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THE ALL-TOGETHER PLANET
Keith Laumer



**ABYSS OF
TARTARUS**

Robert F. Young

**THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT
SAVES THE WORLD**

Harry Harrison

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If you have never asked yourself either of these questions, it is time you read SACRED LOCOMOTIVE FLIES, in which Dick Lupoff *does* ask them. Whether he answers them is another matter. Along the way, we encounter the Sacred Locomotive, the Israeli hyponuclear submarine *Traif*, the Phantom Tanager (and/or Cockatoo, etc.), Mavis Montreal the groupie, the enormous cavern beneath the earth, Ali the lady Mars pilot, and other denizens and fea-

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WORLDS OF



SCIENCE FICTION

September-October, 1971
Vol. 21, No. 1
Issue 156

**ALL NEW
STORIES**

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Cover photography by Bruce Roggeri,
suggested by: THE STAINLESS
STEEL RAT SAVES THE WORLD

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IF is published bimonthly by UPD Publishing Corporation, a subsidiary of Universal Publishing & Distributing Corporation, Arnold E. Abramson, President. Main offices: 235 East 45 Street, New York, N.Y. 10017. 75¢ per copy. 12-issue subscription: \$9.00 in the United States, elsewhere \$10.00. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y. and additional mailing offices. Copyright © 1971 by UPD Publishing Corporation under International, Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction and any similarity between characters and actual persons is coincidental. Title registered U.S. Patent Office. Printed in U.S.A. The company also publishes Award Books, Nova Books, Tandem Books (United Kingdom), Vocational Guidance Manuals, Golf Magazine, Golfdom, Ski, Ski Business, Ski Area Management, Home Garden, The Family Handyman.

**HUE
and
CRY**



Readers write—and write!

Sir:

J.W. Zabel has in the Mar/Apr Hue and Cry made an honest effort to codify via eight descriptive points the function of science fiction. His efforts don't appear to me to be completely rational, though. For each acceptable description, he has produced twice as many ambiguous and incorrect descriptions of the state of the art.

Science fiction exercises the imagination, deliberately, a facet setting it aside from other genre. Score one Zabel. But in other penetrations into the readers' minds SF does nothing that is unique—nor different.

Reading anything will develop perspective—whether that perspective devolves onto one's self or on the world, whether one enjoys it or not, even if one fails completely to understand what he is reading. (Failure at least shows the limits of the reader, a new signpost for self-development.) Science fiction doesn't do those things exclusively, or even on purpose. As for expanding readers' interests into the arts, science fiction is a veritable gold mine of scientific news and predictions in fictional form. But art? The arts developed in sf are imma-

ture in comparison to other narrative writing. Many stories published as sf, though very entertaining, exist only for the gimmick involved—or to communicate a scientific idea—and can't stand up to the question: "Is it art?". Even the New Wave endeavors only repeat techniques abandoned forty years ago, while Brunner's magnificent *Stand On Zanzibar* owes a lot to John Dos Passos. And politics? Politics are a part of everyday life, whether civic or social, and science fiction has yet to do anything but adapt this human preoccupation.

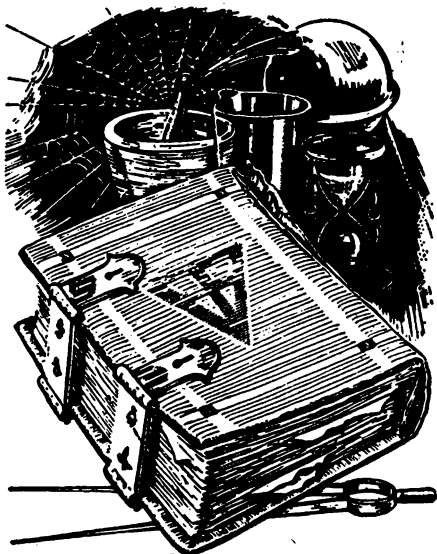
Science fiction examines ideas pragmatically. What else can a genre based on ideas do: each new thought has to be milked completely. What other type of literature is still reworking story ideas first published ninety years ago, as we do with Wells, Verne, etc?

Sf examines the consequences of change? Zabel's statement here is too ambiguous to answer. Every story told by man (myth, news story, mystery, sf, mainstream) is built on change for nobody is interested in non-change. Who'd write anything based on: "The rock sat?" If the rock were different or changed the environment somehow—yes. But only conflict—change—makes stories.

Scientifiction has always wedded art to science. Yet sf no longer merely weds art to science and this is just a fragment of the definition. Zabel's point, "The illustration of principles," is just a qualifier for the scientifiction defini-

(Please turn to page 175)

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entrusted
to a
few



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THE



STAINLESS STEEL RAT SAVES THE WORLD

*The Rat had to return
to Planet Dirt—if only
he could find it in Time!*

HARRY HARRISON

“YOU are a crook, James Bolivar diGriz,” Inskipp said, making animal noises deep in his throat while shaking the sheaf of papers viciously in my direction. I leaned back against the



sideboard in his office, a picture of shocked sincerity.

"I am innocent," I sobbed. "A victim of a campaign of cold calculating lies." I had his humidor behind my back and by touch alone—I really am good at this sort of thing—I felt for the lock.

"Embezzlement, swindling and worse—the reports are still coming in. You have been cheating your own organization, our Special Corps, your own buddies—"

"Never!" I cried, lockpick busy in my fingers.

"They don't call you Slippery Jim for nothing—"

"A mistake, a childish nickname. My mother found me a slippery baby when soaping me in the bath." The humidor sprang open and my nose twitched at the aroma of fragrant leaf.

"Do you know how much you have stolen?" His face was bright red now and his eyes were beginning to bulge in a highly unattractive manner.

"Me? Steal? I would rather die first!" I declaimed movingly as I slipped out a handful of the incredibly expensive cigars destined for visiting VIP's. I could put them to a far more important use by smoking them myself. I am forced to admit that my attention was more on the purloined tobacco than on Inskipp's tedious complaints and I did not at first notice the change in his voice.

But suddenly I realized that I could barely hear his words—not that he was whispering. It was more as though there were a volume control in his throat that had suddenly been turned down.

"Speak up, Inskipp," I told him firmly. "Or are you suddenly beset with guilt over these false accusations?"

I stepped away from the sideboard, half turning as I moved in order to mask the fact that I was slipping about a hundred credits' worth of exotic tobacco into my pocket. He prattled on weakly, ignoring me, shaking the papers soundlessly now.

"Aren't you feeling well?"

I asked this with a certain amount of real concern, because he was beginning to sound quite distant. He did not turn his head to look at me when I moved but instead kept staring at the place where I had been, nattering away in an inaudible voice. And he was looking pale. I blinked and looked again.

Not pale, transparent.

The back of his chair was very definitely becoming visible through his head.

"Stop it!" I shouted, but he did not appear to hear. "What games are you playing? Is this some sort of 3D projection to fool me? Why bother? Slippery Jim's not the kind who can be fooled, ha-ha!"

Walking quickly across the room I put out my hand and poked

my index finger into his forehead. It went in—there was slight resistance—and he did not seem to mind in the least. But when I withdrew it there was a slight popping sound and he vanished completely while the sheaf of papers, now unsupported, fell to the desk-top.

“Whargh!” I grunted, or something equally incomprehensible. I bent to look for hidden devices under the chair when, with a nasty crunching sound, the office door was broken down.

NOW this was something I could understand. I whirled about, still in the crouch, and was ready for the first man when he came through. The hard edge of my hand got him in the throat, right under the gas mask, and he gurgled and dropped. But there were plenty more behind him, all with masks and white coats, wearing little black packs on their backs, either barefisted or carrying improvised clubs. It was all very unusual. Weight of numbers forced me back but I caught one of them under the chin with my toe while a hard jab to the solar plexus polished off another. Then I had my shoulders to the wall and they began to swarm over me. I smashed one of them across the back of the neck and he fell. And vanished halfway to the floor.

This was very interesting. The number of people in the room be-

gan to change rapidly now as some of the men I hit snuffed out of sight. A good thing that helped even the odds, except for the fact that others kept appearing out of thin air at about the same rate. I struggled to get to the door, could not make it. Then the club got me in the side of the head and scrambled my brains nicely.

After that it was like trying to fight slow-motion under water. I hit a few more of them but my heart wasn't really in it. They had my arms and legs and began to drag me from the room. I writhed about a certain amount and cursed them fluently in a half dozen languages but all of this had just about the results you would expect. They rushed me from the room and down the corridor and into the waiting elevator. One of them held up a canister and I tried to turn my head away, but the blast of gas caught me full in the face.

It did nothing for me that I could feel, though I did get angrier. Kicking and snapping my teeth and shouting insults. The masked men mumbled back in what might have been irritated mutterings, which only goaded me to greater fury. By the time we reached our destination I was ready to kill—which I normally do not find easy to do—and certainly would have if I hadn't been strapped into a gadgety electric chair and had electrodes fastened to my wrists and ankles.

"Tell them that Jim diGriz died like a man, you dogs!" I shouted, not without a certain amount of slavering and foaming. A metal helmet was lowered over my head and just before it covered my face I managed to call out, "Up the Special Corps! And up your—"

Darkness descended and I was aware that death or electrocution or brain destruction or worse was imminent.

NOTHING happened and the helmet was raised again and one of the attackers gave me another shot in the face from a canister and I felt the overwhelming anger draining away as fast as it had arrived. I blinked a bit at this and saw that they were freeing my arms and legs. I also saw that most of them had their masks off now and were recognizable as the Corps technicians and scientists who usually puttered about this lab.

"Someone wouldn't like to tell me just what the hell is going on, would they?"

"Let me fix this first," one of them said, a gray-haired man with buckteeth like old yellowed gravestones caught between his lips. He hung one of the black packs from my shoulder and pulled a length of wire from it that had a metal button on the end. He touched the button to the back of my neck, where it stuck.

"You're Professor Coypu, aren't you?"

"I am." The teeth moved up and down like piano keys.

"Would you think me rude if I asked for an explanation?"

"Not at all. Only natural under the circumstances. Terribly sorry we had to rough you up. Only way. Get you off balance, keep you angry. The angry mind exists only for itself and can survive by itself. If we had tried to reason, to tell you the problem, we would have defeated our own purpose. So we attacked. Gave you the anger gas as well as breathing it ourselves. Only thing to do. Oh, blast, there goes Magistero. It's getting stronger even in here."

One of the white-coated men shimmered and grew transparent, then vanished.

"Inskipp went that way," I said.

"He would. First to go you know."

"Why?" I asked, smiling warmly, thinking that this was the most idiotic conversation I had ever had.

"They are after the Corps. Pick off the top people first."

"Who?"

"Don't know."

I heard my teeth grating together but managed to keep my temper. "Would you kindly explain in greater detail or find someone who can make more sense of this affair than you have been doing."

