dreamed that one lived in his own village. Just like any other villager.

"Then are you sure Delver only had six thousand credits?"

"Yes," he answered nervously. "Why?"

I didn't answer him, merely looked to Freida. "Freida, could the shock have disturbed Grayfur so that he forgot his numbers?"

The other cat snarled at the insult, but Freida considered it carefully. Then her tail arched a careful negative. I looked back at MacDonald.

"Healer, nine thousand credits are missing. Where could they have gone?"

The man seemed paralyzed.

"Stolen off Delver's body? Or what?" I demanded.

He must have thought I was accusing him, for he turned pale. "No, Seeker. No one here was alone with the body. That is, not until the money was counted. If credits were stolen from Delver, it was by some outsider."

I stepped toward him, grasped his shoulders, applied pressure. "Healer, the truth. I'll have it one way or another."

I read the answer in his eyes and

no words were necessary. He was telling the truth as he knew it. No one else had taken the money. But 9,000 credits were missing. A thought struck me and I looked back at the cats.

"Grayfur, how much did the thief take?"

The cat hesitated, then said, "The man took all of it. Fifteen thousand credits—and the master's travel kit and spare suits."

I froze. It had been a wild chance. Out of the mouths of babes, surely. But from the mouths of cats? A travel kit and suits? Why? Where were they now? During that two hours between the deaths, something had happened.

AN OUTSIDE sound intruded. The buzzing of my communicator in the horse's pack drifted to me. A quick glance around to make sure MacDonald stayed put and I ran out to my horse. Pulling out the com, I cut into the channel.

"Seeker Carver here."

"Dan, this is a general alert. A tamper wagon is on the loose. Picked it out in Grailey, about fifteen kilometers from where you are. Escaped me. It's a job from outspace. Mech-assisted wagon. He ditched his horses and just moved out on hover. Heading your way. Can you try for an intercept?"

The urgency of the present task caught at me, but a tamper wagon overrode it by far. To have one of those loose in this area could disrupt every village in the sector and wreak havoc with planning.

"Affirmative, Harlan. Will try. Do you have a fix?"

"No tech fix, but I got a smelly on the wagon before he got out of range."

"Right. I'm riding Warrior, so that'll be enough. I'll contact you afterward. Carver out." I turned back, saw the Healer staring at me.

"What is it?"

"Tamper wagon. Amateur bio-architect. I've got to go after him."

"But what about this?"

"It can wait. I'll be back."

MacDonald shook his head. "I still don't understand. That wagon was probably the one that came through here a few weeks ago. I checked him out and he wasn't working."

I looked at him coldly. "A potential tamper wagon came through here and you didn't report it?"

"He wasn't working. All his equipment was torn down."

"Maybe. And maybe not. But I'll handle you later. I have to move out now. Just be sure not to fool with anything here, eh?" I mounted Warrior and Freida came out, joined me with a leap. I gave the Healer one more stare,

wheeled Warrior around and sped out of the village, moving through the crowds that had gathered at the commotion.

I leaned down over the horse's ear.

"All right, Warrior, a smelly. Find it. And speed, boy, speed."

He whinnied his understanding and his nostrils flared as he soaked in the odors of the surrounding countryside. The smelly would penetrate for kilometers. And Warrior would locate the scent of the tiny beast at the range. Abruptly he signaled his success and broke into his fastest gallop, twice as fast as any horse on Old Terra had ever run. The adjusted animals could top any natural. Leaving the guidance to him, I reached back into my pack, drew out the regulation weapon I'd been issued so long ago. It was deadly, but tamperers could be, too.

It was a long ride and a hard one. The wagon hadn't headed directly toward me, that was certain. But the tamperer couldn't suspect that another Seeker was after him. And though he should have known better from his trade, he probably ignored the capabilities of our adjusted animals. Being from outspace and with a mech-assisted wagon, he had to be one of those arrogant roamers from a tech-overrun world. He had chosen an easy hit for a few months. And instead had found a trap closing on him. Sarus was ready for his kind of operation.

WARRIOR overtook the wagon from the side, running silently, maneuvering in the best operations manner he had mastered. The gene-runner was unsuspecting, loafing along. We drew to within fifteen meters before I issued a warning. The owner's head popped out of the control section, looking startled. He ducked back, started to slow. Warrior continued the approach.

Then, abruptly, the tamperer flung the wagon toward us, trying to run us down. But Warrior's reflexes were too good. The horse jumped out of range of the first attack. I forgot about warnings and took careful aim from atop Warrior's heaving back. It cost me two shots to mangle the wagon's fancy hovergear and send it crashing into the ground at thirty kilometers per hour. It tumbled over, righted itself and lay there, smoke beginning to drift out of the damaged hull.

I kept the laser out as I approached. Freida moved ahead to scout and signaled that the man was out of action. I dismounted and moved into the slightly crumpled vehicle. It was fancier than it looked. There was no danger of explosion—the automatic damage control systems had taken over. I straightened out his

limp form in a chair, sat down myself. Freida brought the com and I opened the channel as I watched him.

"Harlan, come in. I've got him." There was a pause. Then Harlan replied.

"Have any trouble, Dan?"

I looked at the unconscious form, the disarrayed interior, and smiled thinly. "A little. He tried to run me down and failed. I had to stop his wagon with my laser."

There was concern in Harlan's voice as he said, "I assume you're all right. How about the wagon, was it destroyed? And what about the man?"

"His damage control managed to prevent any serious damage. Just a lazed hoverstructure. He's unconscious, but no serious injuries. I'll hold him until you can get here."

"Right. Where are you?"

I hesitated, looked out at the surrounding area. "About two kilometers away from Mount Grover. Almost straight out the main valley, just about to the river crossing. Good enough?"

"Yeah. We're not too far away. Be there in a half-hour, maybe less."

"Okay, out."

I stuck the com into my belt, looked at the tamperer once more. He was still out, so I detailed Freida to watch him, began to look around the wagon.

I'M NO biotech, but a seeker is trained to recognize the equipment, just so he can catch operators like this one. He had the usual run of equipment, most fitted for disappearing into hull recesses to foil inquisitive people. I saw an electronscope, laser scalpel, standard diagnostic bank and a comp for handling gene manipulation and restructuring. Along one wall ran a few small compartments, translucent but obvious. I stepped over to the growth tanks, thumbed the controls of one. A side panel faded into transparency and I saw the developing form of a small cat, with some obvious physical alterations. A novelty item, I thought disgustedly.

I thumbed it back to translucence, turned away. At the back of the wagon was a wall of books and tapes, with a viewer. I stepped over to it, scanned the shelves and felt mildly impressed. He was no incompetent, even if he had taken the route of the traveling tamperer. The texts were impressive, ranging far beyond the requisites for biotech alterations. Then a set of controls on the viewer caught my eye. I looked closer, pressed an inconspicuous button. The wall began to slide apart until a larger growth chamber stood revealed. Large enough for a man. And suddenly I realized this man had stopped at nothing.

Freida hissed a warning that was cut off by a yelp of pain. I whirled, my laser ready, found myself confronting the tamperer, who also held a pocket laser, aimed right at me.

"All right, Seeker, drop it."

I stared at him, shook my head slowly. "I'm not crazy. We've got a deadlock here. You fire, and you're dead. Same here." I paused. "After all, the penalty for tampering isn't death." I looked at him, studying his reaction. "Are you that anxious to see me dead?"

He frowned at me. Then the laser clattered to the floor.

"Logical, Seeker. And correct. What will you do?"

"Enough. Confiscate your wagon, deport you to place of origin and alert authorities there of your operations."

He laughed. "Yes, just enough. No grudges? No fanatical desire to see me punished severely?"

I shrugged. "To what purpose? We wouldn't accomplish anything. As long as you're not operating here any more we're satisfied. What's your name?"

"Jansen, Jacob Jansen." He looked past me to the revealed growth chamber. "I see you've found my pride and joy."

I turned carefully to look at the chamber once more. "Artificial growth?"

"Of course. But even better than that. Cloning, Seeker, with any deviations you want on the way. Care for a living robot that looks just like you? One that'll obey any order and be your twin?" He laughed. "I can do it. You know, I'm good enough to set up legal practice on some inner world."

I gave him a frozen stare. "Then why don't you?"

"No thrill. I'm not a researcher. Besides, they frown on cloning—and cloning fascinates me. To watch a man grow, become an artificial twin." Laughing again, he continued, "Makes me feel like a god."

II

I KEPT my eyes on his wondering if he could read my dislike. I wasn't reacting only to his attitude, but to something subtler. There was an air of phoniness even about his confession of sin. I wanted to step outside for some clean air, but something about his words had caught in my mind, was demanding attention. Then I had it.

"Have you done any human cloning around here?"

"Yes. Why, do you want to pick it up?" He smiled. "I'll cooperate. It's at a village about six kilometers from here. A dull affair—but one guy there has almost a cosmopolitan view."

I heard the sound of horses, knew Harlan had arrived. I kept

my icy attention fixed on the generunner.

"Does the name Delver sound familiar?"

He frowned, searching his memory, then nodded. "Yes. I think that was the man who contracted the clone. He lived alone. I suppose he enjoyed the idea of a slave that looked like him. Why, have you got the clone already?"

I nodded woodenly. "I think we have. It was found dead this morning, supposedly a suicide. Of course, they assumed it was Freeman Delver himself, but now I think that's doubtful."

He nodded gleefully. "So that's what he had in mind. Clever man. Really fooled his neighbors, eh? What is he, a joker? Or did he just want to go away secretly?"

Harlan ducked in. I ignored him.

"Yes, he wanted to get away secretly, Jansen. And you're in trouble. Bad trouble."

"For the death of a clone? Uh-uh. That battle was fought in courts long ago. It may not be legal to make them, but I can't be held criminally responsible for someone's killing one I made."

I shook my head. "Not the clone. You're accessory to the murder of a warranter and theft. Your clone made it directly possible for the murder to be committed, because it gave Delver the perfect escape."

The tamperer was no longer smiling. Disbelief etched his face.

"You're joking, Seeker. Aren't you?"

"I wish I could laugh with you. But Delver was clever. And he took advantage of your helpfulness. That's the real danger of your kind, Jansen. And that's why human cloning is generally outlawed." I looked at Harlan then, saw another Seeker named Corey behind him. "Take him, Harl. And be careful—he has something to escape from. Log him in as accessory to murder, for starters."

Harlan nodded, pulling out his laser. Behind him, Corey duplicated the action, moving around to get a clear view of Jansen.

Harl asked quickly, "What about you?"

"I don't know. Any starships in Grailport?"

"Three, as far as I know. Two freighters and a regular liner."

"Scheduled liftoffs?" I demanded.

"The liner's scheduled for tomorrow night. One freighter for two days from now. The second freighter's a freelance, with no schedule."

"For hire?" I asked. "If a man's willing to pay a few thousand credits?"

Harlan nodded. "Probably. Why?"

"I've got a fugitive who wants to get offplanet. Probably as fast as

possible. And he's got nine thousand credits on him, plus stolen travel papers. He'll probably try for that freighter. He planned well, so I'll bet he's on his way to the port now."

"There's been no transport routing to Grailport for the last two days. He must be either on foot or riding."

I nodded. "With Warrior, it would take about ten hours to reach Grailport. With a normal mount, maybe sixteen or twenty. Our man has had since some time early this morning, probably. That means he could be almost there, if he had spares and discarded the tired mounts. And from the way he's operated so far, I'd bet that's just what he did."

"You'd better contact headquarters in Grailport. They can at least get a couple of monitors to pick him up."

"You reach them, eh, Harl? The man's name is Delver. He'll look normal, because he stole Warranter travel papers. Tell the people to be careful—I don't know what this guy is capable of."

THE generunner grunted. I looked at him. "Look, Seeker, I didn't know what this Delver was going to try. I mean, a little fun with cloning, that I can understand. But murder, theft. Well—"

I swore at him. "You've done your damage."

He shook his head. "You don't understand. I'm trying to help. There's something you should know."

"Get to the point if you have one."

He reddened. "Well, he asked for a novelty item, too. And I found one he went wild over. A Tavarean morphlizard." He gulped. "A programed one, with alterations. Input electrodes and a hand control unit. The units have preset limitations on shape changes, but they can be eliminated in a minute if you know what you're doing. This Delver has a handbook on them. And to top it, the lizard is programed for total loyalty to the owner."

I froze, shut my eyes and mind against a hurt that flared up abruptly.

I heard Harlan through a haze, asking in a puzzled voice, "A morphlizard? What is it?"

From somewhere I got the strength to overcome my reflexive reaction, looked at him soberly. "The dominant life form of Tavare, the second planet of Novterra's system. Through some evolutionary quirk the lizards are capable of altering their shape, abilities. Outlawed on any other planet because of their dangerous potential. And this tamperer has given one to Delver."

The tamperer broke in nervously: "Look, I didn't know. I thought

he was just another ground-mucker, maybe a little more sophisticated, but nothing much. A modified morphlizard wouldn't be that dangerous to one of these muckers. But if he's the way you describe him, well—"

He let his voice trail away.

I left the wagon, unable to stand the sight of the fool any longer. Harlan followed me out.

"You leaving now?"

I glanced at him, shivered. "No. I'll have to contact HQ myself to alert them. Suddenly I'm the expert." I grabbed my com, dialed Grailport.

The expert, I thought, a lonely terror in my guts.

After a moment of static a cool voice came on: "Seeker headquarters, Grailport."

"Route me through to Frasier, quickest. This is Carver."

A hum came as the transfer was effected, then my local chief was on the circuit.

"Sir, I'm working on a murder. Nothing simple. Involves a tamperer. The killer is on the loose, probable heading for Grailport."

"Is that all? You want monitors to pick him up?"

"Not unless they can handle morphlizards," I said, fighting to keep my voice even. "The tamperer fixed him up with one. Fully adapted. There are controls on the lizard's changes, but they can be eliminated easily."

Frasier swore softly. "No one here has had any experience."

He was voicing something I already knew. The morphlizards were rarely seen outsystem.

Ignoring the yammering fear that came bubbling up out of my past, I said in a voice drained of emotion, "Then I think it's my job."

"No. Not even if he's threatening to destroy Grailport. You can't risk it."

His voice held concern. He had read my file, knew my background. He knew, in effect, why I was a Seeker on Sarus, why I had left Novterra. And he was going to protect me if I'd let him. And for a moment I wanted to scream yes, jump the first ship outbound. But something caught in my gut and I knew I couldn't.

"Sir, that other experience was a long time ago. I'm different—conditions have changed. And you can't send a totally unprepared man against a morphlizard. At least I'm somewhat cued in—if anyone is."

I listened to silence for seconds, as he weighed my decision against available alternatives. When he sighed I knew he'd accepted my judgment at least temporarily.

"As you wish, Seeker. What aid can I give you?"

"Put that starport in stasis. Seal any ship in port and don't let anyone through. And send a flitter for

me. I'll have to get there quickest."

"If your man knows what a morphlizard can do seals won't hold him forever."

"I know that. But he's not an expert—he may even be harmless. I can't be sure. In any case, those precautions should hold him until I can get there." I hesitated. "After that it's up to me."

"Right. The flitter's on its way and I'll have that port sealed tighter than a molectronic lock. Contact me when you reach Grailport. I'll check the rest of Sarus for experienced men."

"Check, sir. Carver out." I cut the channel, left my beacon on to guide the flitter to me. Harlan was staring at me.

"What was that all about?"

I WANTED to turn on my heel, walk away. But I forced myself to answer—answer as best I could.

"I was once stationed in Tavare," I said. "During the standard labor draft period. I was a maintaintenance tech at a virtually automated station. I was taking care of a small group of researchers working at the station. There was a girl, Karin. We became quite close." I shut my eyes, started to relive the incident, as I had so many times before. "One day, without warning, there was a run of morphlizards. Thousands, some of them rather ancient. More than any man had ever seen before. They overran the station, breaking through our external security screens as if they were paper. It gave the science boys additional clues to liz life cycles later, but during that run we just retreated to the security room of the station and hid. We were terrified from the very first. Something about a reaction the lizards can evoke in men. Anyway, after two days they even got past the heavy-duty screens and started to trickle through the security room. Half of us died from physical wounds and simple fear. Naked fear. We still don't know why it happened like that, what fates chose the doomed ones. But half died and the rest of us were raving madmen by the time the lizards vanished." I laughed bitterly. "And that's exactly what they did. Vanished, almost every lizard. Dispersed, back to where they came from, almost as if on a signal. They left behind a wrecked station and shattered people."

Harlan asked, "And the girl—Karin?"

"She was one of the dead ones. Eventually, rescue teams arrived from Novterra. They put the survivors in rehab and eventually most of us recovered. Sort of. But we had to get out of the system. The proximity of Tavare was a little too much." I looked at Harlan,

wondered if he really understood. "You know the worst, Harl? What I just told you is just words plugged into my memory by psych technicians. Everything that could flip me again has been carefully filtered out of my mind. The words left don't mean anything—I don't have the equipment left to communicate the reality of what happened. I have no way of transmitting my real feelings to you. Just second-hand phrases psych thinks are safe." I laughed. "And sometimes I wonder if they didn't leave too much."

"And now you're going to face another lizard?"

"No choice, Harl."

"I'll take your place, Dan. You don't have to risk the contact."

I looked at him, wondering if he actually realized what he was offering. And knew he didn't. I couldn't tell him what it was like—though I could have added that the scientists knew that the lizards could produce a fear reaction in men, transmitted by telepathy, or some other mechanism nobody yet understood. And that was beside their actual physical capabilities, which were incredible. But to say more would have been pointless; he still wouldn't have comprehended the reality of the lizards. So I just smiled, shook my head.

"I have to try, Harl," I said. "And not just because no one else knows what I know. See, I've been running from them! The psych people said that was the only way I could insure my sanity." I could feel myself trembling. "But I've merely managed to block the insanity off in a corner of my mind. And a man shouldn't live like that." I looked up at the stars that were beginning to glow through as dusk settled over the countryside. "We didn't get here by pretending that dangers didn't exist, by hiding from them. Men have to face their fears sooner or later if they're going to keep on being men. It's part of our makeup."

"Are you taking the risk for a point of philosophy? Just to prove something?"

I looked at him. "Sort of. To prove something to myself. Everybody's got to some time."

He nodded soberly. "I suppose. Good luck, Dan."

FEET scuffled behind us. I turned to confront the tamperer, Jansen.

"Is there something you want?"

He nodded. "Yes, something I'd like to do. That morphlizard—well, I know how dangerous it can be. And maybe I could help you a little."

I looked at him more closely. His attitude seemed to have changed and this one rang a little truer than the previous façade.

"How?"

"I've read the research reports on them. It's possible to freeze their polymorphic structure temporarily. There's an organic substance from Tavare that will do so if it makes contact in sufficient quantity. I think it originates from a biological enemy of the morphlizards. It's the natural evolutionary reaction to their power. A balance. And I think I can make some for you."

I felt sudden hope flare within me, hated it. Overcoming the paralysis, I demanded, "What range?"

"The reaction depends on amount of contact. For example, most of a dose of about ten milliliters would have to hit the target squarely. And I'm afraid the stuff will have to be thrown. The sudden impact of its being fired from any sort of projectile weapon would conceivably start a decomposition reaction."

Throw it. With human inaccuracy, you'd have to be close to be sure. Well within the range of the lizard's fear-evoking ability. All of which meant it was still my job. I looked at him once more.

"How long will it take you to prepare it?"

He shrugged. "Maybe a half-hour. I can do it right now, if you'll let me."

I nodded. "Let's go." I followed him into the wagon. He stepped toward the lab section, began swinging equipment out into the open. He grabbed a tape, inserted it into a small viewer. Frowning, he began to manipulate the equipment. It was mostly automatic, programing the addition of chemicals to a nutrient broth, maintaining a certain temperature and pressure, checking contaminants.

Abruptly he began to speak, without looking at me.

"Actually, there are two counteragents for the polymorphic ability. The one I'm working on is the venom of the guredu. You've heard of it?"

I nodded vaguely. "Ranks among the most dominant species on the planet. A reptile—and in partial competition with the morphlizards."

"Essentially correct. They spit their venom accurately up to about five meters. Rather astonishing. But that's the only reason they can exist in competition with the lizards. That's true for every competing species. For instance, there's a small mammal similar to the Terran rodents. The lizards can't harm it. At first researchers suspected some sort of scent, but experiment eliminated that possibility. So now they're working on a theory of telepathic defense. They think the rodent can freeze the lizard's changing ability by controlling its mind. The hypoth-

esis is borne out by examination of the mammal's brain. It has certain structural peculiarities. Anyway, it goes that way all along the ecological spectrum. What Tavare's evolution produced, it also found defenses for." He smiled. "We can duplicate this venom, but nowhere near as handily as the guredu makes it. And there's another agent we can't quite duplicate. It's a glandular secretion of the lizard. Right up to maturity this secretion is present, preventing any polymorphism. But at maturity, the glands responsible start dying and the polymorphism comes in. In fact, one can use that point to define maturity."

"You don't sound like a tamperer," I said. "You sound more like a researcher."

III

HE FINISHED a detail, spun to glare at me. "I'm not. I don't have the ability. I found that out long ago. I can understand—but not create. So forget it!"

His vehemence surprised me and I realized I had touched a sore point. I smiled, trying to soothe him. "All right. But there's teaching, you know. The more you say, the more I think you don't belong here, tampering for fun."

He turned back to his work. "They don't use teachers any more. A computer makes a memory scan of some great scientist, and a reaction tape—then simulates his form. It and others like it do all the teaching, over vidcoms. There's no place for humans in the process."

I considered his words, then said softly, "Maybe not on the central worlds. But here we still use human teachers. And I can name a dozen other worlds that do. Maybe not as advanced as your tech-planets, but moving along nicely. And if we're too primitive here, Novterra also uses men. There's a place for a person who wants one."

He was concentrating on the lab equipment. I wasn't sure whether he'd heard me or not. He finished punching out a programing combination for his lab computer, then turned away.

"The rest is automatic." I followed him out of the wagon. He stepped outside, looked around. He spoke to the countryside but his words were directed at me. "What are you, a psych-tech? Are you just trying to torture me? Damn it, I gave up fantasies too long ago to start swallowing them now."

"I meant what I said. Sarus can use intelligent men. Almost any outworld can." I paused. "And you might find that your creativity is better here. There's something about the tech worlds, about their

crowdedness, their hectic pace, that bothers some men. It's as if some men adapted to the tech civilization as it developed—and others didn't and have had to leave it really to achieve. I'm not making promises. But if you're not a tamperer at heart, consider the possibilities. A good word from a Seeker can do wonders."

He looked at me and his cynicism was gone.

"I'll think about it, Seeker. Thanks for the offer."

He stepped off into the darkness. I should have followed a tamperer, made sure he didn't attempt to escape. But I didn't think this one would. I turned back to the wagon, found Harlan staring at me, a strange smile on his face.

"Do you think I should follow him?" I demanded.

He shook his head. "I think you found a chink in his armor. Maybe you should go into rehab work."

I laughed. "A Seeker is trained to handle difficulties, Harl."

"Of course. I wasn't criticizing you, Dan. I wish I could do as much for a tamperer. It's sure better than just deporting them." He frowned. "About this morphlizard. Can it actually change shape?"

Oh, damn, can it! But I kept my voice calm. "Yeah. The researchers didn't believe it at first either. But there's documented proof." Besides my personal experience. "It can even increase its mass to a certain extent by absorbing organic compounds and simple molecules from the atmosphere. That's one reason for the intense interest in it. If we could duplicate its synthesizing abilities we'd make a big jump over current techniques. But the secret is nothing solely structural—something in the lizard's entire physiological system enables it to change. A dead morphlizard is just a hunk of decaying protoplasm, with perhaps a greater percentage of undifferentiated cells than most creatures. It's a mystery that we can't solve yet." As usual, a question in the right area had triggered the dry lecture; it was a means of psychological defense, the psych-techs said. They were probably right.

"You sound as if you remember quite a bit about them."

"Just what the research team learned before the incident," I snapped at him. "Oh, hell, Harl, I'm sorry. But I've completely avoided the subject for some time. That was part of the intended rehab program."

"Okay, Dan." After a moment he asked softly, "Before that incident, what job were you heading for?"

I shrugged. "Biological research. But they decided afterward that it was better to dissociate myself completely from the previous life. It was only by a narrow margin

that they decided it was safe to let me keep my memories."

"So you became a Seeker on Sarus?"

"That's what my psych profile indicated was a good alternative. And Sarus was far enough away to let me forget. Although sometimes I wish they *had* wiped my memories.

"And let you start over? What was that you gave me about men facing their dangers, not hiding from them?"

I laughed bitterly. "Maybe it was just hot air. I think most men would rather erase a problem than face it—if they could."

"But we don't evolve that way, eh?"

He was goading me, and I recognized the fact. And I suddenly realized why.

"Maybe *you* should go into rehab," I commented dryly.

AN ALARM rang from within the wagon. Jansen appeared out of the night and we entered the vehicle together. He took four cubes from the apparatus, handed them to me.

"One'll do the job. Press the stud and throw it. They're contact explosion cubes. When they hit, the cube will shatter and spread the agent around. That way even a near miss might slow the lizard down. Hopefully, with four you'll have an adequate safety margin."

I stared at the cubes for a few seconds, then dropped them into a pocket. "One cube will do the job?"

"Yes. A full dose will freeze its polymorphic ability and paralyze it."

I thought of facing a lizard, depending on those four small cubes, and shuddered. "Are you sure these will work?"

He returned my glance. "The venom works, Seeker. If the synthesis is accurate it will freeze the lizard. Otherwise I can't promise anything. If you don't trust me—" he let it trail off, then smiled thinly. "I guess I can't blame you if you don't. But I think the synthesis was good and that the stuff will work."

"That's good enough. After all, venom or not, I have to face the lizard."

A shrill whine rose outside, growing louder until it culminated in the thump of the flitter setting down. I stepped out, started to walk to it, paused to look back.

"Jansen, want to come along?"

He looked surprised. Then: "I'd like to."

Harlan said, "I'll come along, too. Corey can handle the situation here, wait for the pick-up van. All right with you?"

I smiled. "Sure, why not? I can use all the support I can get."

IT WAS well into the night by the time the flitter reached

Grailport. Patterns of light beckoned us to the ground below. Off to one side of the city was a dark area, one that usually was alive with lights and activity. But the starport had been sealed off, as I requested. The flitter homed on the signal that Frasier was casting for us—he'd gone into the field to handle the coordination of this task. We swooped down and I recognized the warehouse area outside the perimeter of the port. As I stepped out of the flitter, Frasier walked up.

"Hello, Carver."

"Hello, sir."

"We caught him coming into the city. A couple of monitors tried to pick him up, against orders."

"What happened?"

The chief shook his head. "One is dead and the other is under sedation—in the hands of the psych lads. The freeman knows how to use the lizard fully, it appears. We managed to corner him in this warehouse when he couldn't get through the screens around the port. We've got him screened in now."

"It's only a matter of time until he finds out what a lizard can do to a defensive screen. And then there'll be no choice. We'll have to destroy him and the lizard." I swallowed quickly. "And the only sure way is a nuke. Anything less the lizard will handle."

"You intend to go in there?"

"Yes, sir."

He considered. Then: "I suppose it's worth the risk. But you're taking a man in with you."

I looked at him, knew he was decided on this. But I had to try. "Chief, it's too dangerous. To throw in a man who's had no experience with a lizard is insane."

His eyes were hard, unyielding. "I'm not known for being insane, Carver," he rasped. "And I'm not going to risk your going in there alone. What makes you think your experience gives you any immunity? I've thought it over—and I've checked with psych. And they say just the opposite will be true, if anything. How do you know you won't freeze up, become a madman again at the first contact with the lizard?"

I could feel myself flushing, but I didn't know whether from anger or shame. I choked down an angry retort. "All right, if that's the way you feel. Who's going with me?"

"Since Harlan's here, he'll go."

We both looked at him, watched the surprise flash across his face. Then grimness replaced it.

"Good," he said. "I'll go in with you."

He was sorry, that much was obvious. But so was I. Anybody who hadn't felt the impact of a lizard couldn't begin to understand what it was like. Not even the psych teams. It was impossible to communicate the reality. None of them

really understood what Harlan would be walking into.

Then a monitor was standing before me, holding out a survival suit. The chief coughed. "These might be able to protect you from some of the physical danger."

WE BOTH knew the futility of the precaution. The lizard could come up with a transformation that would cut through the suit like plastic. And even then the physical danger was the lesser evil. I didn't know exactly what effect a single lizard would have on a man, except that one monitor had been hurt mentally. But any uncertainty didn't harbor good possibilities as far as I could see. I found my hand drifting toward the blaster that hung at the belt of the survival suit, jerked it away. I looked at Harlan.

"Harl, no matter what, don't kill Delver if that lizard is still loose."

"Why not?"

"Because at present it's bonded to him by implanted loyalty restricting it. Delver is a limiting factor. Without him the lizard could be even worse." I turned away, glanced at the chief. "If we don't come out soon you'll know we failed. This'll either be done fast or not at all."

"I know. And Carver—"

I looked back.

"Don't you think you should give half those cubes to Harlan?"

I looked at him for an eternity, then nodded woodenly. I reached into my pocket, pulled out the cubes and gave Harlan two. "Use them carefully. They're the best chance we've got."

"I know," he said.

But did he really? Few men can truly accept helplessness against an animal when full precautions have been taken. I turned away, motioned for Harlan to follow me.

We approached the warehouse, a towering building that stretched five stories into the night sky, totally enclosed by the protective screens Frasier had erected. I held the blaster in my left hand, a cube in my right and signaled for the Seekers to cut the screens and let us enter. Frasier gave us a thumbs-up and a faint odor of ozone came as the screens blinked off. We ran forward, through the open doors to the warehouse, and felt the screens snapping on behind us, as closely timed as possible.

I glanced at Harlan, saw him studying the interior.

"Remember," I cautioned him, "it's not a standard capture. Try for paralysis. Only use the blaster if you have to. Take care."

"You, too, Dan."

The interior was dark, and I had no idea where the controls were, so I switched onto infrared scanning with the suit. Not as good as visual, but better than being blind. Containers were stacked in rows

throughout the warehouse. At the center, the open space extended to the ceiling, past levels of cargo storage, with a cargo lift dimly visible at the top.

I paused and decided to risk revealing our whereabouts; it would take too long to search the entire place.

"Delver," I called out. "Come on out and surrender. This isn't going to do you any good."

Nothing happened at first. Then an eerie cry echoed through the building.

PANIC started to rise in me. I felt myself freezing up, then I saw the dark form arrowing out of the upper reaches of the building, resembling a Saran dart bird enlarged five times. Waves of fear rolled across me, set up sympathetic vibrations that shook me to the core. I stood facing the naked core of truth. I couldn't fight the lizard!

I forced my head around, saw that Harlan was on his knees. His blaster lay forgotten on the floor and the cubes had vanished. The stink of the terror within me triggered buried memories, scenes from the past. God, the scenes! I saw Karin again, kneeling, falling, her face filled with madness. I saw her die again, looking to me for help, saw her form being ripped apart by the hordes of lizards that had overrun the station. She had died hours before—what they were destroying was the mindless hulk that remained. But still I shouted and cried. She was mine! They had no right! I could feel the last vestige of reason being torn out of my soul, feel the pain, the cancerous fear eating at my gut. Nightmares?

Yes, nightmares! Shapes, all the shapes of the Lord of Creation—but all with the same soul. The soul of fear, the soul of the lizard!

Then the real/present lizard struck, slicing through the protective suit and tracing a cut along my arm. The past vanished and I saw the lizard/dart bird sweep up into the darkness once more. And suddenly I was enraged, maddened by the existence of the creature that had taken Karin away and driven me from my home. No matter that the creature was different; his soul was the same. My rage fought my fear and overwhelmed it. I was not sane but I did not fear—a weird, berseker state possessed me. I looked down, saw the blaster I'd dropped. Stooping, I gathered it into my grasp once more.

I groped along the suit belt, pulled out a set of flares. Triggering them, I tossed them high into the air, where they hovered on antigrav devices, spilling light into the darkness. I switched from infrared to visual and looked at Harlan for help, but

he still kneeled on the floor. I dismissed him from my mind and looked for the damned lizard again. I caught sight of it, wheeling in great arcs above my head. I kneeled, took careful aim, and fired the blaster. Energy cut through the air, searing at the lizard's form. With another enraged cry, it dropped toward me.

I fought to keep the blaster trained on it, and the bird started to burn. I'd won the first battle. The lizard shimmered, transformed itself into a form immune to blaster fire. But the creature was not basically intelligent—and the new form could not fly. It plummeted toward the ground, still bathed in the blaster's discharge. At the last moment it adapted to the dual threat and shimmered into a new form. It hovered scant meters above the ground, a large flying reptile with glistening scales that shed blaster fire with little damage.

THEN it was on the ground and I cut off the blaster. It shimmered into a new form, a mere five meters away. Convulsively I triggered a cube, threw it. The projectile hit the floor near the creature and exploded, scattering venom onto the lizard, which uttered a cry of pain and charged at me, shimmering again. The transformation took longer, seemed forced; the venom was taking effect. I recognized the new form; a Tavarean marsh lion, huge, muscled and full of claws. I threw my second cube as it neared me; it hit the lizard squarely and the venom splashed across it. Screaming again, it kept on charging, moving clumsily. I fired at it and it started to shimmer, but more slowly still.

It was a bare two meters away when it finished and the lion was still there, but with gleaming, blaster-proof scales. It jumped at me, claws extended, and I swung away from it awkwardly. I dove at Harlan, knocking him over and fighting to get his cubes. I came up with one. I spun around to face the next charge and was bowled over and carried past Harlan's form by the beast. With savage glee, I grabbed to hang on, stuck my hand down the gaping jaws and triggered the cube. The teeth ripped my hand as I started to withdraw and then the venom took effect.

Gradually, almost comically, the life went out of the lizard. It toppled over in slow motion. I shoved it off me, stood up and felt the searing heat of a blaster beam slice past me. I fell, rolling aside and scrambling for my blaster. With one motion I had it, aimed it and triggered it. Delver's hand vanished a second later, his weapon with it.

Somehow I managed to keep from turning the beam onto his

head, totally destroying him. Instead, as he crumpled, I turned it on the lizard once more. And burned it, even against the protection of the adapted scales. When I was through it was just a burning mass of dead protoplasm, framed in a scorched pit in the floor. I stared at it and strangely felt something missing. My gaze wandered over to Harlan—he had lost consciousness during our brief struggle, but seemed intact. And then I realized what was missing. When I had turned the blaster on the lizard, finishing it, I had finished burning the fear out of me, without realizing it. Even the core of insanity that had lingered over the years was gone.

I thought of Karin and felt pain. But the pain I could bear, with the cushion of the reality of the present. I dropped the blaster, looked back at Delver, saw him lying on the floor. No bleeding; the blaster cauterized its own wound. Just a large part of his arm missing and he was in shock. I felt no pity, instead a kind of joy that I knew was alien to the principles of the Seekers. But it was good that Delver lay there, and not some innocent clone of him, like the one that had died to start this whole affair.

I turned away, stumbled toward the door and signaled for the Seekers to open up the screens. I faced Frasier with a slight grin on my face, knew it was ridiculous. I walked into his arms.

"You were wrong. I got it, and Delver too. Harlan's in there, unconscious. I got the lizard. You were wrong—and the psych boys too. Wrong."

He didn't seem upset at his mistake—instead he looked quite joyful. I pondered on it as I collapsed into his arms, facing the darkness without fear.

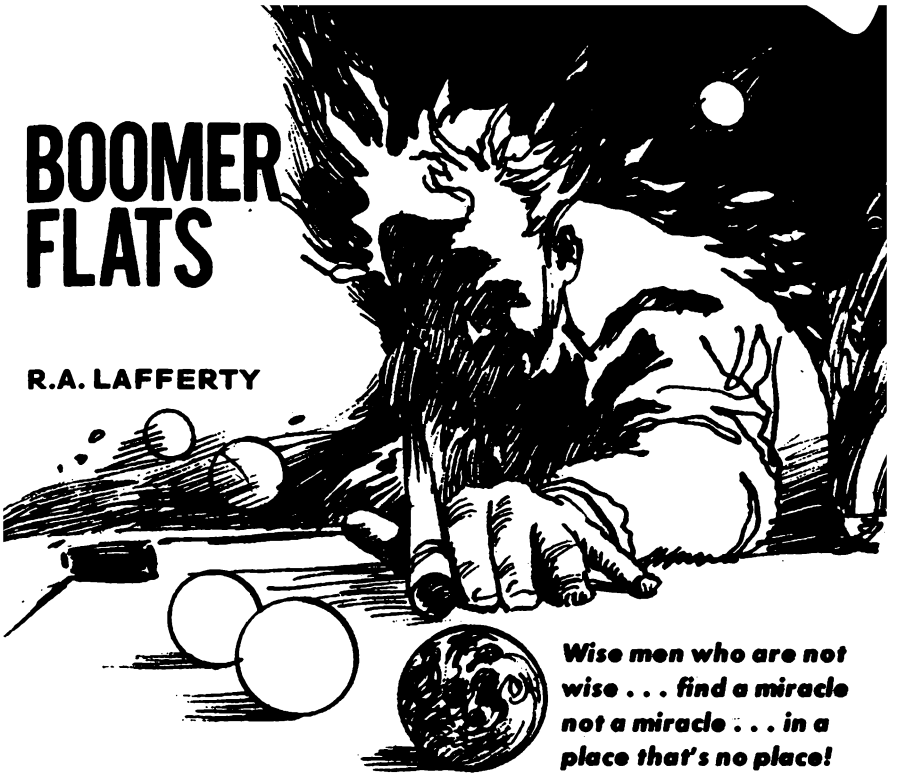
SOMEHOW it's all over. My collapse was simply a combination of the lizard's venom and the psychological after-effects of the battle. I was out of medical care inside of a day. So was Harlan.

Jansen was waiting too. He didn't mention it, but I remembered our conversation. I'm going to speak for him at the trial and he'll probably get off lightly. As I said, we need teachers out here.

And Seekers, too. Who are trained to handle difficulties. In the end, even our own. ●

BOOMER FLATS

R.A. LAFFERTY



Wise men who are not wise . . . find a miracle not a miracle . . . in a place that's no place!

"IN THE tracks of our spiritual father John Henderson we may now have trailed a clutch of ABSMs to their lair," the eminent scientist Arpad Arkabarana was saying in his rattling voice. "And that lair may not be a mountain thicket or rain forest or swamp, but these scrimpy red clay flats. I would give my life for the success of this quest, but it seems that such sacrifice should have a more magnificent setting."

"It looks like a wild goose chase," the eminent scientist Willy McGilly commented. But no, Willy was not downgrading their quest. He was referring to the wild geese that rose about them from the sedges of the flats with clatter and whistle and honk. This was a flightway, a chase of theirs. There were hundreds of them if one had the fine eyes to pick them out from the background. "Mud Geese," Willy said. "We don't see as many of them as when I was a boy."

"I do not, and I am afraid that I will not, believe in the ABSMs," said the eminent scientist Dr. Veli-

kof Vonk, stroking his—(no he didn't, he didn't have one)—stroking his jaw, "and yet this is the thing that I also have most desired, to find this missing link finally, and to refute all believers in the other thing."

"We can't see the chain for the links," said Willy McGilly. "I never believed any of them were missing. There have always been too many of them for the length of the chain. That's the trouble."

"I've traveled a million miles in search of them," said Arpad. "I've pretty well probed all the meager ribs of the world in that travel. My fear has always been that I'd miss them by a trick—or that in some unaccountable way I wouldn't know them when I found them. It would be ironic if we did find them in such a place as this—not a wild place, only a shabby and overlooked place."

"My own fear has been that when I finally gazed on one I would wake with a start and find that I had been looking in a mirror," said Velikof. "There must be some symbolism here that I don't understand. What is your own anticipation of them, Willy?"

"Oh, coming back to people I've always liked. There used to be a bunch of them on the edge of my home town," Willy McGilly said. "Come to think of it, there used to be a bunch of them on the edge of every home town. Now they're more likely to be found right in the middle of every town. They're the scrubs, you know, for the bottoming of the breed."

"What are you talking about, Willy?" Arpad asked sharply.

What they were all talking about was ABSMs.

EVERY town in the south part of that county has a shadow or secondary. There is Meehan, and Meehan Corners; Perkins, and Perkins Corner; Boomer, and Boomer Flats. The three eminent scientists were driving the three miles from Boomer to Boomer Flats looking for the bones and hopefully even the living flesh of a legend. It was that of the missing link, of the Abominable Snowman, the ABSM. It wasn't snowy country there, but the so-called Snowmen have been reported in every sort of climate and countryside.

The local legend, recently uncovered by Arpad, was that a non-African non-Indian "people of color" was living in the neighborhood of Boomer Flats—between the sand-bush thickets and the river. It was said that they lived on the very red mudbanks of the river and that they lived a little in the river itself.

Then Dr. Velikof Vonk had come onto a tape in a bunch of anthropological tapes, and the tape contained sequences like this:

"What do they do when the river floods?"