"Sorry. My fault entirely." He dabbed at a beading of sweat on his forehead and a whisk of red tongue dampened the dry ends of his teeth. "It all came about so fast, you know. Emergency measures, everything. Time war I imagine one might call it. Someone, somewhere, somewhen, is tampering with time. Naturally they had to pick the Special Corps as their first target, no matter what other ambitions they might have. Since the Corps is the most effective, most widespread supranational and supra-planetal law-enforcement organization in the history of the galaxy we automatically become the main obstacle in their path. Sooner or later in any ambitious time-changing plan they run up against the Corps. They have therefore elected to do it sooner. If they can eliminate Inskipp and the other top people the probability of the Corps' existence will be lowered and we'll all snuff out like poor Magistero did just then."

I blinked rapidly. "Do you think we could have a drink that might act as a bit of lubricant to my thoughts?"

"Splendid idea, join you myself."

The dispenser produced a sickly sort of green liquid that he favored but I dialed for a large Syrian Panther Sweat, most of which I drained with the first swallow. This frightening beverage—whose hid-

eous aftereffects forbade its sale on most civilized worlds—did me nothing but good at that moment. I finished the glass and a sudden memory popped up out of the tangled jumble of my subconscious.

"Stop me if I'm wrong, but didn't I hear you lecture once about the impossibility of time travel?"

"Of course. My specialty. Smoke screen, that talk. We've had time travel for years here. Afraid to use it, though. Alter time tracks and all that sort of trouble. Just the kind of thing that is happening now. But we have had a continuing project of research and time investigation. Which is why we knew what was happening when it began to happen. The alarms were going off and we had no time to warn anyone—not that warnings would do any good. We were aware of our duty. Plus the fact that we were the only ones who could do anything at all. We jury rigged a time-fixator around this laboratory, then made the smaller portable models, such as the one you are wearing now."

"What does it do?" I asked, touching with great respect the metal disk on the nape of my neck.

"Has a recording of your memory that it keeps feeding back to your brain every three milliseconds. Telling you that you are, that you see, and rebuilding any personality changes that time-line

alterations in the past may have shifted. "Purely a defensive mechanism, but it is all we have." Out of the corner of my eye I saw another man wink out of sight and the professor's voice grew grim. "We must attack if we are to save the Corps."

"Attack? How?"

"Send someone back in time to uncover the forces waging this time war and destroy them before they destroy us. We have a machine."

"I volunteer. Sounds like my kind of job."

"There is no way to return. It is a one-way mission."

"I withdraw the last statement. I like it here." Sudden memory—restored no doubt three milliseconds earlier—grabbed me and a prod of fear pumped a number of interesting chemical substances into my blood.

"Angelina, *my* Angelina. I must speak to her—"

"She is not the only one."

"The only one for me, Professor. Now stand aside or I'll go through you."

HE STEPPED back, frowning and mumbling and tapping his teeth with his fingernails, and I jabbed the code into the phone. The screen beeped twice and the few seconds crawled by like lead snails before she answered the call.

"You're there?" I gasped.

"Where did you expect me to

be?" A frown crossed her perfect features and she sniffed as though to get the aroma of booze from the screen. "You've been drinking—and so early too."

"Just a drop, but that's not why I called. How are you? You look great, not transparent at all."

"A drop? Sounds more like a whole bottle." Her voice chilled and there was more than a trace left of the old, unreformed Angelina, the most ruthless and deadly crook in the galaxy before the Corps medics straightened out the knots in her brain. "I suggest you hang up. Get a drive-right pill, then call me back as soon as you are sober." She reached out for the disconnect button.

"*Don't!* I am cold sober and wish I weren't. This is an emergency, red *A* top priority. Get over here now as absolutely fast as you can."

"Of course." She was on her feet instantly, ready to go. "Where are you?"

"The location of this lab?" I asked, turning to Professor Coypu.

"Level one-hundred and twelve. Room thirty."

"Did you get that," I said, turning back to the screen.

Which was blank.

"Angelina—"

I jabbed the disconnect, tapped her code on the keys. The screen lit up. With the message: THIS IS AN UNCONNECTED NUM-

BER. Then I ran for the door. Someone clutched at my shoulder, but I brushed him aside, grabbed the door and flung it open.

There was nothing outside. A formless, colorless nothing that did strange things to my brain when I looked at it. Then the door was pulled from my hand and slammed shut and Coypu stood with his back to it, breathing heavily, his features twisted by the same unnameable sensations I had felt.

"Gone," he said hoarsely. "The corridor, the entire station, all the buildings, everything. Gone. Just this laboratory is left, locked here by the time-fixator. The Special Corps no longer exists; no one in the galaxy has even a memory of us. When the time-fixator goes we go as well."

"Angelina, where is she—where are they all?"

"They were never born, never existed."

"But I can remember her—all of them."

"That is what we count upon. As long as there is one person alive with memories of us, of the Corps, we stand a microscopic chance of eventual survival. Someone must stop the time attack. If not for the Corps, for the sake of civilization. History is now being rewritten. But not inflexibly, if we can counterattack."

A one-way trip back to a lifetime on an alien world, in an alien

time. Whoever went would be the loneliest man alive, living thousands of years before his people, his friends, would even be born.

"Get ready," I said. "I'll go."

II

"FIRST we must find out where you are going. And when."

Professor Coypu staggered across the laboratory and I followed, in almost as bad shape. He was mumbling over the accordion sheets of the computer printout that were chuntering and pouring from the machine and piling up on the floor.

"Must be accurate, very accurate," he said. "We have been running a time probe backward. Following the traces of these disturbances. We have found the particular planet. Now we must zero in on the time. If you arrive too late they may have already finished their job. Too early and you might die of old age before the fiends are even born."

"Sounds charming. What is the planet?"

"Strange name. Or rather names. It is called Dirt or Earth or something like that. Supposed to be the legendary home of all mankind."

"Another one? I never heard of it."

"No reason you should. Blown up in an atomic war ages ago. Here

it is. You have to be pushed backwards thirty-two thousand, five hundred and ninety-eight years. We can't guarantee anything better than a plus or minus three months at that distance."

"I don't think I'll notice. What year will that be?"

"Well before our present calendar began. It is, I believe, 1975 A.D. by the primitive records of the aborigines of the time."

"Not so aboriginal if they're fiddling with time travel."

"Probably not them at all. Chances are the people you are looking for are just operating in that period."

"How do I find them?"

"With this." One of the assistants handed me a small black box with dials and buttons on it, as well as a transparent bulge that contained a free-floating needle. The needle quivered like a hunting dog and continued to point in the same direction no matter how I turned the box.

"A detector of temporal energy generators," Coypu said. "A less sensitive and portable version of our larger machines. Right now it is pointing at our time-helix. When you arrive at this planet, Dirt, you will use it to seek out the people you want. This other dial is for field strength and will give you an approximation of the distance to the energy source."

I looked at the box and felt the first bubbling and seething of an

idea. "If I can carry this I can take other equipment with me, right?"

"Correct. Small items that can be secured close to your body. The time field generates a surface charge that is not unlike static electricity."

"Then I'll take whatever weapons or armament you have here in the lab."

"There is not very much. We have only the smaller items."

"Then I'll make my own. Are there any weapons technicians working here?"

He looked around and thought. "Old Jarl, there, was in the weapons sections. But we have no time to fabricate anything."

"That's not what I had in mind. Get him."

Old Jarl had taken his rejuvenation treatments recently so he looked like a world-soiled nineteen-year-old—with an ancient and suspicious look in his eye as he came closer.

"I want that box," I said, pointing to the memory unit on his back. He whinnied like a prodded pony and skittered away clutching to the thing.

"Mine, I tell you mine! You can't have it. Not fair even to ask. Without it I'll just fade away." Tears of senile self-pity rose to his eyes.

"Control yourself, Jarl. I don't want to fade you out, I just want a duplicate of the box. Get cracking on it."

He shambled away mumbling to himself and the technicians closed in.

"I don't understand," Coypu said.

"Simple. If I am gunning after a large organization I may need some heavy weapon. If I do I'll plug old Jarl into my brain and use his memories to build them."

"But—he will be *you*, take over your body—it has never been done."

"It's being done now. Desperate times demand desperate measures. Which brings us to another important point. You said this would be a one-way trip through time and that I couldn't return."

"Yes. The time-helix hurls you into the past. There will be no helix there to return you."

"But if one could be built there, I could return?"

"Theoretically. But it has never been tried. Much of the equipment and materials would not be available among the primitive natives."

"But if the materials were available a time-helix *could* be built. Now who do you know that could build it?"

"Only myself. The helix is of my own construction and design."

"Great. I'll want your memory box too. Be sure you boys paint your names on the outside so I don't hook up with the wrong specialist."

The technicians grabbed for the professor.

"The time-fixator is losing power!" one of the engineers shouted in a voice filled with rising hysteria. "When the field goes down we die. We will never have existed. It can't be—"

He screamed, then fell over as one of his mates gave him a faceful of knockout gas.

"Hurry!" Coypu shouted. "Take diGriz to the time-helix, prepare him—"

THEY grabbed me and rushed me into the next room, shouting instructions at one another. They almost dropped me when two of the technicians vanished at the same moment. Most of the voices had hysterical overtones—as well they might with the world coming to an end. Some of the more distant walls were already becoming misty and vague. Only training and experience kept me from panicking too. I finally had to push them away from the emergency spacesuit they were trying to jam me into in order to close the fastenings myself. Professor Coypu was the only other cool one in the whole crowd.

"Seat the helmet but leave the faceplate open until the last minute. That's fine. Here are the memories—I suggest the leg pocket would be the safest place. The grav-chute on your back—I assume you know how to operate it. These weapon canisters across

your chest. The temporal detector here—”

There was more like this until I could hardly stand. I didn't complain. If I didn't take it—I wouldn't have it. Hang on more.

“A language unit,” I said. “How can I speak to the natives if I don't know their language?”

“We don't have one here,” Coypu said, tucking a rack of gas containers under my arm. “But here is a memorygram—”

“They give me headaches.”

“—that you can use to learn the local tongue. In this pocket.”

“What do I do? You haven't explained. How do I arrive?”

“Very high. In the stratosphere that is. Less chance of colliding with anything material. We'll get you there. After that you're on your own.”

“The front lab is gone—” someone shouted, and popped out of existence at almost the same instant.

“To the time-helix,” Coypu called out hoarsely and they dragged me through the door.

Slower and slower, as the scientists and technicians vanished from sight like pricked balloons until there were only four of them left and, heavily burdened, I staggered along at a decrepit waddle.

“The time-helix,” Coypu said breathlessly. “It is a bar, a column of pure force that has been warped into a helix and put under tension.”

It was green and glittered and almost filled the room, a coiled form of sparkling light as thick as my arm.

“It's like a big spring that you have wound up.”

“Yes, perhaps. We prefer to call it a time-helix. It has been wound up—put under tension, the force carefully calculated. You will be placed at the outer end and the restraining latch released. As you are flung into the past the helix will hurl itself into the future where the energies will gradually dissipate. You must go.”

There were just three of us left.

“Remember me,” the short dark technician called out. “Remember Charli Nate. As long as you remember me I'll never—”

Coypu and I were alone, the walls going, the air darkening.

“The end—touch it—” he called out. Was his voice weaker?

I stumbled, partly fell toward the glowing end of the helix, my fingers outstretched. There was no sensation, but when I touched it I was instantly surrounded by the same green glow, could barely see through it. The professor was at a console, working the controls, reaching for a rather large switch.

Pulling it down.

III

EVERYTHING stopped. Professor Coypu stood frozen

at the controls, his hand locked on the closed switch. I had been facing in his direction or I would not have seen this because my eyes were fixed rigidly ahead. My body was rigid as well—and my brain gave a flutter of panic and tried to bounce around in its bony pan as I realized that I had stopped breathing. For all I knew my heart wasn't beating either. Something had gone wrong, I was sure of that, since the time-helix was still tightly coiled. More soundless panic as Coypu grew transparent and the walls behind him took on a definitely hazy quality. It was all going, fading before my eyes. Would I be next? There was no way of knowing.

A primitive part of my mind, the ape-man's heir, jibbered and wailed and rushed about in little circles. Yet at the same time I felt a cold objectivity and interest—not everyone is privileged to watch the dissolving of his world while hanging from a helical force field that may possibly whip him back into the remote past. It was a privilege I would have been happy to pass on to any volunteers. None presented themselves, so I hung there, popeyed and stiff as a statue while the laboratory faded away around me and I was floating in interstellar space. Apparently even the asteroid on which the Special Corps base had been built no longer had any reality in this new universe.

Something moved. I was tugged in a way that is impossible to describe and moved in a direction I never knew existed before. The time-helix was beginning to uncoil. Or perhaps it had been uncoiling all the while and the alteration in time had concealed my awareness of it. Certainly some of the stars appeared to be moving faster—and faster—until they made little blurred lines. It was not a reassuring sight and I tried to close my eyes, but the paralysis still clutched me. A star whipped by, close enough so that I could see its disk, and burned an afterimage across my retina. Everything speeded up as my time velocity accelerated and eventually space became a gray blur as even stellar events became too fast for me to see. This blur had a hypnotic effect, or my brain was affected by the time motion, because my thoughts became thoroughly muddled. I sank into a quasi-state somewhere between sleep and unconsciousness that lasted a very long time. Or a short time, I'm not really sure. It could have been an instant or it could have been eternity. Perhaps there was some corner of my brain that remained aware of the terrible slow passage of all those years but, if so, I do not care to think about it. Survival has always been rather important to me and as a stainless steel rat in among the concrete passages of society I look only to myself for

aid. There are more ways to fail than to succeed, to go mad than to stay sane, and I needed all my mental energies to find the right course. So I existed and stayed relatively sane during the insane temporal voyage and waited for something to happen. After an immeasurable period of time something did.

I ARRIVED. The ending was even more dramatic than the beginning of the journey as everything happened all at once.

I could move again. I could see again—the light blinded me at first—and I was aware of all the bodily sensations that had been suspended so long.

More than that, I was falling. My long-paralyzed stomach gave a twist and the adrenalin and like substances that my brain had been longing to pour into my blood for the past 32,598 years—give or take three months—pumped in and my heart began to thud in a healthily excited manner. As I fell I turned and the sun was out of my eyes and I looked out at a black sky and down at fluffy white clouds far below. Was this it? Dirt, the mysterious homeland of mankind? There was no telling, but it was still a distinct pleasure to be somewhere and somewhen without things dissolving around me. All of my equipment seemed still to be with me and when I touched the control on my wrist I could feel

the tug of the grav-chute taking hold. Great. I turned it off and dropped free again until I felt the first traces of thin atmosphere pulling at the suit. By the time I came to the clouds I was falling gently as a leaf, plunging feet first into their wet embrace. I slowed the rate of fall even more as I dropped blind, rubbing at the condensation on the faceplate of the spacesuit. Then I was out of the clouds, turned the control to *hover* and took a slow look around at this new world, perhaps the home of mankind, surely my home forever.

Above me the clouds hung like a soft wet ceiling. There were trees and countryside about 3,000 meters below, the details blurred by my wet faceplate. I had to try the atmosphere here sooner or later and, hoping my remote ancestors were not methane breathers, I cracked the faceplate and took a quick sniff.

Not bad. Cold and a little thin at this height, but sweet and fresh. And it didn't kill me. I opened the faceplate wide, breathed deeply and looked down at the world below. Pleasant enough from this altitude. Rolling green hills covered with trees of some kind, blue lakes, roads cutting sharply through the valleys, some sort of city on the horizon boiling out clouds of pollution. I'd stay as far away from that as possible for the time being. I had to establish myself first, see about . . .

The sound had been pushing at my awareness, a thin humming like an insect. But there shouldn't have been insects at this altitude. I would have thought of this sooner if my attention hadn't been on the landscape below. Just about the time I realized this the humming grew to a roar and I twisted to look over my shoulder. Gaping. At the globular flying craft supported by an archaic rotating airfoil of some kind, behind the transparent sides of which sat a man gaping back at me. I slammed the wrist controller to LIFT and shot back up into the protecting cloud.

Not a good beginning. The pilot had had a fine look at me, although there was always the chance that he might have disbelieved what he had seen. But he had believed. The communicators in this age had to be most sophisticated, the military's preparedness or paranoia equally so, because within a few minutes I heard the rumble of powerful jets below. They circled a bit, roaring and bellowing, and one even shot up through the clouds. I had a quick glimpse of an arrow-like silver form before it was gone, the clouds roiling and seething in its wake.

It was time to leave. The lateral control on a grav-chute isn't too precise but I wobbled off through the clouds to put as much room between myself and those machines

as I could. When I had not heard them for some time I risked a drop down just below the cloud level.

Nothing. In any direction. I snapped my faceplate shut and cut all the power.

The drop in free fall could not have taken very long, though it seemed a lot longer. I had unhealthy visions of detectors clattering, computers digesting the information and pointing mechanical fingers, mighty machines of war whistling and roaring toward me. I rotated as I fell, squinting my eyes for the first sight of shining metal.

Nothing at all happened. Some large white birds flapped slowly along, veering off with sharp squawks as I plunged by. There was the blue mirror of a lake below and I gave a nudge of power that moved me toward it. If the pursuit did show up I could drop under the surface and out of detection range. When I was below the level of the surrounding hills with the water rushing up uncomfortably close below, I slammed on the power. I shuddered and groaned and felt the straps cutting deep into my flesh. The grav-chute on my back grew uncomfortably warm, though I began to sweat for a different reason. It was still a long fall—to water hard as steel from this height.

WHEN I finally did stop moving, my feet were in the wa-

ter. Not a bad landing at all. There was still no sign of pursuit as I lifted a bit above the surface and drifted toward the gray cliff that fell directly into the lake on the far side. The air smelled good when I opened the faceplate again—and everything was silent. No voices, no sounds of machines. Nor signs of human habitation. When I came closer to the shore I heard the wind in the leaves but that was all. Great. I needed a place to hole up until I got my bearings and this would do just fine. The gray cliff turned out to be a wall of solid rock, inaccessible and high. I drifted along its face until I found a ledge wide enough to sit on, so I sat. It felt good.

"Been a long time since I sat down," I said aloud, pleased to hear my voice. *Yeah*, my evil subconscious snapped back, *about thirty-three thousand years*. I was depressed again and wished that I had a drink. But that was the one essential item I had neglected to bring, a mistake I would have to rectify quickly.

With the power cut, the spacesuit began to warm up in the sun and I stripped it off, placing all the items of equipment against the rock far from the edge.

What next? I felt something crunch in my side pocket and pulled out a handful of hideously expensive and broken cigars. A tragedy. By some miracle few were intact. I snapped the end to

ignite it and breathed deeply. Wonderful! I smoked for a bit, my legs dangling over the drop below, and let my morale build up to its normal, highly efficient level. A fish broke through the surface of the lake and splashed back; some small birds twittered in the trees and I thought about the next step. I needed shelter, but the more I moved around to find it the more chance I had of being discovered. Why couldn't I stay right here?

Among the assorted junk I had been draped with at the last minute was a laboratory tool called a masser. I had started to complain at the time, but it had been hung on my waist before I had managed to say anything. I considered it now. The handgrip that contained the power source blossomed out into a bulbous body which thinned again into a sharp, spikelike prod. A field was generated at the end that had the interesting ability of being able to concentrate most forms of matter by increasing the binding energy in the molecules. This would crunch them together into a smaller space, though they of course, still had the same mass. Some things, depending upon the material and the power used, could be compressed up to one-half their original size.

At the other end the ledge narrowed until it vanished. I walked along it as far as I safely could. Reaching out, I pressed the spike

to the surface of the gray stone and thumped the button. There was a sharp crack as a compressed slab of stone the size of my hand fell from the face of the cliff and slid down to the ledge. It felt heavy, more like lead than rock. Flipping it out into the lake, I turned up the power and went to work.

Once I got the knack of the thing the job went fast. I found I could generate an almost spherical field that would detach a solid ball of compressed stone as big as my head. After I had struggled to roll a couple of these heavyweights over the edge—and almost rolled down with them—I worked the rock away at an angle, then cut out above this slope.

The spheres would crunch free, bang down onto the slope and roll off the edge in a short arc, to splash noisily into the water below. Every once in a while I would stop, listen and look.

I was still alone.

The sun was close to the horizon before I had a neat little cave in the rock face that would just hold all my goods and myself. An animal's den that I longed to crawl into. Which I did, after a quick floating trip down to the lake for some water. The concentrates were tasteless but filling, so my stomach knew that I had dined, though not well. As the first stars began to come out I planned the next step in my conquest of Dirt, or Earth, whichever the name was.

MY TIME voyage must have been more fatiguing than I had thought. The next thing I realized was that the sky was black and a great orange full moon was sitting on the mountains. My bottom was chilled from contact with the cold rock and I was stiff from sleeping in a cramped sitting position.

Come mighty changer of history, I groaned as my muscles creaked and my joints cracked. *Get out and get to work.*

That was exactly what I had to do. Action would bring reaction. As long as I holed up in this den any planning I might do would be valueless since I had no facts to operate with. As yet I didn't even know if this was the right world, or the right time—or anything else. I had to get out and get cracking. Though there was one thing that I could do—that I should have done first thing upon arrival. Mumbling curses at my own stupidity, I dug through the assorted junk I had brought with me and came up with the black box of the time-energy detector. I used a small light to illuminate it and my heart thudded down on top of my stomach when I saw that the needle was floating limply. Time was not being warped anywhere on this world.

“Ha-ha you moron,” I called out loudly, cheered by the sound of the voice I liked the most, “This thing would work a lot better if

you turned on the power." An oversight. Taking a deep breath, I threw the switch.

Still nothing. The needle hung as limp as my deflated hopes. There was still a good chance that the time triflers were around and just happened to have their machine turned off at the present moment. I hoped.