"Ah, they close their noses and mouths and ears with mud and they lie down with big rocks on their breasts and stay there till the flood has passed."

"Can they be taught?"

"Some of the children go to school, and they learn. But when they are older then they stay at home, and they forget."

"What sort of language do they talk?"

"Ah, they don't seem to talk very much. They keep to themselves. Sometimes when they talk it is just plain Cimarron Valley English."

"What do they eat?"

"They boil river water in mud clay pots. They put in wild onions and greenery. The pottage thickens then, I don't know how. It gets lumps of meat or clay in it, and they eat that too. They eat frogs and fish and owls and thicket filaments. But mostly they don't eat very much of anything."

"It is said that they aren't all of the same appearance. It is even said that they are born, ah, shapeless, and that—ah—could you tell me anything about that?"

"Yeah. They're born without much shape. Most of them never do get much shape. When they have any, well actually their mothers lick them into shape, give them their appearance."

"It's an old folk tale that bears do that."

"Maybe they learned it from the bears then, young fellow. There's quite a bit of bear mixture in them, but the bears themselves have nearly gone from the flats and thickets now. More than likely the bears learned it from them. Sometimes the mothers lick the cubs into the shape of regular people for a joke."

"That is the legend?"

"You keep saying legend. I don't know anything about legend. I just tell you what you ask me. I'll tell you a funny one, though. One of the mothers who was getting ready to bear happened to get hold of an old movie magazine that some fishers from Boomer had left on the river edge. There was a picture in it of the prettiest girl that anyone ever saw and it was a picture of *all* of that girl. This mother was tickled by that picture. She bore a daughter and she licked her into the shape and appearance of the girl in the movie magazine. And the girl grew up looking like that and she still looks like that, pretty as a picture. I don't believe the girl appreciates the joke. She is the prettiest of all the people, though. Her name is Crayola Catfish."

"Are you having me, old fellow? Have those creatures any humor?"

"Some of them tell old jokes. John Salt tells old jokes. The Licorice Man tells really old jokes. And man, does the Comet ever tell old jokes!"

"Are the creatures long-lived?"

"Long-lived as we want to be. The elixir comes from these flats, you know. Some of us use it, some of us don't."

"Are *you* one of the creatures?"

"Sure, I'm one of them. I like to get out from it sometimes though. I follow the harvests."

THIS tape (recorded by an anthropology student at State University who, by the way, has since busted out of anthropology and is now taking hotel and restaurant management) had greatly excited the eminent scientist Dr. Velikof Vonk when he had played it, along with several hundred other tapes that had come in that week from the anthropology circuit. He scratched his—(no he didn't, he didn't have one)—he scratched his jowl and he phoned the eminent scientists Arpad Arkabaranan and Willy McGilly.

"I'll go, I'll go, of course I'll go," Arpad had cried. "I've traveled a million miles in search of it, and should I refuse to go sixty? This won't be it, this can't be it, but I'll never give up. Yes, we'll go tomorrow."

"Sure, I'll go," Willy McGilly had said. "I've been there before, I kind of like those folks on the Flats. I don't know about the biggest catfish in the world, but the biggest catfish stories in the world have been pulled out of the Cimarron River right about at Boomer Flats. Sure, we'll go tomorrow."

"This may be it," Velikof had said. "How can we miss it? I can almost reach out and scratch it on the nose from here."

"You'll find yourself scratching your own nose, that's how you'll miss it. But it's there and it's real."

"I believe, Willy, that there is a sort of amnesia which has prevented us finding them or remembering them accurately."

"Not that, Velikof. It's just that they're always too close to us to see."

So the next day the three eminent scientists drove over from T-Town to come to Boomer Flats. Willy McGilly knew where the place was, but his pointing out of the way seemed improbable and Velikof was more inclined to trust the information of people in Boomer.

There was a difficulty. People kept saying, "This is Boomer. There isn't exactly any place called Boomer Flats." Boomer Flats wasn't on any map. It was too small even to have a post office. And the Boomer people were exasperating in not knowing about it or knowing the way to it.

"Three miles from here, and you don't know where it is?" Velikof asked one of them angrily.

"I don't even know *that* it is," the Boomer man had said in his own near anger. "I don't believe that there *is* such a place."

Finally, however, other men told the eminent scientists that there sort of was such a place, sort of a place. Sort of a road going to it too. They pointed out the same improbable way that Willy McGilly had pointed out.

The three eminents took the road. The flats hadn't flooded lately. The road was sand, but it could be negotiated. They came to the town, to the sort of town, in the ragged river flats. There *was* such a place. They went to the Cimarron Hotel which was like any hotel anywhere, only older. They went into the dining room for it was noon.

It had tables, but it was more than a dining room. It was a common room. It even had intimations of old elegance in blued pier mirrors. There was a dingy bar. There was a pool table, and a hairy man was playing rotation with the Comet on it. The Comet was a long gray-bearded man (in fact, comet means a star with a beard) and small pieces were always falling off him. Clay-colored men with their hats on were playing dominos at several of the tables, and half a dozen dogs were in the room. Something a little queer and primordial about those dogs! Something a little queer and primordial about the whole place!

But, as if set to serve as distraction, a remarkably pretty girl was there. She might have been a waitress. She seemed to be waiting, either listlessly or thoughtfully, for something.

Dr. Velikof Vonk twinkled his deep eyes in their orbital caves. Perhaps he cogitated his massive brain behind his massive orbital ridges and he arrived, by sheer mentality, at the next step.

"Have you a menu, young lady?" he asked.

"No," she answered simply, but it wasn't simple at all. Her voice didn't go with her prettiness. It was much more intricate than her appearance, even in that one syllable. It was powerful, not really harsh, deep and resonant as caverns, full and timeless. The girl was big-boned beneath her prettiness, with heavy brindled hair and complex eyes.

"We would like something to eat," Arpad Arkabaranan ventured. "What do you have?"

"They're fixing it for you now," the girl said. "I'll bring it after a while."

There was a rich river smell about the whole place, and the room was badly lit.

"Her voice is an odd one," Arpad whispered in curious admiration. "Like rocks rolled around by water, but it also has a touch of springtime in it, springtime of a very peculiar quality."

"Not just a springtime; it's an interstadial time," Willy McGilly stated accurately. "I've noticed that about them in other places. It's old green season in their voices,

green season between the ice."

The room was lit only by hanging lamps. They had a flicker to them. They were not electric.

"There's a lot of the gaslight era in this place," Arpad gave the opinion, "but the lights aren't gaslights either."

"No, they're hanging oil lamps," Velikof said. "An amusing fancy just went through my head that they might be old whale-oil lamps."

"Girl, what do you burn in the hanging lamps?" Willy McGilly asked her.

"Catfish oil," she said in the resonant voice that had a touch of the green interstadial time in it. And catfish oil burns with a clay-colored flame.

"Can you bring us drinks while we wait?" Velikof of the massive head asked.

"They're fixing them for you now," the girl said. "I'll bring them after a while."

Meanwhile on the old pool table the Comet was beating the hairy man at rotation. Nobody could beat the Comet at rotation.

"We came here looking for strange creatures," Arpad said in the direction of the girl. "Do you know anything about strange creatures or people, or where they can be found?"

"You are the only strange people who have come here lately," she told them. Then she brought their drinks to them, three great sloshing clay cups or bulbous steins that smelled strongly of river, perhaps of interstadial river. She set them in front of the eminents with something like a twinkle in her eyes—something like, but much more. It was laughing lightning flashing from under the ridges of that pretty head. She was waiting their reaction.

Velikof cocked a big deep eye at his drink. This itself was a feat. Other men hadn't such eyes, or such brows above them, as had Velikof Vonk. They took a bit of cocking, and it wasn't done lightly. And Velikof grinned out of deep folk memory as he began to drink. Velikof was always strong on the folk memory bit.

Arpad Arkabaranan screamed, rose backwards, toppled his chair, and stood aghast while pointing a shaking finger at his splashing clay cup. Arpad was disturbed.

Willy McGilly drank deeply from his own stirring vessel.

"Why, it's Green Snake Snorter!" he cried in amazement and delight. "Oh, drink of drinks, thou art pleasure beyond expectation! They used to serve it to us back home, but I never even hoped to find it here. What great thing have we done to deserve this?"

He drank again of the wonderful splashing liquor while the spray of it filled the air. And Velikof also drank with noisy pleasure. The girl righted Arpad's chair, put Arpad into it again with strong

hands, and addressed him powerfully to his cresting breaker. But Arpad was scared of his lively drink. "It's alive, it's alive," was all that he could jabber. Arpad Arkabaranan specialized in primitives, and primitives by definition are prime stuff. But there wasn't, now in his moment of, weakness, enough prime stuff in Arpad himself to face so pleasant and primitive a drink as this.

The liquid was sparkling with bright action, was adequately alcoholic, something like bock beer, and there was a green snake in each cup. (Velikof in his notebook states that they were green worms of the species *vermis ebrius viridis,* but that is only a quibble. They were snake-like worms and of the size of small snakes, and we will call them snakes.)

"Do get with it, Arpad," Willy McGilly cried. "The trick is to drink it up before the snake drinks it. I tell you though that the snakes can discern when a man is afraid of them. They'll fang the face off a man who's afraid of them."

"Ah, I don't believe that I want the drink," Arpad declared with sickish grace. "I'm not much of a drinking man."

So Arpad's green snake drank up his Green Snake Snorter, noisily and greedily. Then it expired—it breathed out its life and evaporated. That green snake was gone.

"Where did he go?" Arpad asked nervously. He was still uneasy about the business.

"Back to the catfish," the girl said. "All the snakes are spirits of catfish just out for a little ramble."

"Interesting," Velikof said, and he noted in his pocket notebook that the *vermis ebrius viridis* is not a discrete species of worm or snake, but is rather spirit of catfish. It is out of such careful notation that science is built up.

"Is there anything noteworthy about Boomer Flats?" Velikof asked the girl then. "Has it any unique claim to fame?"

"Yes," the girl said. "This is the place that the comets come back to."

"Ah, but the moths have eaten the comets," Willy McGilly quoted from the old epic.

THE girl brought them three big clay bowls heaped with fish eggs, and these they were to eat with three clay spoons. Willy McGilly and Dr. Velikof Vonk addressed themselves to the rich meal with pleasure, but Arpad Arkabaranan refused.

"Why, it's all mixed with mud and sand and trash," he objected.

"Certainly, certainly, wonderful, wonderful," Willy McGilly slushed out the happy words with a mouth full of delicious gloop. "I always thought that something went out of the world when they cleaned up the old shantytown

dish of shad roe. In some places they cleaned it up—not everywhere. I maintain that roe at its best must always have at least a slight tang of river sewage."

But Arpad broke his clay spoon in disgust. And he would not eat. Arpad had traveled a million miles in search of it but he didn't know it when he found it. He hadn't any of it inside him, so he missed it.

One of the domino players at a near table (the three eminents had noticed this some time before but had not fully realized it) was a bear. The bear was dressed as a shabby man. He wore a big black hat on his head. He played dominoes well; he was winning.

"How is it that the bear plays so well?" Velikof asked.

"He doesn't play at all well," Willy McGilly protested. "I could beat him. I could beat any of them."

"He isn't really a bear," the girl said. "He is my cousin. Our mothers, who were sisters, were clownish. His mother licked him into the shape of a bear for fun. But that is nothing to what my mother did to me. She licked me into pretty face and pretty figure for a joke, and now I am stuck with it. I think it is too much of a joke. I'm not really like this, but I guess I may as well laugh at me just as everybody else does."

"What is your name?" Arpad asked her without real interest.

"Crayola Catfish."

But Arpad Arkabaranan didn't hear or recognize the name, though it had been on a tape that Dr. Velikof Vonk had played for them, the same tape that had really brought them to Boomer Flats. Arpad had now closed his eyes and ears and heart to all of it.

The hairy man and the Comet were still shooting pool, but pieces were still falling off the Comet.

"He's diminishing, he's breaking up," Velikof observed. "He won't last another hundred years at that rate."

Then the eminents left board and room and the Cimarron Hotel to go looking for ABSMs who were rumored to live in that area.

ABSM is the code name for the Abominable Snowman, for the Hairy Woodman, for the Wild Man of Borneo, for the Sasquatch, for the Booger-Man, for the Ape-Man, for the Bear-Man, for the Missing Link, for the nine-foot-tall Giant things, for the living Neanderthals. It is believed by some that all of these beings are the same. It is believed by most that these things are no thing at all, nowhere, not in any form.

And it seemed as if the most were right, for the three eminents could not find hide nor hair (rough hide and copious hair were supposed to be marks by which the ABSMs might be known) of the queer folks anywhere along the red bank of the Cimarron River. Such creatures as they did en-

counter were very like the shabby and untalkative creatures they had already encountered in Boomer Flats. They weren't an ugly people. They were pleasantly mud-homely. They were civil and most often they were silent. They dressed something as people had dressed seventy-five years before that time—as the poor working people had dressed then. Maybe they were poor, maybe not. They didn't seem to work very much. Sometimes a man or a woman seemed to be doing a little bit of work, very casually.

It may be that the red-mud river was full of fish. Something was splashing and jumping there. Big turtles waddled out of the water, caked with mud even around their eyes. The shores and flats were treacherous, and sometimes an eminent would sink into the sand-mud up to the hips. But the broad-footed people of the area didn't seem to sink in.

There was plenty of greenery (or brownery, for it had been the dusty weeks) along the shores. There were muskrats, there were even beavers, there were skunks and possums and badgers. There were wolf dens and coyote dens dug into the banks, and they had their particular smells about them. There were dog dens. There were coon trees. There were even bear dens or caves. But no, that was not a bear smell either. What smell was it?

"What lives in these clay caves?" Velikof asked a woman who was digging river clams.

"The Giants live in them," she said. Well, they were tall enough to be giants' caves. A nine-footer need hardly stoop to enter one of them.

"We have missed it," Arpad said. "There is nothing at all to be found here. I will travel farther, and I may find it in other places."

"Oh, I believe we are right in the middle of it," Velikof gave the opinion.

"It is all around us, Arpad, everything you wanted," Willy McGilly insisted.

But Arpad Arkabaranan would have none of the muddy water, none of the red sand or the red sand caves, nothing of anything here. The interest had all gone out of him. The three of them went back to the Cimarron Hotel without, apparently, finding a primitive creature or missing link at all.

They entered the common room of the hotel again. Dominoes were set before them. They played listlessly.

"You are sure that there are no odd creatures around this place?" Arpad again asked the girl Crayola Catfish.

"John Salt is an odd creature and he comes from this place," Crayola told them. "The Licorice Man is an odd creature, I suppose. So is Ape Woodman. He used to be a big-time football

player. All three of them had regular-people blood in them. I suppose that's what made them odd. They were almost as odd as you three creatures. And the Comet playing pool there is an odd one. I don't know what kind of blood he has in him to make him odd."

"How long has he been around here?" Velikof asked.

"He returns every eighty-seven years. He stays here about three years, and he's already been here two of them. Then he goes off on another circuit. He goes out past the planets and among the stars."

"Oh? And how does he travel out there?" Velikof asked with cocked tongue and eye.

"With horse and buggy, of course."

"Oh there, Comet," Willy McGilly called. "Is it true that you travel out among the stars with horse and buggy?"

"Aye, that I do," the long gray-bearded man named Comet called back, "with a horse named Peegosh and a buggy named Harma. It's a flop-eared horse and a broken buggy, but they take me there."

"Touch clay," said Crayola Catfish, "for the lightning."

THEY touched clay. Everything was of baked clay anyhow, even the dominoes. And there had been lightning, fantastic lightning dashing itself through every crack and cranny of the flimsy hotel. It was a lightning brighter than all the catfish-oil lamps in the world put together. And it continued. There was clattering sequence thunder, and there was a roaring booming sound that came from a few miles west of the thunder.

The Giants came in and stood around the edges of the room. They were all very much alike, like brothers. They were tall and somber, shabby, black-bearded to the eyes, and with black hats on their heads. Unkempt. All were about nine feet tall.

"Shall I sound like a simpleton if I ask if they are really giants?" Velikof questioned.

"As your eyes tell you, they are the giants," Crayola said. "They stay here in the out-of-the-way places even more than the rest of us. Sometimes regular people see them and do not understand that they are regular people too. For that there is scandal. It was the scent of such a scandal, I believe, that brought the three of you here. But they are not apes or bears or monsters. They are people too."

"They are of your own kindred?" Velikof asked.

"Oh, yes. They are the uncles, the old bachelors. That's why they grow tall and silent. That's why they stand around the edges of the room. And that is why they dig themselves caves into the banks and bluffs instead of living in huts. The roofs of huts are too low for them."

"It would be possible to build taller huts," Willy McGilly suggested.

"It would be possible for you, yes," Crayola said. "It would not be possible for them. They are set in their ways. They develop a stoop and a gait because they feel themselves so tall. They let their hair grow and overflow, all over their faces and around their eyes, and all over their bodies also. They are the steers of the species. Having no children or furniture, what can they do but grow tall and ungainly like that? This happens also to the steers of cattle and bears and apes, that they grow tall and gangling. They become bashful, you see, so sometimes it is mistakenly believed that they are fierce."

The roaring and booming from west of the thunder was becoming louder and nearer. The river was coming dangerously alive. All of the people in the room knew that it was now dark outside, and it was not yet time to be night.

The Comet gave his pool cue to one of the bashful giants and came and sat with the eminents.

"You are Magi?" he asked.

"I am a magus, yes," Willy McGilly said. "We are called eminent scientists nowadays. Velikof here also remains a magus, but Arpad has lost it all this day."

"You are not the same three I first believed," the old Comet said. "Those three passed me several of my cycles back. They had had word of an Event and they had come from a great distance as soon as they heard. But it took them near two thousand years to make the trip and they were worried that myth had them as already arriving long ago. They were worried that false Magi had anticipated them and set up a preventing myth. And I believe that is what did happen."

"And your own myths, old fellow, have they preceded you, or have you really been here before?" Willy McGilly asked. "I see that you have a twisty tongue that turns out some really winding myths."

"Thank you, for that is my intent. Myths are not merely things that were made in times past. Myths are among the things that maintain the present in being. I wish most strongly that the present should be maintained. I often live in it."

"Tell us, old man, why is Boomer Flats a place that the comets come back to?" Willy said.

"Oh, it's just one of the post stations where we change horses when we make our orbits. A lot of the comets come to the Flats—Booger, Donati, Encke, 1914c and Halley."

"But why to Boomer Flats on the little Cimarron River?" Willy inquired.

"Things are often more than they seem. The Cimarron isn't really so little a river as you would

imagine. Actually it is the river named Ocean that runs around all the worlds."

"Old Comet, old man with the pieces falling off you," Dr. Velikof Vonk asked out of that big head of his, "can you tell us just who are the under-people that we have tracked all around the world and have probably found here no more than seventy miles from our own illustrious T-Town?"

"A phyz like you have on you, and you have to ask!" the old Comet twinkled at Velikof (a man who twinkled like that had indeed been among the stars—he had their dust on him). "You're one of them, you know."

"I've suspected that for a long time," Velikof admitted. "But who are they? And who am I?"

"Wise Willy here said it correctly to you last night. They are the scrubs who bottom the breed. But do not demean the scrubs. They are the foundation. They are human as all of us are human. They are a race that underlies the other several races of man. When the bones and blood of the more manifest races grow too thin, then they sustain you with the mixture of their strong kinship. The mixing always goes on, but in special eras it is more widespread. They are the link that is never really missing, the link between the clay and the blood."

"Why are they, and I myself if I were not well-kempt and eminent, sometimes taken to be animals?" Velikof asked. "Why do they always live in such outlandish places?"

"They don't always. Sometimes they live in very inlandish places. Even wise Willy understands that. But it is their function to stand apart and grow in strength. Look at the strong bone structure of the girl there! It is their function to invent form—look at the form her mother invented for her. They have a depth of mind, and they have it particularly in those ghostly areas where the other races lack it. And they share and mingle it in those sudden motley ages of great achievement and vigor. Consider the great ages of Athens, of Florence, of Los Angeles. And afterward, this people will withdraw again to gather new strength and bottom."

"And why are they centered here in a tumble-down hotel that is like a series of old daguerrotypes?" Willy McGilly asked. "Will you tell us that there is something cosmic about this little old hotel, as there is about this little old river?"

"Aye, of course there is, Willy. This is the hotel named Xenodocheion. This is the special center of these Xenoi, these strangers, and of all strangers everywhere. It isn't small. You merely see but a portion of it at one time. They center here to keep out of the way. Sometimes they live in areas and neighborhoods that regularized

humanity has abandoned (whether in inner city or boondock). Sometimes they live in eras and decades that regularized humanity has abandoned. For their profundity of mind in the more ghostly areas, they have come to have a cavalier way with time. What is wrong with that? If regular people are finished with those days and times, why may not others use them?"

The roaring and booming to the west of the thunder had become very loud and very near now, and in the immediate outdoors there was heavy rain.

"It is the time," the girl Crayola Catfish cried out in her powerful and intricate voice. "The flash flood is upon us and it will smash everything. We will all go and lie down in the river."

All the Boomer Flats people began to follow her out: the Giants, the eminents, everybody.

"Will you also lie down in the river, Comet?" Willy McGilly asked. "Somehow I don't believe it of you."

"No, I will not. That isn't my way. I will take my horse and buggy and ascend above it."

"Ah, but Comet, will it look like a horse and buggy to us?"

"No, it will look quite other, if you do chance to see it."

"And what are you really, Comet?" Velikof asked as they left him. "What species do *you* belong to?"

"To the human species, of course, Velikof. I belong to still another race of it, another race that mixes sometimes and then withdraws again to gather more strength and depth. Some individuals of us withdraw for quite long times. There are a number of races of us in the wide cousinship, you see, and it is a necessity that we be strangers to each other for a good part of the time."

"Are you a Saucerian?"

"Oh Saucerian be damned, Velikof! Herma means chariot or it means buggy; it does not mean saucer. We are the comets. And our own mingling with the commonalty of people has also had quite a bit to do with those sudden incandescent eras. Say, I'd like to talk with you fellows again some time. I'll be by this way again in about eighty-seven years."

"Maybe so," said Dr. Velikof Vonk.

"Maybe so," said Willy McGilly.

THE eminents followed the Boomer Flats people to the river. And the Comet, we suppose, took his horse and buggy and ascended out of it. Odd old fellow he was, pieces falling off him. He'd hardly last another hundred years.

The red and black river was in surging flood with a blood-colored crest bearing down. And the Flats—they were just too flat. The

flood would be a mile wide here in one minute and everywhere in that width it would be deep enough and swift enough to drown a man. It was near dark, near the limit of roaring sound. But there was a pile of large rocks there in the deepening shallows. Plenty of rocks—at least one big heavy rock for every person.

The Boomer Flats people understood what the rocks were for, and the Giants among them understood. Two of the eminents understood. One of them, Arpad, apparently did not. Arpad was carrying on in great fear about the dangers of death by drowning.

Quickly then, to cram mud into the eyes and ears and noses and mouths. There is plenty of mud and all of it is good. Spirits of Catfish protect us now!—it will be only for a few hours, for two or three days at the most.

Arpad alone panicked. He broke and ran when Crayola Catfish tried to put mud in his mouth and nose to save him. He ran, and stumbled in the rising waters to his death.

But all the others understood. They lay down in the red roaring river, and one of the giants set a heavy rock on the breast of every person of them to hold them down. The last of the giants then rolled the biggest of the rocks onto his own breast.

So all were safe on the bottom of the surging torrent, safe in the old mud-clay cradle. Nobody can stand against a surging flood like that. The only way is to lie down on the bottom and wait it out. And it was a refreshing, a deepening, a renewing experience. There are persons, both inside and outside the orders, who make religious retreats of three days every year for their renewal. This was very like such a retreat.

When the flood had subsided (this was three days later), they all rose again, rolling the big rocks off their breasts. They cleared their eyes and ears and mouths of the preserving mud. They resumed their ways and days.

For Velikof Vonk and for Willy McGilly it had been an enriching experience. They had found the link that was not really lost, leaving the other ninety-nine meanwhile. They had grown in cousinship and wisdom. They said they would return to the Flats every year at mud-duck season and turtle-egg season. They went back to T-Town enlarged and happy.

THERE is, however, a gap in the Magi set, due to the foolish dying of Arpad Arkabaranan. It is not of Scripture that a set of Magi should consist of only three. There have been sets of seven and nine and eleven. It is almost of Scripture, though, that a set should not consist of less than three. In the Masulla Apocalypse it seems to be said that a set must

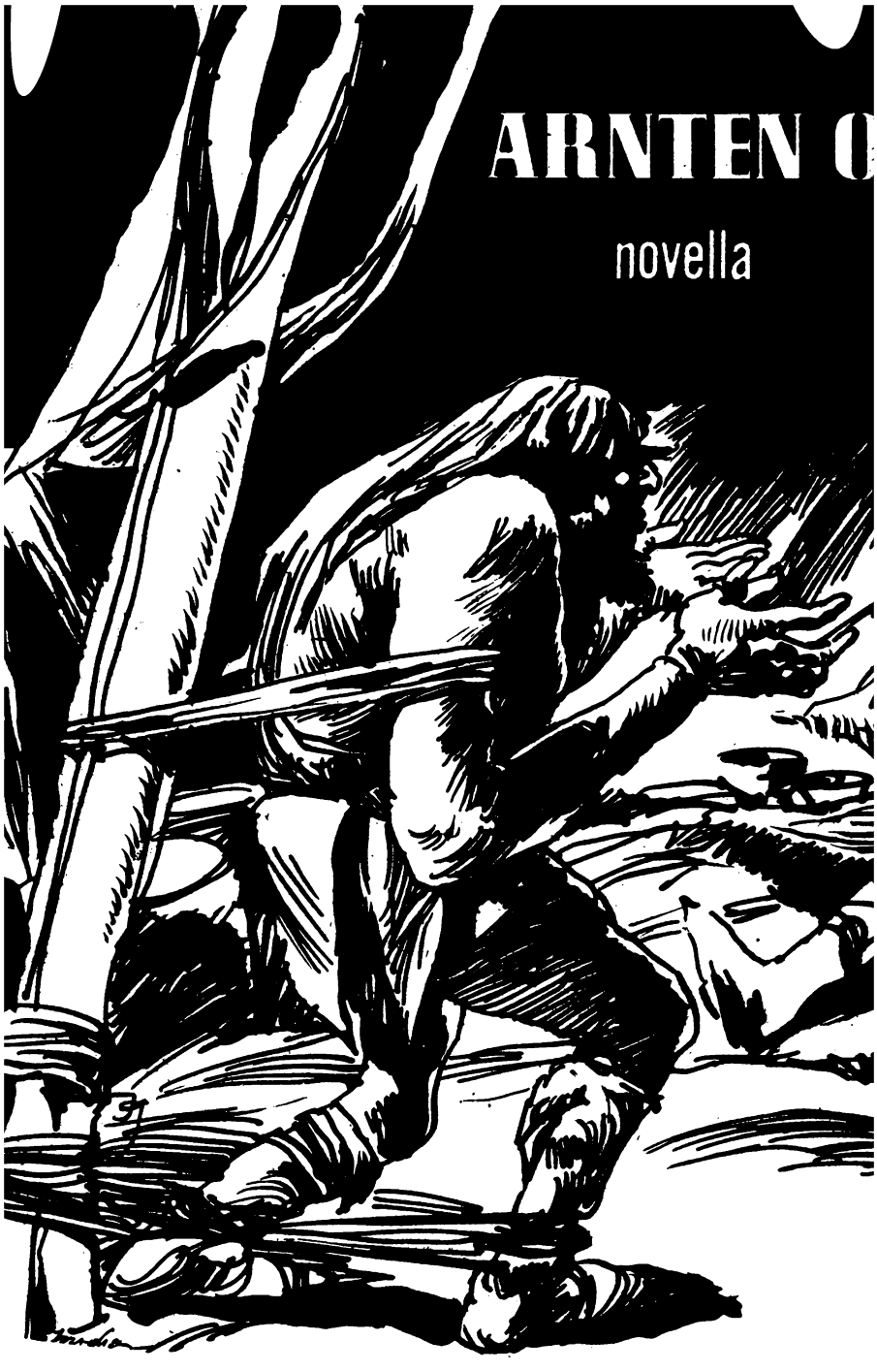
contain at the least a Comet, a Commoner and a Catfish. The meaning of this is pretty muddy, and it may be a mistranslation.

There is Dr. Velikof Vonk with his huge head, with his heavy orbital ridges, with the protruding near-muzzle on him that makes the chin unnecessary and impossible, with the great back-brain and the great good humor. He is (and you had already guessed it of him) an ABSM, a neo-Neanderthal, an unmissing link, one of that branch of the human race that lives closest to clay and catfish.

There is Willy McGilly who belongs (and he himself has come to the realization of this quite lately) to that race of mankind called the Comets. He is quite bright, and he has his periods. He himself is a short-orbit Comet, but for all that he has been among the stars. Pieces fall off him. He leaves a wake. But he'll last a while yet.

One more is needed so that this set of Magi may be formed again. The other two aspects being already covered, the third member could well be a regularized person. An older person of ability, an eminent. Or a younger person of ability, a pre-eminent.

This person may be you. Put your hand to it if you have the surety about you, if you are not afraid of green snakes in the cup (they'll fang the face off you if you're afraid of them), or of claymud, or of comet dust, or of the rollicking world between. ●


ARNTEN O
novella

ULTIMA THULE

Green food was free. Water was pure. But iron had a sickness caught from man!

AVRAM DAVIDSON

I

IN THE darkness of his grand-uncle's medicine hut by the flickerflicker of the faint fire (whick the man was alllowed to have, grudgingly, and at high tax, for preparing his simple witcheries) the boy recollected the sound of the taptap beats on the tiny witch-ery-drum and the sight of the man-drakes lifting the lid of their bark box house and coming out to dance by the fire, tossing up their small-small scrannel arms and stamping their tiny-tiny feet to the toom-*toom*, toom-*toom*, toom-*toom*petty-*toom* of the child-sized drum—then dancing backward and closing the lid on themselves as the last faint pulse beat died away.

A small man, his uncle or granduncle (in those days the boy did not distinguish), with a skill in small witcheries and small magics by which he sustained them. And

the boy felt proud of seeing what other boys did not see.

But most of his memories before the breakaway were ill ones.

When he grew big enough to wander from the partly underground medicine hut or the round thatched house where his uncle's sister sat mumbling as she pounded bark or stirred the acorn gruel, the boy learned swiftly enough of how little he had to pride himself in. If you are smaller by far than the smallest of any born in your birth year, if they are smooth of skin and fair of hair and you are dark and your swarthy skin is covered with a nap or bloom of dark hair—are these things to be proud of? If others have fathers and brothers who return from the hunt to be greeted by the singing of their women and if your only family connection with it all is when old uncle or old uncle's sister comes stooping up and waits for a bone or an offal to be tossed as to a dog—is there pride in this?

To be sure, he was quicker of body and sharper of mind than any of his birth year; sharp and quick enough to learn that sharpness and quickness won praise only for others and in him were only to be resented. That magic and witchery produced fear and that fear often produced respect; but that small-scale magic and witchery caused only small fear—suspicion, rather—and hardly ever respect at all. For fear and fears hung over the town like the smoke from the great central fire on lowering days. Fear that someone was working a witchery, fear of the wild ones of the woods, fear of the king and the tax-gathers, fear of known magic and of unknown even more. And the boy who was small and sharp and dark and shaggy produced an effect of strangeness which was like the subtle smell of fear—but was not strong enough to ward off the hates and wraths which this caused—and besides—and besides . . .

The affair of the great roan mammont, the rogue mammont, fear of fears and terror of terrors, brought all things to a head; but before that, long-long before that day of blood and death, that day of the hill-that-moved, the trees-that-walk, serpent-snout and spear-teeth and all the other names used when one dares not use the real name: *mammont;* long before then, when he was very small, there was the token.

The token hung on a thong from a peg in a post in his grandmother's hut. For a while it was above his head and he reached for it often while the old one squatted, mumbling, in the sun of the doorfront. He could not remember the first time he actually reached it, standing on a stool (probably), but he had a clear recollection of one day scanning it and seeing it and recognizing it. It was carved of wood, roughly but forcefully, in the form of a bear. It had the bear's head and one tooth clearly in the crude snout; it had the bear's paws and legs.

But the legs ended in the feet of a man.

PERHAPS at that time he had not recognized this strangeness;

he had certainly never seen a bear, for it was not till later that Tall Roke brought in the cub which was partly petted and partly tortured until it was abruptly killed and eaten. Likely at that childtime he did not know that a bear has bear's feet and that although they resemble a man's, yet they are not. Nor was it yet clear to him how subtly manlike the carving was.

But he had the clear recollection of scanning it that one day and becoming aware that the old woman, granduncle's sister and his own grandmother, had come in and was staring at him, on her blear and withered face a look odd even for her on whom odd looks were common. A look of fear and love and awe and horror.

Sensing that she was in what was for her a lucid mood, he asked as he pointed, "This—what?"

And she, promptly and matter-of-factly, said, "Your father." And as promply thrust awry her snaggle-snarl hair and screamed and rolled her rheumy eyes and tore open the bosom of her bark-cloth dress and beat and scratched her withered dugs and wailed and howled and beat her head upon the earthen floor. "Hinna!" she screamed. "Hinna! Hinna!" and, "Hinna-tenna!"

Such fits and antics were not so rare as to alarm the boy—for all he knew, all grandmothers behaved so—just as, for all he knew, all fathers were carved of wood and hung on leather thongs from posts. But this fit was uncommon severe and he appreciated, in fact, he rather enjoyed the new aspects of it, as he might have enjoyed a new grip noted in a dog-fight.

Hinna. So the old man sometimes addressed the old woman. Sometimes the old woman said it as she pointed out the small blue flowers of a plant occasionally brought back with other herbs and roots or leaves and barks from the woods by the old man. So: Hinna was the old woman and hinna was a flower, but he knew that this old woman was not thrown into a fit in order to mention either; he did not know *how* he knew and wondered, mildly, that he knew at all. Logic was here working scarcely above the level of intuition.

The old woman shrieked and babbled of something which was "Woe!" but mostly her words were strange and, *"Hinna-tenna!"* she screamed. And, *"Arn't! Arn't Arn't!"*

And then the old uncle was kneeling beside her, soothing her, calming her, arranging her tattered dress of pounded bark-lining, carrying her—at last, when her voice was a mere croon or drone—to the worn-almost-hairless half of deerhide which covered her grass bed. And the old man got up and seemed at a loss as he looked at the boy. Who sensed and instantly seized an opportunity.

Pointing to the token on the thong, "My father," he said.

"Yes," said the old man, unsurprised. Then he winced.

What made the boy say what he next said, still pointing? No knowing—unless it was unrealized awareness of a connection between strange things enclosed in a space of time—such as this moment

which had just passed, or perhaps still was passing.

Pointing to the token he asid, "Arn't. Arn't."

"Arn," his uncle said, absent-minded correction in his tone.

So. *Arn* was the token which was the bear which was his father and his father had somehow thrown the old woman into a fit in which *Arn't* was somehow different. And what else was in the fit which was familiar yet different—for something was.

Ah.

"Tenna," the boy said; immediately correcting himself: *"Hinna-tenna."*

Without so much as a sigh and in the same flat, abstracted voice in which he would explain to a visitor at the medicine hut the care and feeding of mandrakes or the price of a charm or the manner of a charm (other men whose work was witchery had the better sense to sink their voices and roll their eyes and make at least a few fearful gestures and whisper at least a few words in a doleful whisper, lips to ear. Other witcherers commanded higher prices, too, got amber-grains and goodly pelts, were not content with bones and offals) his granduncle said to him, "Hinna is the cornflower and is also my sister's name. Your grandmother. Was her daughter's name. Your mother. *Tenna* is a word in the Old Tongue, now archaic, used chiefly for witchery. Spoken sometimes by such relics as myself and sister. Tenna means 'daughter.' *Arn* in the older tongue is 'bear.' So, now I consider it, *Arn't* may be applied to the token, for my sister's daughter said she had it of the bear. As she said, too, she had you. But she was never right in her wits after that and grew worse and we found her drowned."

After a moment he nodded once or twice and left the house without more word, confident, apparantly, that he had said everything there was to be said. As, perhaps, he had.

THE boy realized, growing older, that often he himself saw sequences and connections where other boys saw none. But just as he could see logic and they not, just so things that seemed sensible to them were senseless and unpredictable to him. More than once he had been stoned away from following hunters, yet today he had been asked—not allowed, *asked*—"Come, honey-dripper, bring us good luck!" And here he was with the rest of them in the high grass and the sun hot upon the earth and on them all so that he could smell it and them and the grass and other things not even seen.

Honey-dripper, with a guffaw. It was a name for him. *Comb-robber* was another. Both meant *bear*, who stole the honeycomb from the honey tree and ate it, dripping its richness, grubs and wax and all. But *comb-robber*, applied to him, was merely an ill-name. *Honey-dripper* was less so, was a laughing term, and—somehow—referred not exclusively to the bear but also had something to do with men and the things men had with women. Tall Roke it was who'd said him this name this day and asked

him to come; and Tall Roke it was, when another had looked black and muttered, who had briskly and blithely answered, "What? For that some rough fellow tumbled his mad mother and gamed her, saying, 'I'm a bear!' What? A bigger fool than she or you I'd be to think the kid an ill-bringer for that. Ah no, but that his old uncle's witchery had maybe rubbed off on him a bit, and then a-smells as wild as any beasty and so may cover our own man-stinks—"

But as yet the boy could not smell the wild white horses they were hunting—the swift, mane-tossing, clever-cunning, clever-mad, mad-eyed, red-eyed, wild-eyed, wild, white horses—whom no man's mind or hand had ever yet thought to tame. Three days since, some village stripling, gaming about in the meadows, had found a colt with its leg broken in a mole hole, had swiftly (but, be sure, not without a swifter, fearful lookabout) cut its throat and borne it home. Perhaps one of its marrowbones was still stewing in a pot of spelt; the rest had sure been eaten. But the clever-mad horses of the herd had tracked the lostling down to its place of injury, had seen the blood, had traced the drips of blood as far to the village as even their mad courage cared to go. Since then they had been waging war: trampling crops, attacking cultivators and wanderers with hooves and teeth. So now the menfolk were carrying the war unto the horsefolk.

Time was when only the poorest of the poor would have had stone or bone for his weapons. All else had had iron—had even had arrow or spear-heads to spare, in case of breakage before a wandernain (some called them "shamblenain," but not to their faces) would come trading new irons for old: amber and peltries their fee: taking the broken points with them back to strange and distant Nainland to mend upon their witchery-forge, an art which only the nains had. As for bronze, that was only a memory, bronze had long since died of the green-sickness. As yet, out here, the deadly rust was moving slowly, but move it did; something was deadly wrong with iron, and no nains came; grim was the mood of the distant king, and—

"Hist, now," said Tall Roke. "Mind the plan, now. Drive away the young stallions and the mares with stones, the colts will follow—cut off the great stallion, and whilst we three engage him from in front, you two cut his tendons from behind." The great stallion, with hamstrings severed on his hind legs, would go down and never rise. Deprived of leader, the other steeds would flee.

Tall Roke hawked and spat and grunted. He needed not to point. They had come to the edge of the escarpment and in the near distance of the wide, shallow valley, they saw the horses like wee white clouds floating in the blue-green sky of grass. For a moment they gazed, the five or six full men, the twice that many striplings and the boy who had no name. Then they spread out widely and began the slow and cautious descent from the rim. Slow, for there was no

swift going down that uncertain slope; cautious, because they dared not give alarm to the horse herd.

The boy felt for the pouch with the stones in it. The touch was reassuring. Nothing else was. His first hunt. His heart pounding. It had been agreed that any needed signaling would take the form of a ground squirrel's whistling, as this would (at most) arouse the hunger of no creature larger than a fox or hawk. Tentatively the boy formed his mouth to make such a signal. But he never made it. The while he had been keeping a sort of sketch of things in his head. Yonder was the sun. The cliff directly behind. The wind, so. To the right must be the horse herd. A little left of straight ahead were, though now not seen, a clump of thick-boled trees. Beyond that, a low hillock of rusty scrub. A brook. A wallow.

ALARM, alarm rose so swift in his chest that it choked his breath. Something was wrong. Everything was wrong. He had gone the wrong way—or—for he was much too close to the hillock, he could see it now, he could not see the trees, which meant—and then came the whistle, and the whistle was to have come from Tall Roke and Tall Roke should be *that* way and the whistle was over *this* way —Vertigo took him, he was on both knees and one hand. Earthshake? For the hillock moved and his eyes fled from it and his eyes saw trees walking and someone screamed and screamed—it was not him, then it *was* him as it was many others, for by now all knew it was *the hill-that-moves, the trees-that-walk,* all of them could see the *serpent snout* that rose up huge and hairy and drank the wind, all could see the flash of *spear teeth,* all could hear the horrid trumpet scream of the *mammont! mammont! mamont!* as its tree-huge legs shook the grassy ground in its terrible charge, its trunk sweeping down the grass before it as a scythe, bloody scythe, bloody grass, bloody spears, bloody teeth—

Fear and failing flesh and yet senses still undimmed enough to hear Tall Roke's voice full strong as he shouted, "Hold to the plan! Axe men to the rear whilst I engage to the front—" *I* and not *we,* he did not trust to any others' courage to face the huge red mammont from the front, but still had hopes that some might brave the great beast's hind legs to strike at the lower tendons. Onward the mammoth beast had come, fast, fast, but faster yet ran Tall Roke, passing it—so swift he might have escaped, had he run in another direction, had such been his intent —passing it, running backward before it, turning it, darting back and away from it, shouting and feinting his spear at it—"Strike! Strike!" he shouted—

But no one was there to strike. No one was there but Tall Roke. One man. One boy. Who shrieked with all the fury of his unformed voice and cast his stones with all the power of his unformed arms. For one fell moment the mammont wavered, rage-reddened eyes darting from man to boy.