To work. I secreted a few handy devices about my person and disengaged the grav-chute from the spacesuit. It still had about a half charge in its power pack, which should get me up and down the cliff a number of times. I slipped my arms through the straps, stepped off the ledge and touched the controls so that my fall changed to an arc that pointed in the direction of the nearest road I had seen on the way down. Floating low over the trees, I checked landmarks and direction constantly. The outsize and gleamingly bedialed watch I always wear on my left wrist does a lot more things than tell the time. A touch of the right button illuminated the needle of the radio compass that was zeroed in on my home base. I drifted silently on.

Moonlight reflected from a smooth surface that cut through the forest and I floated to the ground. Enough light filtered through the boughs for me not to need my flash as I made my way to the road, covering the last few meters with extreme caution. It

was empty in both directions and the night was silent. I bent and examined the surface. It was made of some hard white substance, not metal or plastic, that appeared to have tiny grains of sand in it. Most uninteresting. Staying close to the edge I turned in the direction of the city I had glimpsed and started walking. Progress was slow but I was saving the power in the grav-chute.

What happened next I can attribute only to carelessness, tempered with fatigue, and seasoned by my ignorance of this world. My mind wandered to Angelina and my friends in the Corps, all of whom existed only in my thoughts. They now had no more reality than my memory of characters I had read about in a novel. This was a very depressing idea and I brooded over it rather than rejecting it, so I was taken completely unaware by the sudden roar of engines. At this moment I was rounding a turn in the road that had apparently been blasted through a small hill, since there were steep banks on each side. I should have considered being caught in this cut and have planned some means to avoid it. Now, while I considered the advisability of climbing the slope, of lifting up by grav-chute or using some other means of escape, bright lights shone around the turn ahead and the roar grew louder. In the end I only dropped to one side

of the road, into the ditch that ran there, lay down and tried to think small, burying my face in my arm. My clothing was a neutral dark gray and might blend into the ground.

Then the shuttering roar was upon me, next to me. Bright lights washed over me and were gone. I sat up and looked after the four strange vehicles that had passed. Details were not clear, since I saw them only as silhouettes against their own headlights, but they seemed very narrow, like monocycles, and each had a little red light at the back. Their sound quieted, became mixed with a kind of honking like some animal sound and a shrill screeching. They were slowing. They must have seen me.

Cracking, barking sounds echoed in the cut as the lights turned full circle and headed back in my direction.

IV

WHEN in doubt let the other guy make the first mistake: one of my older mottos. I could attempt to escape, climbing or floating, but whoever these people were they might have weapons and I would make a peachy target. Even if I did escape I would only draw attention to this area. Better to see who and what they were first. Turning my back, so their lights wouldn't blind me, I waited patiently as the machines rum-

bled up and stopped in an arc around me, motors coughing and lights pointed at me. I closed my eyes to slits to shield them from the glare and listened to the strange sounds the riders made gabbling to each other, not one word of which I found comprehensible. The chances were good that my clothing was on the exotic side as far as they were concerned. They must have reached some agreement because the engine on one of the invisible conveyances clattered into silence and the driver stepped forward into the light.

We exchanged looks of mutual interest. He was a little shorter than I but looked taller because of the bucket-shaped metal helmet he was wearing. It was studded with rivets and bore a tall spike on the top, very unattractive, as was the rest of his dress. All black plastic with shining knobs and clasps, brought to the acme of vulgarity by a stylized skull and crossbones on the chest that was picked out with fake gems of some kind.

"*Kryzl prtzblk?*" he said in an insulting manner, allowing his jaw to protrude at the same time. I smiled to show that I was a friendly, good-natured fellow and responded in the warmest fashion.

"You'll look uglier dead than alive, bowb, and that's what you will be if you keep talking to me that way."

He looked puzzled at that and there was more incomprehensible chit-chat back and forth. The first driver was joined by one of the others, equally strangely garbed, who pointed excitedly to my arm. All of them looked at my wrist chronometer and there were shrill cries of interest that changed to anger when I put my hand behind my back.

"*Prubl!*" the first thug said, stepping forward with his hand out. There was a sharp *snik* and a gleaming blade appeared in his other fist.

Now this was language I understood and I almost smiled at the sight. No honest men these, unless the law of the land decreed drawing weapons on strangers and attempting to rob them. Now that I knew the rules I could play by them.

"*Prubl, prubl!*" I cried, shrinking away and raising my hands in a gesture of despair.

"*Prubl drubl!*" the evilly grinning lout shouted jumping towards me.

"How's that for *prubl!*" I asked as I kicked up and caught him on the wrist with my toe. The knife sailed away into the darkness and he squeaked with pain, the squeak turning into a vanishing gurgle as my pointed fingers stabbed him in the throat.

By this time all the eyes must be on me so I triggered a miniflare into my hand from my sleeve hold-

out and dropped it to the ground before me, closing my eyes just before it exploded. The glare burned hot on my lids and I saw little floating blobs of light when I opened them again. I fared a lot better than my attackers, who were all temporarily blinded, if their groans and complaints meant anything. None of them stopped me as I walked behind them and gave each in turn a sharp boot where it would do the most good. They all yiped with pain and ran in little circles until two collided by chance and began to beat each other unmercifully. While they were amusing themselves in this manner I examined their conveyances. Strange things with only two wheels and no sign of a gyro to stabilize them in motion. Each had a single seat on which the operator sat, straddling the thing to make it go. They looked very dangerous and I had no desire at all to learn to operate one.

What was I to do with these creatures? I had never enjoyed killing people, so they couldn't be silenced that way. If they were the criminals they appeared to be, there was a good chance they would not report the event to the authorities. Criminals! Of course, just the kind of informants I needed. One would be enough—the first one preferably since I would have no compunction about being stern with him. He was moaning his way back to

consciousness, but a whiff of sleepgas put him well under. Around his waist was a wide, metal-studded belt that looked fairly strong. I fastened this to one of my belt clips and held him in friendly embrace under the arms. Then thumbed the grav-chute control.

SILENTLY and smoothly we drifted, floating up and away from the noisy little group, arrowing back toward my lakeside retreat. Their companion's vanishing act would be singularly mysterious and even if they reported it to the authorities they would accomplish nothing. I was going to hole up with my dozing companion for a few days and learn the speech of this land. My accent was sure to be of the lowest, but that could be corrected later. My retreat gaped its welcoming mouth at me and I zipped in, dropping my limp burden ungracefully on the stone.

By the time he came groaning back to awareness I was completely prepared and had all the equipment laid out. I puffed pleasantly on a cigar from my pocket humidor and said nothing while he went through a painful series of adjustments. There was plenty of lip-smacking before he opened his eyes and sat up, only to moan and clutch at his head. My sleep gas does have some painful after-effects. But memory of his knife aimed at me did much to steel me to his suffering. Then came

the wild look around, the goggling at me and my equipment, the crafty look at the black opening of the entrance and the apparently accidental way he got his legs beneath him. To spring out of the opening. To land smash on his face as the cable that secured his ankle to the rock brought him down.

"Now the games are over and we get to work," I told him, not unkindly, as I sat him back against the wall and tightened the device about his wrist. I had rigged it while he slept and it was simple but effective. It contained a blood pressure and skin resistance gauge with readouts on the control box that I held before me. A basic form of lie detector. It also contained a negative reinforcement circuit. I normally wouldn't use this technique on a human being—it was usually reserved for training laboratory animals—but this present human being was an exception. We were playing by his rules and this shortcut would save a lot of time. When he began shouting what I am sure were obnoxious insults and started to tear at the box I pressed the reinforcement button. He shrieked and thrashed about enthusiastically as the electric current hit him. It wasn't really that bad; I had tried it on myself and set the level at slightly painful, the sort of pain one could easily endure but would prefer not to.

"Now we begin," I said, "but

let me prepare myself first."

He looked on in wide-eyed silence while I adjusted the metal pads of the memorygram on my temples and activated the circuit.

"The key word is—" I looked at my companion— "ugly. Now we begin."

There was a pile of simple objects at my side and I picked up the first one and held it out before me so he could see it. When he looked at it I said *rock* loudly, then was silent. He was silent as well and after a moment I triggered the reinforcement circuit and he jumped at the sudden burst of pain and looked around wildly.

"Rock," I repeated in a quiet, patient voice.

It took him a while to get the idea, but he learned. There was a shock for cursing or saying anything irrelevant, and a double shock when he tried to lie about a word; my polygraph kept me informed about that. He had enough of this quite quickly and found it easier to supply the word I wanted. We quickly ran through my supply of objects and shifted to drawings and acted out motions. I accepted the phrase *I don't know*—as long as it wasn't used too often—and my store of words grew. Under the pressure of the microcurrents of the memorygram the new vocabulary was jammed into my cortex, but not without some painful side effects. When my head began to

throb I took a painpill and went on with the word game. It didn't take long to file away enough words to switch to the second part of the learning process, grammar and structure. *What is your name?* I thought to myself and added the code word *ugly*.

"What . . . name?" I said aloud. A very unattractive language indeed.

"Slasher."

"Me . . . name . . . Jim."

"Lemme go, I ain't done nuttin to you."

"Learn first . . . leave later. Now tell, what year?"

"What year what?"

"What year now, dum-dum?"

I REPEATED the question in different ways until realization of what I was asking finally penetrated the solid bone of his skull. I was beginning to sweat.

"Oh, the *year*. It's nineteen-seventy-five. Yes, June the nineteenth, nineteen-seventy-five."

Right on the target! Across all those centuries and millennia the time-helix had snapped me with precise accuracy. I made a mental note of thanks to Professor Coypu and the other vanished scientists and, since they lived on only in my memory, this was probably the only way to send the message. Much cheered by this information I got on with the language lesson.

The memorygram clutched onto

everything he said, organized it and jammed it deep into my bruised synapses. I stifled a groan and took another painpill. By sunrise I felt I had enough command of the language to add to it by myself and switched off the machine. My companion fell over, asleep, and clunked his head on the rock without waking. I let him sleep and disentangled us both from the electronic equipment. After the nightlong session I was tired myself, but a stimtab took care of that. Hunger growled plaintively in my gut and I broke out some rations. Slasher awoke soon after and shared my breakfast, eating one of the bars only after he saw me break off the end and consume it myself. I belched with satisfaction and he echoed eructingly. He eyed me and my equipment for some time before he made a positive statement.

"I know who you are."

"So tell me."

"You're from Mars, dat's what."

"What's Mars?"

"The planet, you know."

"Yeah, you might be right. It don't matter. You gonna do what I said, help me get some loot?"

"I told you, I'm on parole. If I'm grabbed they'll throw the key away."

"Don't let it bug you. Stick with me and they won't lay a finger on you. You'll be rolling in bucks. Do you have any of these bucks? I

want to see what they look like."

"No!" he said, and his hand went to a bulge in a flap of material affixed to his lower garments. By this time I could detect his simple lies without my equipment.

Sleepgas quieted him and I worked a sort of hide envelope from his clothing that contained flimsy scraps of green paper, undoubtedly the bucks he had referred to not having. To look at them was to laugh! The cheapest copying machine could turn out duplicates of these by the barrelful—unless there were hidden means for authentication. To check I went over them with the most delicate equipment and found no trace of chemical, physical or radioactive identification. Amazing. The paper did appear to contain short threads of some kind of substance, but a duplicator would print replicas of these on the surface which would do fine. If only I had a duplicator. Or did I have a duplicator? Toward the end Professor Coypu and his helpers had been hanging every kind of equipment on me that they could. I rooted through the pile and, sure enough, there was a tiny duplicator. It was loaded with a block of extremely dense material that was expanded in some cellular fashion inside the machine to produce a sheet of smooth white plastic on which the copies were made. After a number of adjustments I

managed to reduce the quality of the plastic until it was as rough and crumpled as the bucks. Now when I touched the copy button the machine produced a buck that appeared a duplicate of the original. The largest denomination Slasher had was a ten buck note and I made a number of copies of this. Of course they all had the same serial number, but my experience has been that people never look very closely at the money they accept.

IT WAS time to move into the next phase of my penetration of the society on this primitive planet, Earth. (I had discovered that Dirt was not correct and had another meaning altogether.) I arranged about my person the equipment I might need and left the remainder in the cave with the spacesuit. It would be here whenever I needed it. Slasher mumbled and snored when I floated him back across the lake and low over the trees towards the road. There was more traffic on it now during the day, I could hear the vehicles rumbling by, so I once more dropped into the forest. Before waking Slasher I buried the gravchute with a radio transponder that would lead me back to it if need be.

"What, what?" Slasher asked, sitting up as soon as the antidote took effect. He looked uncomprehendingly around at the forest.

"On your hoofs," I told him. "We gotta move out of here."

He shambled after me, still half asleep, though he woke up rather quickly when I ruffled the wad of money under his nose.

"How do these bucks look to you?"

"Great—but I thought you didn't have any bread?"

"I got enough food, but not enough money. So I made these. Are they okay?"

"A-okay, I never seen better." He flipped through them with the appraising eye of the professional. "The only way you can tell is that the numbers are all the same. This is high-class green."

He parted with them only reluctantly. A man of little imagination and no compunction; just what I needed. The sight of the bucks seemed to have driven all fear of me from him and he actively joined in planning to obtain even more money as we trudged along the road.

"That outfit you're wearing, it's okay from a distance, like now, no one in the cars notices nuttin. But we gotta get you some threads. There's kind of a general store foot of this hill. You wait away from the road while I go in and buy what you need. In fact maybe we get some wheels before that, my feet are killing me. There's some kind of little factory there with a parking lot. We'll see what they're selling."

The factory proved to be a squat squarish building with a number of chimneys that were puffing out smoke and pollution. An assortment of multicolored vehicles were arranged to one side and, following Slasher's example, I bent low as we moved quickly to the nearest one in the outside row. When he was sure we were unobserved my companion released a catch on a swollen purple thing, with what appeared to be a row of metal teeth at one end, and lifted a large lid. I looked in and gasped at the excessively complex and primitive propulsion engine it contained. I was indeed in the past. In response to my questions, Slasher described it as he shorted some wires that seemed to control the ignition.

"An intoinal combustion engine we call it. Almost new, should be three hundred horses there. Climb in and we'll make tracks out of here before anybody sees us."

I made a mental note to inquire later about the theory behind this intoinal combustion. From earlier conversation I understood that horses were a rather large quadruped, so perhaps it was an animal-miniaturizing process to get a large number of them into the machine. But, primitive as the device looked, it certainly moved quickly enough. Slasher manipulated the controls and twisted the large wheel and we shot out onto the road and were away—appar-

ently without being detected. I was more than satisfied to let Slasher drive while I observed this world that I had arrived on.

"Where is all the money kept? You know, like the place where they lock it up."

"You must mean the banks. Places with thick walls, big vaults, armed guards. They got at least one in every town."

"And the bigger the town, the bigger the bank?"

"You're catchin on."

"Then drive on to the nearest big town and find the biggest bank. I need plenty of bread. So we'll clean it out tonight."

Slasher gaped in awe. "You can't mean it! They got all kinds of alarms and stuff."

"I laugh at their stone-age gadgets. Just find the town, find the bank, then find some food and drink. Tonight I'll make you rich."

V

IN ALL truth I have never robbed a bank more easily, or cracked a simpler crib. The establishment I selected was in the center of a city with the improbable sounding name of Hartford. It was severely constructed of gray stone and all the openings were covered with thick metal bars—but these defenses were negated by the fact that other buildings were joined to the bank on both sides. A rat rare-

ly enters by the front door. It was early evening when we set out and Slasher was jittery and nervous, despite the large quantity of low quality alcoholic beverage he had consumed.

"We oughta wait until later," he complained. "Plenty of people are still in the street."

"Just how I want it. They won't pay no attention to a couple more. Now park this heap around the corner where we planned and bring the bags."

I carried my tools in a small case while Slasher followed me with the two large pieces of luggage we had purchased. The building ahead, on the left of the bank, was dark and the outer door was surely locked. No trouble. I had looked at the lock earlier in the day and had determined that it presented no problem at all. The device in my left hand neutralized the alarm while I inserted the lockpick with my right. It opened so easily that Slasher did not even have to stop but went right on by me with the bags. Not a soul in the street paid us the slightest attention. A corridor led to some more locked doors, which I passed through with the same ease, until we reached an office in the rear.

"This room should share a wall with the bank. Now I'm gonna find out," I said.

I whistled under my breath as I went to work. This was by no means my first bank robbery and I

had no intention of making it my last. Of all the varied forms of crime, bank robbery is the most satisfactory to both the individual and to society. The individual of course gets a lot of money—that goes without saying—and he benefits society by putting large amounts of cash back into circulation. The economy is stimulated, small businessmen prosper, people read about the crime with great interest, and the police have a chance to exercise their various skills. Good for all. Though I have heard foolish people complain that it hurts the bank. This is arrant nonsense. All banks are insured, so they lose nothing, while the sums involved are minuscule in the overall operation of the insuring firm, where the most that might happen is that a microscopically smaller dividend will be paid at the end of the year. Little enough price to pay for all the good caused. It was as a benefactor of mankind, not a thief, that I moved the echo sounder along the wall. A large opening on the other side; the bank without a doubt.

There were a number of cables and pipes in the wall, power and water I presumed, along with some that were obviously alarms. I marked their positions on the wall until the pattern was clear. One area was free of all obstructions. I outlined it.

"We go in here," I said.

"How we gonna break the wall

down?" Slasher swung between elation and fear, wanting the money, afraid he would be caught. He was obviously a petty criminal and this was the biggest job he had ever been on.

"Not break, dum-dum," I said, not unkindly, holding up the masser. "We just convince it to open before us."

Of course he had no idea what I was talking about, but sight of the gleaming instrument seemed to reassure him. I had reversed the device so instead of increasing the binding energy of molecules it reduced their attraction close to zero. With slow precision I ran the point of the device completely over the chosen area of wall, then turned it off and stowed it away.

"Nuttin happened," Slasher complained.

"Sometin will now." I pushed the wall with my hand and the entire area I had prepared fell away with a soft whoosh, sliding down like so much fine dust. Which it had become. We looked through into the brightly lit interior of the bank.

WE WERE invisible from the street when we crawled through and crept along behind the high counter where the tellers normally sat. The builders had thoughtfully put their vault in the lower depths of the building and out of sight of the street, so once

down the steps we could straighten up and go about our task in comfort. In rapid sequence I went through a pair of locked doors and a grill made of thick steel bars. Their locks and alarms were too simple to discuss. The vault door itself looked more formidable yet proved the simplest of them all.

"Look at dat," I called out enthusiastically. "There is a time lock here that opens automatically sometime tomorrow."

"I knew it," Slasher wailed. "Let's get out before the alarms go off—"

As he ran for the stairs I tripped him and put one foot on his chest while I explained.

"That is what they call good, dum-dum. All we have to do to open the thing is to advance the clock so it thinks it is the morning."

"Impossible! It's sealed behind a couple of inches of steel!"

Of course he had no way of knowing that an ordinary serviceman's manipulator is designed to work through casings of any kind. When I felt the field engage the cogs I rotated it and the dials whirled and his eyes bulged—and the mechanism gave a satisfied click and the door swung open.

"Bring da bags," I ordered, entering the vault.

Whistling and humming gaily we packed the two bags solid with the tightly wrapped bundles of crisp notes. Slasher closed and sealed his

first, then mumbled impatiently at my slowness.

"What's da rush?" I asked him, closing the case and assembling my tools. "You gotta take the time to do things the right way."

As I put the last of my instruments away I noticed a needle jump, then hold steady. Interesting. I adjusted the field strength then stood with it in my hand and looked around. Slasher was on the other side of the vault fumbling with some long metal boxes.

"And what are you doing?" I asked in my warmest voice.

"Takin a shuftly to see if maybe there are some jewels in these safe deposit boxes."

"Oh, that is what you are doing. You shoulda asked me."

"I can do it myself." Surly and cocksure.

"Yes, but I can do it without setting off the silent alarm to the police station." Cold and angry. "As you have just done."

The blood drained from his face nicely, his hands shook so he dropped the box, then he jumped about to bend and pick up the satchel of money.

"Dum-dum yo-yo," I snarled and booted hard the inviting target presented. "Now get that bag and get out of here and start the car. I'm right behind you."

Slasher stumbled and scrambled up the stairs and I followed more calmly after, taking a moment to close all the gates and grills behind

me in order to make things as difficult as possible for the police. They would know the bank had been entered, but would not know it had been robbed until they roused out some bank official and opened the vault. By which time we would be long gone.

But as I came up the stairs I heard the squeal of tires and saw, through the front windows, a police car pulling up outside.

They had certainly been fast, incredibly so for an ancient and primitive society like this one. Though perhaps that was why; certainly crime and crime detection must consume a large part of everyone's energies. However I wasted no time philosophizing over their arrival, but pushed the bags ahead of me as I crawled behind the tellers' counter. As I was going through the hole to the other building I heard keys rattling in the outer door locks. Just right. As they came in I would go out—and this proved to be the case. When I looked out at the street I saw that all of the occupants of the police car had entered the bank while a small, but curious, crowd had gathered. With their backs towards me. I exited slowly and strode towards the corner.

These neolithic fuzz were certainly fast on their feet. It must come from running down and catching their own game or something. Because I had not reached the corner before they popped out

of the building behind me, tooting painfully on shrill whistles. They had entered the bank, seen the hole in the wall, then retraced my path. I took one quick look at them, all shining teeth, blue uniforms, brass buttons and guns, and started running.

Around the corner and into the car.

Except that the street was empty and the car was gone.

Slasher must have decided that he had earned enough for one evening and had driven away and left me for the law.

VI

I AM not suggesting that I may be made of sterner stuff than most men. Though I do feel that most men when presented with a situation like this—32,000 years in the past, a load of stolen money, the law in hot pursuit—might give way to more than a little suggestion of panic. Only conditioning—and the fact that I had been in this position far too often during my life—kept me running smoothly while I considered what to do next. In a few moments some heavy-footed minions of the law would come barreling around the corner while, I am sure, a radio alarm would be drawing in reinforcements to cut me off. Think fast, Jim.