"Ankles! Ankles! Ah! Strike!

Ankles!" hoarsely but still hopefully: Tall Roke's voice. But no one struck. And the one man's spear hung in the air, it seemed not so much that he had cast it at the mammont as that the mammont had hurled itself upon the airborne spear: it lanced the line of the great face from tusk-socket to eye-socket: the mammont screamed its pain and rage: again the spear hung in the air: and now—and this was so puzzling—Tall Roke himself hung in the air, his fair hair all in a mist about his face—the python trunk seemed to rise slowly, slowly, slowly, and to descend slowly—slowly, slowly, and to wrap itself so slowly gently lovingly about the man's neck.

THERE were flowers in the meadow and bees in the air and then there was a dripping comb of honey and he thrust his paws first into the comb and then into his mouth and its taste was of gold and sweet and strong and delightful beyond the taste of any food tasted before and when it was quite quite gone he licked his paws and he licked the grass it had dripped on and then he went scampering off to where the bushes hung heavy with the full ripe berries and he ate his wonder full of them and

THREE of them returned alive to the village and Tall Roke was found alive (though only barely) where the mammont had tossed and gored him but, unaccountably, not trampled him as it had the others. But he, too, was soon dead. Another's head was found in the branches of a tree. Something that was probably his body, for it could be nothing else, was smeared nearby.

The horses had vanished.

That the great roan mammont was a rogue, all agreed. Only a rogue would travel alone, and there was no sign at all of any other mammont—and, for that matter, of that one himself—any more.

At first no one in the village said anything but, *It has happened.* Since the starting of the red-rust-sickness of all iron and the increasing wrath of the distant and once indifferent king, since the nains had ceased to visit and the tax exactions had begun to increase, rumors faint as whispers and whispers loud as shouts had been spreading, spreading, spreading. Some great calamity impended. And now it had come. It had happened.

Next in the village they began to ask, *How did it happen?*

By this time the boy thought he knew. And there was one other who, he thought, also thought he knew. And that meant there was a third who certainly knew.

The name of the second was Corm, a lad perhaps a year or two older, eyes gray rather than the common blue, hair not blond and curling but brown and lank, sallow of skin; his father was one of the three subchiefs of the townlet. If Corm had not given the boy many good words, that was nothing, no one did that; but he had never given any ill ones at all. The third was a whey-faced, slack-mouthed, slack-limbed shambelton, with an almost perpetual eruption about

the mouth at which he ever picked and which generally bled; a liar and bully and boor, yet well connected—that is, connected to families of some small importance who, by talking loud and often and big, made that small seem greater.

It was one of those moments which seem to have been a part of the center of all things, lying in wait from the beginning. No hint of it before. Old Hinna's grandson standing idly watching. Whey-face shambling along. The boy looking at him. Looking up to see Corm watching Whey-face as well. His eyes meeting Corm's. Instantly, as though spoken words had passed between them: *It was Whey-face who gave that first, wrong whistle, which would have been done right if Tall Roke had done it at the right time if it should have been done at all; it came from where Whey-face was, and only he would have been fool enough, coward enough to have done it, done it in coward-fool hopes of a reassuring return of it: it was that whistle, ill-done, which roused the mammont —in another moment Tall Roke would have seen it and managed to get us all safe away somehow, but—*

Still that same second. Whey-face looking up as though called, catching their glance, understanding, flushing, paling, and at once reacting in his coward way—not coward-foolish this time but coward-cunning. Pointing at the boy, shouting at the boy, attracting instantly every eye and mind voicing the unvoiced and making clamor become instant fact: "It was *him*! *He* brought the ill-fate, *he* brought the mammont there! The bear's bastard with the bear-stink on him! Bear's bastard! Nain's get! Made the mammont come! Curse-bringer! Shag-skin! Killed our men and boys! *Him! Him! Him*!" And, stooping, he snatched up a piece of dried filth, ran and flung it.

Then sticks, then stones. Next would-be arrows, axes, spears. No need to inquire, discuss, reason, weigh—instant, heart-warming hatred was quick, easy. "*Bear's bastard! Curse-bringer! Men killed! Bear-stink!*" The mammont was gone, the boy remained. He saw Corm's mouth open but neither he nor any heard Corm's word, drowned out in the bull-voiced clamor of all of Whey-face's kith and kin, believing or not believing, belief beside the point, the point: Ours. Support him. Shout loud. Throw something.

The boy ran. Terror runs swifter than rage follows. Boys can go where big men cannot—holes, hollows, runways, dogpaths, shinny up slender trees and drop over palings. There was his old uncle crouching by his slender fire. It was an instant. His grandmother's hut. A packet thrust into his hands, the bark bag with the small victuals the old man took with him when he hunted herbs. A hide lifted up to show an opening the boy had never seen before. A burrow, wide enough for him. A patch of light. The village palisades behind him. An echoing that might have been the clamor of the mob. That might have been the beating of his blood. Something clutched in his other hand. He ran. He ran.

II

"GO, ARNTEN. Find your father," the old uncle had said as he lifted the hide-flap. As it fell and all was dark, the boy heard him say, "It is time." Then nothing but a faint moment of one of the old man's chantings. *Arnten.* The word lodged like a grub in a honeycomb cell. *Arnten.* But there was no sign, yet. A faint thought: *it is my name.* No time for further thought. *Arnten.* His name. That and escape. For now, enough. A life. A name.

In the woods, however, nothing was now asking his name. With a knowledge deeper than thought he avoided the hard-trodden dust of the common path and sank into the thicket like a snake. Behind, he heard the clamor and shouting descend into a single sound on a single note and stay there, like the noise of a swarm of bees hovering and *mrumming* its one dull note forever. Somehow it sounded infinitely more menacing than any cluster of mere words. Presently the humming-*mrumming* grew louder. Then loud. The ear-pressed earth echoed like a drumhead. The echo filled the ear and air. Suddenly it was gone and he, Arnten, realized that it had gone a time ago and that he was alone and that if any were still seeking him, they were not doing it here.

Slowly he rose up in the thicket like a mist. He gained the path. He snuffed up the breeze. He listened. He was gone.

A BIRD sang twit-twit-*twit* on a branch. A ground squirrel hopped and scampered, scampered and hopped, vanished from view. There was a smell of wetness, of damp earth and the scent of the sweet green breath of plants. Arnten knew that there were times to look up and times to look down and times to look straight ahead. He saw the bush, he saw through the bush and, a long, long way beyond the bush he saw the boles of several trees but nothing in between. Softly, gently, he pushed the shrubby branches aside. For a moment he paused, holding his breath, listening. There was not, had not been for long, sounds of mob or pack or crowd. There had been no man sounds at all, save for his own. It was improbable that any enemy of his own blood was near. It was not impossible.

But he heard no new noise. Only the faint patter of the ground squirrel. Only the same twit-twit-*twit* of the bird on the branch.

He slipped past the handful of branches and let them make their own return to their natural positions, only restraining them enough so that they should close without sound. He went on a bit and then he stopped and considered, there in the cool green corridor which for now meant safety. It had been used enough to create a trail, but little enough to allow the bush's growing to obscure the entrance. Perhaps small and dainty deer slipped along this tunnel through the trees. They would not mind sharing it with him. Or perhaps white tiger, dire wolf, snowy leopard, used it in quest of the same small dainty deer. This thought contracted and shook his

limbs in a long shudder. He felt and saw the nap of hairs quiver upon his skin and stand up from the fearful flesh.

His mind leaped from thought to thought as a spark of fire leaps from one twig to another. Another boy, conceiving the same thought, might find his mind working *thought of danger—beast equals danger—beast equals panic—run for your life*, without even realizing the process. But his own mind worked *thought of danger—beast equals* think *about danger—beast*. And he stopped and thought.

The thought is not the thing.

And the thought told him that the thing, the great ones among the danger-beasts, were seldom if ever to be found in this part of Thule at this season of the year; they were to be found (or rather, avoided) farther to the north, where men had less thinned out the game on which they chiefly preyed; winter snows, in which the hooved beasts would flounder and be more easily tracked and trapped and killed, might indeed bring the great killers down.

But then again might not.

He felt the drum within his bosom slow its clamor and then its beats receded to their normal slow strokes, below the threshhold of perception. He began to go on, but the trail was narrow and something caught upon a branch and held him. He looked down and saw he was still carrying without awareness the two things hastily taken in his flight from town. The bark bag of food, the bear-token upon its leathern thong. It was this last he now had to disengage. It seemed somehow as natural to hang it around his neck as to loop the grass cord of the food wallet from shoulder to hip. So. He had no weapon but he had food, itself a sort of weapon—was not hunger the chief enemy? He had a potency in the form of the bear carving, a token of whoever his father was—a father contained in a piece of wood on a thong was better than no father at all. *Find your father, Arnten.* What did he know of how or where? Either his father was or was not a bear. If not, then he knew and could know nothing. If so—then what? Where were bears? Anywhere, manywhere, where there were trees and streams. So. Avoid the grasslands, the great meadows. But he would have done so in any case. There was the game he could not take, there would be the great beasts, the danger-beasts he could not forfend.

Therefore, the forest. A tree creaked. It seemed a Yes.

WHEN the balls of boiled millet and scraps of dried meat and fish were gone from his bark bag he went a while without and he hungered. Then there were berries and plants his old herb-uncle had shown him. He ate walking and he slept little. He seemed to need less of either. If the path forked and one branch inclined toward the plains of danger, he took the other. If there was still a choice and a question, he held the token in his hands and pointed it between the paths. It moved. Sometimes slowly, slightly. But it moved. It had one day not yet

stopped moving when he felt the eyes upon him and looked up. They were great, glowing, amber eyes—intelligent eyes, but far too strange to be the eyes of any man. Nor were they.

The figure was squat of body and shag of skin, with a brown main of hair upon scalp and broad face. The extraordinarily long arms were folded across the extraordinarily thick chest. A kilt of soft leather girdled the loins. Short were the powerful legs. Over arms, hands and chest and belly the long brown hair grew thickly. The boy found himself looking at his own body and limbs. Instantly, several thoughts—and one of them as an almost instant surprise: *I am not afraid!* And, another—

"Nay, boy." The voice was strange in more than being unknown. It had odd tones and echoes, the final vowels nasalized so that almost they sounded as *nay'n*, *boy'n*. "Nay, boy. It's isn't me nurr any we who's is fathered ye 'n given 'e them warm hairs upon yurr's skin." So acutely did the strange one discern his thoughts. And spoke a few words of no understanding, at first, to the boy—whose ear sped back and caught on a word he knew.

"*Arn't.*"

He said, "The bear—"

Something flashed golden in the amber eyes. More strange words. Then— "Ye dow int speak en witchery words—hey'n?" Arnten shook his head. "Nay," murmured the stranger. Almost, it was "Ngayng." He said, "We speak it ever 't'the forge. Ye must's ever speak en 't' Th' Old Tongue t'iron, furr iron 't's a witchery thing. So we speak en it furr habit, ef we dow int think not to—"

"You said—*'Arn't'*—"

"Eh. We speak 's'en it, too, 't'the bear, furr the bear dow be a witchery-beast. All creaturr dow die, but the bear dow come alive agains. And the Star Bear dow gived we-folk the first fire." The glowing eyes fixed his own. The odd voice, strong and strange, but devoid of harm for him, went on. "En all of Thule's the wurrd gone round, '*When the wolf dow meet the bear: beware.*' " There seemed something expectant in his tone, something expectant in his look.

But look and tone alike meant nothing to the boy, who said, as though thinking aloud, "A nain." The nain stopped his head and his shoulders. And the boy said, "Arnten, I am Arnten." And this time the nain stooped his entire thick body to the waist.

Then, straightening, he extended an arm so long that its fingers almost touched Arnten's chest. "We know en what place 't' is." The boy's eyes followed and saw the thick and hairy fingers of the thick and hairy hand were pointing not to his body but to the token slung upon it.

"Where? It is *here*."

The nain grunted, held up a hand straight from the wrist in the nain sign of negation. "Not this. Th' other this. Th'—th'—" He struggled to express himself, his manner rather like that of a man seeking a paraphrase for a thing he does not care to name precisely. "Th' *other* this. *That*!"

And he turned and walked away. Arnten followed.

AFTER a full seven-days' walk they came to it. The place was more of a hole or cleft than a cave, but it was dry. Part of the ceiling had fallen in; boulders littered the floor. The nain without hesitating or pausing put his chest against the largest and wound long arms around it. He moved the stone up and over and then back. "Take 't' up," he said. "'T's not furr we to touch." *It*, clearly, was not the rock. A moment passed, in the dim light before Arnten saw *it*. For a moment he thought it was a piece of wood. Then, more by intuition than lineal recognition, he knew that what he saw on the ground where the rock had been was a witchery-bundle.

That.

It was perhaps the size of his forearm and, with his forearm, after he had taken it outside in the sunlight, he wiped at the dusty hide covering. It was certainly a witchery-bundle. There were witchery signs upon it, some clear, some dim, some familiar, some unknown. Largest and most deeply etched were the sun and the bear. The bear was almost certainly a replica of the one he wore. Or—was it the other way around? "The sun," he said.

"Eh'ng," the nain agreed. "The sun and the bear, they go together. For the sun dies and 't comes alive again. And the bear dow die and dow come alive again. The sun give fire and the bear, too. Eh'ng," he said, after a moment, eyeing the hide-covered bundle, and musing. "How many snowtimes? Two hands? Surely two. But three? Surely not three. Bear, he telled a-we, Here dow be my token. Here dow by my," the nain gestured, "*that*. Bear telled: 'Look for it. If you see him, manchild-bearchild—if you see my token on'-t'him; show him where.' And we say'd him, Eh'ng-ah, Bear."

It was mystery, but it was good mystery. Witchery, but he could not think it any but good witchery. It was a good moment. Why, then, did the flood of bad memory rise up in his mind, come spilling out of his mouth? "They stoned me. They pelted me with filth. They called me *nain's get* and *bear's bastard* and they tried to kill me."

The nain's amber-colored eyes glowed and darkened and in level sunlight glowed like a beast's in the night, glowed red, glowed like an amber in the nighttime fire.

Words like distant thunder rolled in his vast chest and rumbled in his wide throat.

"Wolf's lice! Accursed smoothskins!" He spoke at last in the common tongue and continued to do so, though occasionally dropping into naintalk or the archaic language of witchery. "If it were not for us and our iron they would still be eating of grubs and lizards and roots. And what will they do now, as iron dies? Is there one of them, a single one even, with cunning and courage enough to feed the wizards? Their king, ah, he might have, when he was young, but he's gotten old now, he's gotten half-mad now, he looks in the wrong direction, he afflicts where no affliction can help, the wind

blows cruel hard from the north but he thinks it blows from the south! A nain's life is that it's worth to try to persuade him—if a nain wished it. As for the rest of the slim race—" He caught his breath, part in a sigh, part in a sob. The fiery glow in his eyes began to die away.

"Nay, I'll say no more as regards that race and blood, 'tis partly yours. They may deny it, may deny you—you may wish to deny it and them. But the blood cannot be denied. Nay, nay. The blood cannot be denied." Abruptly, gesturing to the bundle, the nain said, "Open it then."

The outer covering had been tied tight with sinews, but his probing fingers found one loose enough to allow his teeth purchase. He gnawed, felt the fibers give way—give until his teeth met with a click. Quickly his fingernails pulled the thread, tugged it from pierced hole, from the next and next. Some sort of dried membrane—the bladder, perhaps, of a large animal—was inside the outer covering, bound about with bark cord which did not long resist attack. Inside was a long pouch with a drawstring tied in tassels. Carefully he unfastened this, carefully he laid out the contents on the outer wrappings.

First, by size alone, was a knife in a sheath of horn and leather, with a good bone handle carved in the same likeness of a bear. It was entirely unaffected by the iron-rot. It was a good knife.

There was also a dried and withered beechnut.

There was also a greenstone.

There was also a bear's claw.

There was also, bent and doubled, but not yet broken, a river-reed.

There was nothing else.

He looked up to ask about these, but the nain was gone.

EVERY man had a witchery-bundle; even children devised them in imitation of their elders. Some had richly adorned ones, the contents bought of high-priced witcherers for nuggets of amber and pelts of marten, sable, ermine, white tigers, snow leopards. Some had but meager pouches containing perhaps a single item—a bone, a dried this-or-that, a something seen in a dream and sought for and found. A tooth pried from a dry skull. A fragment of something said to be a thunderstone.

Some had inherited.

So had he.

The knife alone would at any time have been deemed a good inheritage, the more so now that good iron was hard to find and harder to keep. The more so for the circumstances of its hiding and finding. But what did the other mean? A bear claw, now that was easy to understand. But the reed? The greenstone? *Arnten, find your father.* Had he found him? Not yet. But now, having found this much, might he not find a source? For as long—no, longer—than he himself had lived, the nains had not seen his father. He might be dead. He might be far away. He might be neither. He might be alive and very near.

Arnten carefully restored the magic items to their pouch—ex-

cept for the knife, which he slung about his waist—and started off. Excitement and happiness had made him heedless and when he heard the low-voiced song in the clearing he had no thought but to see who was singing it.

It was one of the Painted Men, that was at once obvious—one of the Painted Men whom it was death to see unpainted. By greatest good fortune, though, he had just finished painting himself, however—and what a curious pattern his skin did present! Almost hideous. Not till the man, still humming his witchery-song, lifted his brush and dipped it in a tiny pot did Arnten realize, cold with horror, that what he was seeing was the man's naked skin!—that he had only then begun.

The Painted (or unPainted) Man swung about, panting with shame and rage. Arnten felt the club's first blow.

III

THE old nain stood stolidly where the uneasy soldiers had bade him stand. He could without great effort have broken the ribs of all of them and the necks of most before any of them could stop him—and perhaps it was this that made them uneasy. But perhaps not. The king's camp and court was an uneasy place in general these days—not that the rest of Thule lay at much ease either. Slots of sunlight came through the smoke hole in the top of the great tent. The king sat back on a pelt-piled bench and the nain thought it seemed they lied who said the king was age-wasted. Indeed, as the Orfas sat there, glaring, hands-clenched upon his knees, he seemed all too vigorous. Within himself the old nain sighed a slight sigh. Only to the extent that the smoothskins were unpredictable were they predictable at all. Ah, eh. Seasons come and seasons go and ever the race of nains would remain upon the earth. Meanwhile, one endured. Heat, cold, toil, hunger, thirst, a savage beast, an unwise king.

A witchery queen.

The soldiers, fumbling and breathing their unhappiness, finished shackling the old nain's horsehide fetters to one of the roof posts, were angrily waved outside, almost stumbled over each other in their eagerness to obey.

For a long moment the king continued to glare. Then he said, slowly and with effort, but quite correctly, "Uur-tenokh-tenokh-guur."

So, this was something. At least the king remembered the nain's proper name. Or had learned it. A small courtesy, perhaps. But a courtesy. He would return it. "Orfas," he said.

The king's head snapped up with a jerk. He was not angered, he was not pleased, his attention had been called to something forgotten. Probably it had been long since he had been called by his own name in The Old Tongue, called anything (perhaps) save King or Great Bull Mammont or some other lickleg flattery such as the smoothskins used. The old nain almost without thinking essayed more syllables in the witchery language, but the king's swift gesture cut him off.

"My store of that speech has rusted in my mind," Orfas said, "as has my story of the iron you have cursed." His head shifted, his eyes flashed. "*Why* have you cursed it?"

"We have not. Do you curse your kingdom?"

"You are the High Smith of the nains. I have not had you brought here to bandy questions with me."

"You had not brought me here at all, had I not thought you would keep your word."

Bluff and bluster. What? Not kept his word? How?

"You said I would not be bound."

A false and further look of outraged pride, falling into one of faint regret and helplessness at having been stupidly misunderstood. "I said that you would not be bound with iron."

"Is it by such cunning shift of words that you hope to command either my respect or my assistance?" The king flushed, either in affront or from some vestigial sense of shame. "Do you think me an owl or a bat, unable to see in daylight? I see that none of your captives are bound in iron. It is not out of any honor that I have been bound in thongs of skin, but because you no longer trust iron." It was a statement, not a question, it went home. The king looked aside, for a moment at a loss. "I will give you an advice—" The king sat up. "Sea-cow's skin is tougher by far and far less risky to hunt."

The king growled and moved on his bench. Then he came forward and, stooping, loosed the High Smith's bounds. "It is well," the old nain said aloud. In his mind he said that in the brighter light the Orfas looked his full age indeed. Gray streaked the once yellow hair, now scanted. The smoothskin was no longer quite so smooth of skin at all: here wrinkled, there slack, elsewhere puffed with fat where not hollowed. It was nonetheless well, this act. Uur-tenokh-tenokh-guur sat and the king sat before him. Would he eat?—Would he drink? the king asked. The nain grunted, held his hand up. No. A silence fell.

"Listen," said the king at last. "What will you nains do when the barbar-folk invade?"

"I do not know that they will invade. I do not believe that they will invade. Why do you think so?"

The king restrained himself. Beneath his shag eyebrows his eyes looked at the nain like the waters of a wintry sea. "Why should they not invade? Are we now known to them as the source of great wealth? Amber and ivory and peltry—do they not value these things? Is there not a proverb, *When the prey stumbles, the hunter sharpens his knife*? They will invade to gain our wealth; they will invade because without iron, good iron for weapons, we are weak before them; they will invade because I tell you they intend to invade and it is in order to strengthen themselves by weakening us that they have cursed our iron—"

The old nain wheezed in the way that nains have and he said, "So now it is the barbar-folk who have cursed iron. And not the nains."

Slant-glanced, Orfas looked at him. "All the witchery of iron is yours and you have kept it yours

and we have suffered you to keep it yours. Besides the one kept by treaty at my court, there has been no forge outside of Nainland. If any man had a broken spear or plowpoint, he had to wait in hopes of a wandernain coming by with unbroken spear or plowpoint to trade him old for new plus a goodly gift— Nay, High Smith. I never begrudged the nainfee, myself paying highest of all. If this is at the bottom of all, let it be said the nainfee will be raised, let it be doubled, tripled—"

"It is not we."

The king's teeth clenched upon a strand of beard he had thrust into his mouth. "What has ever happened to iron without the nains' causing it to happen?"

"This is a new thing, King. Had we not asked you long before you asked we?"

The king's hand made a movement, the king's face made a movement. The king was not in an instant persuaded. "You asked in order to cover yourself. But you have not covered yourself. Do you not know that *the king's ears are the longest ears in Thule*? I hear all things and I can, from what I hear, reckon all things. Thus it is that I know that iron is accursed, that the nainfolk have cursed it— at whose behest and for what purpose? Your silence is useless. Speak, then."

The old nain sighed.

"If you hear all things, then already you have heard of what the nains say among the nains in Nainland, namely that it is doubtless a device of the neglected wizards of Wizardland in order to ensure that they do not remain neglected: this curse, the death of iron. And if from what you hear you can reckon all things, then you can reckon what needs be done."

Now it was the king who sighed.

"You speak to me as though we were two old women pounding bark. You will speak differently if I come upon Nainland with all my men."

The old High Smith shook his massive head. "It is all one, if you come upon Nainland with all your men or with but one or none of your men. The forges of Nainland are cold, Orfas. The forges of Nainland are cold."

AS HE stepped from the outer to the inner of the two rooms in which he was to be lodged—or confined—he saw three great white flowers lying together upon a mat. He stopped still.

"I thought you might remember," a voice said. "I thought it might please you."

"Dame, I do remember," the old nain said. "And I am pleased."

He touched without bending down the flowers with his fingers. The blooms were scentless, but the room contained the scent of some that had never blossomed in the northern land of Thule. He had heard of the tiny horns and small flasks carven in strange designs upon strange stone, which contained the odorous essences of plants for which Thule had no name, delivered at intervals in trading vessels for great price and for the anointing and the pleasure of the Orfas Queen. He turned.

"Your face told me that you

had never seen them before and that they pleased you; so I gave them to you, the three of them, and presently you gave me these —" She took from her broad bejewled belt the ivory case containing the three small things so carefully wrought: dirk and spoon and comb. "Only see," she said, sorrowfully. The red-rotted metal crumbled at her slight finger touch. "Can you not effect a cure?"

His broad stern face relaxed into something much like sorrow, he held both his hands straight up at the wrists. "They are so small," he said, musing. "All the witchery of iron known to the nains might just suffice to mend them. But the Orfas King would not believe that. If these could be cured, he would expect, he would demand, he would require, that all the rotting iron in his realm be cured. And this cannot be done. I do not say it can never be done. But it cannot be done now. I do not know when. Perhaps never again in our lives—Dame—perhaps never in our lives —"

A moment's silence. "I shall leave them at the forge," she said. Again a moment's silence. Then she said and her beauty seemed no less than it had been that long ago when Uur-tenokh-tenokh-guur had been a wandernain and she the lady of the Orfas Chief. He not yet king. She not yet queen. Sundry sayings floated in his mind. *One queen is every queen, every queen is all queens.* A beautiful woman, no doubt, and without question well versed in witchery, though he knew as little of queencraft as she of naincraft. She spoke again and said, "What have you to tell me of one who waits to return from across the all-circling sea?" He looked at her with pure unknowing and the certainty ebbed from her face. Then she said, "One who is not to be named, one who is the son of the half-brother—"

Understanding seemed to come not so much from his mind as from his broad and grizzled chest, whence a sigh of comprehension welled. "Ahhh. That one, who contested with— Nay, Dame, I haven't seen that one for four handfuls of seasons. Eh, must be full four. Nor heard of that one in that time. Say you that he has passed the all-circling seas?"

She gazed at him, a line between her brows. "Say you not? I see you seem full ignorant of what I had thought every nain, as every man, has heard: that one fled to the barbar-lands after fleeing court —when my Orfas gained the kingship—and has conspired to curse the iron so that, when he returns with hordes of barbar-folk, the kingsmen shall be as though unarmed. And say you that you know this not?"

He stretched forth both his long, long arms and held up both his thick and calloused palms—straight up—and he looked at her with pure unknowing.

LONG he sat there alone, musing on what she had said, striving to make sense of it. Long he sat there, reflecting on old conflicts long forgotten—though clearly not forgotten by the Orfas King. Long he sat there, yearning

for the red fires and the hot forges and the lust and joy of beating out the good red iron. Old forge songs and sayings came to him and old sayings not of the forge at all, such as *By three things only can a king be made: by strength, by magic, and by fortune.*

Having set in the outercourt a watch of mandrakes who would shriek beshrew if so much as unbidden shadow fell, Merreddelfen, the principal witcherer, and the king and queen sat in the Room of Secret Counsel.

Said the queen, "What news?"

Said the king, "What help?"

Said the sage, "Much news, little help."

In his mind he said, *Little news, no help.* But one did not say such dire words, doom words, to the king. "Slayer of SpearTeeth, the Painted Men report a spy in the forest. I have no fear; the spy is dead."

Said the king, "Why dead? Why dead? From a dead spy no news can be gotten."

Said the queen, "Why not dead? A dead spy betrays no secrets."

Said the sage, "Great Dire Wolf, a dream has been dreamed of All-Caller, the great fey horn. No doubt this portends great good and who better to enjoy great good than thee, Great Dire Wolf?"

Said the king, "Ah."

Said the queen, "Oh."

Said the sage, "Woe."

Said the king and queen, "*What?*"

Said the sage quite swiftly, "Woe to the enemies of the King of Thule, the Slayer of Bull Mammonts, the Great Dire Wolf."

Said the sage quite slowly, "Wearing my Cloak of Night, I crept to the mines; there I heard the nain-thralls chanting in the Old Language, singing in the Magic Tongue. Lord and Lady, they intoned a tale of Fireborn, a thing of witchery of which they said it will cut good iron. *Good iron!*—Lord and Lady! And if the nainfolk make words about good iron, is this not a sigh that the nains know that irón will soon be as good as iron was before?"

Said the sage quite steadily, "Lady, you must use all your ways and wiles. Lady, you must prepare for many journeyings. Lady, you must wear many masks."

Then they set their heads even closer together and they whispered and nodded and bit their lips. The mandrakes muttered. And the shadows danced.

THE breadth of the cavern was one nain wide and the height of the cavern was one nain high. Soldier guards, kingsmen, were obliged to stoop. More than once when the nain-thralls had been ordered to make the roof higher they expressed a gruff unwillingness to do so, saying that the roof would fall. So the guards were obliged to swing sideways the cudgels with which they struck the nain-thralls if the nains did not hack their stone-mattocks into the crumbly ironrock swiftly enough or if they lingered or stumbled while carrying the baskets of ore up the long incline and up the risky ladders set in shallow steps—up, up and up to the open sky inside the grim stockade.

Not long ago the notion of nain-thralls had only belonged to the past—a subject for winter tales or summer-night songs—how, in the days of bronze—when no king reigned—the nain-thralls dug the brazen-ore* and forged the brazen-tools, how the green-sickness came upon Thule and all bronze died and Chaos was king; how the nains discovered the secret witchery of iron and were free men at all times after, only paying the nainfee to the man king who in subduing the chiefs succeeded them as Power.

Thralldom was still the subject of song and story—or rather, again.

But who cared what dirges the nains sang as they toiled or what accounts they told as they lay on their beds of bracken in their imprisoned nights?

The swans fly overhead
And the nains see them.
The moles tunnel through the earth
And the nains see them.
Stockades do not wall the swans
And the nains see them.
Fetters do not bind the moles
And the nains see them.

The baskets of ore were emptied into hand barrows and the thralls carried the barrows to the forge.

Once the nains were free as swans
And the nains see them.
Once the nains were free as moles
And the nains see them.

The forge was a flat rock rising from deep under the ground. The fire burned upon a hearth of other flat rocks, raised to a platform of the same height as the forge. The lumps of ironstone (and the articles of sick iron) were placed in the fire and burned. Although the kingsmen walked to and fro in violation of the ancient compact which excluded them as it did all strangers, they learned nothing from their observations that did them any good. All ores looked alike to them; they did not know which ones to discard. All fired ironstones remained mysteries still to them; they knew not, though the nains did, which ones to discard as too brittle and which to pull out with greenwood toolsticks to be pounded upon the forge stone. Nor did they learn (or very much attempt to learn) the art of smiting with the stout stone hammer, turning and beating, beating and turning—all the while intoning in the Old Tongue:

Pound it, pound it, pound it well,
Pound it well, well, well,
Pound it well, pound it well,
Pound it well, well, well . . .

because it was said, *The sound of the voice is good for the iron . . .*

PERHAPS it was no longer as good as it once had been. Nothing seemed to be. Day after day the nains toiled to make new iron, hacks and spears and knife-heads and arrow points. And day after day the productions of—at first—the previous year were returned to them, rotten with rust,

* Although the presence of bronze as a crude earth is very rare, it is not unknown.

flaking and powdering, to be melted down and made new and whole again. The previous year—at first. Then the irons of the previous half-year. Then the previous season. Then last week, month—last fortnight.

One sweating nainsmith paused and pointed to a red-sick lancehead and his chest, thick and thicketed as some woodland hill, swelled as he spoke. "Not a seven-night since I beat this out—and now look how swift the iron-ill has afflicted it!" And he added in the witchery-tongue: "Thou art sick, thou art sick. Alas and woe to thee and us for thy very sickness"

And in his rumbling, echoing voice he began to chant and was joined by his thrall-fellows:

Woe for the iron that is sick,
And the nains see it.
Woe for the black stone whose red blood wastes,
And the nains see it.

He thrust the heap of rusted metal into the wood fire, deep, deep, till red coals and red metals met.

Woe for the king whose men take captive,
And the nains see it.
They take captive upon the paths,
And the nains see it.
They lead away in heavy ropes,
And the nains see it.
Captivity and toil lay waste the heart,
And the nains see it.
Captivity and toil lay waste the flesh,
And the nains see it.
The nain-thralls waste like iron,
The king's evil is like rust,
The queen's lust is wasteful, evil,
Evil, evil, are these times,
These days, consumed as though by wolves.
When will the wolf confront the bear,
And the nains see it?
When will the stars throw down their spears?
And the nains see it?
Confusion take these smooth of skin
And the nains see it?
When will the wizards' mouths be fed,
And the nains see it?

The nainsmith seized a lump of iron and beat upon it with the stone hammer with great, resounding blows; and with each blow they all shouted a word:

When! Will! This! King-! -dom!
Rot! And! Rust!
And! The! Nains! See! It!

IV

STRANGE sounds he heard as he lay between earth and sky, rising and sinking, turning over and over again. Strange calls upon strange horns, strange voices, sounds. Pains, swift and passing like flashes of lightning, shot through him, again and again, then less often. The Painted Men were pursuing him; he hid from them; he hid in hollows beneath the roots of trees, he hid in the forks of the branches of trees, perched upon the crests of rocks,

slid into the spaces between them. Always, always, saw the Painted Men prance by, panting in rage and shame that he had seen their naked skin. Always, always he stayed quite still. And always, always, they passed him by. And always, always they paused, legs frozen in mid-stride.

And always they turned, saw him; he felt the blows; all vanished.

Years went by.

WHEN he became aware that he was returning to the everyday world he said in his mind that he would be very cunning and not reveal that he was no longer in the other world. He lay very still. Perhaps the Painted Men were uncertain if he were alive or dead and were lying in wait to see. He could not, through his parted eyelids, observe anyone or anything at all, save for the green network surrounding him and through which faint glints of sky were visible. But he had a faint yet firm feeling that if he were to roll his eyes just a bit to the right — He did not; he was too canny for that.

Besides, his right eye seemed swollen so much that—

And then a hand appeared, small as that of a large child, delicate as that of a young woman, yet not either: in the dim green light and through only one and a half eyes the hand seemed not entirely real, seemed almost translucent, had something about the bone structure, the nails—how many joints were there—nacreous as the inside of certain sea or river shells.

The hand placed something on his puffed eye, something cool and damp and soothing.

. . . and without awareness of intent to do so, he put up his hand and took the other by the wrist and sat up. Almost, he had not held the hand at all. Almost, it was as if his fingers were encircling something which had dimension without having substance—a delicate flower, as it might be, in the shape of a hand—and it slipped out from his grasp as simply as a sunbeam.

He had never seen a perry before.

Something slipped off his eye—he saw it was a dressing of bruised leaves and grasses, damp as though with the morning's dew: the perry's delicate and almost insubstantial hand took it and placed it on the swollen eye again and the perry's other hand took his hand, did not so much lift as guide it to hold the compress in place.

As the thin dew sparkling upon a cobweb, so did the perry's garments glint and sparkle; as the shy fawn stands in the gladey underbrush, not quite trembling and not quite looking at the intruder but poised for instant flight, so did the perry stand at the entrance to the leafy bower.

Arnten's body did not so much still pain him as it echoed faint reflections of remembered pain. Dim outlines of bruises he could see here and there upon his skin; he remembered enough lore of herbs and simples from his medi-

cine uncle to know that even the most puissant leaves or roots or grasses had not by themselves done all this work of healing: but the witchery of the perries, either intent or inherent or both, had aided them. At first he had had a fleeting thought that he might be in the hands of The Woman of the Woods, of whom many tales were told. To be sure, he had never seen the Woman of the Woods, just as he had never seen a perry—but his uncle had told him enough of each so that now he knew. His uncle who was his mother's uncle. His mother whom he had lost.

Arnten, find your father.

His father whom he had never had. The bear he could not find. The man, the mocker (had said Long Roke) who had "gamed" his mother. The bogey for whom the boys of the village had held him slightly in awe and so much in scorn. Because of whom he had fled for very life. In which flight he had all but lately lost his life. And now lay here, back from the edge of death, in the company of a creature far more fey than any nain, who spoke no word and barely looked at him and barely smiled yet had felt that deep concern for him and even now trembled between visibility and invisibility, substance and shadow, staying and leaving.

This gentle presence touched the cords which bound his pent misery and long-contained sorrow and did that which heavy and brutal blows had not and could not have done, and he covered his face with his hands and broke into tears.

He wept long and without restraint and when he had stopped at last, he knew it would be long, if ever, before he wept again. His eyes were wet and his chest ached, but these were slight shadows which would pass. All his body aches had gone. Something had changed in him forever. He dried his eyes, including the one no longer swollen—and he was on his knees and rising when he realized that the perry was no longer there.

HE WAS aware of hunger and thirst, but more of thirst. He was aware of something else, a sound that had been sighing in his ears for as long as he had been in this shelter which somehow the perry had made for him. Sometimes the sound was as faint as a baby's breath; sometimes it grew almost as loud as the wind which carried it and sometimes louder, the rider overbearing the steed. Somewhere not so very far away was a river and now, in this moment of his great thirst (water perhaps needed to replenish that shed by his uncommon tears), great was the sound of its rushing.

The perry had stood upright, but Arnten found he was obliged to stoop, although certainly the grasses and the light, light withes would have yielded easily to his head. And so, while at the curiously woven opening, stooping slightly and about to go out, he became aware of two things lying almost concealed by the fragrant grasses of the shelter's floor. One was the witchery-bundle to which both bark basket and knife had been tied by deft and curious per-

ry-knots; the other reappeared to him as though out of his dream-world between the time the Painted Man had beaten him to the ground and the time of his re-awakening.

He recalled it now. When he had felt (and doubtless had indicated) thirst, something had glowed and glittered in the air before him, touched his lips and he had drunk. He had in his semi-thoughts believed it a fragment of a rainbow conveying the cooling rainwater to his lips; or a gigantically distended drop, suffused with multicolored lights, distilling into water on his lips and tongue. Now he saw it to be, less fantastically but not much less wondrously, a flask of some substance unfamiliar to him. Light passed into it and through it and he voiced wordless surprise on observing that he could see *through* it! What he saw was subject to a gross distortion. The flask was iridescent as the fingernails of the perry or the interior of certain shells, shining with a multitude of colors which shifted and changed. And it weighed much less than a vessel of earthenware of the same bulk. He marveled, but did not stop for long to do so; he placed it in the basket along with the witchery-bundle (knife again by hip); he considered what its name might be. For present identification alone he deemed to call it perryware.

And then he stepped outside, ready to seek his stream.

The sound of the river was quite strong outside the small grass shelter, shelter so slight that seemingly a fawn could have crushed it by rolling over, now that the protecting presence of the perry was withdrawn. He saw no traces of a fawn, but pausing a moment and wondering what had cropped the small measure of meadow, greenery and flowery, he saw the pellet droppings of the wild rams and—his eyes now opened—here a shred and there a fluff of their wool. His uncle had at one time amassed a small heap of their hooves (begged, doubtless, from hunters) which lay a long while in a corner, oily and strong-smelling. Once a nain had come to trade new iron for old and the rams' hooves had vanished—but for what consideration and for what purpose he had never asked and never learned.

The wind brought the river sound stronger, nearer, to his ears; the wind brought a scent of flowers, too. He was on a downward slope and in a moment, following the land contours, he found himself wading through the blossoms—first they were under his feet, then around his ankles; then they touched the calves of his legs, his knee—and he brushed them away from his face. Glancing at his hands, he saw blood.

Astonished, he looked around. Each clump of flowers grew from a flashy green pod. Pod? Paw? There had been a wild catton in the village once, though not for long. Taking amiss being prodded with a stick as it lay stretching with paws outthrust, out from those paws it thrust its claws and struck—once—twice—at its tormentor. Who in one moment

more had crushed its skull with a rock. So, now: even as he half-halted his movements he saw a cluster of flowers dip down toward him, thrust out a sheaf of thorns and rake his chest with them. And then another. And then another. His arms, his legs, his back—he cried out, looked back, was struck again, flung his arms up before his eyes and staggered forward, raked with thorns and racked with pain. Then vinelets wrapped around his ankles . . .

And then, for a long moment, nothing.

CAUTIOUSLY he opened his eyes. At once his ears seemed to open, too. There was a deep, intent humming in the air. He saw the thorn-paws of the thickets sway and waver. He saw them droop. He saw a swarm of bees spread out, circle; saw, one by one, the thorns draw back into their pods; saw the flowers open wider. Saw each bee select its first flower, mount and enter, heard the bumbledrone alter in pitch and quicken. Saw each plant stretch itself taut, then begin a slow undulant motion.

Saw himself utterly forgotten and ignored.

Once again had the wary feeling of being watched.

Saw nothing.

Made his way unvexed to the water, kneeled and drank.

Here the water rushed noisily over the rocks, there it eddied and circled silently into pools, out farther it glided with a joyful clamor along its main channel; then paused and murmured thoughtfully among the reeds. Everywhere it sparkled—in his cupped hands as he lifted it to his mouth, as it fell in droplets from his face, spun around sunken logs, made the reeds rustle. Something was trying to tell him—what? The reeds nodded.

Reeds.

With a movement so quick and unstudied that he sank one foot into water, he stood up, spun around and unslung his witchery-bundle—or, more exactly, the witchery-bundle supposedly left by his father—and spread out its contents in the sunshine. Fingers trembling, he unsheathed the knife and cut a fresh reed and laid it down beside the one in the bundle. Except that one was dry and one was fresh, they were identical.

Surely it was a sign.

The medicine objects restored to their coverings, he considered long what he should do. It seemed somehow natural that he should continue along the river; there, where he had found the first sign, might he not find at least a second?

At first he splattered along on the sand flats and gravel beds, the mudbanks and shallows of the shore. The river looked so wild, so wide, full of mystery (and, perhaps, menace). Here presently the salmon would come surging upstream, that was certain, but not now. What else might lie beneath those sounding waters was uncertain indeed. Sometimes the forest came right down to the brim and barm as though the trees would dip and drink. Sometimes he walked beneath towering banks and bluffs. After a while he saw the

river divide and flow around an island, the main channel to the far side, the hither side forming a quiet pool, the shore of which was a sandy beach. On impulse he stopped, scooped out a hollow, placed into it his bundle and his basket with the perry thing, covered all with his leathern kilt, heaped sand over it. Then he turned and walked into the water.

THE shallows had been sun-warmed, but now the deeper and cooler waters began to lap against his legs, higher and higher, and he saw and felt the flesh about each hair creep into a tiny mound. He saw that hair was now growing thicker about his man-parts. Abruptly, with a slight gasp, he slipped deliberately beneath the surface and for a moment squatted on the bottom like a frog. His breath heaved against his chest. He opened his eyes. All was strange in this new world. Then something was suddenly familiar; he opened his mouth and only the sudden burst of bubbles reminded him that water and not air was his surrounding. He surfaced, took another breath, slid down once more. In the curious light he exchanged quick glances with a small fish, then bent his eyes to the river bottom. Green light wavered in the green water and rippled over the green stones.

Reed in his medicine bag, reed beside the water.

Greenstone in his medicine-bag, greenstones beneath the water.

It was the sought-for second sign.

The boy-frog squatted on the sand, sand clinging to him here and there, and looked at the other two small things in his budget of wonders: the beechnut and the bear claw. Certainly the last was the Sign of the Bear himself, and by now it was plain that what the bear was saying was, *Seek these others if you would seek me. Find these others and you will find me.* In the way a scout leaves signs along a trail so that those who follow may see and know what his message is, so the Bear had left these signs—not indeed in any sequence set apart by space—so that one who followed after might follow farther yet.

All clear, that. But what was the meaning of the beechnut? Beechnuts were good to eat, though perhaps not very good. The black swine of the woods were said to be fond of them. It wasn't clear what connection the wild swine had with the bear. Perhaps none. He began to feel confused and set his thoughts to tracing their way as though through a forest path: Bear—black swine—beechnut—well enough, by working backward he had come at least to some certain thing—beechnut—forest—trees—

Beechnuts, whatever else they indicated, certainly indicated a beech tree.

Not bothering to brush the sand from his bare legs and bottom, not from the leather kilt he swiftly and absently donned, he slung on his gear once more and set off along the river. But this time he walked along the dry land and looked, not down, but up. And so, by and by, by its silver-gray bark and its pale

green leaves, but most of all its height, he saw the trees he sought. Some long past storm or earthshake, or perhaps a hidden subsidence of the ground beneath its roots, had inclined it at a slight angle, for it was near enough the river for the stream in spate to have undercut and then covered up its excavating—or, perhaps the blow of a thunderstone had bent it; above the lowest branch, many times his own length high over his head a great scar was burned into the massive trunk.

Once again he had the feeling of being watched; the feeling ebbed again.

And there was certainly no sight nor sign of a bear.

HIS disappointment was great. It would have been easy to stumble or falter, only that day's morning had he gotten up from a daze of illness which had lasted—he realized he did not know for how long—and he had barely paused for rest. He had drunk once. He had not eaten. Weakness rose inside him. What had he expected? To find his father and, in finding him, an end to all mystery and aloneness forever? Had he expected to find a father sitting at the bottom of the huge beech tree, ready to welcome him with warm embrace? Here he was, Arnten, and he was as alone, as hungry, as unknowing as he had ever been.

What then was he to do? Slump behind the shelter of a bush and sleep and die? Weakness vanished. The very force of its sensation became a strength that blazed up within him and made itself felt without. He felt his skin tingle with something close to rage against this curious father who had cost his mother's life, had never come near to see what he had begotten, had left his cryptic messages with the nains alone. A father who might be dead, long dead.

Had he been pursuing a ghost? Had he himself perhaps died already under the blows of the Painted Man and was now himself but a ghost? Did ghosts hunger? He allowed himself a cry of anger and bafflement. Then, fiercely, he filled his bark basket with such nuts and barries and leaves and shoots of greenfood as were close to hand. At a small trickle on its way to join the stream, he filled the perryware flask, stoppered its neck with a plug of fern. He arranged everything to hang behind him. Then, angry and hot-eyed, defiant and determined, he set his toes and fingers in the cracks and ridges of the beech tree's bark and began to climb. For the first time he allowed himself to speak his thoughts aloud.

"I will go up!" he said, through his set teeth. "I-will-go-up!" He inched up. And up. "And I *will* find out!" The bundle and basket dangled, swung out, bumped back, grew heavier. "And until I find out—" he panted, dug in once more, advanced, advanced—"I will not come down—"

He swung one leg over the lowermost branch, hoisted himself up, pressed his head to the rough bosom of the tree and hung on for very life against the wave of vertigo which threatened to plummet him to the ground. Slowly it

passed and slowly he opened his eyes. The lazy wind swung into his face, laden with scents of the rich earth, of flowers and other growing things. He looked over leagues of land and the swelling and falling away of hills, the glittering serpentine length of the river, forest forever a great green roof. And far, far off, so distant that he could not be sure, he thought he saw thread-thin smoke. It might have been his village. He thrust forward his chin so suddenly that he felt a creak in his neck and, with all his force and might, spat in its direction. And then he allowed himself to realize that the lightning-burn upon the tree, just above the branch, was actually a tree-cave, a hollow.

It was, he considered (with a shiver), too small to harbor either tiger or leopard; it even lacked the reek of a bird's nest. Serpents would not go so high. Slowly, cautiously, he passed himself into it. Part of the bark still lay in place like a shell. And, patiently awaiting his discovery, wedged with splits of wood, protected from the worst assaults of the weather, was another hide-bound bag. Inside this was a box of carved wood. And in the box, padded with red-dyed fleece, was something that lay almost outside all his experience. Long he crouched in the dim light, half-afraid to touch it; then his fingers played over the intricate carvings. There was mammont-ivory and horn of wild ram, horn of elk; there was bear claw, there was—there were many things. Parts of it moved around, circle-wise, when he turned them. Parts moved up and down from holes, like little levers, when he touched them. Shapes of beasts and birds were carved into it. No man—nor nain—nor perry—had devised it. It was wizards' work, and wizardry of witchery alone. It was a witch-horn, so huge and adorned and complex it could only be *the* witch-horn. Could only be All-caller, the great, fey horn.

V

SEE then, in the late rays of the afternoon sun, while the great red circle still throws heat before descending for its slow journey through the Cavern Beneath The Earth whence it will rise again next morning, a small, a very small Something sticking out its head from the bole of the huge beech tree. After the head, an arm, at the end of the arm a hand and in the hand—what? It is needful to come closer. A shaggy boy, not quite a new young man, excitement and triumph and also fear upon its mold-smutched face. Carefully he holds the great horn in both his dirty hands. Carefully he examines it yet again, turning its turnable parts.

Ah. Ahah. So. Here is the bear claw, as like to the bear claw in his witchery-bundle to make one think they had come from the same bear-beast. As, perhaps they had.

The boy's full lips protrude, compressed in thought. So—here is the bear carved in ivory upon the horn band. Surely it was meant to come in apposition to the bear claw. He takes a deep breath, fills his dusty cheeks, lifts

the horn to his lips. His eyes roll, his nostrils distend.

And below upon the mossy ground, while the echoes of the great cry, part growl, part roar, still send the birds whirling about and the leaves quivering, something comes into the open glade around the beech tree. Something comes as though the thicket were mere fern grass. Something comes crashing, comes trampling, comes on all fours, comes walking upright. Stands, stopping. Peering this way and that. Paws and head swaying. Issues a cry, part roar, part growl. Part challenge, part question. Puzzled. Vexed. Brute. Bewildered.

Bear.

Bear.

Bear.

A moment passes, or does not pass; endures without end. Then the bear coughs, grunts, sighs, brushes at one ear. Gurgles deep within its shaggy chest. Ambles and shambles down to the river. Stands there without motion. Then makes gestures which no bear has ever before been seen to make—or so it seems to the watcher up high. Who has ever seen a bear take off its skin before? Who has ever seen a man inside a bear before? Who has ever seen a man stride into the water and leave an empty bearskin lying on the bank behind, gaping empty, eyeholes looking up, sightless, at the sky?

Has anyone—?

—before?

ARNTEN plucked up his talisman and, though it was the familiar-most of any object he had with him, he studied it as though he had never seen it before. Almost, for that matter, he had never seen a bear before. Perhaps he had seen live bears one or two times—dead ones, before they had been all skinned and dismembered for food and hide, several times. The carving did not seem to have changed. The bear was still certainly a bear—except that it still certainly had man's feet. He could not recall that he had ever observed the feet of living bears, these must have been concealed in grass or underbrush, or perhaps he had just not been looking; likelier he had had his eyes (as he crouched fearfully out of sight) on the paws of the forelimbs, on the fearsome jaws. Perhaps *all* bears had man's feet. But then a clear picture came to him of the four paws of one dead bear, cut off for the pot—and all were *paws*, none truly feet. And yet, might it not be that bears, alive, had feet like men, and that these changed at death? As for the bear below? Truly, he had not noticed. He did not know.

Well, regardless, he knew what he had to do now.

He watched the man (formerly bear) swimming strongly in the water, bobbing under, emerging with hair all sleek, shaking his head, then resuming his swim, finally passing out of sight around a bend in the river. He would certainly be back. But Arnten was certain that he would not be back at once. Unencumbered by any burdens, all of which he left in the hollow, he climbed carefully down; he ran, eyes racing between three places—the ground, lest he stum-

ble—the water, lest the man, returning, see him soon—the bearskin, lest—lest what? Lest, perhaps, and most horrifying by far, the empty skin somehow take on life and move, either toward or away from him. For a second it did indeed seem upon the point of doing so and he gasped in fright. But it was only the wind raising a worn corner.

He seized the skin and ran, flinging it across his shoulder and feeling it on his back, bounding and bouncing. He could see it, feel it, thankfully he could not hear it, he had no desire or reason to taste it. He could smell it, though, and its reek was very strong, partly bear, partly man. All these things he perceived without being aware of concentrating on them. He concentrated first on getting out of sight of the water. And then he paused to think of what he should do next.

And, with a start, realized that he had already done something. Perhaps he should not have, perhaps he should return and undo it. But he knew he would not. That which he had so greatly desired, the one whom he had so straightly sought, the source of his being and his childhood's woe, man or bear or manbear or bearman, the witchery creature which had been his weakness and must now be his strength . . .

"I am afraid," he whispered.

True, That One In The Water clearly had desired to see him, had left a trail for him to follow perhaps not as clearly as if it had been blazed, as if it had consisted of traditional and familiar hunters' marks or patterns (but blazing and patterning were not intended to be other than open for all who could to read). And yet—and yet, *why* had he intended that his son should some day follow? How sure he had felt the son would follow, would meet the nains, would understand the messages bound up in the witchery-bundle: but this was for the moment beside the point and the point was the bearman/manbear was power, and power, as much as it was to be desired, so much was it to be feared.

Presently something showed itself in the river, moving against the current. Arms flashing in the declining sunlight. A figure came padding out of the water on a sandbar, moving as a bear does on all fours, but was not a bear; moved to the other end of the sandbar, where, motionless, it seemed to be staring into the water. A forelimb moved so fast that the motion could hardly be followed. Something flew out of the water, sparkled, fell. Twice more was the scene repeated before, now walking upright, a fish in each hand and one in the mouth, the figure walked through the water to the shore and shambled up the bank. Another, smaller figure, watching, trembled. The tall one was thickly built, with hair (now slicked down flat with water) so thick that almost the skin could be termed a pelt. It seemed that all the brightness of the sky of Thule, which had only an hour ago been evenly divided, was now moved and crowded to one side and that side so much brighter; while a blue dimness gathered on the other

side. The birds began to fall silent. The air grew cool. Leisurely, the tall figure ambled up the slope and onto the bluff. The fish fell from its hands and mouth and it dropped backward so that it came to rest sitting down, legs straight out and arms crooked upright from the elbows. It gave a great roar of disbelief and rage. Then it rose and stabbed at the mossy ground and took up something in its hands.

The talisman, the wooden carving . . .

Then the head rose and scanned the bluff, the brush, the crowded arbor of the forest. Abrupt growls came from the thick chest formed themselves into rage words.

"Where are you?

"Why have you done this?

"*Where is my skin*?"

A voice came from somewhere up above, from the thickening darkness. "I will not answer your questions till you have answered mine."

"Ask, then—"

And the other voice, a moment silent, wavering a bit, but not halting, said, "Who are you? Who am I? What is next?"

APPROPRIATELY the backlog of the fire had come from the great beech tree. "Long since I have made fire, or eaten food cooked on it, or food with salt on it," said Arntat. His hands, however, seemed to have lost no skill. The fish had been deftly gutted, gilled and grilled. Salt, in a screw of barkrag, was still in Arnten's basket. "Salmon will be better," Arntat said, smacking his mouth at the thought. "But these are well enough." Sparks leaped, embers blackened, glowed again. Abruptly he swiveled and faced the boy. "You be thinking, 'Is it to hear talk of fish and fire that I've come this long way, waiting?' Eh? I see it by your face, 'tis so. Arnten. I have waited longer than you. Be patient."

And the boy was silent.

AND his fullfather said, "The bear is in the blood and the bear may take you as the bear took me. At any time whilest life blood be in you the bear may take you, for the bear is in the blood. If it takes you not, and it may not take you, if it takes you not then 'twill take your son and if not you and not him then 'twill take your son's or daughter's son for sure. Let this be no burden. Fear it not. I've dabbled and dallied with a queen of love, and though 'twas joyous passion, yet 'twas nought compared to shambling 'mongst the new berries or finding honey in a tree or scooping forth first salmon, when I was gone a-bearing," his fullfather said.

And he said, "Bear's weird be better than man's weird and better than nain's weird. As a man I've been a chieftain high with lands and wealth—you may let your ears drop, 'tis nought to you *where* and nought to you *what's-my-name-then*. You were not made upon empty bear hide in lawful bedchamber, ah no, you were made when the bear was in the bearskin. My heritage to you is other than to my othergotten

sons. Heed and hear me now, Arnten. By my witch-bundle and by my shadow, sons you make outside the bearskin be outside the bear-blood. But sons you make when you be a-bearing and be inside the bearskin, the blood of the bear be in them. And if the blood of the bear be in them, then not running water nor icy pools nor firehot springs can wash it out."

And the bear was silent.

BEECHWOOD makes hard embers and hard embers make long fires. Long fires make long tales. Long they sat there in the scented night and Arntat talked and Arnten listened and learned. He learned that the shift and shape was truly not confined to man to bear, that other creatures indeed could pair, could couple, could double and shift.

Bee and salmon, wolf and bear,
Tiger, lion, mole and hare . . .

He learned of the slow growth of metals beneath the earth's skin and the formation of amber beneath the sea, how amber was one of the things of the perries, whereas metal was a thing of the nains. Once there was a metal called bronze but at length it grew green and sick and presently it died. Now there was iron.

"The sickness of iron is red," said Arnten, "and iron is dying." Red glints in the ashes. Reflections in the eyes of the watchers.

"Aye, eh," muttered Arntat. "The sickness of iron is red." He swung up his head and his hand gripped his son's. "What say thee, bear's boy? *'Iron is dying?'* What?"

That he, knowing so much, should not know this, for several heartbeats kept Arnten silent and astonished. Then he saw pictures in his mind: one: one: then he saw things moving, heard the nain tell of years since "Bear" was by them seen. Arnten said, "You have been long inside the bearskin, then, and that long you've not seen iron?"

Still the hand gripping his did not move. "*Iron is dying*? True, true, many springtimes I have caught and killed the great salmon and many summertimes I have climbed for honey in the honey-trees and in the rocky clefts. Many falltimes have I eaten the last of the frost-touched fruits and the sweet flesh of nuts. And many wintertimes have I felt the bearsleep come upon me and felt the numbness grow inside my head and sunk into the lair till the snows grow thinner. Aye. Eh. I can count the time only by counting your time. You are barely a man. And the last iron I had seen, the last iron I had thought of, I wrapped well the iron knifelet in my witchery-bundle and hid it well for thee. May it be sick?"

Arnten did not mind the grip upon his hand. He crouched against the crouching body of his fullfather. He rested on that puissant flesh which had made his own and which was now his present as well as his past. Defying mankind and beastkind and time and the night, he let himself recline against the great rough beast which was his father and he let his hand

recline in that great rough paw. Quietly, almost drowsily he said, "That witchery-knife alone is not sick. But all other iron is sick." And he muttered, "The nains," and he muttered of the nains. And he sighed, "The king—" and he sighed words of the king. And almost he fell asleep, comforted by the rough, warm body and its rough and powerful smell. Then the body moved, releasing his hand, and a sound which was almost a cry and almost a groan rumbled and broke loose from that strong fatherbody by the embers.

"*Iron*!

"*The nains*!

"*The king*!"

Almost he flew awake. He slid down so that he might stand up. The day had been long and there was still much to talk about. The day had begun with the mammont hunt and he had run far and he had been hurt and nains and perries and Painted Men pursued him and he ran along the river and now the long long day was over and he had nevermore again to run to bolt to flee and *Iron*! *Sick iron*! *The wizards*! and *The king*! sounded their names in the darkness. And the embers slid down because they were tired and the embers slipped beneath the ashes and the embers slept.

In the morning the embers were awake again and spitting and flaring at the meat that turned, spitted and smoking. Arntat was still crouched by the fire as though he had never left it and as though the meat had come at his bidding and obediently slipped out of its skin and onto the spit. Arntat yawned hugely and glanced at Arnten and it seemed as though his teeth were still the tushes and the fangs of Bear, his eyes still Bear's eyes so small and cunning and sharp, his blunt face still Bear's muzzle and his hairy hands with long thick nails— The yawn closed with a snap.

The man said, "There was the lone one of you?"

"The—"

"Sometimes a she kindles with twain. Or more. My get, by your dam—"

"Only me, as I ever heard. I never knew her. Uncle said she drowned. Was mad."

Arntat grunted. "It was time for it to be done and I was there and she was there and 'twas done, so. If not she, another. If not me, another. If not she and me, then not thee." He took the spit from its forks and rested the savory roast, dribbling, on the grass. "So. The lone one of you. Called me from my bearguise." He seized his son by his downy shoulders. "Hid from me my bearskin." Son resisted, wordlessly, was pressed down nontheless. "Carried off with him my token. Found the nain. Found me. Called me from my bearguise. Stole away my bearskin. The lone one of you." Arnten was on his back, flat. "Am I to regret 'twasn't twins? Or be one of such enough?" The single hand quivered the boy belly as one would a pup's. Then moved, one hand, two hands, tore the roasted meat apart, slapped on part still sizzling on the place the hand had been—boy leapt up, yelp-

ing—bared his teeth and began to eat.

Boy teeth shining sharp in quick-closed mouth. Boy hand rubbing belly. Boy snout smelling savory food. Boy cub by bear man, tearing meat from bone.

Still eating when father got up and strode off, he followed at quick pace, still holding his own unfinished portion. "Arn!" he said. "Arntat! Bearfather!"

Bearfather growled over his shoulder.

"The hide! The horn! The witchery-bundle! Shall I fetch?"

Arntat growled, "The hide? Leave it be. I'll go no more abearing for now. The horn? Leave it be. Rather than call wrong, call none for now. The witcher-bundle? As you want." And he melted into the shadows of the all-circling forest. Arnten followed, thinking and eating as he went. Claw and reed and stone and nut, he had read their message and read them rightly; he could part with them for now. The hide with its medicine signs he needed not now. For a moment he begrudged the knife, the good knife of good iron. He took a longing look at the slightly slant and towering beech tree, casting a long shadow in the morning sun as it had cast in the evening. They were all safe up there in the hollow of the hideyhole. And there, safely, let them bide, then.

Still eating, he slipped after his father into the dappled surface of the forest.

ARNTAT did not precisely linger, he did not exactly dally, neither did he rush ahead with great speed, nor slink through the woods. Some sort of game was being played. For neither did Arnten go so fast as he might. It was the game, then, that each should generally hold the other in sight, but only generally. And sometimes the bigger one would suddenly hide himself and as suddenly reveal himself when the smaller paused to look around, then proceed as though he had not been hidden at all. Before long they had developed many aspects to this game and little tricks and presently they were again and again filled with silent laughter at each other. Through many a clearing and burn and along the paths they played their game, sometimes 'Tat leaping along a fallen tree as lightly as a squirrel, at least once 'Ten dropping several leaves before being realized and looked up at.

It lasted most of the morning and might have lasted much longer, but then Arnten, running noiselessly around a great lichen-studded boulder, ran full tilt into flesh which only in that first second he thought was his father's. A swift blow and an angry word undeceived him before his eyes did—he who had for all morning dropped even the memory of blows and angry words—and, as he tried to scramble to his feet, tried to turn his head to see who it was, tried (all these at once) to run away any which way, someone grabbed his arm and twisted it. Only then did he cry out.

The man's face had the look of one who kicks a dog not to be rid of

it but for the pleasure of kicking it. Then the face changed and the arm released him, raised its spear; the mouth that cursed him gave a sick croak as something snapped which was not the spear. Arntat was there. Arntat was holding, embracing, Arntat was crushing. Ugly sounds of witless fright, then, from this other's mouth. Blood gushing from that mouth. And then other men, many other men, spears and clubs and then ropes, Arntat down on one knee. Arntat releasing limp and bleeding body, Arntat clawing out for a grip upon another. Arnten biting, beating. Arntat down. Arntat growling, roaring. Men cursing as much in fright as wrath. Arntat down. Arntat suddenly silent, save for his breathing in the sudden silence. Arntat bound. Arnten, too.

And after some moments of gasping, recovering breath, slowing hearts, hissing of pain, someone said as though to a question none had heard, "I don't know—I don't know— Eh? Ah? Nains? *No*! Nor bears—"

Another voice. "We be the king's men. Let the king say *what*." And others, others. "Aye! Ah! Let the king say what!"

VI

THE red-sickness of all iron flamed into a plague. At first whispered, it was now said openly that the king himself had caught the evil and the ill. Indeed, it seemed to be so. Red blotches were seen about his face and hands and all his face and limbs and frame looked wasted and hollowed. His voice cracked and croaked. His hands shook. In the mornings he groaned and staggered. In the late afternoons his eyes would roll up and his eyelids roll down and he folded his legs and lay where he happened to be, servants hastily bringing furs and fleeces and lifting him and settling him again. For the length of time it took for the shadow of the sun-staff to move over two stones the king at such times lay as one dead. And in the late night hours he tended to enrage easily, to shout and strike out and to cast things.

But in the early and middle afternoon and in the early and middle night times he was as well as ever in those days he was well. As to the first of these periods, it was assumed he was passing well, for his voice could be heard talking—talking, not groaning, not yelling—and as for the second of these periods, it was then that he held such gatherings as he held and saw such outsiders as he saw. In the red light of the hearth all men may look reddened and the dancing shadows may make all men look gaunted.

But not all men hide themselves in daylight.

Day by day the couriers trouped in. Night by night the king himself would see them and let himself be seen by them and from them receive the tidings which he had, of course, already received; for did he not sit upon his stool or lie upon his pallet behind the reed curtain while the courier made report upon the other side? Tirlagusak, grown stout and gray in his

service as a first captain of the king's men, generally stood forth as the couriers came in, each with the strip of white bark cloth bound about his head, which even toddle-babes knew signified *I am the king's mouth and I am the king's eyes and I am the king's ears. Delay me not—and if I need aid, aid me.*

"Thirty-deer Hill," the courier might say. Or: "Whalefish Point."

Tirlag-usak puts out his hand. "Tally," he says. "Why so slow?"

The courier hands over the cut and carved piece of wood. He pants to show how hard he has run. Of late there had been increasingly less sham in this. Tirlag-usek, of course, knows whence every one of the couriers has come but he sees if the tallystick fits the proper one from his own box.

"Report sightings," he directs. "Swiftly."

"Good omens from the flocks of birds," says the courier. It would not do to report *No sighting.*

"Eat. Wash. Rest. Return after evening meal."

The courier retires, sweating but relieved. His tongue may be the king's tongue but that need not prevent it's being cut.

Behind the reed curtain the king's lips writhe, the king's hands move convulsively. The king's face grows redder yet. The red-sickness increases fast upon him. And the red-sickness increases fast upon the iron. The courier has gone. Tirlag-usak remains standing. From behind the reed curtain comes an anguished whisper.

"Iron? *Iron*?"

"The ears of the king hear all things," says the grizzled first captain. After just a breath, he says, "The king already has heard that it is not better. It is not even as it was." After three breaths should come the groan or hiss which has come to mean *Go!* but Tirlag-usak today, after only two breaths, repeats, "The ears of the king hear all things." And says further, "The king has already heard that ten of his men who went north in a search for nains have this day returned with captives."

"*Uhh*?"

"One great and one small, as the king already has heard. The eyes of the king have already seen them and it may be that the king's eyes have already recognized one of them as the king's kin to whom the king's mouth will speak more words."

Tirlag-usak had spoken somewhat more rapidly than usual. Now he waits for the space of many breaths and he hears each of these breaths from behind the reed curtain. But no question now comes from behind the reed curtain and what now comes thence at last is a cry of such agony and terror and rage that almost the hand of Tirlag-usak touches the woven reed barrier—almost he stoops to lift it. But he hears other feet, other voices, babble and whisper and shuffle and sigh. Then nothing. Then, only then, he departs.

Later, in the enclosure where they were penned, Arnten suddenly looked up. Arntat, his father, did not pause in his shambling and shuffling, shuffling and shambling, back and forth and

back and forth, head weaving like a snake's head from side to side. It seemed he did not share his son's thought, a sudden one which projected into the boy's mind a picture of the mandrakes dancing to the sound of the small drum in his old uncle's medicine hut. The recollection was so clear that the boy sat and watched it inside his head for some time.

MERED-DELFIN beat the small drum and his mandrakes, which were the mandrakes of the king and queen, danced their witchery-dance and Mered-delfin watched them from the corner of his eyes and the king and queen watched them full front. Every feeling moved across the king's face, none at all disturbed the face of the queen. The mandrakes moved and the mandrakes moved and they mimed and mimed and they danced. At first, coming forth from their carved wood chest, the mandrakes' motion kept time to the tune of the witchery-drumlet. But after a while and after Mered-delfin had sung to them and hummed to them and chanted to them, whistled and drummed to them, then the pattern of their moving changed. They led and Mered-delfin followed, his fingers and his palms straining to keep up with them, to maintain the proper tune and rhythm upon the drumhead made from the skin entire of a dwarf deer slain without bruise or blood.

At length, when they had begun to repeat themselves and no chantings or whistlings could prevail upon them to enact any new pattern, Mered-delfin drummed them back and dancing they went, throwing up their root-thin arms they danced backward upon their root-thin legs, and climbed back into their box at last and closed its lid upon them.

Thus the dancing mandrakes. As for the watching mandrakes, they remained in the outer court and would shriek, beshrew, if so much as an unbidden shadow fell. And there they muttered and watched.

The chief witcherer licked his mouth and wiped his arm across his sweat-slick face and quickly rolled his eyes. The other two were not looking at him. Swiftly he set his countenance into its accepted lines. He softly clicked his fingernail against the side of the drum. They looked up toward him.

"It is as we have seen, it is as I have said, they have enacted the lineaments of the dream and mimed for us the finding and the sounding of All-Caller, the Great Fey Horn—"

The king grimaced and showed his sharp teeth. As he leaned forward on his hands and arms he seemed to crouch on all fours. "And where, then," he asked, "is the great good which you said this dream portended for me?"

Mered-delfin parted his thin beard from lips and mouth and dared to grin. The very daring of the deed made the king draw back, somewhat relax the tenseness of his pose. Witch-Mered thrust out his hand and arm and described a quarter-circle in the air and let the hand extend two fingers in a point. "Can it be that the sounding

of All-Caller has lured from across the all-circling sea an enemy who is not to be named? And with him a son begat in treacherous exile? Lured them thence and it must be alone?"

His master's grimace grew into a snarl. His eyes blazed red. He seemed like a creature of the forest about to hurl itself from its den. He gave off the rank and bitter smell of denizen and den. "I shall kill them!" His voice rose into a howl. "I shall have them killed! They shall be killed for me and before me!" His tongue lolled out of his mouth. "Limbs broken—" the howl prolonged itself—" impaled—"

"Slayer of Bull Mammonts—"

"—*flayed*—"

"Great Dire Wolf—"

"—*disemboweled*—"

The last word hung upon the air. The Orfas panted. His sides heaved. He flung up his head and again he howled. In this howl there were no words, but it rang with a lust for vengeance long delayed. In his narrow pen Arntat heard it and stopped in his mindless pacing and hearkened to it and his arms moved slightly and he stood still. The nain-thralls heard it in their tunnels and turned their massy heads on their short necks. Servants heard it and shivered and tremored. King's men felt flesh pucker and hair rise and let their eyes roll to each other, and almost they clean forgot the tales of the ill-struck king, cloistered and shabby and sick and old.

"The Orfas," they whispered to one another.

"The wolf! The wolf!

"King Orfas! Great Wolf! King Wolf!

"—*King Wolf*—"

LONG the wolf-king lay upon his side, panting, wet with sweat. Then he jerked his head and in two silent bounds Mered-warlock was crouching at his head. Said the king, "Not kill him?"

Said the witcherer, "Not yet."

Said the wolf-king, "When, then?"

Said the sage, "When the curse is canceled. When iron is well."

The king said no word. His eyes rolled up and his lids rolled down. He nodded. He touched his sage's hand. His queen kneeled beside him and he touched her face. The words last spoken hung upon the air.

And the words unspoken, too.

ARNTEN and his father were allowed to toil together; one of the guards had said with a guffaw that the two of them were barely equal to one nain. Iron was the nains' heritage and though they had been used to it in all its workings at their own speed and though timed toil was inhospitable to them, still the nature of mining was not strange. But it was all strange, strange and fell, to Arntat and his son. Only the unswerving friendship of the nains and the fact of his and his son's being still together at all relieved the toil. And worse by far than the toil was the circumstance of bondage, of confinement, of life now being limited to a set series of motions within severely limited space. All thralldoms are one same thrall-

dom. The unremitting labor of the toil, the unremitting oppression of the guards, the ill food, cramped space, uncleanliness, lack of hope, dull hatred, scanted sleep, infinite heaviness of spirit—are not these the features of all thralldoms?

"It is harder, Bear, for thee than we," the nains said. "The tunnel fits we as the hoodskin fits the pizzle."

"Then I stoop," he said. Stooped, grunted. "I have stooped before." But his eyes were sunken. And his forehead bruised and scabrous, for he did not always think to stoop, nor they to warn him.

And the nains said, "It is harder, Bear, for thee than we. We be used to the smell of iron dust and fire and have forgot the smell of grass and waterflows."

"Then I shall grow used to this and shall forget that other, too," he said. But he did not grow used to it, he often was coughing, and there was that in his eyes and on his face which seemed to show that he was not forgetting. And one night when the begrudged fire burned low and the older nains had begun to creep into their sleepy-holes and kick the crushed bracken-fern into a brief semblance of softness—at last that night his voice burst loud with, "But I cannot forget! No! No! I cannot forget!"

The older nains crept out from their sleepy-holes, greasy-sided, fetid, close. They laid their hands on his, and on his knees and arms and legs, their huge and calloused hands. And a few did so to Arnten, who had crept close to his father; and the heavy nain-hands were light and gentle. "Since thee cannot forget, Bear, cease to try," they said. "And speak it out to we." And the Bear spoke.

Not—at first—of the free life of sun and stars, grass and waterflows, salmon hunts and honey thefts, of timeless days and world without walls. These all, it seemed, though well remembered in general, had become as it were a design bordered in dyed grasses around a basket rim—turn it, turn it, now faster, now slower, and see the same sequences following forever; man's mind no longer holding in differentiating recollection any one sequence from any other like it—so it seemed, when by and by his talk took up those days.

BUT he began with other days, when he was a man's child among other mens' children, he one and Orfas another and Orfas a little older. Not much difference in age and little if any in status, even after both presently realized that Orfas was in a way an uncle—that Orfas' father was the other's grandfather, the other's father Orfas' half-brother. Both playing and tumbling and chasing dogs in one familiar yard onto which opened (so it seemed) the doors of many houses, yet all of them family houses. In those days they were but two among many and each father had several sons and neither more of a rival to each other than either was to any others. All the sons and cousins and uncles of that age had cast their reed practice spears and

awkwardly fletched their boy-arrows and went creeping and hunting in the mock-forests of the great yard. The years had flown away like the wild swans fly away, yet never do the absent years return as do the absent swans.

Boys had grown to men, passed through ordeal and initiation, learned which was their witchery-beast, dreamed medicine dreams, had found women and knew the milk of life to be within them. The hunt had ceased to be play and often man had fought with man, not for proving or for pleasure but for very life; and some had taken life and some had lost it. Some of all that company of boykin had died young beneath the feet or claws or within the jaws of wild beasts or had been dragged down beneath the waves by waterkelpies or by fierce hippotames. Others had made themselves house-holders and gotten children while still barely bearded. Some had sought a name and fame by captaining pursuits of whalefish or were-whales, tree-tigers, or had gone north into the snows to hunt the wild leopard. One had been allured by the bewitchments of the Painted Men (whose skin must not be seen).

"There was a certain great tree whose wide-spreading branches we all climbed as boys. It became our gathering place and remained so even when we were men and gathered there more seldom. But whenever we so returned, there we went and there we looked to meet with our comrades and our kin of our age. I had been away and gone a full handful of years, and I returned and sat beneath the tree upon a seat made by an out-thrust of rootburl. There I sat and long I sat and many passed but none were of our old company. And then came one whose shape I knew, whose walk I knew, even before I kenned his face.

"It was Orfas.

"He came and I remembered it was right that I should rise because he was my father's brother of the half-blood, and so we at some length stood and faced each other. He had the slight semblance of a smile on his face. For a while we said no word. And then I said, 'It seems, then, that of all only we two remain, in this corner of the Land of Thule.'

"And he said, 'It seems that this be one too many,' and although I did not deeply consider on his words, still, a particle of them must have touched upon a particle in me—at once I said, 'Then let us both be gone and let us make a compact and both be gone together.' We made our compact and prepared a boat and formed an alliance with others, gathered our gear and store and had the witcherers discover the best day to depart. South-south across the all-encircling sea we went, to the barbar-lands we made our course, sometimes along the coast and sometimes up the great rivers. Betimes we traded and betimes we sold the service of our swords and spears, fighting now for one town or tribe or chieftan, now for another; and betimes we shared the plunder-spoil or betimes we kept it all, as it had been agreed, or as it fell out. And then for a while

we went a-roving and a-robbing as we would and as we willed, until the durancy of our compact fell away to expire, and there was only a handful of day-sticks left in the tally-bag. One of us had a dream to take a certain course with our three vessels (as by then they were) and reach on the third day an island all suitable for our needs, which was done, and the day we broke the third stick we made our landfall and the island was as had been seen."

EVERYONE has in his mind the image presented by story and by song, of all the troves and treasures piled in one great glittery heap, "dragon-high, dragon-bright, sparkling while its seekers fight—"but it is not always thus in fact, nor was it so this time.

Said he who had dreamed the dream, "Think it clearly for yourselves. Will he who lives alone to claim it be wanting to lug it all back to the ships again?" There was a burst of laughter in which was no sound of love or warmth. It was done so, that the wealth was divided between two ships, which were dismasted, and the third was broken up at once to make a deck for the complete vessel, which was a double-hulled raft of sorts, with a single mast. Then each man set to sharpening his weapons and mostly he sat alone, with no more than now and then a sideways glance to estimate the strength or calculate the skill of another; and sometimes the other, on whom his direct look might fall had been his near-comrade; and some seemed to repent greatly of this compact and to wish themselves away.

But only one would live to go away.

The fighting field was laid out and deeply trenched around, and then the lots were drawn to select the two for the first combat. Orfas drew one of the black pebbles and a younger man, often a singer of merry songs, drew the other. He sang no song now but muttered charms as they stepped to the center of the field but Orfas did not open his mouth as they faced each other. Then all the rest shouted *Ho*! and in that instant Orfas spat in his opponent's eye and as he blinked, dumbstruck, Orfas rushed him from the side of that eye and with his axe he split through his collarbone. The man fell backward with a great croaking cry. Orfas kicked up the fallen one's kilt and again he spat, now upon his foe's manhood, saying, "That is for the wench you stole of me a two months' since!" and then he brought the axe down once again.

And went and took his rest across the trench until every other man should have fought once—and then he would again be subject to the lots.

Not every victor lived to draw a second lot.

Now—said Arntat—I had killed my man and had killed my second man. And as I sat resting and waiting I chanced to feel an eye strong upon me and I looked up and around and I saw that it was the eye of Orfas. It came to me that I had felt it heavy upon me before but had not fully thought

about it. And now all at once I recollected what had been said that time we met after long apart, under the tree of meeting; I saying, *It seems that only we two remain*, and he saying, *This be one too many*. It came to me so late as then that he had long hated me, and I suppose that inside me that one particle must have returned his feeling or I would not have answered as I did.

Well! So be it! I knew then that we two would be the last to stand upon our feet and fight for life and for treasure, winner take all. It was our weird. I do not know at what point in our lives he had begun to hate me—or why. Perhaps he himself did not know it till he saw me there under the tree of meeting. Perhaps until then he had thought I would not come back, that I was dead; it may be that the deaths of others of our line had gradually or suddenly given him hope that he would be chief over all our line—and, as our line has always been a line high in Thule, he may have bethought him that he might some day be highest of all in Thule.

If I were not.

THE fire barely lived at all. Then someone blew briefly on the dull embers and someone placed an armful of bracken on it. "Eh, ah, Bear," an older nain said. "Well I remember when the old asking began to be heard again. *By what three things is a king made*? and answered, *By strength, by magic, and by fortune*. He who paid the nain-fee then, I shall say plain, was not the worst as ever paid it. But even kings live not forever. And in all that struggle which came then, Bear, some say thee helped the Orfas, he being near of kin. Some say thee befoed him and would have been king instead. I ask not and care I not. Thee has ever been the friend of nains, as nains have ever been the friends of thee. The Orfas winned the kingship and was made king as kings be made and he paid the nain-fee—*then*—full and fair. But the nains be feed to work in iron, not to set snares for bears—or men. We saw thee in the wildwood dwelling where never manfolk dwell at all, we told it to each other and we told it to the forge, but never did we tell it to the king."

"I know."

"Such rewards he offered, and such afflictions he threatened as never did we hear before."

"I know."

"That bitter winter when the birds fell frozen from the sky and the all-circling sea itself was turned to ice, far as ever eye could see, when no track nor trace could be concealed upon the snowy ground and no snow fell more from the fast frozen sky; then the Orfas came for thee, for Witch-Mered did plot it out for him."

"I know."

"Corby-Mered. Mered-Crow."

"His witcheries espied thee out, we knew and said nought, he saw and said all. With a many troops of men they came for thee, and circled around where thee had gone. Where could thee hide? We thought it woe, we whispered low, we told it to the forge, but nains mix not in the affairs of man-

folk—would that man would mix as little in the life of nainfolk! They circled all about where thee had gone, they scanned the still, unbroken snow, they drew their lines inward as wading fishermen draw their nets, they met face to face and arm to arm in the center; but *Arn* they never met."

"I know."

He said, "I know. I know." Crouching in the darkness marred by feeble flicks of flames, he said, "I cannot forget." A prisoner, he remembered himself a fugitive; though it had seemed bitter then, now long later it revealed its sweetnesses. And he could not forget.

The nains sighed and they sighed for him, not for themselves. The king had sought him then and found him not, and hunted him again and found him not. King and king's men hunted a man, but he whom they hunted was a man no more. He had become a bear.

VII

DAY followed day and toil followed toil and slowly the great rust increased. Its pace was not steady. At times it had seemed to leap onward like a dread grass fire in the dry season, at times it had seemed to pause as though tired. Now for some long while, the red-sickness had gone at so slow a step that some did not perceive that it still continued until, perhaps, an axe-head crumbled as it met the wood it could not cleave, or an arrowhead collapsed into a pinch of russet dust when the quiver was moved. And many still had not realized that the pest pursued its course.