I did. Before I had taken five

more paces my entire plan for escape was outlined, detailed, set into type, printed and bound into a little booklet with page one open in my mind's eye before me.

First—get off the street. As I jumped into the next doorway I dropped the money and let a mini-grenade drop into my fingers from my holdout. This fitted into the round opening of the keyhole very nicely and, with an impressive thud, it blew out the lock and part of the frame. My pursuers were not in sight yet so I hesitated until they appeared before pushing open the ruined door. Hoarse shouts and more whistle blowing signaled that I had been observed. The door opened into a long corridor and I was at the far end of it, hands raised in surrender when the gun-toting law hesitatingly pecked in through the opening.

“Don't shoot, coppers,” I shouted. “I surrender, a poor young man led to crime by evil companions.”

“Don't move or we'll hole you,” they growled happily, entering warily with strong lights flashing into my eyes. I simply stood there, fingers groping for empty air, until the lights slid away and there was the double thud of falling bodies. There should have been since there was more sleepgas than air in that hallway.

Being careful to breathe through the filter plugs in my nostrils I stripped the uniform from the snor-

ing figure that was closest to my size, cursing the crude arrangement of fastenings, and put it on over my own clothes. Then I took the hand weapon he had been carrying and restored it to its holster, picked up my bags again and left, walking back up the street towards the bank. Frightened civilians peered out of doorways like animals from their burrows and at the corner I was met by another police car. As I had guessed a number of them were converging on this spot.

"I have the loot," I called in to the solid figure behind the wheel. "I'm takin it back to da bank. We have them cornered, da rats, a whole gang. Through that door. Go get them!"

This last advice was unneeded because the vehicle had already left. The first police conveyance still stood where I had last seen it and, under the cow-like eyes of the spectators, I threw the bags into the front seat and climbed in.

"Gowan, beat it. Da show's over," I shouted as I groped among the unfamiliar instruments. There were an awful lot of them, enough to fly a spaceship with let alone this squalid groundcar. Nothing happened. The crowd milled back then milled forward. I was sweating slightly. Only then did I notice that the tiny keyhole was empty and remembered—belatedly—something Slasher had said about using keys to start these

vehicles with. Sirens grew louder on all sides as I groped and fumbled through the odd selection of pockets and wallets on the uniform I wore.

Keys! An entire ring of them. Chortling I pushed one after another into the keyhole until I realized that they were all too big to fit. Outside the fascinated crowd pressed close, greatly admiring my performance.

"Back, back," I cried, and struggled the weapon from its holster to add menace to my words.

EVIDENTLY it had been primed and was ready to be actuated and I inadvertently touched the wrong control. There was a terrible explosion, cloud of smoke and the weapon jumped from my hand. Some kind of projectile hurtled through the metal roof of the car and my thumb felt quite sore.

At least the spectators left. Hurriedly. As they ran in all directions I saw that one of the police cars was coming up behind me and I felt that things were just not going as well as they should. There must be other keys. I groped again, throwing the miscellaneous items I discovered onto the seat beside me until there were no more. The other car stopped behind mine and the doors opened.

Was that a glint of metal in that small hide case? It was. A pair of keys. One of them slid gently into

the correct orifice as the two minions of law and order walked up on both sides of the car.

"What's going on here?" the nearest called out as the key turned and there was the groaning of an engine and a metallic clashing.

"Trouble!" I said as I fumbled with the metal levers.

"Get outta there you!" he said, pulling out his weapon.

"Matter of life and death!" I shouted in a cracked voice as I stamped on one of the pedals as I had seen Slasher do. The car roared with power, the wheels squealed; it leaped to life, hurtling.

In the wrong direction, backward.

There was an intense crashing and clanging of glass and metal and the police vanished. I groped for the controls again. One of the fuzz appeared ahead, raising his weapon, but jumped for his life as I found the right combination and the car roared at him. The road was clear and I was on my way.

With the police in hot pursuit. Before I reached the corner the other car started up and tore forward. Colored lights began rotating on top of it and its siren wailed. I drove with one hand and fumbled with my own controls—spraying liquid on the windscreen then seeing it wiped away by moving arms, hearing loud music, warming my feet with a hot blast of air—until I also had a screaming siren and, perhaps, a flashing light.

We tore down the wide road in this manner and I felt that this was not the way to escape. The police knew their city and their vehicles and could radio ahead to cut me off. As soon as I realized this I pulled at the wheel and turned into the next street. Since I was going a bit faster than I should the tires screeched and the car bounced up onto the sidewalk and caromed off a building before shuddering back into the roadway. My pursuers dropped behind with this maneuver, not willing to make the turn in this same dramatic manner, but were still after me when I barreled around the next corner. With these two right-angle turns I had succeeded in reversing my course and was now headed back toward the scene of the crime.

WHICH may sound like madness but was really the safest thing to do. In a few moments, siren wailing and lights going, I was safe in the middle of a pack of screaming flashing blue and white vehicles. It was lovely. They were turning and backing and getting in each other's way and I did what I could to increase the confusion. It was quite interesting with much cursing and the shaking of fists from windows and I would have stayed longer if reason had not prevailed. When the excitement reached its merriest I worked my way out and slid my vehicle around the corner. I was not followed. At a

more reasonable pace, siren silenced and lights lowered, I trundled along the street looking for a haven. I could never escape in the police car and I had no intention of doing so; what I needed was a rat hole to crawl into.

A luxurious one, I do not believe in doing things halfway. Not very much farther on I saw my goal, ablaze with lights and signs, glittering with ornament, a hotel of the plush and luxury class almost a stone's throw from the site of the crime. The last place where I would be looked for. I hoped. Certain chances have to be taken always. At the next turning I parked the car, stripped off the uniform, put a bundle of bills in my pocket, then trundled back towards the hotel with my two bags. When the car was found they would probably think I had changed vehicles, an obvious ploy, and the area of search would widen.

"Hey, you," I called out to the uniformed functionary who stood proudly before the entrance. "Carry these bags."

My tone was insulting, my manners rude and he would have ignored me had I not spoken in another language and pressed a large denomination banknote into his hand. A quick glimpse of this produced smiles and a false obsequiousness as he grabbed for my bags, shuffling after me as I entered the lobby.

Glowing wood paneling, soft

rugs, discreet lighting, lovely women in low-cut dresses accompanied by elderly men with low-hung bellies—this was the right place. There were a number of raised eyebrows at my rough clothing as I strode across to the reception desk. The individual behind it looked coldly down a long patrician nose and I could see the ice already starting to form. I thawed it with a wad of money on the counter before him.

"You have the pleasure of meeting a rich but eccentric millionaire," I told him. "This is for you." The bills vanished even as I offered them. "I have just come back from the boonies and I want the best room you got."

"Something *might* be arranged, but only the Emperor Suite is available and that costs—"

"Don't bodder me with money. Take this loot and let me know when you want more."

"Yes, well, perhaps something can be arranged. If you would be so kind as to sign your name here—"

"What's *your* name?"

"Me? Why, it's Roscoe Amberdexter."

"Ain't that a coincidence—that's my name too, but you can call me sir. Must be a very common name around here. So you sign for me since we both got the same name." I beckoned and he leaned forward and I spoke in a hoarse whisper. "I don't want no one to know I am here. Everyone's

after my loot. Send up the martager if he wants more information." What he would get would be money which I was sure would do just as well.

Buoyed on a wave of greenbacks the rest was clear sailing. I was ushered to my quarters and I bestowed largesse on my two bag-carriers for being so smart they hadn't dropped them. They opened and shut things, showed me all the controls. I had one of them call room service for much food and drink. They left in the best of humors, pockets bulging. I put the bag of money in the closet and opened the smaller case.

And froze.

The indicator needle on the temporal energy detector had moved and was pointing steadily toward the window and the world outside.

VII

MY HANDS wanted to shake but I would not let them as I took out the detector and placed it gently on the floor. The field strength was 117.56 and I made a rapid note of this. Then I dropped and sighted along the needle at the exact spot under the window where it pointed. Running over quickly, I marked a big X on this spot, then rushed back to check it. As I took the second sighting the needle began to drift and the meter dropped to zero.

But I had them! Whoever they

were, they were operating out of this era. They had used their apparatus once and they were sure to use it again. When they did I would be waiting for them. For the first time since I had been shipped back to this crude barbarian world I was warmed by a small spark of hope.

After a hearty dinner and a snowfall of fluttering banknotes I went to sleep. Not for long though. A two-hour zonk pill put me under in the deepest possible sleep. I awoke feeling much more human. I found a number of interesting bottles in the bar in the next room, some of them rather palatable, and I sat down with a filled glass in front of a glass-eyed instrument called a teevee. As I had guessed my accent in the local language left a lot to be desired and I wanted to listen to someone who spoke a better form of it.

This was not easy to find. To begin with it was hard to tell which were the educational channels and which were there for entertainment. I found what appeared to be a morality play in historical form—all the men wore wide-brimmed hats and rode horses. But the total vocabulary used could not have been more than one hundred words and most of the characters were killed by shooting before I could discover what it was all about. Guns seemed to play an important role in most of the dramas I watched, though this was varied with sadism and assorted kinds of

mayhem. All this violence and hurtling from one place to another in various conveyances did not leave the people much time for intersexual activity; a brief kiss was the only manifestation of affection or libido that I saw. Most of the dramas were also difficult to follow since they kept being interrupted by brief playlets and illustrated lectures about the purchase of various consumer goods. By dawn I had had enough of this and my speech had improved only microscopically so I kicked in the glass picture tube as fitting comment and went to wash myself in a pink room filled with museum pieces out of the history of plumbing.

As soon as the shops opened in the morning I had a number of hotel employees at work with a great deal of money and my purchases soon poured in. New clothing to fit my high station, with expensive luggage to carry it in. Plus a number of maps, a carefully made gadget called a magnetic compass and a book on the principles of navigation. It was simplicity itself to determine the exact direction to which the detector had pointed and to transfer this to a local map and get a fairly good approximation of the distance in the measurement units called miles to the source of the time energy field. A long black line on the map gave me my direction, a slash across it to show distance—and I had my target. The

two lines crossed at what appeared to be a major center of population, in fact the largest one on this map.

It was called, quaintly, New York City. There was no indication where Old York City was and it did not matter. I knew where I had to go.

LEAVING the hotel was more like a royal abdication than a simple parting and there were many glad cries for me to hurry back. As well there might be. A hired car whirled me out to the airport and ready hands rushed my luggage to the proper exit. Where a rude shock was awaiting me, since I had completely forgotten about the bank robbery. Others had not.

“Open up da bags,” a grim looking defender of law and order said.

“Of course,” I said, very cheerily. I noticed that all the passengers were being subjected to this same search. “Might I ask what you are looking for?”

“Money. Bank robbery,” he muttered, poking through my possessions.

“I’m afraid I never carry large sums,” I said, holding the bag with my massed banknotes tight to my chest.

“These are okay. Let’s see that one.”

“Not in public if you please, officer. I am a high-placed government official and these papers are top secret.” I quoted this word for word from the teevee.

"In the room," he said, pointing. I was almost sorry I had kicked the thing in since it had been so educational.