But the king was not among the many.

It was not only that he asked or caused to be asked, "How goes it with iron?" of those who came from far off. He asked always, in hope of hearing what he would hear; but he was not content only to ask. The king had great store of iron, not in the armories alone, but in his own chambers, very near to him. Several times a day, if he did not go to iron things, he had iron things come to him. He looked, he tested, poked, probed, he scraped iron with his fingernails and he scaled with instruments which were not of iron. The king knew the rate each day at which the plague pursued. He knew it and he sickened from his knowing.

"Will you not leave off?" the queen asked him with a sigh.

"How can I?" he asked, with a sick and sidelong look.

There was almost a proverb in those days: *The queen grows not old.* Some had grown up hearing it and thought it a saying applied to all queens; that women who held the queenly seat, by virtue of the power of that office did not age. But in truth it was a saying which had not been heard before, although likely enough that any woman spared the labors of hoeing and bark-beating and preparing hides and all such toilsome work, who had but to put on her clothes and jewelry and suckle her children—and sometimes not even such slight, light tasks as that—likely enough that thus a woman, queen or not, would grow not old

so soon and certain as the generality of her sex.

Still, the saying was a new one, as sayings go. Here lies the truth —quite early had her hair turned the color of a winter's sky, quite early and quite suddenly. Therefore most of Thule became aware of her when she in some measure already wore the mantle of more years than she had. And also her manner had already then become grave and withdrawn. Since the mass of folk did not observe her slowly losing what were common tokens of youth, gradually the saying came to be heard: *The queen grows not old.*

Some held this to be due to her command of witchery-wisdom. Only a few, and they not often and never openly, were lately beginning to whisper that she sipped the cup of the king's own years, that she stayed one age while he aged swiftly. And at least the very last part of this was true.

"You can leave off by leaving off." she said. Only a very few lines were to be seen upon her face —about the eyes, and about the corners of the mouth—but none at all upon her upper lip. "Rest upon your cot or couch and let others examine iron while you watch. And watch not too closely, that is to say, too nearly. Iron is sorely ill. And you are not too well."

A slight snarl moved his mouth, but did not move it much; his next words and the inclination of his head showed how little the snarl was meant for her. "You are ever gentle of me in word and deed—but I know well what they say out *there*—that I have caught the ironrot. Perhaps I have. But if I have caught it, I have it—so what good then be distance? Or any precaution?" He moved nonetheless to his couch. Muttered, "If iron die, then I die. If I die, let iron die. But let we not die, either, nor the barbar folk come swarming—savages from over the circling sea—" He let himself down on his couch and leaned on the pile of prime pelts sewn in bags and stuffed with the downy breast feathers of swans. His eyes were sunken and closed. A long breath shuddered and sighed in his throat and fluttered his cracked and blistered lips.

Suddenly his eyes flew open. Those of the queen were fixed upon his. "Why do you think he came back alone? Or did he?" Without giving her time to reply he rolled his head back and forth and clenched his hands. "Only because Mered-delfin feels that this traitor may somehow prove the key to the cure of iron do I spare his life." His teeth showed and sounded. "I should never have spared it before." Another thought worked its way across his ravaged face and the queen drew near and kneeled beside him. "Mered-delfin—he said that you must prepare to wear many masks and to make many journeys." She gave a slow, single nod. The king said, "Wear one mask now. Make one short journey."

FROM time to time word came, presumably from the king, to switch the mining from the open pit to the tunnels or from the tunnels to the open pit. Evidently neither change had perceptibly improved

the fate of iron, but from time to time still came directions—*change.*

Thus on this day the mattocks swung up and down upon the encircling path which went around and around about the great deep pit, up from its narrow center to its wider rim, digging deeper into the walls of ruddy ore. *Up* the tools went, paused, still scattering dust; *down* they fell, a grunt, a thud, and some were of bone and some were of stone, but none were of iron. Arnten had been detailed to carry the yoke with its brace of leathern water buckets and a drinking horn slung about his neck on a thong. For the most part he kept his eyes on the uneven footing of the circling path, but when he paused to allow one of the nain-thralls to drink he allowed himself to look up. The yoke had bitten into his flesh, but he preferred it out here in the open pit. He thought they all must. It was like being inside a great clay pot, one only partly made; the pot-woman had rolled the strip of red clay between her palms and coiled it into the rough shape of the pot-to-be, but she had not yet taken up her shell or shard to smooth it. The pit was like a great clay pot and they were inside it, small as mandrakes.

Of course, pots had no light blue lids on them. Against the rim, outlined, stood the guards. His eyes swung around. The nain groaned gratefully between gulps. All about the rim the guards stood at equal intervals, weapons sticking up like fishnet sticks. But at one place there were a number of them grouped together. They moved and he saw that one of them had no spear, no club, seemed to be dressed differently. Dressed more.

The nain gave one last groan, looked enviously at the rest of the water in the pails, licked his mouth and bristles and put the flat of his huge hand between the boy's shoulders below the yoke the nain had effortlessly lifted into place, gently shoved him on his way. The yoke grew lighter as he went from nain to nain. Presently he stood before his father. Arntat looked at him a moment with a dull gaze. His eyes were filmy. Then they saw the boy. A faint smile rested briefly on his haggard face. Suddenly the boy cried out, "I am sorry! I am sorry, Father, that I ever took away the bearskin!"

The yoke was lifted, the buckets put down. "I had set all things to *that* end," his father said. "As for all *this*—it be our weird. Ah, water. Good." He took the horn and dipped it full and raised his head as he raised the horn to his mouth and his eyes settled on something beyond. For a moment he did not move. Then his teeth clicked and rattled on the rim of the horn. Then he made sounds in his throat. And next he drank. But his eyes never moved.

A guard, perhaps thinking that they had been too long over the matter, approached—the expression on his face was part sneer and part fear. He gave a quick look over his shoulder and with his head motioned to another guard to follow. This first guard set his features for stern speech and gave the hand which held the club a shake or two. But what he was about to say went unsaid, as from above and

beyond a voice whose syllables the boy could not make out came floating on the air and echoed twice or more. The guard's face twisted in his own effort to comprehend, then showed surprise—regret—relief. The guard turned away, turned back, spoke to the guard behind. And this one gave a quick look at the captive father and son, a quick look up and beyond. He shrugged. The two king's men moved apart and drew themselves up in a stance of bravado and watchfulness.

Arntat let out a long breath. One hand groped for his son. The other then hung the horn-thong around the boy's neck. A drop of water trickled from it, made a muddy wormtrack through the dust on his chest. Both hands found the yoke and lifted it as the boy bent to receive it. Both hands turned the boy around and told him, plain as words, to be on his way. Arnten went. He went several steps. He heard behind him the grunt and the thud as, rest over, toil returned to, the mattock struck the red-ore ground. Then he stopped and looked up, whither his father had looked, up to where the guards had looked. Nothing was there. His eyes, darting about, saw again the group of guards. They had just begun crossing over the rim and, as one by one they stepped out of sight, he saw once more the unarmed person among them, who paused upon the edge between earth and sky. Pausing for a moment and looking back, this person for an instant seemed to have raised wings poised for flight.

Wide-cut sleeves. A woman.

She vanished over the rim.

A blow caught him in the ribs, a rock fell and bounced. He dodged the second. It came from the guard who had desisted from striking him and his father before. But he had to move and turn his back and yet balance the yoke and the buckets, so he could not run. The third stone caught him. And so did the fourth.

WHEN the thralls lay down their mattocks and began to load the broken ore into the barrows the first captain looked, saying nothing. Afterward he gestured to Arnten and Arntat. "You two—or you one and half—" the guards guffawed—"Take the tools to the tunnel. The rest of you to the forge." Two by two, the nains stooped and took up the barrow poles. Low at first like a mutter, then a rumble, as though the voices had descended from mouth to throat and chest; then so very high it seemed almost that they sang not at all as they padded along the curving path—and then cry after cry, as great wave after great wave breaking upon the rocks—

The swans fly overhead
And the nains see them.
The moles tunnel through
the earth
And the nains see them.

The guards could not ken the words, but the sound of the chant made them uneasy. They howled and mocked, they threw stones, small ones but vicious and thrown hard.

The king's fire gives no light,
The queen's light gives no fire,
Evil, evil, are these times,
These carrion times, consumed by crows.
When will the wizard's mouths be fed,
And the nains see it?

The tools were gathered and bundled together like great faggots of firewood. Father and son bowed their backs beneath their loads and turned their faces toward the tunnel. It was not the load that made Arntat tremble now, nor was it his last labor of the day that made him sweat and gasp. Unwilling, unwilling, slow, were his steps and he craned his neck at the darkening sky as though he would never see it again.

Beyond them the guards seemed to have been taken by a frenzy, stoning the nains and shouting and feinting at them with clubs and spears. But above all such noise the wild chant continued to be heard.

The king's evil rots like rust,
And the nains see it.
When will the stars throw down their spears,
And the nains see it?
Then may this kingdom turn to dust,
And the nains see it!

SOMETIMES the bigger Arn trudged back and forth in the tunnel, head stooped low—perhaps for safety, perhaps from apathy—hands against the sides as though at any moment he might push one or another of them aside. Sometimes he shambled on all his limbs, head weaving from side to side. But he was sitting motionless when the dry bracken rustled as it sometimes did, as though remembering when it was alive and yielding to each slight breeze. And a woman came in. She first saw the smaller Arn, and for just a moment the smooth composure of her face was disturbed—how curious, then, her expression! He moved at once to his father's side and her face was as before. In a single motion, effortless, graceful, she seated herself, her legs tucked under, her hands resting in her lap. Son looked at father and he thought his father looked as though he had always been looking at her.

"Yet another son gotten, Ahazmazra," she said. "And so much younger than the others." She made a slight sound as if pleasantly relaxing from some not too onerous task and she said, "You will want to know about your other sons."

Lips barely moving, he said, "Either they died or they made their peace. I can do them no good. Nor they me."

Calmly: "You may do good for this one then," she said.

This one, crouching next to his father, was not much thinking how good could be done for him. Part of his mind was entranced by the appearance of her. Part of his mind scurried and searched, as a squirrel rousting nuts, for certain words his father had said—when? Long, long ago. When they were free.

'Tis nought to you what's my-name-then. But now he knew, his fullfather's name then was Ahazmazra and if this woman knew it

she had known him then. Her underdress, beneath which her feet were tucked, was all of blue. He had never seen so much cloth of blue before, blue was a precious color, a sky-color, and he had heard more than one say that far-far-away at the farthermost edge of the world dwelt the Sky Gatherers and that all the blue in the world came from them, scarce, scarce, precious and beautiful blue: but his old uncle had said this was in no way true and that blue was made from an herb called woad; it did not flourish in Thule, was brought from the barbar-lands and traded for amber, weight for weight.

Ahaz-mazra. And not Arn.

My other begotten sons . . . made upon empty bearhide in lawful bedchamber. Her sleeveless overdress was the whitest white which he had ever seen, paler than the common pallor of bark-cloth, and came to her knees. Round yoke and hem were broad and complex broider-work in several colors, flowers and leaves and thicket—something else which he could not quite determine and which peered out of the thicket. Around her neck was a rope of pieces of amber wrapped in golden wire. Her face was strong, serious, totally self-assured. Although she had come from the free, the outside world, she had come neither to triumph nor to condescend. *I have dabbled.* Why was that word in his mind? . . . *have dabbled* . . . Or should it be *dappled?* That made no sense. Yet the memory that went with the words was of his father's face dappled by a leaf shadows as he held for a passing moment a branch he presently threw upon the fire. *I have—*

"I have done ill enough for him by getting him," said his father (now) to the strange woman. Who said a strange, strange thing indeed.

"You may get him back with you whither you both came—on a ship already prepared in all things —at dawn tide three days hence," she said. "You have only to renounce the curse on iron and to swear by your shadow and by his that it shall stay renounced. And you may even delay compliance to the last—when the third day's sun comes up and shadows first appear —upon the very shore beside the ship."

The sick, confused look, which had been absent since her entrance, now returned to the man's face. He muttered, uncertainly. "The third day's sun?"

"It is three days' journey to where the boats are."

He squinted, trying to resolve all into sense. Then he in one swift rush was on his feet and Arnten cried out and put his hands on his own head as though feeling the pain of his father's would crash upon the tunnel top. But that one or two fingers' breadth away the man's head stayed, stooped. The woman had not moved. She did not even raise her eyes. And the man fell to a charging position, his eyes level with hers, his face very close to hers, his eyes now suffused with blood.

"Innahat—erex," he cried, "ah, eh! Does that crow still live, that he has stolen all the wits of thee? 'Wither we both came?' 'By ship?'

'Renounce the curse on iron?' What babblement is this? From nowhere did we come by ship! No word of any curse on iron heard I ever till my cub here did mention it, before we fell into the nets of your long-tongued lord! 'Sear by my shadow and by his?' Eh, ah! By my shadow and by his, then—"

MORE than once, after having returned in from out, Arnten had felt sickened and dizzied. The sun might have been the cause, beating as it did on him all day. Such a moment came upon him suddenly as he wondered what great oath his father was about to swear upon their twain shadows. He closed his eyes. He did not hear if the oath were sworn. He did hear the distant droning of the nains as they returned, as their voices rose suddenly and dropped again. The strange woman was now gone, he saw. He saw his father's eyes were fixed on his and all manner of strange things he saw in them.

"Eh, ah, Bear! What odd thing we seed by yonder tunnel-mouth but two, or three! How 't did leap! A hare! Was 't an omen, eh?"

"I ken't not, if omen 'tiz," another nain said. "But 'twas as thee say, senior Aar-heved-heved-aar, a great puss-longears indeed, and would I'd a snare to catch she doe-hare, do she return—eh?—cub?"

For this other nain looked now at Arnten, who had stood up, although still dizzied, waving his hand, trying frantically to put a thought into words before the thought fled. "The hare came in!" he said, almost stammering. "The hare came in! What way she came in, would she not go out?"

The man put an arm around his son. The comforting nain-drone and nain musk surrounded them. The boy's head drooped upon his father's side. He felt weak and sore and hungry. Food would come. Words sang in his head and faint fires danced there. *Bee and salmon, wolf and bear.* A rough hand rested gently on him. *Tiger, lion, mole and hare.*

Fetters do not bind the moles.

And the nains see them.

VIII

AAR-heved-heved-aar that night sent a youngster nain to search out the passage where the hare had run. Guards did not trust the lower levels at night, would not even if the nains were gone. Posts and watch fires were at pit mouth only. Even wind and rain could not drive the guards more than a few feet inside after full dark. The nain-senior knew this, but did not trust the slickskins as cowards any more than he trusted them as braves; he chose to lessen all risks. It was not true that nains had full vision in the dark, but in this wise their eyes were in between those of men and those of beasts. The younger nain reported that although the tunnel appeared to be a blind gut, yet it did not end clean. A huge pile of debris at one end seemed to show that it might not always have been a blind gut—that perhaps the roof had fallen in at one time. And, more than this, the younger nain had sought and found the scent of the hare and it had seemed to go on up the pile of detritus to its peak.

"But I clambered not after it," he concluded.

"Wisely," said the senior. "For though I be as much a-zeal as any to be gone from here, needless risks we must not take. It is man who is impetuous, but we nains do be deliberate, so—"

"Feed the wizards."

Aar-heved-heved-aar, true to his penultimate word, reflected. Then, "Eh, ah, Bear. Say thee well."

"*Feed the wizards!*"

The nain-senior looked up at the man—for all his breadth, the nain was no taller than Arnten—and nodded his massive head. "That must be our aim, hard task though it be. It is the coming death of iron which has turned this king's head mad and turned his hands against us all. His need be great. But is our need not greater? If he do die tonight and tomorrow we be told that we be free, what then? Iron be our life, without iron we be dead nains. 'Tiz but the first step, getting gone from here. He will pursue we, but if he should not, what, eh? We do make the hoe, but we hoe not; we have traded iron and iron's work for most our food. We make the spearhead, but we cast no spear. And if we will to eat in the woods, as the wild brawnes do—say, ah!—be not the wild brawnes a fitter match for us, be we not armed with iron?"

He uttered a long, shuddering cry and his head shook so from side to side that his thick hair rustled upon his broad and shaggy shoulders. "Men gender much," he said, "and the men-wives bear often. Nains gender seldom for our passion be for the forge and few are the nain-bairns our shes do get. Before the Great Bear took starfire and gave it we and beteached we how to delve and deliver metal from the earth's belly and to mold and shape it as the bears do mold and shape their cubs—before even the yore-tide—men were few and nains were few and lived they twain folk far apart, for broad and long be Thule.

"But since then men have swarmed—yet the nain's numbers do stay the same. Still be Nainland far from menland, eh but ah, *it be not so far as once 'twas!* Men can hunt without iron, men can farm without iron, men can still beget them many mennikins without iron; men can do without iron and I betell thee this: *If men may live without iron, men may live without nains.*"

The echo of his voice was long in his listeners' minds.

He divided them into nine watches and to each watch he assigned a third part of one night. And the first watch for the first third of the first night began at once to clear away with slow care the rubble at the end of what they had begun to call The Doe-Hare's Den. The nains stripped off their leather kilts and piled loose stone therein, then gathered up the corners four and slung the juried bags over their shoulders and trudged away on noiseless feet to empty their loads well out of sight in yet another disused corridor. And then to return. Thus, while the work went on, none lost more rest than one-third of every third night; and, after many nights, the toilers in the Doe-Hare's Den, pausing a

moment for rest, recognized in their nostrils the bitter, faint, familiar smell of woodsmoke—and recognized that an aperture, of whatsoever a nature, existed between them in their captivity and the unfettered outside world.

AND thus the elusive memory returned to the boy. Remembering woodsmoke and firelight and father's words, he said, "The strange woman who was here. Was she the queen of love with whom you dabbled and dallied?"

A silence. "Eh, she was."

"Be that why the king do hate thee?"

A growl. "She said he never knew."

"Then why *do* he hate thee?"

A grunt. "Has thee forgot my tale of how he and me vowed a compact and at the end stood face to face to fight for treasure and for life, winner take all?"

"No, I remember that."

A cough. A second, longer, deeper cough.

A gasp. "I won. He lay at my feet. He groveled and gibbered. I raised him up, gave him half the plunder and I spared his life. That is why. For this he cannot forgive me."

IN THE darkness he heard droning of dry and dusty voices and he knew it was the wizards that he heard. He heard them droning as though ineffably bored and weary, as though repeating over and over to themselves, lest they forget, forcing their dust-choked voices and thinking with dust-choked minds, at a great distance away, repeating something of great importance which must not be forgotten—*The bear dies, iron dies. The bear dies, iron dies. As the bear comes to life, so must iron come to life. As the bear comes to life, so must iron come to life.* A pause, a faint gasp, the click of voices in dry, dusty throats. And again and again the droning recommenced. *The bear sleeps in the ground, so must iron sleep in the ground. As the bear sleeps its death-sleep-life, so must iron . . .*

The bear dies, iron dies . . .

Endlessly he heard this. The sound ebbed and fadded away as he felt himself gently rocked.

"*What?*"

"Bear's boy, it be time."

Time for iron, time for . . . But the droning voices were away and gone. Had he heard them echoing thinly in a cavern somewhere? Or was it only the familiar echo of the nain voices in the mine? Confused, already forgetting, he got up.

Still half asleep he followed, sometimes stumbling, as the men filed from their sleeping-cell into unguarded tunnels. In the Doe-Hare's Hole he saw the now familiar sight of and heard the now familiar sounds of debris and detritus being shoveled and scraped into the carrying-skins. But while this still went on he heard those who watched and who waited discussing whither they should go when they had made their escape from the mines: and should they go in one body for defense, or should they split up and make their several—or it might be their many—ways, in order to divide and so to weaken their pursuers.

He did not hear if an answer had been concluded, let alone what it was, for Aar-heved-heved-aar took hold of him and said, "Bear's-boy, 'tis thought they have broke through up ahead. Get thee up then, for thee be but small as be compare to us and maybe can find out—"

The senior nain did not finish his phrase, but propelled Arnten forward, saying, "Up, then, and up and up."

Though so much diminished, still the pile was high and required climbing. He half scuttled and he half slid as he set to climbing. And he had somehow a fear that, though he went on his way slow enough, still, he might strike his head there in the darkness; and from this fear he went slower. And every few paces he paused and thrust his hands forward.

And by and by he felt his hand as it scraped the face of the cavern suddenly fall through into nothingness, and he fell forward a bit and he grunted rather than cried out. And ahead of him, where yet he could not see, ahead of him in the black, black, blackness, something moved which was even blacker (though how he knew this he did not know). Something made a sudden movement and a sudden noise and he had the impression that something had been waiting and hearkening, listening very closely, he had an impression of a head cocked to one side—

And before he himself could do more, the sound from the other side of the hole ceased to be startled, flurried, resolved itself into the flap of wings in the darkness.

And he and all of them heard the sudden sharp cry of a crow. And again, farther away. And once more, faint.

NOW the work quickened, concentrated and focused on enlarging the opening. An opening onto the world at large? Or into another cave? If the latter, still, this next cave must itself open onto the world at large, else how came any bird to be there? But the stone or bone blades of their picks no longer sank into rubble. Either they sprang back as they were swung against the lips of the scrape-hole or they shattered. The nains began to mutter. Then Arn came forward on all fours, reached out his long, shaggy arms, felt and pawed and groped in the darkness.

"It seems that two slabs of rock all but meet face to face here," he said. "Some bit of softer stone did rest between them, as might a piece of stale bread between a dead man's teeth—

"Now, part of that had weathered away, else that hare had neither entered nor left—and we have battered away the rest—but the teeth be fixed firm. Somehow we must crack the jawbones, then. So—"

His voice fell into a muttering growl.

"We must break the jaws of the rock," he said once more. "How?" he muttered. "How? *How?*"

A DULL glow from a brazier of coals made shadows as the king moved slowly and painfully upon his bed. Something scuttled outside the chamber. Someone en-

tered on hands and knees. The king lifted his head, stopped, groaned, rubbed his face, moaned.

"You smell of mold and of trees," he whispered. "Well—what?"

Merred-delphin panted a moment. Then: "Slayer of—"

The king made a noise of loathing, deep in his throat.

"Damn all fulsome phrases! None's here now save thee and me. *What?*"

"Wolf—the mine-thralls—trying to break—" His wind failed, his voice caught in his scrannel chest and throat.

His master finished the words. "To break out? Eh? To—" He struggled up, hissed his pain, rested on his elbows. Raised his voice. "*Hoy!*" he cried. "The captain of the guard! *Hoy! Hoy!* Hither! Flay him, does he slumber? Hither! Here! Now! *Hoy!*"

THE bear half-slid, half-crawled backward. The air in the hole was thick. "Bring bracken," he said. "Bring all the bracken that be. Not all of ye!" he called sharply. "The crew of the first third—go!" What might have been confusion was at once averted. "The crew of the second third—to that line of tunnel where the pit props be fallen and bring, for the first fetch, the smallest and the softest pieces of the dry-rotted old props—"

He waited till they had got them gone and next he said, "Senior Aar. We must needs soon make fire."

A moment, then the elder nain murmured, "Ah, bear, that be no easy thing, thee knows."

"I do know!"

"They take care—and always have—the accursed smoothskins, that we have no flint about us—to name but one lack—and though we might break the pick-handles, their wood be not—"

"And this, all this, I know. And *thee* knows and all of ye know what I mean. Well. The cub and I will withdraw."

Softly, as it might have been reluctantly, the senior nain said, "Nay the twain of ye may bide. 'Tis no time to stand upon custom."

He made a sign to the remaining nains and, though somewhat slowly, they joined hands. There was scarce room even at the broader end of the Doe-Hare's cave for a wide circle, shoulder to broad shoulder they stood, hand in hand, leg against leg and foot against foot. All was silent and, as silence will when thought upon, silence gradually gave voice. Silence whispered to itself, and silence began to sing a little song. It was a curious bit of song and it hissed and it crackled as the nain feet shuffled, as the nain forms shifted themselves in the darkness, as the small and cramped circle went around and around in the darkness, softly stamping feet upon the rubble-strewn floor.

Arnten stared into the blackness and, as it will when stared long into, the blackness began to give light, a faint blue light, a spark, a worm, a glow that had no outline and faded. And then did not fade.

Arnten felt the hairs on his flesh

rise as his skin puckered in something the far side of fear. He saw in the darkness the forms of the nains and he saw their hairs risen and he saw upon that nimbus of hair outlining each head and each body a nimbus of blue light: and as the nains so softly-softly muttered the lights wavered and as the nains slowly circled around the blue lights slowly undulated and as the nains slowly and softly stamped their feet the blue lights softly hissed and softly crackled.

The dance did not cease when the first crew returned, arms laden with the great coarse bracken-fern; Arnten gestured and they passed their burdens, bundle by bundle, to the end of the cave. First they stuffed it through the still small opening into the outside world and then, when this would take no more, piled it all around about.

Then the second crew began to come back, stripped to the buff, their garment-skins used as carry-alls for piles of wood from the fallen pit-props, soft from long dry rot, and Arnten gestured again and they piled wood on the bracken. And still the slow, strange dance went on and on. Arn, in a few words, bade two more crews begone. They must bring back the larger stumps and shafts of the wooden columns used here and there to hold up the tunnel roof.

The dancing nains, meanwhile, had danced nearer and closer to what was now a bosky mass of dry-rotted wood and bracken. The dancing nains were pressed together almost as though to make one enormous grotesque creature with many limbs, a sort of nainipede; and this grotesque heaved and huddled close to the piled up bracken-fern which had been its bed. Still it sang and still the blue lights wavered at the ends of its hairs; and then the blue light gathered itself together into one mass and the nainipede went dancing back on its many limbs. The ball of light floated up and bounced along the rough roof of the cave and settled upon the pile of wood. It seemed next to snuggle and to creep its way deep into the bracken and then there was a flash and the blue was gone and there was the familiar red and orange and yellow of fire. And the song was silent but in its place they heard the crackling of flames.

MERRED-DELPHIN stood by the curtained door and flapped wide black sleeves.

"My men have them safe now?" the Orfas demanded.

His chief witcherer opened his mouth and closed it, long thin tongue fluttering. Then he said, "They will not go."

Then seemed the King confused. "How now? Won't go? The nains?"

Merred shook his dry old head, his long nose seeming to point all ways at once. "Not the nains, King Wolf! The men! Your men! The king's men will not go! They will not go down into the mine! It seems—I should have remembered that—" His voice stuck, came out again at last. "They fear the deep, they fear the darkness, assuredly they fear the nains and their witchery."

The old wolf let waste no time in rage and imprecation, but he

rubbed one rusty wrist with one rusty hand and he said in the voice of one who thinks, "Then what is it which they may fear e'en more, my crow, than the nains and the deep and dark—eh?"

They looked at each other. The king's eyes went past the old vizier and the old vizier turned; and together they exclaimed a word.

SO DRY was bracken and dry-rotted wood that both together burned with minimal smoke, but smoke even so there was. Arn and Arnten and the nains stood in the main corridor and with their garment-skins they flapped and fanned away the smoke. And now and then they stopped and took sips of water from the buckets, but only sips. A thin glow of firelight lit the somber halls of underground and over this overlay a thin haze of smoke. The fire dance of the nain-folk had ceased.

He leaned against his father and in his body he was in the mine-cave and beside his father, yet in his mind he was beside his old uncle in the old man's medicine hut. And there was the sound of a dance . . . the sound of a drum . . .

Out of the dimness and the deep, deep darkness came the figures of men. It was no vision or dream—here, in the mine and out of the darkness of the mine-tunnels, they came.

"The guards," said Aar. "Aye, ehh'ng, be sure, be sure, 'twas that skulk-crow as sped the word to their crank lord." And in the nain-tongue he said a word. The men came not fast ahead, they moved slowly, irresolute. And in the dim glow of the fire and the thin haze of the smoke the nains began another sort of dance. They moved their feet up and down and they leaned forward and they waved their long, long arms. They did not actually move an ell along the tunnel floor, but in the misty, swimmy light, dim and flickering, it seemed as though they did move, did advance; and the men, moaning, dismayed, retreated.

Then at the edge of his ear Arnten heard the sound which had tapped below the surface, the thin *tap-tap, tump-tump*, of a witchery drum. And the soldiers milled about, cried out in alarm and unease. A spurt of fresh air cleared vision for a moment and a way ahead and now it was Arnten who cried out and a murmur went up. For back, far back, as far back as they could see in the main corridor came a marching column, a marching double column, a dancing double column, of figures which were manlike but were no men, a-waving in their tiny hands the menace of tiny spears.

And the witch-drum beat and the witch-things came and the men cried out and turned and turned.

Said one nain voice, amused and scorning, "Do they come at us with mandrakes, then? Nay'ng! The children o' the forge know a power or two for that."

Swiftly said the elder Aar, " 'Tis not against us that they deploy the mandrakes, 'tis to force on the men o'the king, who know no power, let alone two, for that."

Arn, without one word, picked up one of the water buckets and went straightway into the smoke-

filled hole of the hare, pausing a moment at the entrance to pick up a fallen bit of bracken and dip it in the water and crush the dripping frond against his nose and mouth. In a moment came a hissing sound and a cloud of steam rolled out and all firelight was quenched.

But not for long, for torches now made appearances farther down the main corridor. The men, fearing the mandrakes more than the nains, came closer.

Arn emerged, stumbling, seized another bucket and again entered the cave. Again there was a hissing and a sizzling and again a cloud of steam. And a long pause—and Arnten held his breath and feared. And then the bear emerged again.

"The fire be out," he said, low and urgent. "And now it comes time to take these two last buckets of water and toss them on the hot rock. Do they crack well, we may all yèt take our leave. And if not—" He shrugged. A huge mass of smoldering bracken was dragged out, picked up, heaved toward the advancing soldiery—who cried out, fell back into the smoke and gloom. And the drums beat and the mandrakes moved.

Now, all at once, all were in the place whence the hare had fled. Somehow there was light, light of a thin gray sort, obscured by steam, by smoke, but light. And Arnten felt the floor hot, hot against his feet and hissed his pain. He saw his father toss one bucket, heard him toss the second. Heard a cracking sound. And a second. Heard the nains give cry to their satisfaction. Heard the almost desperate cries of the king's men as they charged. Heard the sound of spears striking against wall and floor. Heard the sound of spear striking against flesh. Heard his voice raised in a wail as he saw his father stumble upon one knee with one spear into him. Saw Aarheved-heved-aar fall and saw him crawl and saw him writhe and heard his death rattle.

Saw the bear seizing the very rims of the hole of the rock and smelled his flesh burn and saw his shoulders writhe and saw the rock face crack still more. Cried out and wailed again as he saw his father turn toward him, face grim and hideous and smudged with ash and soot and blood spurting from nose and mouth. Saw that protruding from his father's flesh which he knew was the bloodied head of a spear. Felt his father seize him up and swing him around and protect his smaller body and thrust him through the hole in the rock whence came the milky light of dawn. Felt the last great thrust of that great body and saw the mine vanish from sight and felt the hot rock graze his side and saw the sky and felt himself fall. And roll. And move, crawling, crawling. Leaves in his mouth, dust in his nostrils, smoke all about him. Then no smoke about him. Writhing on his belly like a wounded snake. No more smoke. Shouts and cries in his mind alone. Then silence falling in his mind.

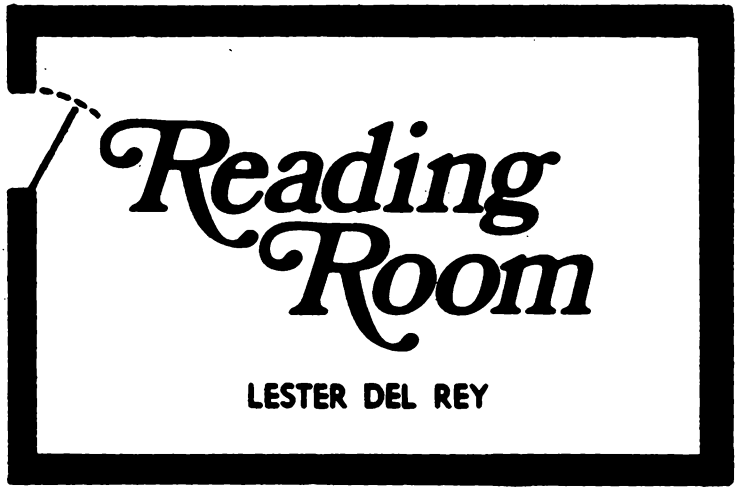
His father.

His father's face.

His father's deed.

At this last moment his father had said no word.

His deed had been enough. •



THERE is a theory that our progress must be represented by an asymptotic curve; that is, the higher we climb, the steeper the rate of change. If the predictions I've seen are even reasonably close, there will be far more change in conditions and in what we call our body of fact in the next thirty years than in the last hundred.

This makes it difficult for science fiction to predict the future with even a crude approximation of what will happen by the year 2000. In fact, writers in search of a reputation for prophecy can't be sure whether to produce wish-dreams of glory or nightmares of man's ultimate doom. Most of the dooms pictured a century ago turned out to be nonsense, as did the utopias. And while we seem to be living at a time of ill omens, those who seek the easy answer by predicting horrible futures are no closer to probability than the most optimistic.

But nobody with any serious right to be heard ever claimed that science fiction was primarily prophecy. At best it is merely an attempt to create a consistent, reasonably rational background picture of what a future might be like. The science in our science fiction doesn't really relate to the hard body of physical facts that might be used by an engineer, though we try not to violate such facts unwittingly. Instead, we

try to use some of the techniques of the supposedly impractical, "pure" scientist; we look over the known facts to find what isn't fully known; we devise theories, carefully weeding out what is inconsistent or already disproved; and finally we test our theories to see whether they work. Of course, we test them only as fiction, with the proof being the workability of our future world as a place where our story characters can function as more than shadows.

Unfortunately, much of the material now being written doesn't operate that way. A great deal of it cops out by taking something that is currently in the news and acting as if it would be even more so a hundred years from now. Other current writing, all too often, borrows from past vision without adding current vision.

As a result, I find it difficult to locate material that has any real insight, either visionary or nightmarish, except for the fortunate reprinting of stories done a decade or three ago.

However, there is now a series of books which should be read by everyone who enjoys good fiction *re* the future. These are reprints, long unavailable except in rather expensive hard-to-find editions.

They are the so-called juvenile books of Robert A. Heinlein, currently being issued in soft covers by Ace, at a price of 95¢ each. Many of them are the top examples of what good science fiction should be. They represent the work of one of our best writers at the very peak of his form.

Don't let the term "juvenile" fool you. The stories are partially told from the viewpoint of characters who haven't reached legal maturity yet; but so was van Vogt's *Slan*, and nobody considered that a juvenile story. The outlook, the writing, the philosophy and the complexity of the Heinlein pieces are completely adult.

Above all, they present a highly structured, thoroughly imagined and consistent picture of a future for each novel. On the average, nobody has done as good a job of making futures real as Heinlein, and these books are among his best in that respect.

Between Planets is most certainly not a picture of *the* future, according to what we now know scientifically about Venus. This was written twenty years ago, before radio astronomy and the Venus probes. It uses a picture of Venus that is hopeless, in the light of later discoveries. Here the planet is the old-fashioned water-drenched world, covered with deep fogs and mists, with some islands sticking up from the great shallow seas. As hard prophecy, it fails miserably.

But that doesn't matter too much. The water-world is complete, livable and lived in, with

technologies and attitudes that fit it. It has its own intelligent race and a bunch of alien creatures that are completely delightful. And it is one of the better stories of an attempt by a colony world to break from the strictures of Earth in a sort of interplanetary war—one logically worked out for its space "battles" and its eroding, desultory home battles.

THIS was fairly early in Heinlein's work in the juveniles. The protagonist is quite acceptable to any adult reader—and he most definitely doesn't stay a juvenile—but some of the mechanics of the solution creak a bit. Still, *Between Planets* stands up today better than many current adult books, and there is no writing down in it. When it first appeared, it was good enough to be used as a serial by one of the most adult of the adventure magazines, at a time when science fiction had to be better than most other material to win acceptance.

Red Planet, in a way, lets down a bit. Again there is the completely believable development of rebellion, this time by the colonists on Mars against the Earth-based Company and its corrupt local representatives. Again, local fauna and flora are worked out so well that the book is justified by its aliens alone. But much of this seems somehow more standard in its development than the Venus book. The science is not as far from current theories—Mars was better known than Venus—but it fails in indicating too rich a supply of oxygen on Mars.

But when we get to *The Rolling Stones*, all the early slight compromises Heinlein made to the age of his readers is discarded. This must be a delight to young readers, but it's twice as much fun for those who are adult. The main viewpoint characters here are a couple of teen-age twins. But the whole Stone family—mentioned in the later adult *Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*—is the real "hero" of the story.

Unlike most of the series, *Stones* is one of Heinlein's fairly rare stories with a completely humorous slant. The humor doesn't impede the plot, which is a bit free-wheeling but still excellent.

My own favorite is *Star Beast*. Given a period of interstellar exploration, it seems inevitable that some odd pets would be brought back to Earth. But suppose one of those pets, a hundred-odd years later, turned out to be a ranking member of one of the most important, sapient and rambunctious races in the universe? Suppose it didn't particularly want to return, but the total future of interstellar peace depended on finding and returning it? That's just the beginning of the complications in this novel. The real hero isn't a youngster, either. He's the

real head of all interstellar government on Earth, though lacking the title. He's also allergic to certain aliens, though he has to deal warmly with them.

This novel also is brightened by as unpleasant a mother and as precocious a girl friend as can be found in science fiction. Heinlein uses them, among other things, as pointers toward the radical changes that have to be made in our society and its mores when we enter an age of interstellar negotiations. His concept of a future earth is complete not merely surface treated. His people think differently from us, act differently, and have to find different ways of making the same instincts and methods serve them. If sociology and psychology are to be treated as sciences in our field, this book stands out as one of the better examples of how to do so.

The science of sociology forms the background also for *Tunnel in the Sky*. The tunnel here refers to a "tube" between dimensions, in which it is possible to transfer from one world to another. Earth has obviously just opened up colonization of various habitable worlds discovered by the tunnel. And it is undergoing some rather radical upsets in its social customs. Among these is the need to prepare its younger people for the unknown hazards they may face on other worlds. One method of training is a course in survival. The graduating class has to pass a simple test. It's members are dumped onto a planet—type and conditions not specified—and left there to take care of themselves for two weeks. They can take any equipment with them which they can carry—though Heinlein indicates what he thinks is the best equipment. At the end, those who survive are graduated; those who fail are simply dead.

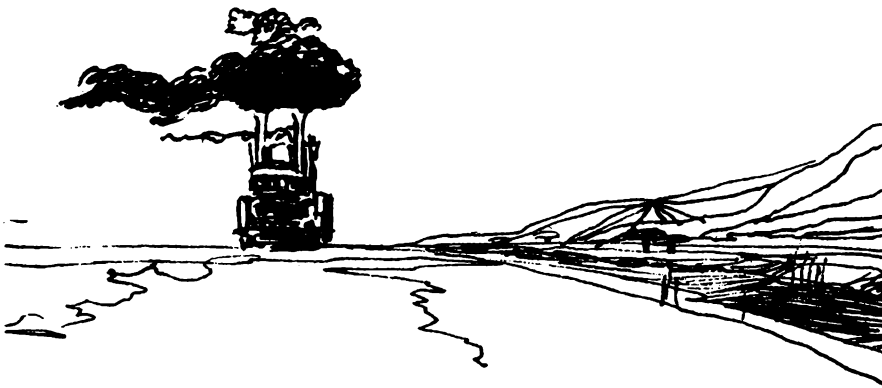
Nice. And probably totally unconvincing to most readers of this quick summary who cannot believe that our attitudes toward young men and women could change that radically. But historically, Heinlein is on solid ground, and he develops his theme so well that it makes total sense in the story.

A local accident makes it impossible for a student group to use their return "tunnel." The time for return comes and goes—and more time goes. And those who have survived for this long gradually begin to realize that they may never be called back. Now, on a world about which they still know very little, and with only rudimentary equipment for a two-week survival test, they must set out to build a viable way of life for their colony and, hopefully, to become a real world in time.

But this is also a story of sociology, as I said. Heinlein has used

(Please turn to page 176)

PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER



THE FABULOUS

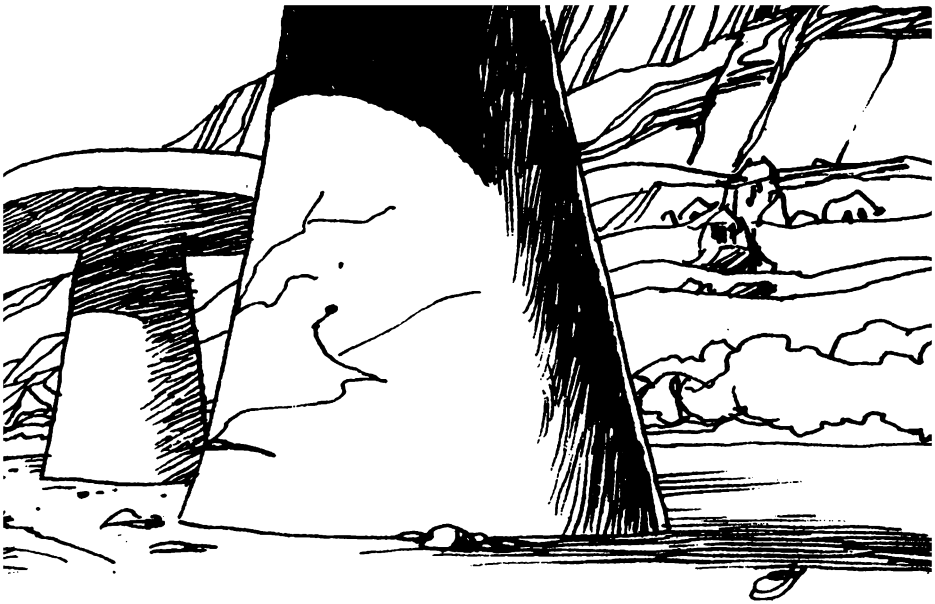
WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

One morning the dead of Earth awoke with a great cry.

They were on the banks of a river of a planet somewhere in a star swarm. They were naked and in an interminable valley which offered no food—at first. The old had been rejuvenated, so that an eighty-year-old, for instance, again had his twenty-five-year-old body. The diseased were healthy; the crippled walked straight; the misshapen were reshaped. Moreover, all men had awakened circumcised and were permanently without facial hair. All women were virgins again but forever sterile.

After the horrible fears of hell and the shocks of resurrection were over, humanity began to look around and to construct new societies within the physical limitations of the Rivervalley, their psychic conditioning and the changed rules of human life.

The River was usually one to one and one-half miles wide, though it sometimes became a narrow strait or a lake. The only animal life consisted of the small earthworm and the fish, which ranged from trout- to whale-sized. On each side of The River was a gently sloping plain a mile wide, then two or so miles of hills and then perpendicular unscalable mountains 10,000 feet and more. The plains were covered with short grasses, the hills with tall grasses.



RIVERBOAT

CONCLUSION

The other plants were bamboo (which is a grass), giant oaks, pine, fir, yew and the indestructible non-Terrestrial irontrees. Vines with huge, varicolored blooms grew on the latter.

The temperature rose to an estimated 85° F at 2:00 P.M. and fell to 60° F around 2:00 A.M. The rainfall was unvarying. The estimated population density was 260-261 persons per square mile—total population was 36 billion or so. The River was supposed to be from five to ten million miles long. It circled this world like a Midgard Serpent, issuing from the north polar sea and, after much twisting across one hemisphere and cutting back around the south pole, twisted back up the other hemisphere and emptied into the north polar sea.

Along each bank of The River, at one-mile intervals, and also in the hills, were huge mushroom-shaped stones. Three times a day they discharged enormous electrical energies derived from some place—or mechanism—deep in the planet's guts. Mankind had awakened possessing metal cylinders containing snap-down racks and dishes. These cylinders—the grails—when placed on top of the stones, yielded food, liquor, tobacco, marihuana cigarettes and cigars and "dreamgum" after the energy discharge. Apparently the grails contained devices, inside false bottoms, for converting energy to matter.

Mankind was where he could live simply but with no fear of freezing or dying of thirst or starvation or bacterial or viral disease or cancer or almost any of the scourges that had made life on Earth a hell.

Sixty percent of mankind had been strung along The River in a sequence roughly corresponding to the chronology of their existence on Earth. Thus the earliest men (and subhumans) of circa 2,000,000 B.C. were closest to The Riverhead and the latest, born circa 1980-2009 A.D., were near the mouth. (Mankind had been wiped out in 2009 A.D.) Mixed with the 60% of a particular time and nationality were 30% of a minority from another time and nationality and 10% apparently chosen at random from any time and place. But 1% of the total was composed of 20th-century humans, these being the most numerous of mankind and the most widely scattered.

Though many people clung to the idea that their resurrection was of supernatural origin, many thought they knew better. It was rumored that one man had awakened in a strange and frightening place where the dead were being recreated, refleshed and prepared for their second deaths and recreation upon the planet's surface through some unknown means. This man (who, said some, was Richard Francis Burton, the 19th-century English explorer, linguist, and author) had seen the warders of that chamber of the dead, who looked just like men.

During this time, the first twenty years after Resurrection Day, Samuel Langhorne Clemens—or Mark Twain—had been looking for two things. One was his Earth wife, Olivia. The other was iron. He had two dreams, neither of which seemed likely to come true.

Sam Clemens had met a colossal subhuman (whom he called Joe Miller) who told a strange story. Joe had managed to get up through the mountains surrounding the north pole and had seen a tall pale tower in a misty sea and a flying machine descending towards it. Then he had fallen to his death and awakened near Clemens. Sam was fired-up about this; he thought that the beings responsible for this world must have their headquarters in that tower. He would build a boat and go all the way up The River, if it took him a hundred years to do it. Then, somehow, he would storm the tower and discover the secret of resurrection.

For the trip Sam wanted a great riverboat such as he had piloted on the Mississippi in his youth. Unfortunately the planet seemed to have little iron ore. However, he met a Norseman, Eric Bloodaxe, who had an axe made from a nickel-iron meteorite. With Eric's Norsemen and Joe, Sam set out down The River to find a large supply of meteorite metal.

He found it, but not as he had planned. A giant meteorite struck the valley and the tidal waves almost killed the searchers. But they located the iron and began mining. From the first, to attain his boat, Sam had had to make deals and compromises he would other-

wise have scorned. He had to become partners with the man who had once been King John of England. He had to murder Eric Bloodaxe. And Eric, before dying, had sworn that when Sam did get to the end of The River, he would find Eric waiting for him, and Eric would kill him and thus send him off down The River a million or so miles. Sam would never get to the misty tower, nor would he keep his fabulous Riverboat. Sam was to have nightmares thereafter about Eric.

One night Sam awoke in his hut to find a hooded man crouched beside him. This man, whom Sam was to call The Mysterious Stranger—or X—was one of the group that had created this planet and the resurrection. Though an Ethical (as these beings called themselves), he was a renegade. He told Sam that he had used his powers to deflect the giant meteorite and to deactivate the repulsive system that would ordinarily have sent the falling star past the planet. His fellows suspected that they had a traitor among them, but none of them knew for sure. Sam was to build his great boat and take a crew upRiver. He would be aided by eleven men whom The Stranger had chosen to storm the tower and wreck the plans of the Ethicals. These men would come secretly to Clemens and introduce themselves.

Sam's problems as co-consul of Parolando, the state formed to build the boat, kept him busy day and night. One of his problems was getting enough wood as fuel for the mills and plastic factories. And Parolando had to trade for—or gain by conquest—materials and ores other states had: cryolite and bauxite to make aluminum, tungsten and iridium for electrical components. Adding to Sam's troubles was the attitude of Olivia, his Earth wife, who was no longer in love with him, but chose to live with the resurrected Frenchman, Cyrano de Bergerac.

One downRiver state, Soul City, was headed by a late 20th-century American black militant, Elwood Hacking. He had control of certain materials Sam needed and was demanding high prices. He was also, Sam was sure, plotting to get hold of the boat after it was finished, if not before. Neighboring states were hoping to do the same. King John also was making life jumpy for Sam. He was bound to be plotting to get the boat for himself. Meanwhile, John's arrogance and lechery had to be repressed by Sam.

Moreover, the missionaries of the Church of the Second Chance were plaguing him. This religious body had formed a few years after Resurrection Day. It claimed to know what the whole business of the River and the Resurrection was about. Its members preached total pacifism, love for all and a striving towards ethical perfection. They were also responsible for introducing Esperanto as a universal language. They welcomed martyrdom as the quickest way for them to travel up and down The River and spread their religion.

They were a threat to Clemens because they were opposed to the

building of the boat. Their main speaker in this area was Hermann Goering, the ex-Nazi, the ex-Reichsmarschal. Goering had suffered a psychic conversion as sudden and as strange and apparently as sincere as that of Paul of Tarsus.

A large group of fellow missionaries, kicked out of a neighboring state, landed in Parolando despite orders to stay out. King John, eager to try out a new pistol using plastic bullets, massacred all but a few women. These he took into his log palace. Sam could not allow John to get away with this, even if it meant civil war. So he set out to demand the women back, unharmed, and to arrest John. Odysseus was upRiver on a mission. Sam had with him Lothar von Richthofen, de Bergerac, Joe Miller and a few others. If John resisted he could cause Sam to lose—forever—all hopes of sailing on his fabulous Riverboat.

VIII

SAM saw thirty or so women walking out through the open gates and knew that John had decided to rectify his mistake. Even so, he could be accused of kidnaping, a graver crime than murder in this topsyturvy world. But if the women were unharmed it would be too much trouble to push the charge.

He stopped—and this time he thought his heart would also stop. Gwenafra was with the women!

Lothar, crying her name, ran to her. She ran to him with her arms out and they embraced.

After a minute of hugging, kissing and sobbing, she pulled herself away and went to Sam. He could not help reproaching himself. If he had shown that he wanted her, when she had made it plain that he could have her, she might not have turned to von Richthofen. Why hadn't he taken her? Why had he clung to the idea that Livy would eventually come back and that, if he took another woman now, Livy would resent it so much she would never have anything to do with him? She was living with Cyrano. So he could do what he pleased.

His thinking wasn't logical. He sighed. Logic was what one used to justify one's emotions.

Gwenafra kissed him while her tears ran down his bare chest. Again she left his arms and went back to Lothar, and Sam Clemens was left with the problem of what to do with—or to—John Lackland.

He strode through the gates, Joe Miller lumbering behind him. A moment later von Richthofen had caught up with him. He was swearing and muttering in German, "I'll kill him!"

Sam stopped. "You get out of here," he said. "I'm mad enough, but I can control myself. You're in the lion's den now—and if you try anything he can have you killed and claim self-defense. He'd love that. In fact, he may have done all this just to set up our murder."

Lothar said, "But you're here with only Joe."

"I wouldn't ever call Joe an *only*," Sam replied. "Anyway, if you hadn't been so busy mugging with Gwen you would have heard me order the troops to storm the

palace and kill everybody in it if I'm not out in fifteen minutes."

Lothar stared at Sam. "You've certainly gotten much more agressive than you used to be."

"The more trouble I have and the longer the building of the Riverboat takes, the meaner I get," Sam said. There was no point in mentioning that his anger at Lothar and Gwenafra was turned onto John, who already had so much directed at him that he should have curled up and crisped away. And would have if there were any justice in the world.

He entered the largest building inside the stockade of tall lodgepole-pine logs and brushed past Sharkey. The slope-shouldered thug started to block his way, but Sam did not break his stride. Sharkey snarled soundlessly and made the mistake of not moving far enough to one side. A huge reddish-haired hip sent the two-hundred-and-thirty-pound man staggering back as if he were a hollow dummy.

"I'll kill you one of these days," Sharkey said in English.

Joe turned his head slowly as if it were a turret on a battleship and the tremendous proboscis were a cannon. "Yeth? You and vhat army?"

"You're getting pretty snappy with the comeback, Joe," Sam muttered. "My influence, no doubt."

"I'm not ath dumb ath motht people think," Joe said.

"That wouldn't be possible."

SAM'S rage had become a dull red now. Even with Joe as his bodyguard, he was far from being safe. But he was banking on the fact that John would go only so far with him—John wanted the Riverboat, too.

John was sitting at the big round oaken table with a dozen of his thugs. The giant Zaksksromb was standing behind him. All held clay steins. The room reeked of tobacco and liquor. John's eyes were red—but then they usually were. Light came in through the windows but the direct sunlight was blocked off by the stockade poles. Some pine torches burned smokily.

Sam stopped, took a cigar out of the little box in the bag hanging from his belt and lit it. It angered him that his hand shook so much.

He said, "All right, Your Majesty. It was bad enough that you took those women for your own vile purposes. But to take Gwenafra? She's a citizen of this state! You really put your neck in the noose, John, and I'm not just using figurative language."

John downed the whiskey in the stein and gently put it down on the table. He said softly, "I had those women removed for their own safety. The crowd was ugly; they wanted to kill all the missionaries. And Gwenafra was taken along through a mistake. I will ascertain who is responsible for that and punish him."

"John," Sam said, "I ought to arrest your assertions for vagrancy. They certainly are without any visible support. But I got to hand it to you. You just dispossessed the devil. You are now the father of lies and grand master, past, present and future, of deceit. If being bare-

faced is the criterion of the greatest liar, all other liars are whiskered like Santa Claus."

John's face turned red. Zaksksromb sneered and lifted his club chest high. Joe growled.

John blew out a deep breath and said, smiling, "You are upset over a little blood. You will get over it. You cannot disprove anything I have said—isn't that right? By the way, have you called a meeting of the Council yet? The law of the land requires you to do so, you know."

The horrible thing was that John would get away with his claims. Everybody, including his supporters would know he was lying. But there was nothing Sam could do unless he wanted to start a civil war. And civil war would mean that the wolves—Iyeyasu, Hacking, maybe the supposed neutrals, Publius Crassus, Chernsky, Tai Fung and the savages across the River—would invade.

SAM snorted and walked out. Two hours later his expectations became realities. The Councilmen voted an official reprimand against John for his mishandling of the situation and his hastiness. He was directed to confer with his co-Consul in any such future situations.

No doubt John would laugh uproariously when he was told of the decision and he would call for more liquor, tobacco, marihuana and women to celebrate.

However, he did not have a complete victory. Every Parolando knew how Sam Clemens had stood up to John, stormed his palace with only one supporter, released the women and insulted John to his face. John knew that his triumph was standing on shaky legs.

Sam asked the Council to exile every Second Chancer in Parolando for his/her own protection. But several Councilors pointed out that this would be illegal. The Carta would have to be changed. Besides, it was unlikely that John would take any more action against the sect after the warning he had received.

They knew as well as Sam why he was taking advantage of the emotional climate to oust the Second Chancers. But there were some stubborn men on the Council. Perhaps they felt angry because they had not been able to do anything about John and wanted to make a stand for principle.

Sam would have bet that the survivors of the massacre would want to leave immediately. But they insisted on staying. The slaughter had convinced them that Parolando needed them. Goering was building several large huts for them. Sam sent word down that this should stop. Parolando was already short of wood. Goering sent word back that he and his male comrades would move out and sleep under the grailstones. Sam swore and blew smoke in the face of the Chancer messenger and said that it was too bad pneumonia did not exist. Afterward he felt ashamed, but he did not relent. He wasn't going to scant his furnaces so that people he did not even want could sleep under a roof.

He felt upset enough, but that evening he got two messages which opened the earth under him. One

was that Odysseus had disappeared at night from his boat while on his way back to Parolando. Nobody knew what had happened to him. He was just gone. The second message informed him that William Grevel, the man who had been spying on John, had been found under a ledge at the base of the mountain, his skull smashed in.

Somehow, John had found him out and executed him. And John would be laughing because Sam could not prove a thing or, for that matter, even admit that Grevel had been working for him.

SAM called in von Richthofen, de Bergerac and others whom he considered to be his people. It was true that de Bergerac and he were hostile because of Livy, but de Bergerac preferred Clemens to John, with whom he had had some hot words.

"Maybe Odysseus' disappearance from the boat is only a coincidence," Sam said. "But that, plus Grevel's death, makes we wonder if John isn't striking at me through my friends. He may be planning on cutting you down, one by one, under circumstances where he can't be accused. He's crafty. He probably won't do anything now for some time. But Odysseus was gotten rid of in a place where an investigation will probably reveal nothing. And I can't accuse John about Grevel without exposing what I've been doing. So, watch out for situations where accidents can happen. And be careful when you are alone."

De Bergerac swore. "If it weren't for this ridiculous law against dueling, I could challenge John and run him through. You, Sinjoro Clemens, were responsible for that law!"

"I was raised in a country where duels were common," Sam said. "The whole idea sickens me. If you'd seen the tragedies—well, never mind. I guess you did see and it doesn't seem to have affected you. Anyway, do you think for one moment that John would ever let you live long enough to meet him for a duel? No, you'd disappear or have an accident, you can bet on that."

"Vhy can't Chohn have an acthident?" Joe Miller asked.

"How would you get past the living wall of his bodyguards?" Sam said. "No, if John has an accident, it must be a genuine one."

He dismissed them with the exception of de Bergerac and Joe, who never left him unless he was sick or Sam wanted privacy. These were the only ones who knew about The Mysterious Stranger.

"The Stranger said that he'd picked out twelve humans for the final onslaught against the Misty Tower," Sam told Cyrano. "Joe, you, Richard Francis Burton, Odysseus, and me. That's five. But none of us knows who the other seven are. Now Odysseus is gone and God knows if we'll ever see him again. The Stranger implied that all of the twelve would join the others on the Riverboat somewhere along the line. But if Odysseus has been resurrected somewhere to the south, downRiver, so far away he can't get back up here before the Riverboat is built, then he is out of luck."

Cyrano shrugged and rubbed his long nose. "Why worry? Or is that your nature? For all we know, Odysseus is not dead. He may have been contacted by this Mysterious Stranger—who, Odysseus claims, is a woman, so his Stranger is not the one that you and I met—but I digress. As I said, Odysseus may have been called away suddenly by this so mysterious person and we will find out in time what did happen. Let that shadowy angel—or fiend—take care of the matter. We must concentrate on getting this fabulous boat constructed and skewering anybody who gets in our way."

"That maketh thenthe," Joe said. "If Tham had a hair for every time he vorried, he'd look like a porcupine. Vhich, now that I come to think of it—"

"Out of the mouths of babes—and tailless monkeys," Sam said. "Or is it the other end? Anyway, if everything goes well—and so far it hasn't—we'll start bonding the magnalium plates for the hull in thirty days. That'll be my happiest day until we actually launch the boat. I'll be happier even than when Livy said yes—"

HE COULD have cut himself off sooner, but he wanted to antagonize Cyrano. The Frenchman, however, did not react. Why should he? He had Livy—she was saying yes to him all the time.

"Me, I do not like the idea, since I am a peaceful man. I would like to have the leisure to indulge myself with the good things of life. I would like to have an end to wars—and if there is to be any bloodshed, let it be between gentlemen who know how to wield their swords. But we cannot build the boat without interference, because those who do not have iron desire it and will not stop until they get it. So, me, I think that John Lackland may be right in one particular. Perhaps we should wage an all-out war as soon as we have enough weapons, and clear The River on both sides of all opposition for thirty miles both ways. We can then have unlimited access to the wood and the bauxite and platinum—"

"But if you did that, if you killed all the inhabitants, the countries would be filled up within a day," Sam said. "You know how resurrection works. Look at how swiftly this area was reinhabited after the meteorite had killed everybody in it."

Cyrano held up a long—and dirty—finger. Sam wondered if Livy was losing her battle to keep him clean.

"Ah!" Cyrano said. "But these people will remain unorganized and we, being on the spot, will organize them, take them in as citizens of the expanded Parolando. We will include them in the lottery for the crew of the boat. In the long run, it would be faster to stop the boat building now and do as I suggest."

And I will send you forth in the lead, Sam thought. *And it will be David and Bathseba and Uriah all over again. Except that David probably didn't have a conscience, never lost a wink of sleep over what he did . . .*

"I don't think so," Sam said.

"In the first place, our citizens will fight like hell to defend themselves, because they're involved in the boat. But they're not going to engage in a war of conquest, especially after they figure out that bringing new citizens into the lottery is going to reduce their chances enormously. Besides, it just isn't right."

De Bergerac stood up, his hand on the hilt of his rapier. "Perhaps you are right. But the day you made an agreement with John Lackland and then murdered Erik Bloodaxe, that was the day you launched your boat on blood and treachery and cruelty. I do not reproach you, my friend. What you did was unavoidable if you wanted the boat. But you cannot start thus and then shy away from similar or even worse acts. Not if you want your boat. Good night, my friend."

He bowed and left. Sam puffed on his cigar, then said, "I hate that man. He tells the truth."

Joe stood up, and the floor creaked under his eight hundred pounds. "I'm going to bed. My head hurtth. Thith whole thing ith giving me a pain in my aththh. Either you do or you don't. It'th that thimple."

"If I had my brainth in my aththh I'd thay the thame thing," Sam snarled. "Joe, I love you. You're beautiful. Your world is so uncomplex. Problems make you sleepy—so you sleep. But I—"

"Good night, Tham!" Joe said, and walked into the texas. Sam made sure that the door was barred and that the guards he'd posted around the building were alert. Then he, too, went to bed.

HE DREAMED about Erik Bloodaxe, who chased him through the decks and into the hold of the Riverboat. He awoke yelling. Joe loomed over him, shaking him. Rain pounded the roof and thunder boomed somewhere up along the face of the mountain.

Joe stayed a while after making some coffee. He put a spoonful of dried crystals into cold water and the coffee crystals heated the mixture in three seconds. They sipped their coffee and Sam smoked while they talked about the days when they had voyaged down The River with Bloodaxe and his Vikings in search of iron. And then Joe talked of how he had awakened along The River the first time and found himself in the Arctic regions among his own kind, the titanthropi. Then Egyptians had come in their oared vessels and he had been induced to go with them up The River. They called him Tehuti (that is, Thoth) because of his long nose, which reminded them of the ibis-headed god. And then they had come to the headwaters of The River and climbed mountains which seemed unclimbable. They had found their way prepared, some steps cut out of the cliff, a tunnel bored, a ledge widened, ropes left hanging down. The person who had done this, Joe now knew, must have been Sam's Mysterious Stranger. And then high up on a ledge, with the cold gray mists of the north polar sea below him and the sun creeping along forever just below the top of the mountain range that ringed the sea, the mists had parted for a moment. The top of a tower, a vast gray cylinder shaped like a

grail, had been visible for a few seconds as the sun passed a notch in the mountains. A big egg-shaped machine had flown down toward the top of the tower. Joe had stepped back, forgetting that there was a grail just behind him. He had fallen backward off the mountain and down into the mists and then into the sea, many thousands of feet below. He had awakened in a region of The River where only humans lived and there had met Sam Clemens.

"At leatht, ve uthed to have fun now and then," Joe said. "But not any more. There 'th too much vork to do and too many people out to thkin our hideth. And your voman *vould* thyow up vith that bignothed Thyrano."

Sam chuckled and said, "Thanks for the first laugh I've had in days, Joe. Big-nosed! Ye Gods!"

"Thometimeth I'm too thubtle even for you, Tham," Joe said. He rose from the table and walked back to his room.

Sam had little time for sleep that night and on subsequent nights. He had always liked to stay in bed in the mornings—now he managed less than five hours out of twenty-four, with an occasional siesta. Someone always seemed to need a question answered or an issue thrashed out. His chief engineers were far from agreeing on everything. Sam had thought engineering a cut-and-dried profession. You had a problem and you solved it the best way. Usually there was only one way. But Van Boom, Velitsky, and O'Brien seemed to be living in worlds that did not quite dovetail. Finally, to spare himself the aggravating and often wasted hours of wrangling, Sam delegated the final word to Van Boom. They were not to worry him about anything unless they needed his authorization.

An amazing number of things instantly required his authorization.

IX

IYEYASU conquered not only the Bushman-Hottentot area across The River from him but nine miles of the Ulmak territory. Then he sent a fleet down to the three-mile stretch below the Ulmaks, where seventeenth-century A.D. Sac and Fox Indians lived. This country was conquered with resultant slaughter of half the inhabitants. Iyeyasu then began dickering with Parolando for a higher price for his wood. Also, he wanted an amphibian exactly like the *Firedragon I*.

By then the second *Firedragon* was almost finished.

And by this time over five hundred blacks from Parolando had been exchanged for an equal number of Dravidians. Sam had steadfastly refused to accept the Wahhabi Arabs, or at least had insisted that the Asiatic Indians come first. Hacking apparently did not like this, but nothing had been said in the agreement about which group had priority.

Hacking, having heard from his spies about Iyeyasu's demands, sent a message. He wanted a *Firedragon*, too, and he was willing to exchange a great quantity of minerals for it.

Publius Crassus and Tai Fung allied to invade the area across The River from them. This was occupied by stone-age peoples from everywhere and everytime and stretched for fourteen miles along the left bank. With their superior steel weapons and numbers, the invaders killed half the population and enslaved the rest. And they upped their price for the wood but kept it below Iseyasu's.

Spies reported that Chernsky, who ruled the fourteen-mile-long nation just north of Parolando, had made a visit to Soul City. What happened there was anybody's guess, since Hacking had set up a security system that seemed to be one hundred percent effective. Sam had gotten in eight blacks to spy for him and he knew that John had sent in at least a dozen. The severed heads of all soon were tossed from boats in the mists late at night onto the top of the wall along the bank of Parolando.

Van Boom came to Sam late one night and said that Firebrass had cautiously approached him.

"He offered me the position of chief engineer on the boat," Van Boom said.

"*He* offered it to you?" Sam said, his cigar almost dropping.

"Yes. He didn't say so in so many words, but I got the idea. The Riverboat will be taken over by the Soul Citizens and I will be chief engineer."

"And what did you say about his fine offer? After all, you can't lose, either way."

"I told him not to etch a pseudo-circuit. Come out and say it. He wouldn't, though he grinned. I told him I hadn't sworn any oath of loyalty to you, but I had accepted your offer and that was as good I said. I wasn't going to betray you and that if Soul City invaded Parolando I'd defend it to the death."

"That's fine, superb." Sam said. "Here, have a snort of bourbon—and a cigar! I'm proud of you and proud to command such loyalty. But I wish—I wish—"

Van Boom looked over the cup. "Yes?"

"I wish you'd strung him along. We could have found out a lot with you feeding us information."

Van Boom put the cup down and stood up. His handsome brown features were ugly. "I am not a dirty spy!"

"Come back," Sam said, but Van Boom ignored him. Sam buried his head in his arms for a minute and then picked up Van Boom's cup. Never let it be said that Samuel Langhorne Clemens wasted good whiskey. Or even bad, for that matter. Although the grail never yielded any but the best.

Van Boom's lack of realism irritated him. At the same time he knew a counter feeling of warm pleasure. It was good to know that incorruptible men still existed.

He regretted that he had not had a chance to pry out of Van Boom his basic attitude toward whites. Sam knew that his chief engineer had been delivered by a Zulu mother in a ditch during a bombardment in the course of a revolution in South Africa. Van Boom's father had been an Afrikaans who had joined the black underground. Van Boom had been raised in a society in which whites and blacks were

theoretically equal, though there were not many whites around. Most of them had been slaughtered or fled the country. He had grown up with the history of the long exploitation and suppression of the blacks by the whites drilled into him. But he himself had seemed to be unaffected by his background and he had not come into contact with whites who looked down on him. He had never left his country.

Sam decided he did not have to worry about Van Boom.

IN THE middle of the night he awoke wondering if he did have to worry after all. What if Van Boom were not as upright as he pretended to be? What if the clever Firebrass had told Van Boom to go to Clemens with his story? What better way to put a man off his guard? But then it would have been better if Van Boom had pretended to Sam that he was playing along with Firebrass.

"I'm beginning to think like King John," Sam said aloud.

He finally decided that he had to trust Van Boom.

The work on the great Riverboat went on day and night. The plates of the hull were bonded and the beams were welded on. The batacitor and the giant electric motors were built and cranes began the slow and cautious work of lowering them into the hull. The cranes themselves were enormous structures on huge rails, powered by electricity from the prototype batacitor. People came from thousands of miles up and down The River, in galleys, dugouts, canoes, to see the fabulous works.

Sam and King John agreed that so many people wandering about would get in the way of the work and would enable spies to function more efficiently.

"Also, it'll put the temptation to steal before them, and we don't want to be responsible for tempting people. They have enough trouble as it is," Sam said.

John did not smile. He signed the order that expelled all noncitizens, except for ambassadors and messengers, from the work area. This still did not prevent many boats from sailing by while the occupants gawked. The dirt and stone walls along the bank were about finished —there were, however, many breaks through which the curious could stare. These openings were left to provide ingress to freight boats bringing wood, ore and flints. Moreover, since the plain sloped up toward the hills, the tourists could see the factories and cranes —and the great structure of the boatyard itself was visible for miles around.

After a while the tourist trade began to peter out. Too many of the curious were being picked up along the way by grail slavers. Word got around that it was becoming dangerous to travel The River in that section. Six months passed. The wood supply in the area was cut off. Bamboo grew to full length in three to six weeks; the trees took six months to reach complete maturity. Every state for fifty miles both ways from Parolando had enough wood for their own uses only.

Parolando's representatives made treaties with more distant

states, trading iron ore and weapons for wood. A large supply of siderite masses was still available; Sam was not worried about running out of it. But the mining of it took many men and materials and caused the central part of Parolando to look like a heavily shelled landscape. And the more wood was brought in, the more men, materials and machines had to be diverted from the boatbuilding to make weapons for trade. Moreover, the increase in shipping resulted in more demand for lumber to build freighters. And more men had to be trained and shipped out as sailors and guards for the wood-carrying and ore-carrying fleets. Finally boats had to be rented from neighboring states and the rent, as always, was iron-nickel ore and finished weapons.

SAM wanted to be with the boat from dawn to dusk and even later—he loved every minute of progress there. But he was caught in so many administrative details that he could indulge himself for only two to three hours—on a good day. He tried to get John to take over more of the administration, but John would accept only duties which gave him more power over the military forces or allowed him to exert pressure on those who opposed him.

The anticipated attempts at assassination of those close to Sam did not occur. The bodyguards and the close watch at nights were continued, but Sam decided that John was going to lay low for a while. He had probably seen that it would be best for his purposes to wait until the boat was nearly finished.

Once Joe Miller said, "Tham, don't you think maybe you're wrong about Chohn? Maybe he'th going to be content vith being thecond in command of the boat?"

"Joe, would a sabertooth part with his canines?"

"Vhat?"

"John is rotten to the core. The old kings of England were never any great shakes, morally speaking. The only difference between them and Jack the Ripper was that they operated openly and with the sanction of Church and State. But John was such a wicked monarch that it became traditional never to name another English king John. Even the Church, which had a high tolerance for evil in high places, could not stomach John. The Pope slapped the Interdict on the entire nation and brought John crawling and begging to the feet of the Pope, like a whipped puppy. But I suppose that even when he was kissing the Pope's foot, John managed to suck a little blood. And the Pope must have felt his pockets to make sure his money was still there after he embraced John.

"What I'm trying to put across is that John couldn't reform even if he wanted to. He'll always be a human weasel, a hyena, a skunk."

JOE puffed on a cigar even longer than his nose and said, "Vell, I don't know. Look at vhat the Church of the Thecond Chanthe hath done to Goering. Look at you. You told me that in your time vomen vore clotheth that covered them from the neck to the ankleth and you got ekthited if you thaw a

good-looking ankle—and a thigh, oh my! Now you aren't too dithturbed if you thee—"

"I know—I know," Sam said. "Old attitudes and what the psychologists call conditioned reflexes can be changed. That's why I say that anybody who still carries in him the racial and sexual prejudices he had on Earth is not taking advantage of what The River offers. A man can change, but—"

"He can?" Joe said. "But you alvayth told me that everything in life, even the vay a man actth and thinkth, ith determined by vhat vent on long before he vath even born. Vhat ith it? Yeth, it'th a determinithtic philothophy, that'th vhat. Now, if you believe that everything ith fikthed in itth courthe, that humanth are mathyineth, tho to thpeak, then how can you believe that men can chanche themthelveth?"

"Well," Sam drawled, looking fierce, his blue-green eyes bright above the falcon nose, "even my theories are determined in advance and if they conflict, that can't be helped."

"Then, for heaven'th thaketh," Joe said, throwing up his football-sized hands, "vhat'th the uthe of talking about it? Or even doing anything? Voy don't you chutht give up?"

"Because I can't help myself," Sam said. "Because, when the first atom in this universe bumped against the second atom my fate was decreed, my every thought and action was fixed."

"Then you can't be, uh, rethponthible for vhat you do, right?"

"That's right," Sam said. He began to feel uncomfortable.

"Then Chohn can't help it that he'th a murdering treacherouth thoroughly dethpicable thvine?"

"No—and I can't help despising him for what he is."

"And I thuppothe that if thomebody thmarter than I am came along and thyowed you, by thtrict undeniable lochic, that you were wrong in your philothophy, that you vould thay that he can't help thinking you're wrong? But he'th wrong, it'th chutht that he'th predetermined, mechanically, to think the vay he doeth."

"I'm right and I know it," Sam said, puffing harder. "This hypothetical man couldn't convince me because his own reasoning does not spring from a free will, which is like a vegetarian tiger—that is, it doesn't exist."

"But your own reathoning doethn't thpring from a free vill."

"True. We're all screwed. We believe what we have to."

"You laugh at thothe people who have vhat you call invinthible ignoranthe, Tham. Yet you're full of it, yourthelf."

"Lord deliver us from apes who think they're philosophers!"

"Thee! You fall back on inthultth vhen you can't think of anything elthe to thay! Admit it, Tham! You haven't got a lochical leg to thtand on!"

"You just aren't capable of seeing what I mean, because of the way you are," Sam said.

"You thyould talk to Thyrano de Bercherac more, Tham. He'th ath big a thynic ath you, although he doethn't go ath far ath you do vith determinithm."

"I'd think you two incapable of talking to each other. Don't you two resent each other, you look so much alike? How can you stand nose to nose, as it were, and not break up with laughter? It's like two anteaters—"

"Inthultth! Inthultth! Oh, vhat'th the uthe?"

"Exactly," Sam said.

Joe did not say good night and Sam did not call after him. He was nettled. Joe looked so dumb with his low forehead, bone-ringed eyes, dill-pickle nose, gorilla build and hairiness. But behind those little blue eyes and the lisping was an undeniable intelligence.

What disturbed him most was Joe's comment that his deterministic belief was only a rationalization. To excuse his guilt? Guilt for what? Guilt for just about everything bad that had happened to those whom he loved.

But it was a philosophic labyrinth which ended in a quagmire. Did he believe in determinism because he wanted not to feel guilty? Or did he feel guilty, even though he should not, because the universe was so constructed that he had to feel guilty?

HE SAT up later than usual that night, but not working. He drank at least a fifth of ethyl alcohol mixed with fruit juice.

Firebrass had said two months earlier he could not understand the failure of Parolando to make ethyl alcohol. Sam had been upset. He had not known that grain alcohol could be made here, had thought that the only supply of liquor was the limited amount that the grails yielded.

No, Firebrass had said. Hadn't any of his engineers told him? If the proper materials, such as acid, coal gas, or acetaldehyde and a proper catalyst were available wood cellulose could be converted into ethyl alcohol.

Sam had called in Van Boom, who had stated that he had enough to worry about without providing booze for people who already drank too much.

Sam had ordered materials and men diverted and, for the first time in the history of The River, as far as anyone knew, potable alcohol began to be made on a large scale. This resulted not only in happier citizens, except for the Second Chancers, but in a new industry for Parolando. Sam exported alcohol in exchange for wood and bauxite.

The trade, Sam thought, could afford his indulgence this night. He finished the bottle, fell into bed and, the next morning refused to get up before noon. But the day after he was back at his toils.

He and John sent a message to Iyeyasu that they would regard it as a hostile act if he invaded the rest of the Ulmak territory or Chernsky's Land.

Iyeyasu replied that he had no intention of waging war on these lands and proved it by invading the state just north of his, Sheshshub's Land. Sheshshub was an Assyrian, born in the seventh century B.C. He had been a general of Sargon II, and so, like most powerful people on Earth, had become

a leader on the Riverworld. He gave Iyeyasu a good fight, but the invaders were more numerous.

Iyeyasu was only one worry. Sam had others. Hacking sent a message through Firebrass. He wanted Parolando to quit stalling and send the amphibian promised to him. Sam had kept pleading technical difficulties, but Firebrass told him that excuses of any kind were no longer acceptable.

Firedragon III was reluctantly shipped off.

SAM made a visit to Chernsky, just north of Parolando, to reassure him that Parolando would defend Cernskujo. Coming back, a half-mile upwind of the factories, Sam almost gagged. He had been living so long in the acid-bath-cum-smoke atmosphere that he had gotten used to it and the vacation from it had cleansed his lungs. The stench set him coughing. Though the wind was at fifteen mph, it did not carry the smoke away swiftly enough. The air definitely was hazy. No wonder, he thought, that Publiujo, to the south, complained.

But the boat continued to grow. Standing before the front port of his pilothouse, Sam could look out every morning and be consoled for his troubles and for the hideousness and stench of the land. The three decks would be completed in another six months and the great paddlewheels would be installed. A plastic coating would seal the part of the hull in contact with water. This plastic would not only prevent electrolysis of the magnalium, it would reduce the effect of water turbulence. Van Boom said the reduction would add ten mph to the boat's speed.

The upper decks would be white with red, black and gold trimmings.

During this time Sam received some good news. Tungsten and iridium had been found in Selinujo, the country immediately south of Soul City. The report was brought by a prospector, who trusted no one but Sam. He also brought some bad news. Selina Hastings refused to let Parolando mine there. In fact, if she had known that a Parolandano had been digging along the mountain she would have thrown him out. She did not want to be unfriendly—indeed, she loved Sam Clemens, since he was a human being. But she did not approve of the Riverboat and she would not permit anything to go out of her land that would help build the vessel.

Sam erupted and, as Joe said, "Thyot blue thyit for mileth around." The tungsten was very much needed for hardening machine tools but even more for radios and, eventually, the closed-circuit TV sets. The iridium could be used to harden platinum for various uses—scientific instruments and surgical tools.

The Mysterious Stranger had told Sam that he had set up the deposit of minerals in Sam's territory, but that his fellow Ethicals did not know that he had done so. Along with the bauxite, cryolite, and platinum he had

promised tungsten and iridium. But an error had evidently been made and the latter two metals had been deposited several miles south of the first three.

Sam did not tell John at once—he needed time to think about the situation. John, of course, would want to demand that the metals be traded to Parolando or that war be declared.

While he was pacing back and forth in the pilothouse, clouding the room with green smoke, he heard drums. The drummers were using a code he did not know but recognized, after a moment, as belonging to Soul City. A few minutes later Firebrass was at the foot of the ladder and coming up.

"*Sinjoro* Hacking knows all about the discovery of tungsten and iridium in Selinujo," he said. "He says that if you can come to an agreement with Selina, fine. But don't invade her land. He'd regard that as a declaration of war on Soul City."

Sam looked out the starboard port. "Here comes John, hot-footing it," he said. "He's heard the news, too. His spy system is almost as good as yours, slower by a few minutes, I'd say. I don't know where the leaks in my system are, but they're so wide that I'd be sunk if I were a boat—and I may be anyway."

JOHN, his eyes inflamed, his face red, entered. Since the introduction of grain alcohol he had put on even more fat and seemed half-drunk all the time and all drunk half the time.

Sam was angered but also amused. He knew John would have liked to have sent a messenger with a summons, in keeping with the dignity of an ex-king. But John, in turn, knew that Sam would not have answered for a long time—if at all—and meanwhile there was no telling how much hankypanky Firebrass and Sam would manufacture.

"What's going on?" John asked, glaring.

"You tell me," Sam said. "Something must be on your mind."

"None of your wisecracks," John said. Without being asked he poured out a quart of purple passion into a stein. "I know what that drumming was about—even if I don't know the code."

"I thought as much," Sam said. "For your information, in case you missed anything—" and he told him what Firebrass had said.

John glared at the offender.

"The arrogance of you blacks is unendurable," John said. "You are telling Parolando, a sovereign state, how it must conduct itself in vital business. Well, I say you can't. We'll get those metals one way or the other. Selinujo doesn't need them; we do. It can't hurt Selinujo to give them up in fair trade."

"In what?" Firebrass said. "Selinujo doesn't want weapons or alcohol. What can you trade?"

"Peace, freedom from war."

Firebrass shrugged and grinned, incensing John.

"Sure," Firebrass said, "you can make your offer. But what Hacking says still goes."

"Hacking has no love for Selinujo," Sam said. "He kicked out all the Second Chancers, black or white."

"That's because they were preaching immediate pacifism. They also preach and apparently practice love for all, regardless of color. But Hacking says they're a danger to the state. The blacks have to protect themselves, otherwise they would be enslaved all over again."

"*The* blacks?" Sam asked.

"*Us* blacks," Firebrass replied, grinning.

This was not the first time Firebrass had given the impression that he was not too deeply concerned with skin color. His identification with blacks, as such, was weak. His life had not been untouched by racial prejudice, but it had not been much affected. And he had said things now and then that indicated that he would like a berth on Sam's boat.

All this, of course, could be a put-on.

"We'll negotiate with Sinjorino Hastings," Sam said. "It would be nice to have radios and TV for the boat and the machine shops could use the tungsten. But we can get along without them."

He winked at John to indicate that he should take this line. But John was as stone-headed as usual.

"What we do with Selinujo is our problem, nobody else's."

"I'll tell Hacking," Firebrass said. "But Hacking is a strong person. He won't take any crap from anybody, least of all from white capitalist imperialists."

Sam choked and John stared.