In the room he looked shocked when I opened a sleepgas grenade rather than the bag and he slumped nicely. There was a large metal locker against the wall filled with the numerous forms and papers so dear to the bureaucratic mind and, by rearranging them, I managed to make room for my snoring companion. The longer he remained undiscovered the better. Unless there were unforeseen delays I would be in New York City before he regained consciousness—a process that would have to be a natural one since there would be no known antidote for my gas.

When I left the room another of the uniformed officials was glowering at me, so I turned and called back through the still open door. "Thank you for your kind aid—no trouble at all I assure you, no trouble at all." I closed the door and smiled at the officer as I passed. He raised a reluctant fingertip to the visor of his cap and turned away to grab at the luggage of an elderly passenger. I went on with my bag, not too surprised to notice the finest of pricklings of sweat upon my brow.

The flight was brief, uninteresting, noisy and rather too bumpy, in a great fixed-wing craft that appeared to be powered by jets burning a liquid fuel. Though the smell

of this fuel was everywhere—and familiar—I could not bring myself to believe that they were burning irreplaceable hydrocarbons. I had a moment of expectation when we disembarked, but there did not seem to be any alarm. Reaching the center of the city from the outlying airport was a painful ordeal of hurtling vehicles, shouts, noise of all kinds, and it was with a feeling of great relief that I finally fell through the door of a cool hotel room. But once reason was restored by the quiet, plus a couple of belts of the distilled organ-destroyer I was becoming attached to, I was more than ready for the next step.

WHICH would be what? Reconnoiter or attack? Sweet reason dictated a careful stalk of the time energy source to determine what I was up against—who and what. I had half settled on this course and was berating myself mildly for even considering attack before the force of logic clanked through to its last link. I turned and pointed at myself in the mirror.

"You are—" I shook a disgusted finger at myself—"what the cab driver called the other cab driver. A joick and wise."

I had only one advantage—surprise. Any bit of reconnoitering might tip my hand and the time warriors would know that they were under investigation, perhaps

attack. Since they had launched the time war they were surely prepared for possible retaliation. But how can guards stay alert for weeks and months, possibly years? Once they knew I was around, at this time and place, all sorts of extra precautions would be taken. To prevent this I had to hit and hit hard—even though I had no idea whom I was hitting.

“Does it make a difference?” I asked, snapping open a grenade case. “It might be nice to satisfy my curiosity and find out who has attacked the Corps—and why? But is it relevant or important? The answer is no.” I glared across a small atomic fusion bomb at my red-eyed mirrored image and shook my head. “No, and no again. They must be destroyed, period. Now. Quickly.”

There was no other course open to me, so calmly and surely I fitted about my body the most potent weapons of destruction devised by millennia of weapons research; always a favorite of mankind. Normally I am no believer in the kill or be killed school of thought: affairs are usually not that black and white. But now they were and I felt not the slightest guilt over my decision. This was undeclared war against all mankind of the future—why else had the Special Corps been the first target of attack? Someone, some group, wanted control of *everything*, probably the most selfish and

insane plan ever conceived, and it did not really matter who or what they were. Death for them, before they killed everything of value.

When I left the hotel I was a walking bomb, an army of destruction. The black box of the time energy detector was in the attaché case I carried, the indicators visible through holes I had cut in the lid. Somewhere out there was the enemy and when he moved I would be waiting.

It was a short wait. An unseen burst of time energy was unleashed close by, if the action of the needle was any indication, and I was on the trail. Direction and distance, I worked out the vector as I plunged ahead, almost ignorant of the people and vehicles around me, but slowing and becoming more careful after a close miss by a lumbering truck.

Now, a wide thoroughfare with green in the center of it, tall buildings of a uniformly depressing design, great slabs of metal and glass looming up in the polluted air. One very much like the other. Which one did I want?

The needle swung again, quivering with the intensity of its reaction, turning as I walked, the meter rising to a distance reading right at the top of its scale.

There. In that building, the copper and black one.

In I went, prepared for anything.

Anything that is except what happened next.

They were locking the doors behind me, lining up and blocking them even as they did so. *Everyone*. The visitors to the building, the elevator starters—even the man behind the cigar counter. Running, pressing forward, coming toward me with the cold light of hatred in their eyes.

I had been discovered—they must have detected *my* detector; they knew who I was. They were attacking first.

VIII

IT WAS a nightmare come alive. At some time in our lives we are all touched by incipient paranoia and feel that everyone is against us. Now I was faced with the reality. For a single instant this basic fear possessed me—then I shrugged it off and tried to win.

But that slight hesitation had been enough. What I should have done was shoot, kill, fire, destroy, just as I had planned. But I had not planned to face all these people in this manner; therefore I could not win. Of course I did damage—gas, bombs, a bit of violence—but it wasn't enough. More and more hands tore at my clothing and there was no end to them. Nor were they gentle about it, coming at me with the same raw hatred I felt for them—opposite sides of the coin, both seeing destruction in the other. I was pursued and run down and

unconsciousness was almost a blessing when it dropped.

Not that I was allowed this peace for long. Pain and a sharp smell burning in my nostrils drew me back to face unpleasant reality. A man, a large, tall man, standing and facing me, his features blurred in my unfocused eyes. Many hands seemed to hold me, squeezing and shaking me. Something moist was pulled across my face. It cleared away whatever had obscured my vision and I could see. See him as he saw me.

Twice as tall as a normal man, so much bigger than I that I had to lean back to look up at him towering there. His skin a suffused red, his eyes angled and dark, many of his teeth pointed when he opened his mouth.

"When are you from?" he asked, his voice a harsh drum, speaking the language we used in the Corps. I must have reacted to that because he smiled with victory, but not with warmth.

"The Special Corps, it had to be. The one flare of energy before darkness. How many of you came? Where are the others?"

"They—will find you," I managed to say. A very minor success for my side weighed against the victories of the other. As yet they did not know that I was alone and I would stay alive until they discovered it. Which would not be long. I had been stripped efficiently—all my devices had been re-

moved. My defenses were gone. They would backtrack me to the hotel and find out soon enough that there was nothing more to fear.

"Who are you?" I asked, words my only weapon. He did not answer but instead raised both fists in a victorious gesture. The words came automatically to my lips. "You're mad."

"Of course," he shouted exultantly and the hands holding me pulled and swayed at the same time. "That is our condition and though they killed us once for it they will not kill us again. This time we will be victorious because we will destroy our enemies even before they are born, doom to non-life oblivion the ones who did it."

I remembered something Coypu had said about this Earth's being destroyed in the far past. Had it been done to stop these people? Was it being undone now? His screamed words cut off the thought.

"Take him. Torture him most profoundly for my pleasure and to weaken his will. Then suck all the knowledge from his brain. Everything must be discovered, every thing."

As the hands tore me from the room I knew what I had to do. Wait. Get away from this man, away from the crowds, to the specialized skills of the torturers, to some needed privacy. The opportunity came as technicians in a white laboratory beat at the people

who held me and dragged me from them. They were as brutal to each other as they had been to me, a hierarchy of hatred. They must be mad, as my captor had said. What perversion of human history had brought these people upon the scene? There was no way to imagine.

Again I waited. Calm in the knowledge that I had only a single opportunity and that I should not throw it away. The door was closed. I was pressed back against a table and my ankles secured to it. Five men were in the room with me. Two had their backs turned, attention on their instruments, the others were pushing me down. I moved my jaw forward and bit down as hard as I could upon the last tooth.

THIS was my final weapon, the ultimate weapon, one that I had never used before. Normally I did not even carry it, considering the normal life-and-death dustups not worth this price of winning. The present situation was different. When I bit, the artificial tooth cracked and the drops of bitter liquid it contained ran down my throat.

As the pain hit it was obliterated, engulfed even as it began by the nerve-deadening drug that enabled me to withstand the onslaught of the other ingredients. They were a devil's brew that the Corps' medics had worked out at

my suggestion, that had only been tested before in smaller quantities on test animals. Here were all the stimulants ever discovered, including the new class of synergators, the complex chemicals that enabled the human body to perform the incredible feats of hysterical strength that had been long known but impossible to duplicate.

Time speeded up and the men hovering above me moved slowly. Seeing this I waited those fractions of a second more for the drugs to take complete effect before reaching out my hands. Though each of the heavysset men had his full weight on one of my arms it did not matter. There was no feeling of weight or even effort as I lifted them each clear off the floor at the same time and drove their skulls together before hurling them bodily at the third man at the foot of the table. All of them impacted, rolled, fell, their faces twisted in strange contortions of pain and fear. I sat up and seized the solid metal bands that bound my ankles and tore them loose. It appeared to be the easiest and most obvious thing to do. The act seemed to cause some damage to my fingers but I was aware of it only as a passing annoyance and of no real importance. The two remaining men in the room were still turning toward me as though the destruction of the other three had only taken a few moments. Which it surely had. Seeing them still un-

prepared, one with a weapon half raised, I threw myself at them, sparing a fist or a clutching hand for each, striking them down and hurling them toward the others into the writhing bundle of twisting bodies. They were five to my one and I could afford to show them not even the slightest mercy, even had I cared to. I struck with my feet now, since my hands were not so good, until there was no more motion in the heap. Only then could I permit the cold thoughts of logic to penetrate the hot berserker rage.

Next? Escape. My clothes were rags and I tore them from me in strips. My torturers were dressed in white garments and I took the time to open all the unfamiliar fastenings and dress myself in the least soiled of their clothing. There was a ragged wound in my forehead—I covered it with a neat dressing, then put wrappings about my hands. I was not interrupted and when I was ready I left the room and went hurriedly back down the hallway, retracing the course over which I had been so recently dragged. There was a buzz like a disturbed hive in the building and everyone I passed seemed too preoccupied to notice me—bandages were a common sight—even the people milling about in the anteroom where my weapons had been spread out on a large table to be examined. If it had been a time for smiling I would have smiled.

GENTLY, without disturbing anyone, I reached over and actuated a rack of gas bombs, holding my breath as I groped for the nose filters. It is a fast gas and even those who had seen what I had done had no time for warnings before they fell. The air was hazy with the concentration of the gas when I picked up a gausspistol and threw open the great door to the next room.

"*You!*" he called out, his massive red body standing even as the gas felled the others around him. He swayed and reached for me—fighting the gas that should have dropped him instantly—until I slammed the pistol into the side of his head. Yet his eyes, murderous with hatred, were on me continuously as I bound him in the chair. Only when the door was sealed behind me did I take the time to look him in the face again and see that he was still conscious.

"What kind of man are you?" The words came to my lips unbidden. "Who are you?"

"I am He who will rule forever, the mind that never dies."

There was such a power in his words that I felt myself drawn closer, swaying despite myself, the roundness of his eyes growing before me. I was hazy, the effects of my own drugs wearing off perhaps. I shook my head and blinked rapidly. But another part of me was still alert, still unimpressed by great power, great evil.

"A long rule, but not a comfortable one." I smiled. "Unless you do something about that bad case of sunburn."