"That's how he regards both of you," Firebrass said. "And the way he defines those terms, you are what he says you are."

"Because I want this boat so badly?" Sam shouted. "Do you know what this boat is for, what its ultimate goal is?"

X

HE FOUGHT back his anger, sobbing with the effort. He felt dizzy. For a moment he had almost told Firebrass about the Stranger.

"What is it?" Firebrass said.

"Nothing," Sam replied. "Nothing. I just want to get to the headwaters of The River. Maybe the secret of this whole shebang is there? Who knows? But I certainly don't like criticism from someone who just wants to sit around and collect soul brothers. If he wants to do that, more power to him, but the point is, if I don't use the siderite metal to build a boat, which is designed for travel only, not for fighting any battles, someone else will. And that someone else may use it to conquer and to hold, instead of for tourist purposes.

"Now, we've gone along with Hacking's demands, paid his jacked-up prices for the ores when we could have gone down there and taken them from him. John's apologized for what he called you and Hacking and if you think it's easy for a Plantagenet to do that, you don't know your history. It's too bad about the way Hacking feels. I don't know that I blame

him. Of course, he hates whites. But this is not Earth. Conditions are radically different here."

"But people bring their attitudes along with them," Firebrass said. "Their hates and loves, dislikes and likes, prejudices, reactions, everything."

"But they can change."

Firebrass grinned. "Not according to your philosophy. Hacking hasn't seen anything here to make him change his attitude. So why should he? He's experienced the same exploitation and contempt here as he did on Earth."

"I don't want to argue about that," Sam said. "I'll tell you—"

He stopped and stared out the port. The whitish-gray hull and upper works gleamed in the sun. Beautiful. And, in a sense, all his. She was worth everything he was being put through.

"I'll tell you what," he repeated more slowly. "Why doesn't Hacking come up here? Pay a little visit? He can look around, see for himself what we're doing. See our problems. Maybe he'll appreciate them, see we're not blue-eyed devils who want to enslave him. In fact, the more he helps us the sooner he'll be rid of us."

"I'll give him your message," Firebrass said. "Maybe he'll want to do that."

"We'll greet him in style," Sam said. "A twenty-one gun salute, big reception, food, liquor, gifts. He'll see we aren't such bad fellows after all."

John spat, but said no more.

FIREBRASS brought a message three days later. Hacking would come after Parolando and Selinujo had agreed on the disposition of the metals.

Sam felt like a rusty old boiler in a Mississippi steamboat. A few more pounds of pressure and he would blow skyhigh.

"Sometimes I think you're right!" he shouted at John. "Maybe we should just take over our neighbors and get it done with."

"Of course," John said smoothly. "It's obvious that that ex-Countess Huntingdon—she must be descended from my old enemy, the Earl of Huntingdon—is not going to give in. She is a religious fanatic, a nut, as you say. And Soul City will fight us if we invade Selinujo. Hacking can't go back on his word. And he's stronger now that we've given him *Firedragon III*. But I say nothing about that; I do not reproach you. I have been thinking."

Sam stopped pacing and looked at John. John had been thinking. Shadows would be moving inside shadows; daggers would be unsheathed; the air would grow gray and chill with stealth and intrigue; blood would spurt. And the sleeping would do well to stir.

"I won't say that I have been in contact with Iyeyasu, our powerful neighbor to the north," John said. He was slumped down in the tall-backed, red leather covered chair and staring into the purple passion in the tilted stein. "But I have information—or means of getting it. I am certain that Iyeyasu, who feels very strong indeed, would like to acquire even more territory. And he would like to do us a favor. In return for cer-

tain payments, of course. Say, an amphibian and a flying machine? He's wild to fly one of those himself. If he attacked Selinujo Hacking couldn't blame us. And if Soul City and Iyeyasujo fought and Soul City were destroyed and Iyeyasujo weakened—how could we fail to benefit? Moreover, I happen to know that Chernsky has made a secret compact with Soul City and Tifonujo to fight if any of them are invaded by Iyeyasu. The resultant carnage would certainly find all of them weakened and us strengthened. Then we could take them over—or at least do what we wanted without interference. In any case, we would have uncontrolled access to the bauxite and the tungsten."

The skull under that mass of tawny hair must hold a thundermugful of worms, Sam thought. Worms that fed on corruption and intrigue and deviousness. John was so crooked, he was admirable.

"Did you ever meet yourself coming around a corner?" Sam asked.

"What?" John looked up. "Is this another of your unintelligible insults?"

"Believe me, it's as close to a compliment as you'll ever get from me. What you're suggesting is all hypothetical. But if Iyeyasu did attack Selinujo, what excuse would he have? They've never offended him and they're sixty miles away from him on our side of The River."

"When did any nation ever need a reasonable excuse for invading another?" John asked. "But the fact is that Selinujo keeps sending missionaries into Iyeyasujo, though he has kicked out all Chancers. Since Selinujo won't stop doing this—"

"Well," Sam said, "I couldn't let Parolando get involved in a deal like this. But if Iyeyasu decides on his own to fight, there's nothing we can do about it."

"And you call me dishonest?"

"There's nothing I could do about it," Sam said, clamping down on his cigar. "Nothing. And if something develops that's good for the boat—we'll take advantage of it."

"The shipments from Soul City would be held up while the fighting was going on," John said.

"We've got enough stock to keep going for a week. The big worry would be wood. Maybe Iyeyasu would be able to keep that coming even with a war going on, since the fighting will be south of us. We could handle the chopping and transportation ourselves. If he didn't plan to invade for a couple of weeks we could lay in extra stocks of ore from Soul City by offering Hacking increased payments. Maybe promise him an airplane, the APM-One. That's just a toy—now that we've almost got our first amphibian airplane finished. All this is hypothetical—"

"I understand," John said. He was not trying to mask his contempt.

Sam felt like shouting at him that he had no right to be contemptuous. Whose idea had this whole bloodbath been, anyway?

It was the next day that the three chief engineers were killed.

SAM was there when it happened. He was standing on the scaffolding by the starboard side of the boat, looking down into the open hull. The colossal steam crane was lifting the immense electric motor which would be driving the port paddlewheel. The motor had been moved during the night from the building where it had been built. The moving had taken over eight hours and had been effected by the crane, which also had a gigantic winch. The winch, plus hundreds of men pulling on cables, had pulled the motor on its big car, which moved on steel rails.

Sam rose at dawn to watch the final work, the lifting and then the lowering of the motor into the hull and its attachment to the paddlewheel axle. The three engineers were standing in the bottom of the hull. Sam called down to them to get away, that they were too vulnerable if the motor should drop. But the engineers were stationed in three different places so that they could transmit signals to the men on the port scaffolding, who, in turn, were signaling the crane operator.

Van Boom turned to look up at Sam and his teeth flashed whitely in his dark face. His skin looked purplish in the light of the big electric lamps.

And then it happened. A cable snapped, then another. The motor swung out to one side. The engineers froze for an instant. Then they ran, but they were too late. The motor fell and crushed all three of them.

The impact shook the great hull and the vibrations made the scaffolding on which Sam stood quiver as if a quake were passing through the land.

Blood ran out from under the motor.

It took five hours to put new cables on the crane and lift the motor. The bodies were removed; the hull was washed out and the motor was lowered again. A close inspection had determined that the damage to the motor would not affect its operation.

Sam was so depressed that he would have liked to have gone to bed and remained there for a week. But he could not leave the boat. The work had to go on and while there were good men who would see to it that it did, Sam did not want them to know how shaken he was. Van Boom and Velitsky were Sam's only engineers from the twentieth century.

THREE days after the accident he asked Firebrass into his pilothouse for a private conference. After giving him a cigar and scotch Sam asked Firebrass to take over as chief engineer.

Firebrass almost dropped his cigar.

"Steer me, stymate! Do I read you unfrosted? You want me as your number one dillion?"

"Maybe we should talk in Esperanto," Sam said.

"Okay," Firebrass said. "I'll bring it down to dirt. Just what do you want?"

"I'd like you to get permission to work for me on a temporary basis, supposedly."

"Supposedly?"

"The job is yours permanently if

you want it. On the day the boat sets out on the long journey you can be its chief engineer."

Fiberbrass sat silent for a long time. Sam rose to pace back and forth. Occasionally he looked through the ports. The crane had put in the starboard motor and was now lowering parts of the batacitor into the hull. The huge installation would be thirty-six feet high when fully assembled. A trial run would check its operation and that of the motors. A double cable, six inches thick, would be run out for two hundred feet and its free end, attached to a large shallow hemisphere, would be slipped onto the nearest grailstone. When the stone delivered its tremendous electrical energy, the energy would be transmitted by the cables into the batacitor, which would store it. The power would be drawn out at a controlled rate to run the electrical motors.

Sam turned away from the port. "It's not as if I were asking you to betray your country," he said. "In the first place, all you have to do now is to request permission from Hacking to work for me on the building of the boat. You can make up your mind later about going with us. Which would you rather do? Stay in Soul City where there is actually little to do except indulge yourself? Or go with us on the greatest adventure of all?"

Firebrass said slowly, "If I accepted your offer—*if*, I say—I would not want to go as chief engineer. I would prefer to be the chief of your air force."

"That's not as important a position as the chief engineer's."

"It's a lot more work and responsibility. And I like the idea of flying again—"

"You *can* fly! You *can* fly! But you'd have to serve under von Richthofen. You see, I promised him that he would be the chief of our air force—which, after all, will only consist of two planes. What do you care whether or not you're the chief as long as you get to fly?"

"It's a matter of pride. I have thousands of hours more flying time than Richthofen—in planes far more complex and bigger and speedier. And I was an astronaut. I've been to the Moon and Mars and orbited Jupiter."

"That doesn't mean anything," Sam said. The planes you'll be flying are very primitive. More like the World War I machines that Lothar flew."

"Why does a black always have to take second place?"

"That's unfair," Sam said. "You could be the chief engineer. You'd have thirty-five people under your command. Listen, if I hadn't made Lothar that promise, you'd get the captaincy, believe me."

Firebrass stood up. "I'll tell you what. I'll help you build the boat and set up the training of your engineers. But I get to fly during that time, too—and when the time comes we'll talk about who's going to be head of the air force."

"I won't break my promise to Lothar," Sam said.

"Yes, but many things may happen between now and then."

SAM was relieved in one way but disturbed in another.

Hacking gave his permission, via drum, for Parolando to use Firebrass. This suggested to Sam that Hacking wanted Firebrass to know the boat's operation because he might be serving Hacking as chief engineer some day. As for Firebrass—he might be planning to remove von Richthofen before the boat was ready for launching. Firebrass did not seem like a cold-blooded murderer but looks meant nothing where humans were concerned.

Hacking sent word a few days later that he would agree to a large shipment of minerals in return for the AMP-1. Firebrass flew it the thirty-one miles to the northern limit of Soul City, where another flier, a black who had been a general in the U.S. Air Force, took it over. Firebrass returned by sailboat a few days later.

The batacitor and the electric motors worked perfectly. The paddlewheels turned over slowly in the air, then were speeded up until the vanes whistled. When the time came a canal would be dug from the water's edge to the great boat and it would wheel out into The River under its own power.

Lothar von Richtofen and Gwenafra were not getting along at all. Lothar had always been a lady killer and he could not seem to help flirting. More often than not he followed up the flirtation. Gwenafra had some definite ideas about fidelity with which Lothar agreed only in principle. The practice tripped him up.

Hacking finally agreed to visit Parolando. He wanted to hold a series of conferences on trade, to check on the well-being of Parolando's black citizens and to see the great Riverboat.

Sam announced that he would be happy to receive Hacking. He wasn't, but the essence of diplomacy was dissimulation even in this new life. The preparations for housing Hacking and his large entourage and setting up the conferences occupied Sam. He did not get much chance to supervise the work on the boat.

Special preparations also had to be made for docking the large number of ore boats from Soul City. Hacking was sending three times as much as the normal shipment to show his sincerity and desire for peace and understanding. Sam would have preferred that the shipments be spaced out, but he also wanted to get as much ore as possible in as short a time as possible. The spies said that Iyeyasu was collecting several large fleets and a great number of fighting men on both sides of The River. And he had sent more messages to Selinujo to stop trying to land their missionaries on his territory.

XI

HACKING'S boat docked about an hour before noon. It was a large, two-masted, fore-and-aft rigged ship. Hacking's bodyguard, tall well-muscled blacks holding steel battle axes (but with Mark I pistols in big holsters) marched down the gangplank. Their kilts were pure black and their leather helmets and cuirasses and boots were of black fish skin. They formed in ranks of six

on each side of the gangplank. Finally Hacking himself disembarked.

He was a tall well-built man with a dark brown skin, somewhat slanting eyes, a broad pug nose, thick lips and a prominent chin. He wore a black towel as a cloak, a black kilt and leather sandals. His only weapon was a rapier in a sheath at his broad leather belt.

Sam gave the signal and a cannon boomed twenty-one times. The salute was intended not only to honor Hacking but to impress him. Only Parolando had artillery, even if it consisted of only one .75 mm. cannon.

The introductions took place. Hacking did not offer to shake hands, nor did Sam and John. Both had been warned by Firebrass that Hacking did not care to shake hands with a man unless he regarded him as a proven friend.

Some small talk followed while the grails of Hacking's people were set on the nearest grailstone. After the discharge of energy at high noon the grails were removed and the chiefs of state, accompanied by their bodyguards and guards of honor, walked to John's palace. John had insisted that the first meeting be held in his place, doubtless to impress Hacking with John's primacy. Sam had not argued. Hacking probably knew from Firebrass how things stood between Clemens and Lackland.

Later Sam found some grim amusement in John's discomfiture at being bearded in his own house. Hacking seized the floor during lunch and held it with a long and vitriolic speech about the evils the white man had inflicted on the black. The trouble was, Hacking's indictments were valid. Everything he said was true, Sam had to admit. Hell, he had seen slavery and what it meant and had seen the aftermath of the Civil War. He had been born and raised in it. And he had written *Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *A Connecticut Yankee.*

THE high-pitched voice went on and on, mixing obscenities with facts, lurid tales of miseries, beatings, murders, starvation, humiliations.

Sam felt guilty and ashamed and, at the same time, angry.

"You are all guilty!" Hacking shouted. "Every white man is guilty!"

"I never saw more than a dozen blacks before I died," John said. "What can I have to do with your tale of unjustices?"

"If you had been born five hundred years later you would have been the biggest honky of them all," Hacking said. "I know all about you—"

Sam suddenly stood up and shouted, "Did you come here to tell us about what happened on Earth? We know what happened. But that's the past. Earth is dead. What's taking place now counts."

"Yeah," Hacking said. "And what's taking place now is what took place on good old Earth. Things haven't changed one little bit. I look around here and who heads up this country? Two honkies! Where are the black men? Your black population is about one-tenth of your total. You ought

to have at least one black on a ten-man Council! Do I see one? Just one?"

"There's Cawber," Sam said.

"Yeah. A temporary member and he's that only because I demanded you send me a black ambassador."

"The Arabs make up about a sixth of your state," Sam said, "and there isn't one Arab on your council."

"They're white, that's why. And I'm getting rid of them. Don't get me wrong—many Arabs are good men, unprejudiced men. I met them when I was a fugitive in North Africa. But these Arabs are religious fanatics and they won't stop making trouble—so out they go! What we blacks want is a solid black country, where we're all soul brothers. Where we can live in peace and understanding. We'll have our own kind of life and you honkies can have yours. Segregation with a capital S, Charlie! Here, a big S segregation can work, cause we don't have to depend on the white man for our jobs or food or clothing or protection or justice. We've got it made, whitey. All we have to do is tell you to go to hell, keep away from us and we got it made!"

FIREBRASS sat at the table, his dark-red kinky head bent, looking down, his bronzed hands over his face. Sam had the feeling that he was trying to keep from laughing. But whether he was laughing at Hacking or his hosts, Sam could not guess. Perhaps he was laughing at both.

John kept drinking but the redness of his face came from more than the liquor. He looked ready to explode at any moment. It was difficult to swallow insults about your injustice to blacks when you were innocent—but then John was guilty of so many hideous crimes that he should suffer for some, even if they were committed by others. And, as Hacking said, John would have been guilty of racial bias if he had been given the chance.

Hacking finally quit talking. Sam Clemens said, "Well, we didn't plan on any after-dinner speeches, but I thank you for your volunteering—we all thank you as long as you don't charge us for it. Our exchequer is rather low at the moment."

Hacking said, "You have to make a joke out of it, don't you? Well, how about a tour? I'd love to see that big boat of yours."

The rest of the day passed rather pleasantly. Sam forgot his anger and his resentments while conducting Hacking through the factories, the shops and, finally, through the boat. Even half-finished, it was magnificent. The most beautiful sight he had ever seen. Even, he thought, even—yes, even more beautiful than Livy's face when she had first said she loved him.

Hacking did not become ecstatic, but he was deeply impressed. He could not, however, refrain from commenting on the stench and the desolation.

Sam was called away shortly before supper. A man who had landed from a small boat had demanded to see the ruler of the

land. A Clemens man had taken him in and sent for Sam. He went off at once in one of the two alcohol-burning "jeeps" that had been finished only a week before. A slender blond youth at the guardhouse introduced himself, in Esperanto, as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Sam questioned him in German, noting that, whatever the youth's identity, he did speak the soft Austrian version of High German. He said that he had lived about twenty thousand miles up The River. He heard about the boat—and that it would carry an orchestra for the amusement of passengers. The instruments would be those that Earth had known. Mozart had suffered for twenty-three years in this world of limited materials, where the only musical instruments were drums, whistles, wooden flutes, pan pipes and a crude sort of harp made of bone and the guts of a Riverfish. The great Riverboat's orchestra, he had heard, would feature piano, violin, flute, horns and all the other beautiful instruments he had known on Earth, plus others that had been invented since his death in 1791. And here he was. Was there a place for him in the music-making ranks of the boat?

Sam was an appreciator, though not a passionate lover, of some classical music. But he was thrilled at meeting the great Mozart face to face. That is, if this man truly were Mozart. Phonies on The River were claiming to be everybody from the original one-and-only Jesus Christ down to P. T. Barnum, and Sam took no man's word for his identity. He had even met three men who claimed to be Mark Twain.

"It just so happens that the former archbishop of Salzburg is a citizen of Parolando," Sam said. "Even though you and he parted on bad terms, if I remember correctly, he'll be glad to see you."

Mozart turned neither pale nor red. He said, "At last, somebody I knew during my lifetime! Would you believe—"

Sam would believe that Mozart had not met anybody he had known on Earth. So far he himself had met only three people he'd known and his acquaintanceship had been extensive during his long life and worldwide travels. That his wife Livy was one of the three was a coincidence exceeding the bounds of probability. He suspected that the Mysterious Stranger had arranged that. But even Mozart's eagerness at seeing the archbishop again did not confirm that he was indeed Mozart. In the first place, the imposters that Sam had met had frequently insisted that those who were supposed to be their old friends were either mistaken or else imposters themselves. They had more gall than France. In the second place, the archbishop of Salzburg did not live in Parolando. Sam had no idea where he was. He had sprung him just to test Mozart's reaction.

Sam agreed that Mozart could apply for citizenship. First, he straightened him out about the musical instruments. These had not been made yet. Nor would they

be wood or brass. They would be electronic devices which could reproduce exactly the sounds of various instruments. But if Mozart were indeed the man he claimed to be he had a good chance of being the conductor of the orchestra. And he could have all the time he wanted to compose new works.

Sam did not bind himself to anything. He had learned his lesson about making promises.

A BIG party was held at John's palace in honor of Hacking, who seemed to have discharged his venom for the day at the first meeting. Sam talked with him for an hour and found that Hacking was an intelligent and literate man with a flair for the imaginative and the poetic.

Near midnight Sam accompanied Hacking and party to the big thirty-room, second-story, stone-and-bamboo building set aside for state guests. Then he drove his jeep to his home, three hundred yards away. Joe sulked a little because he had wanted to drive, even though his legs were far too long. They staggered up the ladder and barred the door. Joe went into the rear and flopped on his bed with a crash that shook the house on its stilts. Sam looked out through the ports just in time to see Cyrano and Livy, their arms around each other, lurch into the door of their hut. To their left, set above them, was von Richthofen's hut, where he and Gwenafra had already gone to bed.

He muttered, "Good night—" not knowing exactly whom he was addressing, and fell into his own bed. It had been a long, hard and trying day.

He awoke dreaming that he was caught in a California earthquake on the Fourth of July.

HE LEAPED out of bed and ran on the trembling floor to the Pilothouse. Even before he reached the ports he knew that the explosions and the earth-shaking were caused by invaders. He never reached the ports, because a rocket, its tail flaming red, struck one of the stilts. The roar deafened him, smoke whirled in through the broken ports, and he pitched forward. The house collapsed and its front part fell down.

He banged into the wood and broken glass and earth and lay stunned. A big hand picked him up. By the light of an explosion he saw Joe's great-nosed face. Joe had climbed down from the open end of his room and thrown aside the lumber until he had found Sam. He held his grail and Sam's in his left hand.

"I don't know how—it's a miracle—but I'm not hurt bad," Sam said. "Just bruised and cut by glass."

"I didn't have time to put on my armor," Joe said. "But I got my akthe. Here'th a thword for you and a pithtol and thome bulletth and powder charcheth."

"Who the hell can they be, Joe?" Sam said.

"I don't know. Thee—they're coming in through the holeth in the vallth vhere the dockth are."

The starlight was bright. The clouds that sent the rains down

every night at three o'clock had not yet come but the mists over The River were heavy. Out of them men were still pouring to add to the masses spreading over the plains. Beyond the walls, in the mists, must be a fleet.

The only fleet that could get close without causing an alarm would be the Soul City fleet. Anybody else arriving at this hour would have had to have been within view of the spies Sam and John Lackland had set up along The River, even in hostile territory. Iyeyasu's fleet was still sitting in its docks, according to a report Sam had received just before midnight.

Joe peered over a pile of wood and said, "There'th a hell of a battle around Chohn'th palathe. And the guetht houthe—vhere Hacking and hith boyth vath—ith on fire."

The flames lit a number of bodies on the ground and showed tiny figures struggling around the log stockade of John's palace. Then the cannon was pushed before the stockade.

"That's John's jeep," Sam said, pointing at the vehicle which had just driven up behind the cannon.

"Yeah—and it'th our cannon," Joe said. "But it'th Hacking'th men that're going to blatht Chohn out of hith little love netht."

"Let's get to hell out of here," Sam said and scrambled over the lumber and in the opposite direction. He could not understand why the invaders had not yet sent men to his house. The rocket that had hit the Pilothouse had come from the plains. And if Hacking and his men had sneaked out of the guesthouse to launch a surprise attack in conjunction with an attack from the supposed ore boats, then Sam should have been a primary target along with John Lackland.

He'd find out later what it was all about—if there was a later.

XII

THAT Hacking's men had gotten hold of the cannon was bad news for Parolando. Sam heard the big gun boom. He whirled in his flight and saw pieces of wood flying out of the smoke. John's walls were wide open and the next few shells should reduce his log palace to rubble.

There was only one good thing about the invaders having their hands on the cannon. The supply of shells was limited to fifty. Even with the many tons of nickel-iron still in the ground, metal was not so common that it could be wasted to any extent on explosive shells.

Ahead was Livy's hut. The door was open and the place was empty. Sam looked up the hill. Lothar von Richthofen, clad only in a kilt, carrying a rapier in one hand and a pistol in the other, was running toward him. A few paces behind him came Gwenafra with a pistol and a bag of bullets and gunpowder packages.

Other men and women were coming toward Sam. Among them were a few crossbowmen.

He shouted at Lothar to organize them and turned to look down toward The River. The docks were still black with men. If only the cannon could have been turned

to catch them packed together and unable to retreat. But the cannon had been wheeled around from John's flaming palace and was being trained on Parolandanoj hurrying up the hill.

Then a big dark machine came through a wide breach in the wall. Sam cried out with dismay. It was the *Firedragon III*. But where were the three amphibians of Parolando?

Presently he saw two coming toward the hills. The steam machine guns in the turrets began to stutter and his men—*his* men—were falling.

The Soul Citizens had captured the amphibians.

Everywhere he looked he saw a battle raging. Men were fighting around the Riverboat. He cried out again, because he could not endure the thought of its being damaged. But no cannon shells were delivered near it. Apparently the enemy was as concerned about it as he was.

Rockets from the hills soared overhead and blew up among the invaders below. Enemy rockets rose in reply; scores of red flames streaked above; some came so close Sam could see the blur of the cylindrical body, the long bamboo stick protruding from the rear.

The next half-hour—or was it two hours?—was a shrieking, yelling, shouting, gunpowder-stinking, blood-stinking, sweating, bowel-churning chaos. Time after time the Soul Citizens charged up the hill and time after time they were repelled by rockets, by .69 caliber plastic bullets, by crossbow bolts and longbow arrows. Then a charge carried the enemy through to the defenders and it was rapier, broadsword, axe, club, spear, and dagger that drove them back.

JOE MILLER, ten feet high and eight hundred pounds, his hairy hide drenched with blood—his own and that of others—swung his axe with its eighty-pound nickel-steel head at the end of an oak shaft three inches thick and six feet long. It crashed through oak shield and leather armor, brushed aside rapiers and spears and axes, split breastbones, took off arms and necks, halved skulls. When his enemies refused to come near him, he charged them. Time and again, he broke up assaults that might otherwise have succeeded.

Mark I pistols were fired at him, but the shooters were so unnerved by him that they fired from too far away and missed. Then an arrow went through Joe's left arm and a man braver—or more foolhardy—than the rest stepped under his axe and thrust a rapier into his thigh. The butt end of the shaft came back and broke the attacker's jaw and then the reversed axe severed his head. Joe could still walk, but he was losing blood fast. Sam ordered him to retreat to the other side of the hill, where the badly wounded were being treated.

Joe said, "No—I ain't going—" and fell to his knees with a groan.

"Get back there—that's an order!" Sam screamed and ducked, though it was too late. A bullet whistled past his ear and shattered against the side of an irontree.

Some of the plastic must have ricocheted; he felt a stinging in his arm and calf.

Joe managed to heave himself up and shamble off. Cyrano de Bergerac appeared from the darkness; he was covered with dirt and soot, streaked with blood. He gripped the basket hilt of a long bloody rapier in one hand and a pistol in the other. Behind him, equally disheveled, her long dark hair loose and flying, was Livy. She carried a pistol and a bag of ammunition, and her function seemed to be to reload the pistols. Seeing Sam, she smiled, her teeth white in the powder-blackened face.

"My God, Sam—I thought you were dead. That rocket against your house—"

"I wish you were behind *me* in this," he said.

It was all he had time to say, though he would not have said more whatever the case. The enemy mounted another charge, men slipping and sliding over the piles of the fallen or leaping over them. The bowmen by now seemed out of ammunition and the pistoleers were using theirs sparingly. But the enemy had about expended its powder, too, though it had more arrows.

Joe Miller was gone, but Cyrano de Bergerac tried to make up for the loss and came close to doing so. The man was a demon, as deadly and elusive as the rapier he wielded. From time to time he fired the pistol in his left hand pointblank into an opponent's face while lunging with the rapier to skewer another. He would toss the empty gun behind him; Livy would catch and reload it. Sam thought briefly of the change that had come about in Livy. He had never suspected her potential for action under conditions like these. The frail, often sickly, violence-loathing woman was coolly performing duties that many men would have run from.

Among them me—if I'd had any time to think about it . . .

CYRANO thrust beneath a shield that an amok Wahhabi Arab lifted too high in his frenzy and Livy, seeing that she had to do it, that Cyrano could not, held the pistol in both hands and fired. The hammer made the barrel swerve. She brought it back into line—smoke and flame spurted out, and an Arab fell back with his shoulder torn off.

A massively built attacker leaped over the body, axe raised in both hands and Cyrano ran him through the adam's apple.

The enemy retreated down the hill again. An amphibian—a Merrimac on wheels, Sam thought—huffed into the action. Lothar von Richthofen pushed against Sam, who stepped aside when he saw the aluminum-alloy tube Lothar and a helper were setting up. The helper kneeled while Lothar loaded a rocket with a ten-pound warhead into the bazooka and aimed it. Lothar was good. The rocket sailed down, its fiery arc ending against the front of the amphibian. Lothar scored a bull's-eye. Smoke covered the monster, lifted. The amphibian had stopped—but it came on

presently, its turrets turning, steam guns lifting.

"Well, that was the last one," Lothar said. "We might as well get the hell out of here. We can't fight that. Who should know better than we, heh?"

The enemy was reforming behind the armored vehicle. Many were uttering the ululating cries which the Ulmaks, the pre-Amerinds across The River, made during charges. Apparently Hacking had enlisted those not yet conquered by Iyeyasu.

Suddenly Sam could not see as well as before. Only the fires from the burning houses limned the scene. The rain clouds had come swiftly, as they always did—like wolves chasing the stars. Within a few minutes it would rain savagely.

He looked and listened. The defenders had been thinned out. Fighting was still going on to north and south, on the plains and the hills along the plains. But the shooting and the cries had lessened.

The night seemed to him filled with the enemy. He wondered if Publiujo and Tifonujo had joined the invasion.

He took a last look at the giant hull of the Riverboat with its two paddlewheels, half-hidden beneath the scaffolding and behind the colossal cranes. Then he turned. He felt like weeping, but he was too numbed. It would be some time before the tears would come.

It was more likely that his blood would run out before then, after which there would be no tears. Not in this body, anyway.

GUIDED by the fires of a dozen scattered huts, Sam and a handful of his men stumbled down the other side of the hill. The rains smashed down. A tentacle of the enemy force ran toward them from the left. Sam turned and pulled the trigger of his flintlock; the rain, of course, drowned out the spark. But the enemy's pistols were also rendered useless.

Hacking's men came at the Parolandanoj with their swords and spears and axes. Joe Miller lunged forward, growling with a voice as deep as a cave bear's. Though wounded, he was still a formidable and terrifying fighter. By the flashes of lightning and the rumbling of thunder, his axe cut down attackers. Others jumped in to help him and in a few seconds the Soul Citizens decided they had had enough. They backed away to wait for reinforcements. Why get killed now when victory was theirs?

Sam and his people crossed two more hills. The enemy attacked sporadically. Joe Miller and Cyrano continued formidable, but when Sam finally counted his group of survivors he was shaken. Fifteen. Where had they all gone? He would have sworn that at least a hundred had been with him when he had set out from the main field of battle.

Livy was still close behind Cyrano. Guns were useless now, but she kept at Cyrano's back and helped him with a spear thrust when she could.

Sam was cold and wet. And he was as miserable as Napoleon must have been on the retreat from Russia. All, all gone! His proud little nation and its nickel-iron

mines, its factories and its invulnerable amphibians with their steam guns, its two airplanes and the fabulous Riverboat—all gone! The technological triumphs and marvels, the Magna Carta with the most democratic constitution any country had ever known—gone. And the greatest journey ever to be made would never be made.

How had it all been lost? Through treachery, base treachery.

At least King John had not been part of the betrayal. His palace had been demolished—and he along with it, in all probability. The Great Betrayer had been betrayed.

Sam quit grieving then. He was still too frozen with the terror of battle to think for long about anything except survival.

At the base of the mountain, he led his group north along it until they were opposite the dam. A lake about a quarter of a mile long and a half a mile wide was before them. They followed the shoreline to a thick, concrete dam and walked across it.

Sam paced until he found a sunken symbol, a diagonal cross, in the concrete. He called, "Here it is. Now, if nobody squeals on us—"

HE LET himself down into cold water while the lightning streaked and the thunder bellowed far away. He shivered but kept going down. When the water was up to his armpits his foot struck the first rung. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and sank, running his hands along the concrete until they encountered the first rung. After that he pulled himself down by the other rungs and, at the sixth, knew that the entrance was a few inches below it. He went under it and rose. His head popped up into air and light. A platform a few inches higher than the water was in front of him. Overhead was a dome, the highest point of which was ten feet. Beyond the platform was an exit. Six big electric light bulbs lit the chamber harshly.

Shivering and gasping, he climbed onto the platform and strode to the exit. Joe followed him a moment later. He called weakly and Sam had to turn back and help him crawl onto the platform. He was bleeding from a dozen places.

The others came after him, one by one. They helped Sam get the titanthrop through the exit and down an incline into a large chamber containing beds, towels, food, liquor, weapons and medicine. Sam had prepared this place for just such an emergency, but he had thought he was being foolishly cautious. Only his most trusted lieutenants and the workers who had built this place knew about it. Joe and Cyrano had briefed the rest of the group.

Another entrance, at the bottom of the dam, was hidden beneath the flow that powered the wheels connected to the generators. This one led to a shaft up which a man could climb, only to come to a seemingly blank wall. But the man who knew how could open that wall.

The whole project was, he knew, a product of the romantic foolishness he had not entirely shed in this new life. The idea of secret doors under a waterfall and under the

lake and of hidden apartments where he could rest and plan his revenge while his enemies hunted in vain for him continued irresistible. He had laughed at himself at times for having built the refuge. Now he was glad. Romanticism did have its uses.

Also hidden was a detonator. All he had to do to set off the tons of dynamite inside the base of the dam was to connect two wires. The dam would go up and the water of the lake would roar out and carry the central part of Parolando out into The River.

Sam Clemens and his Riverboat would also be destroyed—but that was the price. Sam did not like to think about it.

THE wounded were treated and put under the sedation of dreamgum or liquor. Sometimes chewing the gum deadened pain; other times it seemed to increase it. The only way to neutralize its pain-expanding effects was to pour liquor into the patient.

They ate and slept while the guards watched at both entrances. Joe Miller was semiconscious most of the time. Sam sat beside him and nursed him as best he could. Cyrano came back from his vigil at the door under the waterfall to report that it was night again outside. That was all he knew—he had seen or heard no one through the waterfall.

Lothar and Sam were the least wounded. Sam decided that they should sneak out past the waterfall exit and spy. Cyrano protested that he should go, too, but Sam refused. Livy did not say anything, but she looked gratefully at Sam. He turned away; he did not want any thanks for sparing her mate.

He wondered if Gwenafra were dead or captured. Lothar said that she had disappeared during the last attack. He had tried to get to her but had been driven back. He now felt ashamed of himself for not having done more.

Sam and Lothar applied a dark stain all over their bodies and then went down the steel rungs of the shaft. The walls were damp and the rungs were slippery with moisture. Electric lights illuminated the shaft.

They exited behind the waterfall, which roared and splashed at them. The ledge curved, following the lower half of the dam, until it ran out about twenty yards from the end. Here they climbed down steel rungs to the junction of the dam wall and the ground. From there they walked cautiously along a channel which had been cut out of the earth. Grass roots still stuck out of the dirt walls; the roots went deeper than any cuts made so far—it seemed impossible to kill the grass.

The sky was bright with the jam-pack of huge stars and glowing gas clouds. Sam and Lothar were able to proceed swiftly in the silvered darkness. After a half a mile they moved at right angles to the canal, heading toward John's ruined palace.

Crouching in the shadows beneath the outflung branches of an irontree, they looked down on the plains below. Men and women moved among the huts. The men were the victors, the women vic-

tims. Sam quivered when he heard screams and beggings, but he tried to push them out of his mind. To act rashly now would be to throw away his chances of doing any good for Parolando.

Yet, if he heard Gwenafra's voice, he knew that he would go to her rescue.

The fires in the open hearths and the smelters were again blazing and men and women were working in them. Evidently Hacking had already put his slaves to work. Guards stood around the buildings.

The plains were well lit for as far as he could see with huge bonfires. The people around them seemed to be drinking and laughing. Occasionally a struggling and screaming woman was carried off into the shadows.

SAM and Lothar walked down the hill as if they owned it, but they did not go near to the buildings or the fires.

Nobody challenged them, though they came within twenty yards of a number of patrols. Most of the enemy seemed to be celebrating the victory with purple passion or any other liquor they had been able to get from the supplies of their prisoners. The exceptions were the Wahhabi Arabs, whose religion forbade drinking alcohol. And some others apparently were abstemious. These probably were disciples of Hacking, who did not drink.

Whatever the laxity now, discipline had been maintained during the day. The corpses had been taken away and a big stockade of poles removed from other buildings had been set up at the foot of the hills. Sam surmised it held prisoners.

He and Lothar strolled along, staggering now and then, as if drunk. They walked boldly between a nitric acid factory and a waste-treatment building and out onto the plain. And stopped. Sam saw Firebrass—some twenty yards ahead—in a bamboo cage so narrow that he could not sit down in it. His hands were tied tightly behind him.

On a big X-frame of wood, upside down, his legs tied to the upper part of the X and his arms to the lower members, hung Goering.

Sam looked around. A number of men, talking and drinking, stood in the big doorway of the waste-recycling plant. They did not say anything to Sam and Lothar, but they were looking at them. Sam decided not to go any closer or to try to talk to Firebrass. He longed to know why Hacking's emissary was in the cage, but he did not dare to ask him. What he had to do was find out all he could and then get back to the hideout inside the dam. So far, he thought, the situation looked hopeless. He could take his faithful and sneak out of the country during the rains. He could blow up the dam and wash out everything, including the forces of Soul City—but he still did not want to lose the boat. He would let the dam alone for as long as he had a chance to get it back.

His and Lothar's slow and seemingly drunken wanderings took them near a big building that had been occupied by Fred Rolfe, King John's supporter on the Council. The number of armed men on

guard around it suggested to Sam that Hacking was inside.

It was a one-story house of pine logs and bamboo. The windows were without shades and the lights showed people inside.

Suddenly Lothar gripped Sam's arm and said, "There she is. Gwenafra."

The light shone on her long honey-colored hair and pale skin. She stood near a window, talking to someone. After a moment she moved away and the bushy hair and black face of Elwood Hacking moved across the bright square. Sam felt sick. Hacking seemed to have taken her for his woman for the night.

Gwenafra had not looked frightened. She had seemed relaxed.

Sam pulled Lothar away.

"There's nothing we can do now and we could be throwing away any chance she might have at all if we started anything."

They drifted around for a while, observing the other factories and noting that the bonfires stretched both ways along the walls as far as their eye could detect. In addition to the Soul Citizens, there were the Ulmaks and a number of Orientals. Sam wondered if these could be the Burmese, Thai, and Ceylonese New Stone Age peoples living across The River from Selinujo.

He and Lothar had just passed into the shade of a gigantic ironwood tree when Sam felt something tighten around his neck from behind. He tried to yell, to turn around, to struggle, but the big hand squeezed and he lost consciousness.

HE AWOKE gasping and coughing. He was still under the tree. He started to get up, but a deep voice growled, "None o' that. Sit still, or I'll split yer skull."

Sam looked around. Lothar, his hands tied behind him and a gag in his mouth, was sitting propped up under a half-grown fir sixty feet away. The man who had spoken was big, with excessively broad shoulders, a deep chest and brawny arms. He wore a black kilt and black cape and gripped medium-sized axe. His belt held a steel tomahawk, a steel knife and a Mark I pistol.

He asked, "You be Sam Clemens?"

"That's right," Sam said. "What does this mean? Who are you?"

The big man jerked a head full of thick hair at Lothar. "I moved him away so he couldn't hear what we have to say. A man we both know sent me."

Sam was silent for a moment, then asked, "The Mysterious Stranger?"

The big man grunted. "Yes. That's what he said you called him. Stranger's good enough. I guess you know what it's all about, so there's not much use us jawing too long about it. You satisfied that I've talked with him?"

"I have to be," Sam said. "It's obvious that you've met him. You're one of the Twelve he's picked. It was a he, wasn't it?"

"I didn't jump him to find out," the man said. "I tell you, this child ain't ever run up against a human, red, black, or white, that ever threw a scare-fit into him. But that Stranger, he'd make a grizzly

scoot just by looking at him. Not that I'm afraid of him, you understand; it's just that he makes me feel—strange. Like I was a plucked bluejay. But enough of that. My handle's Johnston. Might as well give you my history and save jawing later. John Johnston. I was born in New Jersey about eighteen-twenty-seven, I reckon, and died in Los Angeles in the veterans' hospital in 1900. Between times, I was a trapper in the Rocky Mountains. Up to when I came to this River, I killed me hundreds of Injuns—but I ain't never had to kill a white man, not even a Frenchman. Not till I got here. Since then—well, I've collected quite a few white scalps."

The man stood up and moved out into the starlight. His hair was dark but looked as if it would be a bright red in the noonday sun.

"I talk a hell of a lot more'n I used to," he said. "You can't get away from people in this valley."

They walked over to Lothar. On the way Sam asked, "How'd you happen to get here? And at this time?"

"The Stranger told me where to find you, told me about you, your boat, the Misty Tower and all that. Why hash it all over? You know. I promised to find you and go with you on your boat. Why not? I don't like being set down here. There ain't no elbow room; you can't turn around without knocking noses. I was about thirty thousand miles upRiver when I woke up one night and there was that man sitting in the shadows. We had a long talk, him doing most of it. Then I got up and set out. I heard about some of what was going on here way up The River. I snuck in here while the fighting was still going on and I been looking for you ever since. I listened to them blacks talking; they said they couldn't find your body. So I been skulking around, seeing what I could see. Once I had to kill me one a those Ayrabs cause he stumbled across me. I was hungry, anyway."

They had reached Lothar, but Sam straightened up at the last words.

"Hungry? You mean—"

The man did not reply.

Sam said, "Say, uh, you—you wouldn't be a man called 'Liver Eating' Johnston, would you? The Crow Killer?"

The voice rumbled: "I made me peace with the Crows and became their brother. And I quit eating human liver some time after. But a man has to eat."

SAM shivered. He stooped to untie Lothar's bonds and removed the gag. Lothar was furious, but he was also curious. And, like Sam, he seemed to find Johnston a little awing. The man exuded savage force. Without even halftrying, Sam thought.

They walked back to the dam. Johnston did not say anything for a long time. Once he disappeared, leaving Sam feeling strange and cold. Johnston was about six and a half feet tall and looked as if he weighed two hundred and eighty pounds, all bone and muscle. But he moved like a tiger.

Sam jumped. Johnston was back. Sam asked, "What happened?"

Johnston said, "Never mind. You say you didn't get around much. I been all over this place; I know the sitchyation passing well. Lots a your people to the north and the south got away over the walls. If they'd a stood up, they might've licked the blacks. But the blacks ain't won by a long shot. Iyeyasu is getting ready to move against them. I wouldn't be surprised none if he invades tonight. I scouted around his place some before I came here. He ain't going to put up with the blacks owning all this iron and the boat. He will take it away from them or know why."

Sam groaned. It made no difference whether Hacking or Iyeyasu had the boat, if he couldn't get it. But by the time they were inside the dam, he felt better. Maybe the two forces would destroy each other and the Parolandanoj who'd fled could come back and take over.

Moreover, the appearance of the Herculean mountain man, Liver Eating Johnston, heartened Sam. The Mysterious Stranger had not entirely abandoned him. The Stranger was still planning—and he had sent a damn good man for fighting, if the stories about Johnston could be believed. Johnston was the sixth man the Stranger had chosen. The other six would show up some time—though one had been lost. Odysseus had disappeared.

He could show up again. The River was a great place for bad pennies, if you could call the Twelve that. They were bad for *somebody*. For the Stranger's people, the Ethicals, Sam hoped.

In the dam, Johnston had to be introduced and the situation explained. Joe Miller, wrapped in towels, sat up and shook hands with Johnston. And Johnston, awe in his voice, said, "Night and day, this man-child seed many queer things. But I ain't never seed one like you. You didn't have to crush my hand, friend."

"I didn't try," Joe said. "You look pretty big and thtrong to me. Bethideth, I been thick."

They moved out about half an hour before the rains. The land was relatively quiet by then. The celebrators had gone to bed and everybody had cleared away from the fires in expectation of the rain. But the guard towers and the factories were full of enemy guards. They had stopped drinking. Apparently Hacking had called a halt to it.

JOHNSTON, like a giant ghost, drifted away while they leaned against the side of the sulfuric acid factory. Ten minutes later he was suddenly beside them.

"I been giving those blacks the ear," he said. "That Hacking is smart. All that drinking and whooping it up and staggering around, why, that was all a put-on for the benefit of spies from Iyeyasujo. Hacking knows Iyeyasujo is going to attack tonight and he's making it look like it's gonna be easy. But his men are worried. They're short of gunpowder."

Sam was startled by the news. He asked Johnston if he had overheard anything else.

"Yeah. I heard a couple of them Citizens talking about why Hacking decided he had to attack us. He

knew Iyeyasu was going to do it, so he decided he had to jump the gun. If he didn't, Iyeyasu would have control of the metal and the amphibians and would conquer Soul City next. Them jackasses was laughing fit to kill, they said it was King John arranged with Hacking to take over—And then Hacking blew up King John in his own house because he didn't trust John."

Sam said, "But why in hell would John do that to us? What did he have to gain?"

"Hacking and John was gonna conquer all the land for a hundred miles along The River and then split it. John was gonna rule the white half and Hacking the black half. Half and half, with the two sharing everything equal. They was gonna build two boats, two of everything."

"What about Firebrass? Why's he in the cage?"

"Dunno, but somebody did call him a traitor. And that kraut, what's his name—Herring?"

"Goering."

"Yeah. Well, Hacking wasn't to blame for his being tortured. Some of them Wahhabi Ayrabs did it. They's got it in for the Second Chancers, you know, and they got him and tortured him with the help a some a them bad Dahomeyans, who used to torture a dozen people before breakfast, according to what I heard. By the time Hacking heard of it and stopped it, Goering was dying. But he talked to Hacking, called him his soul brother and said he forgave him. Said he'd see him later along The River. Hacking was pretty shook up about it, from what his men said."

Sam digested the news, which set his teeth on edge. He was so upset he couldn't even get any amusement from Hacking's doublecross of the champion doublecrosser, King John. He did have to admire Hacking's statesmanship and perception, however. Hacking had realized there was only one way to deal with John.

JOHNSTON'S crucial data changed everything. Apparently, Iyeyasu was on the way now, which meant that Sam's plans to sneak out during the rains would not work.

"What's the matter, Sam?" Livy said. She was sitting near him, looking sadly at him.

"I think it's all up with us."

"Oh, Sam—where's your manhood? It isn't all up with us. You get depressed so easily if things don't go your way all the time. Why, this is the greatest opportunity you could ask for to get your boat back. Let Hacking and Iyeyasu destroy each other and then take over. Just sit back up in the hills until they have clawed each other to death and jump on them while they're gasping out their last."

Sam said, angrily, "What are you talking about? Jump on them with fifteen men and women?"

"No. You have at least five hundred prisoners in that stockade and God knows how many more in other stockades. And you have thousands who ran away to Cernskujo and Publiujo."

"How can I get hold of them now?" Sam said. "It's too late! The

attack will be launched in a few hours. Besides, the refugees were probably put in stockades, too. For all I know, Chernsky and Publius Crassus may be in cahoots with Hacking."

"You're still the same paralyzed pessimist I knew on Earth," Livy said. "Oh, Sam, I still love you, in a way, that is. I still like you as a friend and—"

"Friend!" he said so loudly that the others jumped.

Cyrano swore and Johnston hissed, "Shet up. You want them black Injuns to get us?"

"We were lovers for years," he said.

"Not always, by a long shot," she said. "But this is no place for a discussion of our failures. I don't intend to thrash those out—it's too late. The point is, do you or do you not want your boat?"

"Of course, I want it," he said fiercely.

"Then get off your dead ass, Sam!" she said.

From anybody else, the remark would have been unremarkable. But from her, his fragile, soft-voiced, clean-speeched Livy, it was unthinkable. But she had said it and now that he thought back on it there had been times on Earth, which he had suppressed in his memory, when . . .

"The lady makes a powerful lot a sense!" Johnston rumbled.

He had far more important things to think about. But the really important matters were best recognized by the unconscious—and for the first time he understood, really understood with every cell of his body that Livy had changed. She was no longer his Livy. She had not been for a long time, perhaps had not been for some years on Earth before her death.

"What do you say, Mr. Clemens?" the mountain man rumbled.

Sam gave a deep sigh, as if he were breathing out the last fragments of Olivia Langdon Clemens de Bergerac.

He said, "Here's what we do."

THE rains lashed down; thunder and lightning made the skies and the land hideous for a half hour. Johnston appeared out of the rain with two bazookas and four rockets tied together on his broad back. He disappeared again and a half hour later was back with some throwing knives and tomahawks, all of steel.

The rain clouds went away and the land was brightly silver under the magnificent stars, as numerous as cherries on a tree in season, as luminous as jewels before electric lights. The air grew colder and Sam's people shivered under the irontree. A thin mist formed over The River; within fifteen minutes, it was so thick that the waters and the grailstones and the high walls along the banks could not be seen.

Iyeyasu struck a half-hour later. The big boats and the small boats, crammed with men and weapons, came from across The River, where the Sacs and Foxes had once ruled, from the northern part of the ex-Ulmak territory, from the land where the Hottentots and Bushmen had once lived in peace. And the main bulk came from the right bank of The River, from the three lands where Iyeyasu now was lord.

Iyeyasu attacked at ten points along the Riverfront walls. Mines blew up the walls, and men poured through the breaches. The number of rockets shot in the first ten minutes was awesome. Iyeyasu must have been saving them for a long time. The three amphibians of the defenders lumbered up, their steam machine guns chuffing and expelling the .75 caliber shells in garden hose fashion. The carnage they made was great, but Iyeyasu launched a surprise. Rockets with wooden warheads containing jellied alcohol (made from soap plus wood alcohol) struck all around the three armored vehicles and made direct hits at least twice each. The crude napalm spread fierily over the vehicles, and if the burning stuff did not get inside the vehicles, it seared the lungs of the men inside.

Sam was shaken by the sight, but not enough to keep him from telling Lothar to remind him of this when it was all over—if either of them were still around.

"The amphibians have to be made more airtight and we'll have to install a self-contained air system," he said.

Johnston appeared as unexpectedly as if he had stepped out of a door in the night—and behind him was Firebrass. The man looked exhausted and as if he were in pain, but he still managed to grin at Sam. He was, however, trembling.

"Hacking was told that I was betraying him," Firebrass said. "And he believed his informant. Who was, by the way, your esteemed and always reliable King John. John told him that I was selling him down The River, that I had revealed everything to you so I could become chief of your air force. Hacking would not believe that I was dickering with you just to string you along. I can't blame him too much. I should have sent word through our spies what I was doing. That I didn't convince him that I wasn't doublecrossing him didn't surprise me."

"Were you?" Sam said.

Firebrass grinned. "No, I wasn't, though I was mightily tempted. But why should I betray him when I'd been promised I could be head flier after Hacking took over the boat? The truth is, Hacking was eager to believe John. He doesn't like me because I'm not his idea of what a soul brother should be. I had too easy a life according to him. He resented the fact that I never lived in a ghetto."

"The job of chief engineer can still be yours," Sam said. "I'll admit that I'm relieved about not having to promise you the captaincy of the air force. But you can still fly, if you want to."

"That's the best offer I've had since I died," Firebrass said. "I'll take it."

He moved closer to Sam and whispered in his ear. "You would have had to take me along in some capacity anyway. I'm one of The Twelve!"

SAM felt as if a cold rod had been plunged through him from the top of his head down.

"The Ethical? The Stranger?"

"Yes. He said you called him The Mysterious Stranger."

"You *were* betraying Hacking?"

"That little speech I just made was for public consumption," Firebrass said. "Yes, I did betray Hacking, if you insist on using that word. But I regard myself as an espionage agent for a higher authority. I have no intention of worrying about all-black or all-white states on The River when I can find out how and why we, the whole human race, were put here. I want answers to my questions, as Karamazov once said. All this white-black turmoil is trivial on this planet, no matter how important it was on Earth. Hacking must have sensed that I thought so, though I tried to conceal it."

Sam did not recover from the shock for some time. Meanwhile, the battle raged on the plain and the Soul Citizens were getting the worst of it. Though they cost the invaders three men for one, they were pushed back with a half-hour.

Sam decided that it was time for him to act and led his group to the stockade where the Parolando prisoners were kept. Lothar fired two rockets into the gates of the stockade. Cyrano and Johnston did most of the work of killing the fifteen guards. Cyrano was a demon using lightning for a sword and Johnston downed four men with thrown tomahawks and three with thrown knives. He broke two legs and a chest with a foot like iron. The freed prisoners were directed to the armory, where bows and arrows were still in supply.

Sam sent two men each to the north and the south to go over the walls and try to contact the Parolandanoj there.

Then he led the rest back up into the hills. They would camp by the dam until they saw how the battle was going. Sam did not have the slightest idea of what they should do. He told Cyrano he would play it by ear from here on and had to repress an impulse to remark that he was tone deaf.

Afterward, Sam thanked whoever there was to thank that he had not camped on top of the dam. He had chosen a knoll above and to the left of the dam. Here he had a better view of the hills and the plains, where the rockets were still exploding but were not as numerous as in the beginning. The starlight glimmered on the waters of the big lake behind the dam as if all were peaceful in the world.

Suddenly Johnston leaped up and said, "Looky there! Yonder—on top of the dam!"

Three dark figures had emerged from the water onto the dam. They ran toward the land. Sam told the others to withdraw behind the great trunk of the irontree. Joe Miller and Johnston seized the three as they raced up to the tree. One tried to stab Joe and Joe squeezed the knifer's neck until blood spurted out from broken veins and arteries. The others were knocked out. By the time they regained consciousness, they did not have to tell Sam what they had done. And he guessed that they had done so at the order of King John.

The earth shook under Sam's feet, and the irontree leaves rattled like dishes in a pantry. The white wall of the dam flew outward with a gigantic cloud of smoke and a roar that pushed at his eardrums.

Enormous chunks of concrete flew through the smoke like white birds above a factory chimney. They tumbled over and over and struck the ground far ahead of the waters. The lake was no longer the peaceful and quiet glimmer of a wonderful world to come. It seemed to hurl itself forward. The roar as it raced down the canyon Sam's men had dug with so much sweat and time was deafening.

THE water, hundreds of thousands of tons of it, funneled by the canyon, rammed through the earthen walls, tearing out great chunks of it. The sudden drop of the water level also removed a great amount of earth around the lake's shores, so much so that the watchers had to scramble for even higher ground. And the thousand-foot irontree, its two-hundred-foot roots abruptly exposed, toppled over.

It seemed to take a long time falling and the explosions of enormous roots breaking and the whistling of air through the huge leaves and vines terrified the humans. They had thought they were far enough away, but even though the giant tree was falling away from them, they were threatened by the eruption of roots from the earth.

The tree struck with a crash on the other side of the lake, tore out overhanging dirt and continued on down into the emptying lake. It slid out entirely from its root-anchors on the bank. The waters picked up the enormous tree as if it were a toothpick and carried it down the canyon for a half-mile before it became wedged.

The water roared out in a wall at least a hundred feet high. Its front carried a tangle of half-grown trees and bamboo plants, huts, people, and debris. It flashed across the mile and a half of plain, spreading out but channeled, for a few minutes, by the secondary walls Sam had built to defend the factories and the Riverboat.

Everything was picked up and carried on out into The River. The factories crumbled as if they were made of straw. The gigantic Riverboat was lifted up like a toy boat cast into the ocean surf. It rode out into The River, pitching, and vanished in darkness and turmoil. The sight made Sam throw himself on the ground and claw at the grass. His boat was lost! All he had made was lost, factories, mines, amphibians, airplanes, smithies, armories—but worst of all, the Riverboat was lost. The dream was shattered, the great shining jewel of his dream had been smashed.

The grass was cold and wet in his face. Joe's huge hand lifted him up and sat him down, as if he were a dummy. Joe's monstrous hairy body was pressed close to his, warming him. And Joe's grotesque face with the shelving brows and the absurdly long nose was before him.

"They're all gone," Joe said. "Chethuth! Vhat a thight—there ain't nothing left, Tham!"

The plain was buried under a whirl and toss of waters, but in fifteen minutes The River had resumed its normal appearance along the shores of Parolando, though it surely was swollen downstream.

The great buildings and the boat in its scaffoldings were gone. The cyclopean walls on the sides, a mile apart, were gone. Small ponds glittered here and there where the mines and the basements of the factories had been. The vast weight of water had gouged out part of the plain. The stone and earth walls along the banks had been swept away as if they were sand.

The skies paled, and the starlit darkness became gray. The great fleet of the invaders was gone far down The River, or under it, broken, smashed. The two armies on the plain and the sailors were all dead, crushed by the weight of the water, drowned, rubbed into nothing or squeezed out like toothpaste.

But Parolando extended for ten miles along The River, and the lake had, after all, only raged across a two-mile area. Its main damage had been in the middle of Parolando, where it had carried everything out that stood within a half a mile wide area.

Dawn brought with it a thousand men in boats or over the walls of Chernsky's Land from the north.

At their head was King John.

XIX

SAM drew up his men in battle formation with Joe Miller in the center, but King John limped forward, his hand held out in sign of peace. Sam walked forward to talk to him. Sam expected eventually to be killed, but he realized that right now John needed him and Firebrass and others if he were going to get the boat rebuilt. Also, he banked on John's wanting the perverted pleasure of keeping Sam alive—and wondering when the dagger in the night would find him.

As it turned out, not everything had to be started from scratch again. The boat was found relatively undamaged, beached on a hill across The River a mile down. It had been deposited as gently as a cat's footstep by the withdrawing waters. The work of getting the great hull back was not easy; but it took much less time than making another one.

John explained more than once to Sam what he had done, but the deviousnesses and the two times two doublecrosses were so complicated that Sam could never see the picture as a whole. John had made a deal to betray Sam, knowing full well that Hacking would betray him in return. John would have been disappointed if Hacking had not tried to stab him in the back. He would have lost all his faith in human nature.

John had made a deal with Iyeyasu to help him invade after Hacking's invasion. Iyeyasu liked the idea that Hacking would weaken his forces while taking Parolando. At the last moment, John had made a deal with Publius Crassus, Tai Fung, and Chernsky that they would help him mop up on Iyeyasu's forces, which would be shattered by the waters released by the blown-up dam.

John had sent the three men to set off the explosives in the dam when the greatest number of invaders and defenders would be concentrated between the fun-

neling secondary-defense walls.

"Then you weren't in your palace when Hacking's cannons opened up on it?" Sam said.

"No," John replied, smiling his cat's smile. "I was miles to the north, traveling to meet Iyeyasu. You have never thought much of me, Samuel, but you should get down on your knees now and kiss my hand in gratitude. Without me you would have lost all."

"If you had told me Hacking was going to invade, I could have kept everything," Sam said. "We could have ambushed Hacking."

The sun came up and struck the tawniness in John's hair and the peculiar gray-blue of his eyes. "Ah, yes, but Iyeyasu would still have been a formidable problem. Now he's gone, and there is little to keep us from ruling all the land we need, including the bauxite and platinum of Soul City and the iridium and tungsten of Selinujo. I presume you have no objections to conquering those two states?"

THERE was a bonanza in the aftermath. Hacking was taken prisoner and Gwenafra was found alive. Both had been pushed during the fighting into the hills to the west. Hacking had been getting ready to lead a fresh charge against Iyeyasu when the edge of the waters deluged his party. Gwenafra escaped, though she almost drowned. Hacking had been hurled against a tree. Both his legs and one arm were broken and he was bleeding internally.

Sam and John hastened to where Hacking lay under an irontree. Gwenafra cried when she saw them and embraced Sam and Lothar. She seemed to give Sam a much longer embrace than she gave Lothar, which was not entirely unexpected, since she and Lothar had been quarreling violently before her capture.

John wanted to finish off Hacking with some refined tortures, preferably as soon after breakfast as possible. Sam objected strongly. He knew that John could have his way if he insisted, since his men outnumbered Sam's by fifty to one. But Sam was past being cautious and John backed away. He needed Sam and Sam's men.

"You had a dream, Sam," Hacking said in a weak voice. "Well, I had one, too. A land where brothers and sisters could loaf and invite their souls. Where we'd be all black. You wouldn't know what that means. No white devils, no white-eyes. Just black soul brothers. A place like that would have been as near heaven as you can get in this hell of a world. Not that we wouldn't have had trouble, no place without trouble, man. But there wouldn't have been any white-man trouble. Life would have been ours. But that isn't to be."

"You could have had your dream," Sam said, "if you'd waited. After the boat was built, we'd have left the iron to whoever could take it. And then—"

Hacking grimaced. Sweat covered him and his face was tight with pain. "Man, you must be out of your skull. You really think I believed that story about you sailing off on this quest for the Big Grail? I

knew you was going to use that big boat to conquer us blacks and lock those chains around us again. An Old South whitey like you—"

He closed his eyes. Sam said, "You're wrong! If you knew me, if you'd taken the trouble to know me—"

Hacking opened his eyes and said, "You'd lie to a nigger even when he was on his deathbed, wouldn't you?" He stared up at Sam. "Shoot me, will you? Put me out of my pain? I'm really suffering."

Lothar stepped up beside Sam and said, "After what you did to Gwenafra I'll be glad to."

He pointed the muzzle of the big flintlock at Hacking's head.

Hacking grinned painfully and muttered, "Rape on principle, mother! I swore off that on Earth—but that woman just brought out the devil in me! Besides, so what? What about all those black slave women you white mothers raped?"

Sam walked away. Behind him the pistol boomed. Hacking would be walking along the banks of The River tomorrow, somewhere far away. He and Sam might even see each other again, although Sam was not looking forward to that.

Lothar, stinking of gunpowder, caught up with him.

"I should have let him suffer. But old habits are hard to break. I wanted to kill him, so I did. That black devil just smiled at me."

"Don't say any more," Sam replied. "I'm sick enough. I'm about to chuck the whole thing and settle down with a steady job of missionarying. The only ones whose suffering meant anything today were the Second Chancers."

"You'll get over that," Lothar said.

THREE years passed. The land was again like a shell-pocked battlefield, stinking with fumes and black with smoke. But the great Riverboat was completed. There was nothing to do to it now except to try it out. Even the last touch, the painting of the Riverboat's name in big black letters on the white hull, had been done. On both sides of the hull, ten feet above the water line, ran the legend: *NOT FOR HIRE.*

"What does the name mean, Sam?" he had been asked by many.

"It means just what it says, contrary to most words in print or speech," Sam said. "The boat is for no man's hire. It's a free boat and its crew are free souls. No man's."

"And why is the boat's launch called *POST NO BILLS?*"

"That comes from a dream I had," Sam would say. "Somebody was trying to put up advertising on it and I told him that the launch was built for no mercenary purpose. *What do you think I am, advance agent for P. T. Barnum?* I said."

There had been more to the dream, but Sam had told no one except Joe about it.

The man who was pasting up those garish posters, advertising the coming of the greatest Riverboat of them all and the greatest Riverboat show of them all was I," Sam had told Joe. *I was both men in the dream.*

I don't get it, Tham, Joe had said.

Sam had given up.

The twenty-sixth anniversary of Resurrection Day was the day the sidewheeler *Not For Hire* first turned its paddles. The big moment came about an hour after the grailstones flamed to charge the breakfast grails. The cables and cap connected to the grailstone had been removed and the cables wound up within the hold through a port in the forward section on the starboard side. The grails had been removed from the stone a mile north and rushed to the big boat in the amphibious, armored, steam-driven launch, the *Post No Bills*. The fabulous Riverboat, gleaming white with red, black and green trimmings, moved out from the canal and into The River behind a huge breakwater on its starboard side.

Whistles blowing, iron bells clanging, passengers cheering, people on the shore shouting, the magnificent paddlewheels churning. *Not For Hire* moved with stately grace out into The River.

THE Riverboat had an overall length of four hundred and forty feet and six inches. The beam over the paddlewheel guards was ninety-three feet. The mean draft, loaded, was twelve feet. The giant electric motors driving the paddle-wheels delivered ten thousand shaft horse power. Top speed, theoretically, was forty-five miles an hour in still water. Going upstream against the fifteen-mile-an-hour current, it would be thirty. Going downstream, it would be sixty. The boat would be going up The River most of the time and cruising at fifteen miles an hour relative to the ground.

There were four decks, the so-called boiler deck, the main deck, the hurricane deck and the landing deck. The pilothouse was at the fore edge of the hurricane deck and the long texas, containing the captain's and chief officers' quarters, was behind the pilothouse. However, the pilothouse was itself double-decked. It was set forward of the two tall but thin smokestacks, which rose thirty feet high. Firebrass had advised against the stacks, because the smoke from the big boilers (used only to heat water and to drive the machine guns) could be piped out on the side. But Sam had snorted and said, "What do I care about air resistance? I want beauty! And beauty is what we'll get! Whoever heard of a Riverboat without tall, graceful impressive smokestacks! Have you no soul, brother?"

There were sixty-five cabins, each about twelve by twelve with snap-up beds and tables and folding chairs. Each cabin had a toilet and a wash basin with hot and cold running water and there was a shower for every six cabins.

There were three big lounges, one in the texas, one on the hurricane deck, and one on the main deck. These held pool tables, dart games, gymnastic equipment, card tables, a movie screen, a stage for dramas or musicals and the main deck lounge held a podium for the orchestra.

The upper deck of the pilot-

house was luxuriously furnished with carved oak chairs and tables covered with red Riverdragon fish leather. The pilot sat in a large and comfortable swivel chair before the instrument board. On this was a bank of small closed-circuit TV screens, giving him views of the control centers of the boat. Before him was a microphone which enabled him to speak to anybody on the boat. He controlled the boat with two levers on a small movable board before him. The left stick controlled the port wheel; the right, the starboard. A screen before him was a radar indicator used at night. Another screen showed him the depth of the water from the bottom of the boat as measured by sonar. A toggle on the instrument board could switch the piloting to automatic, though the rule was that a pilot had to be on duty at all times.

Sam was dressed in bleached fish-leather sandals, a white kilt, a white cape and a white officer's cap of plastic and leather. He wore a bleached leather belt and holster for a ponderous Mark II .69 four-shooter pistol and a sheath for a rapier.

He paced back and forth, a big green cigar in his mouth, and watched the pilot, Robert Styles, steering the boat for the first time. Styles was an old Mississippi pilot, a handsome youth, no liar, though given to inflating facts. Sam had been overcome with joy when he had appeared about two years before. He had known Rob Styles when they were both Mississippi pilots.

STYLES was nervous, as anybody would be the first time, even the steel-nerved Captain Isaiah Sellers of ancient Mississippi fame. There was nothing to piloting the boat—a one-eyed Sunday School teacher with a hangover could do it, his six-year-old child could do it, once he got the hang of the two sticks. Push forward for increased speed, put in the middle position to stop the wheels, pull back to reverse the wheels. To steer the boat to port, pull back a little on the port stick and forward a little on the starboard stick. To steer to starboard, do the reverse.

But it took some practice before the proper coordination was achieved.

Luckily there was no memory work involved in piloting a boat on this River. There were no islands, no sand bars, and there would be few logs with snags. An alarm bell rang before the boat worked too close to shallow water. At night radar or sonar would indicate obstructions and activate a red light.

Sam watched Styles for a half-hour, then took over the piloting and, after another half-hour, asked John if he would like to try. John was dressed entirely in black, as if he were determined to do just the opposite of whatever Sam did. But he took the sticks and did well for an ex-king who had never done a lick of work in his life and had always let inferiors do whatever steering was necessary.

The boat sailed up past the dead Iyeyasu's kingdom, now split into three states again. Then Sam ordered the vessel turned back. Rob Styles got fancy and pivoted her

"on a dime—" as he said, to demonstrate her maneuverability. While the port wheel backed the starboard raced forward at full speed. The boat rotated as if stuck on a pin, then headed downstream. With the current and wind behind her and the paddlewheels turning at maximum speed, the *Not For Hire* raced along at sixty miles an hour. Sam had Styles bring her in close to the shore, where the sonar indicated about one foot of clearance between hull and bottom on the port side. Even above the slapping of the wheels and the splashing of water and the whistling and clanging of bells, they could hear the crowds. The faces whizzed by as if in a dream.

Sam opened the fore ports of the pilothouse to feel the wind and heighten the impression of speed.

The *Not For Hire* raced all the way downstream to Selinujo, then turned again. Sam wished, almost, that there were another boat that he could race against. But it was heaven enough to have the only metal electrically powered Riverboat in existence. A man couldn't have everything, not even in the after-Earthlife.

DURING the return trip the huge hatch in the stern was lowered and the launch slipped into The River. It cut back and forth at top speed and raced ahead of the mother boat. Its steam machine guns traced lines along the water and the thirty steam guns on the *Not For Hire* shot back, though not at the launch.

The big three-place amphibian monoplane came out of the opening in the stern, too. Its wings were straightened out and locked and it took off. Firebrass was at the controls. His woman and Gwenafra were passengers.

A moment later the tiny one-seater open-cockpit scout-fighter was shot off the top of the texas by a steam catapult. Lothar von Richthofen took it up, wood-alcohol motor buzzing, and raced ahead until he was out of sight. He returned, climbed and entertained with the first aerial acrobatics that the Riverworld had ever seen—to the best of Sam's knowledge.

Lothar concluded with a dive, at the end of which he fired four rockets and then the twin machine guns. These were .80 caliber and fired aluminum bullets from aluminum cartridges. There were one hundred thousand of these stored on the boat. When they were used up there would be no more.

Lothar landed the tiny monoplane on the landing deck on top of the texas and devices caught the hook trailed out by the plane. Even so, the whirling propeller stopped only ten feet from the smokestacks. Firebrass returned in the amphibian and later took the wheeled plane up for a flight.

Sam looked down through the port front at the marines drilling on the fore part of the broad boiler deck. They marched back and forth and performed intricate maneuvers under Cyrano's orders. Their silvery duralumin plumed helmets were like those of the ancient Romans. They wore gray and red striped chainmail

shirts halfway down their thighs. Their legs were cased in leather boots. They carried rapiers, long knives and Mark II pistols. They were the pistoleers only, however. The main part of the marines were watching the show; these were the bowmen and the rocketeers.

Seeing Gwenafra's honey-colored head in the crowd on the main deck made Sam happy.

He saw Livy's dark head near her and was unhappy.

Gwenafra, after another six months of a jealousy-ridden life with von Richthofen, had accepted Sam's offer and moved in with him. But Sam still could not see Livy without some pain of loss.

Except for Livy and John he would have been as happy as he could be. But she would be along throughout the forty-year journey. And John prowled through Sam's nightmares.

JOHN had been so willing to let Sam be the captain and so unhesitant about accepting the first mate's position that Sam knew he was up to no good. But when would The Mutiny, as Sam thought of it, take place? It was inevitable that John would try to take over the full command of the Riverboat and any intelligent man, knowing this, would have dumped him.

But Sam had been too conscience-stricken by his killing of Bloodaxe. He could not commit another assassination, not even if he knew that John would not be permanently dead. A corpse was a corpse and a doublecross was a doublecross.

The question was, when would John strike? At the beginning, or much later during the voyage, when Sam's suspicions had been lulled?

Actually the situation was intolerable. But then, it was surprising how much intolerableness a man could tolerate.

A yellow haired near-giant entered the pilothouse. His name was Augustus Strubewell. He was John's aide-de-camp and had been picked up by John during his sojourn in Iyeyasujo after Hacking's invasion. He had been born in 1971 in San Diego, California, had been an All-American fullback, a captain of the U.S. Marines. Decorated for bravery in the Middle East and South America, he had made a career in the movies and on TV. He seemed a pleasant enough fellow except that, like John, he bragged of his conquests among women. Sam did not trust him. Anybody who worked for John Lackland had to have something wrong with him.

Sam shrugged. He might as well enjoy himself. Why let anything rob him of the joy of the greatest day of his life?

He leaned out of the port and watched the drill team and the crowd. The sun sparkled on waves; the breeze was cooling, though he did not need it. He could shut the ports and turn on the air-conditioning. From the tall pole on the bow the flag of the *Not For Hire* flapped in the wind. It was square and bore a scarlet phoenix on a light blue field. The phoenix symbolized the rebirth of mankind.

He waved at the people massed

along the bank and pressed a button that set off a series of steam whistles and clanging bells.

He drew in smoke from his fine cigar, stuck out his chest and paraded back and forth. Strubewell handed John a glass full of bourbon and then he offered Sam one. Everybody in the pilothouse, Styles, the six other pilots, Joe Miller, von Richthofen, Firebrass, Publius Crassus, Mozart, John Lackland, Strubewell and three other aides of John took a glass.

"A toast, gentlemen," John said in Esperanto. "To a long and happy journey and may we all get what we deserve."

JOE MILLER, standing near Sam, the top of his head almost touching the ceiling, held a glass containing about half a quart of bourbon. He sniffed at the amber liquor with his monstrous proboscis and then tasted it with the tip of his tongue.

Sam had been just about to toss down the four-ounce drink when he saw Joe's apish face grimace.

"What's the matter, Joe?"

"Thith thtuff hath thomething in it."

Sam sniffed and could detect nothing but the most excellent of Kentucky's best.

But when John and Strubewell and the others reached for their weapons he threw the liquor in John's face.

Yelling, "It's poison—" he dived for the floor.

Strubewell's Mark II pistol boomed. The plastic bullet shattered against the bulletproof plastic of the port above Sam's head.

Joe roared—he sounded like a lion suddenly released from its cage—and threw his liquor into Strubewell's eyes.

The other aides fired and fired again. The Mark II pistols were four-shot revolvers. The powder in the aluminum cartridges was electrically ignited. They were larger and heavier than the Mark I's, but they could fired more swiftly and cordite, not black gunpowder, propelled the plastic bullets.

The pilothouse became a fury of booming, deafening explosives, the scream of shattered plastic ricocheting, the shouts and screams of men and the subhuman bellowing of Joe.

Sam rolled over, reached up and flicked the automatic pilot switch. Rob Styles was on the floor, his arm almost torn off. One of John's aides was dying in front of him. Strubewell went flying over him and banged against the glass and then fell on him. John was gone; he had fled down the ladder.

Sam crawled out from under Strubewell. Four of his pilots were dead. All of the aides, except for Strubewell, who was only unconscious, were dead. Their necks had been broken or their jaws shattered by Joe. Mozart crouched, quivering, in a corner. Firebrass bled from cuts made by plastic fragments and Lothar from a gash in his arm. One of the aides had struck him with a knife just before Joe twisted his head 180 degrees.

Sam rose shakily and looked through the port. The crowd on the

deck had dispersed, but not without leaving a dozen bodies behind. The marines were firing at men shooting at them from around the sides of the main deck. Some of the fire seemed to be coming from cabin ports in the main deck.

Cyrano stood with his rapidly dwindling crew, shouting orders. Then John's men charged, firing. Cyrano went down. He was up again instantly, his sword flashing silver, then red. The enemy broke and ran.

Cyrano ran after them.

Sam shouted, "You fool—go back—" but he was hot heard, of course.

HE TRIED to struggle out of his shock. John had slipped something into their drinks, a poison or a sedative. Only Joe's subhumanly sensitive nose had saved Sam's people from drinking and allowing John to take over the pilothouse with little trouble.

Sam looked out and ahead. Only a half-mile away was the huge breakwater behind which the boat was to anchor for the night. The long journey would officially begin tomorrow.

He flicked off the automatic pilot toggle switch and took the control sticks in his hands.

"Joe," he said, "I'm going to run this right up alongside the bank. I may even ground us. Get out the bullhorn. I'll tell the people ashore what's happened and we'll get help."

He pulled back on the starboard stick and advanced the port stick.

"What's happening?" he yelled.

The boat was proceeding straight on its course up The River, holding to a distance of about a hundred yards off the shore.

He moved the sticks back and forth, frantically, but the boat did not deviate.

A voice came from the intercom, John's.

"It's no use, Samuel, Boss, Captain, swine! I have control of the boat. My engineer, the man who will be chief engineer, put in a duplicate set of controls in—never mind where. I have cut off your controls, and the boat will go where I want it to. So you don't have any advantage at all. Now my men will storm the pilothouse and take you. But I would prefer that there be as little damage as possible. So, if you will just get off the boat I will let you go unharmed. Provided, that is, that you can swim a hundred yards."

Sam raged and swore and pounded his fists on the instrument panel. But the boat continued past the dock, while the crowds gathered there waved, cheered and wondered.

Lothar said, "They're trying to sneak up on us—" and fired at a man who had appeared around the far end of the texas on the hurricane deck.

"We can't hold out long," Firebrass said. "We don't have much ammunition."

Sam saw some men and women on the boiler deck; they were trying to make a stand.

Livy was among them.

She was firing a Mark II.

John's men charged. A man thrust at Cyrano, who was en-

gaged in running his rapier through the man next to him. Livy tried to knock the blade aside with her pistol and the sword went into her stomach. She fell, the sword still sticking out of her. The man who had killed her died a second later—Cyrano's rapier went through his throat.

Sam cried, "Livy! Livy!"

He was out of the pilothouse and running down the ladder. Bullets screamed past him, smashed against the bulkheads and the ladder. He felt a stinging, then heard a shouting behind him, but he did not stop. He was vaguely aware that Joe Miller and the others had run out after him.

Corpses and wounded were everywhere. The boat was turning into shore, its paddlewheels operating at full speed, the water flying, the wheels chuff-chuffing, the deck trembling. John was turning the boat into shore and Sam saw why. A number of heavily armed men and women had been posted at this section of The Riverbank. They would be the disaffected, Sam guessed, recruited from among the people who were angered because the lottery had cut them out of a place on the crew. John had mobilized them. Once they got aboard, they would mop up whatever resistance they met.

SAM had run along the hurricane deck after leaving the pilothouse ladder. He gripped a pistol with two shots left in it in one hand and his rapier in the other. He did not know how they had gotten into his hands; he had no memory of having drawn either.

A face appeared at the edge of the deck. He fired and it dropped. He was on the edge of the deck then and shooting even as he leaned over to look down the ladder. Sam's bullet did not miss this time. The man's chest erupted red and he fell down the ladder, taking two companions with him. But others on the deck below raised their pistols and he had to jump back. The volley missed him.

Joe Miller said behind him, "Tham! Tham! There'th nothing to do but chump overboard! They got uth thurrounded."

Below, Cyrano, still wielding his rapier, holding off three men at one time, backed to the railing. His blade pierced a throat, the man fell and Cyrano whirled and leaped over the railing. When he came up he began to swim strongly to get away from the starboard paddlewheel thrashing toward him.

Bullets struck the sides of the cabins behind Sam, and Lothar cried, "Jump, Sam! Jump!"

Joe had already turned and was running with his great axe toward the men firing from behind the rear of the cabins along the hurricane deck. Bullets streaked toward him, but he was depending upon his terrifying aspect and his prowess, which they well knew, to panic the shooters.

Sam and Lothar ran behind him until they came to the paddlewheel housing, some ten feet from the edge of the hurricane deck. If they stood up on the railing and leaped out, they could grab hold of the big iron eyes through which cables had

been secured when the housing had been placed over the wheel by the crane.

They jumped, one after the other, while bullets screamed by. Each grabbed an eye, pulled himself to the top of the housing and hit the water from there. The water was thirty feet below, a height which would have made Sam hesitate under different conditions. This time, he went out, fell straight, holding his nose, and plunged into the water feet first.

Sam dove. Several of the steam machine guns had been depressed and .75 caliber bullets were probing for him.

JOHN'S voice boomed from a bullhorn: "Farewell, Sam! Thanks for building the Riverboat for me—I'll change its name to one that'll suit me better! I'm going to enjoy the fruits of your labors—think of me as often as you please. Farewell!"

His laughter blasted Sam's ears.

Sam came out of his hiding place in a hut and climbed the wall on the edge of the water. The boat had stopped and let down a long gangplank on cables to permit the traitors to come aboard. He heard a voice below him and looked down. There was Joe, his reddish hairs black with water except where blood streaked it.

"Lothar and Firebrath and Thyrano and Chohnthton made it," he said.

"How you feel, Tham?"

Sam sat down on the hard-packed dirt and said, "If it would do any good, I'd kill myself. This world is hell, Joe, genuine hell. You can't even commit a decent suicide. You wake up the next day and there you are with your problems stuck on you with glue."

"Vhat do ve do now, Tham?"

Sam did not reply for a long time. If he couldn't have Livy, Cyrano would not have her, either. He could endure the thought of having lost her if she was not where he could see her.

Later, the shame at exulting in Cyrano's loss would come.

Not now. He was too stunned. The loss of the boat had been even a greater shock than seeing Livy killed.

After all these years of hard work, of grief, of betrayal, of planning, of hurting, of—of—

It was too much to bear.

Joe was grieved to see him cry, but he sat patiently by until Sam's tears had quit flowing.

Then he asked, "Do ve thtart building another boat, Tham?"

Sam Clemens rose to his feet. The gangplank was being drawn up by the electromechanical machinery of his fabulous Riverboat. Whistles were shrilling exultantly and bells were clanging. John would still be laughing. He might even be watching Sam through a telescope.

Sam shook his fist, hoping that John was watching him.

"I'll get you yet!" he howled. "I'll build another boat and I'll catch up with you. I'll run you down, John, and I'll blast your stolen boat out of The River. Nobody, the Stranger, or his kind, no matter what their powers, is going to stop me!" •

(Continued from page 121)

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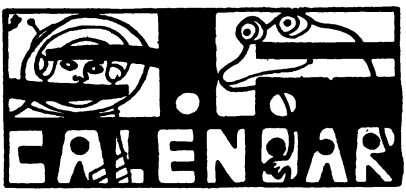

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August 27-28, 1971. NEW MEXICON III. At Ramada Inn East, Albuquerque, New Mexico. For information: Bob Vardman, P.O. Box 11352, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87112.

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September 3-6, 1971. NOREASCON: 29th World Science Fiction Convention. At the Sheraton-Boston Hotel, Prudential Center, Boston, Massachusetts. Guest-of-Honor: Clifford D. Simak. Fan Guest-of-Honor: Harry Warner Jr. For information: Noreascon, P.O. Box 547, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139.

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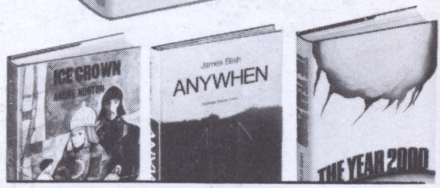

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