It could not have been better spoken. This monster was utterly humorless and must have been used to nothing except slavish obedience. Just once he howled, a speechless animal sound, and then there was speech enough, a torrent of babbled insanity that washed around me as I made preparations to end the time war.

Mad? Of course he was, but with some kind of organized madness that perpetuated and grew and infected those around him. The body was artificial. I could see the scars and grafts now, and he spoke to me about it. A fabricated body, a transplanted, stolen body, a metal-framed monstrosity that told me all too much about the manner of mind that would choose to live in a casing like this.

There were others like him—but he was the best, he was alone—it was hard to make sense of everything but I remembered what I could for future reference. And all the time I was taking off the ventilating grill and dusting my powders into the air system and making preparations to throw a large-sized monkey wrench into this satanic mill.

He and his followers had been destroyed once in the fullness of time. He had told me that. In some unknown manner they had planned

a second chance at the mastery of the universe—but they were not to have it. I, Slippery Jim diGriz, single-minded freebooter of no fixed address, had been called upon for many big tasks before and I had always delivered. Now I was asked to save the world and if I must I must.

“They could not have picked a better man,” I said proudly as I looked in at the great workings of a time laboratory neatly peppered with sprawled bodies. The great green coiled spring of a time-helix glowed at me and I smiled back.

“Bombs in the works and you for a ride,” I called out happily as I made just those preparations. “Wipe out the machinery and leave the nuts here for the local authorities, though perhaps Big Red deserves a special treatment.”

He certainly did—and I wondered what I was waiting for. I was waiting to do it in the heat of passion I imagine; no cold killer I, even of the coldest of killers. Though I would have to be this time. I steeled myself to this realization, thumbed the selector on the gausspistol to explosive charges and turned to the other room.

Opportunity presented itself far more quickly than I had imagined. A great red form was on top of me, striking out, hitting me. I rolled with the blow, across the room to the wall, twisting and bringing up the gun.

He was moving fast, tripping a

switch and hurling himself at the end of the time-helix.

Bullets move fast, too, and mine hissed out of the gausspistol and into his body, exploding there.

And then he was gone. Pulled into time, forward or backward I did not know because the machinery was glowing and melting even as I ran. Would he be dead when he arrived at his destination? He had to be. Those were explosive charges.

THESSE thoughts occupy me as my health improves. Here in the private hospital they still wonder what made the wounds on my body. Money numbs their interest a good deal. I sleep well now and the great scarlet form of He no longer occupies my dreams. Is madness catching? Some kinds must be; I had it there for an instant and in the midst of parallel time there must be a world dominated by it.

But there are better possible worlds. One where the Corps rules quietly with neat justice, where Angelina is waiting for me. She will be there. My most prized possession is a black box with a man's mind inside. The mind of Professor Coypu, the master of time.

If he built his time-helix once he should be able to build it again.

When I am feeling very fit I am going to invite him into my brain and ask him to try. ●





COMPLETE NOVEL

*Until Retief wrapped things up, it
was every Lumbagan against himself . . .*

THE ALL- TOGETHER PLANET

KEITH LAUMER

DACOIT Street was deserted, the shops shuttered and dark. The yells of the demonstrators gathered before the entrance to the Grand Castle Complex of Lumbaga, three blocks to the east, where only a dull surf-roar here. Scattered brickbats and broken spears attested to the political activities of the day, but only a few candy wrappers and old newspapers blowing across the oily cobbles lent movement to the scene.

Retief made his way unmolested along the narrow, crooked way; five minutes' brisk walk brought him to a rough-hewn door under a swinging signboard, adorned with a lumpy purplish free-form pierced by a pointed length of wood. Yellow light leaked from a small leaded-glass window beside the door.

Retief took up his post under the spreading branches of a music tree. A gust stirred the leaves, evoking a rippling arpeggio of crystalline sound that mingled mournfully with the fluting of the night wind.

A small wild creature resembling a disembodied blue eyeball with tiny bird feet hopped along a twig overhead, goggling at the Terran with an appearance of intentness heightened by the absence of an eyelid. A second free-lance ocular appeared, peeping

from among glassy, needle-shaped leaves. Nearer at hand, another variety of the local fauna—this one a convoluted, three-inch ellipsoid bearing a remarkable resemblance to an oversized ear—perched in a froomble bush, pivoting slowly from left to right and back again as if tuning in on a faint sound in the distance.

"You boys ought to get together with a nose and form a corporation," Retief murmured. "You'd be a dynamite vaudeville act."

Both eyeballs whipped out of sight; the ear jerked and began to crawl hastily down the stem. A faint footfall sounded from the direction of a nearby alley mouth. Retief faded back against the bole of the ancient tree and eased his 2mm gun into his hand. A furtive five-foot figure wrapped in an ankle-length djellaba emerged from the alley.

"Ignarp," Retief called softly. The newcomer jumped and emitted a sharp yelp.

"Galloping gastropods!" he hissed. "You nearly scared me out of my epidermis." He advanced another step to peer closely at Retief from three large, watery eyes not unlike those concealed in the foliage above. "Are you the Terry I'm supposed to meet? Frankly, all you foreigners look alike to me."

"An accusation I can't level against you, Ignarp," Retief said.

"Didn't you have four eyes and a purple hide the last time I saw you?"

"Yeah—I stopped by my place for a shower and change." Ignarp gave his rattling sigh. "I didn't know it was going to be such a rough evening. What are you doing out in the streets? The rallying cry of the mob is 'Get Terry.'"

"It does seem the incidence of violence is escalating since the peace talks have been underway. Any idea why?"

"We got a few ideas—but maybe it's not time to spill 'em."

"Don't stall, Ignarp. Conditions have changed since this afternoon. My colleague, Mr. Mag-nan, has been kidnaped."

"Wait a minute! You don't think I—"

"Nothing like that. I just hoped you might be able to tell me who the likeliest suspect is—for a fee, of course."

"Well—that sounds like a gracious offer. But let's get out of sight. I've got the feeling unfriendly eyes are upon us. Come on, the Stake and Kidney's a discreet bistro, if not too clean. All the regulars will be out rioting, so we'll have a modicum of privacy."

THE local rapped a complicated tattoo on the heavy door, shifting from one of his six large feet to another and casting worried glances along the avenue until the door rattled and swung inward

with a lugubrious creak. An undersized cranium adorned with an odd assortment of sensory organs poked out at belt level to look the callers up and down.

"For Greep's sake, Fudsot, let us in before the City Guard sees us," Ignarp hissed. "This Terry's got diplomatic immunity, but those dupes of the power structure would like nothing better than to rearrange my internal integuments along what they consider more conventional lines."

Grumbling, the landlord ushered them down three crooked steps into a long, low-ceilinged room smelling of fried zintx-patties and sour wine. He locked the door behind them and indicated a five-legged table in the corner.

"Too conspicuous," Ignarp demurred. "How about the back room?"

"That'll run you an extra five xots."

"Five xots? You're as bad as the entrenched exploiters."

"Except they'd charge you ten—and then report you. Pay up or get out, you and your offworld chum. It's all the same to me."

"Okay—okay. The Goodies Redistribution Action Bunch will get around to you, you tool of the establishment!" Ignarp extracted a small-mouthed purse from his voluminous robes and handed over a triangular coin of green plastic. Fudsot subjected it to close examination under

what seemed to be an olfactory organ before using a six-inch key to unlock the small door at the back.

"It's all yours, gents," he grunted. "For the next half-hour anyway. After that it'll cost you another five xots."

"Bring us wine," Ignarp ordered as he dusted off a three-legged stool.

"Sure. Four xots for a quarter-zub o' the house brew. Six xots for bottled-in-bond. And I can give you a special deal on some aged Pepsi; I happened to get hold of a small consignment through a special contact down south. Five xots the flask, uncut."

"Smuggler," Ignarp snapped. "Profiteer! Robber! We'll take the Pepsi—in sealed bottles, mind you!"

"Sure—whatta you think I am, one o' these chiselers?"

IGNARP waited in glowering silence until the landlord had delivered the refreshments and withdrawn.

"That's what we're up against," he said gloomily. "You'd think Fudsot would be a loyal supporter of the movement—but no—he's out for the fast xot."

"What's this movement all about?" Retief asked.

"I should think it was obvious," Ignarp said sharply. "Even a foreigner can see that the entire

planet's in the grip of an elite corps of self-serving reactionaries."

"Curious," Retief said, puffing a Chanel dope stick alight. "I had the impression that anarchy was complete. In fact, that's why we Terries are here—"

"I know all about your so-called Peace Commission, Retief. You Terries and those main-chance Groaci are all spinning your wheels. Sure, we fight a lot—we have ever since the dawn of recorded history, six years ago. And even before, if the old tribal legends mean anything. And that's jake—except lately it has taken a nasty turn. The old system of you break my back, I'll break yours, is falling apart."

"Uh-huh." Retief sampled his drink. "And where does your Bunch come into the picture?"

"We've formed a third force to combat the special privilege groups. Of course, we're just getting started—only thirteen members at present—but we won't stop until the gross inequities of the system have been corrected."

"You intend to divide up the wealth, an equal share for everyone?"

"You think we're out of our brainpans? We'll keep the loot for ourselves, naturally!"

"That's your idea of an equitable arrangement?" Retief inquired mildly.

"Of course not." Ignarp looked puzzled. "It's just simple, old-

fashioned greed, the noblest of emotions."

"Sounds like a highly realistic program," Retief said. "And what about the rest of the population?"

"We're planning on selling them into slavery, naturally. And say—maybe you Terries would like a slice of the action—"

"What makes you think so?"

"Well—aside from the fact that the mob is out to get both of us—I've heard you get your jollies out of taking things away from the original owners and handing them over to new management. I could never figure out why, but we members of GRAB are perfectly willing to get in on the redistribution."

"That's a fair assessment of our foreign aid policy, Ignarp. But sometimes it's a little difficult to determine who the deserving parties are."

"Simple enough: Possession is *prima facie* evidence of moral leprosy; have-nots are pure in heart by definition."

"But if we hand the planet over to you fellows, then *you'll* be the haves—"

"That's different," Ignarp stated crisply. "Now, when can we expect the first consignment of guns, tanks, bombers, some poisoned bodkins and the rest?"

"Well, there may be a few administrative delays, Ignarp. Even a bureaucrat as dedicated to

the spread of enlightenment as Ambassador Pouncetrifle may have some difficulty picturing a baker's dozen of malcontents as the authentic inheritors of the mantle of planetary dictatorship."

"I had an idea you might try to stall," Ignarp said accusingly. "Fortunately we have a telling ideological point in reserve." He leaned toward Retief confidentially. "The situation," he stated solemnly, "has a very nasty—are you ready?—racial angle."

"Tell me about it."

"**Y**OU don't sound very excited," Ignarp said in tones reflecting disappointment. "I heard all a fellow had to do was mention the word and you Terries automatically started writing checks."

"A mild exaggeration. In any event, the syndrome hardly applies to Lumbaga. You fellows don't have any races."

"Hey, what kind of a crack is that?"

"I've noticed," Retief said, "that the eyeballs and lower lips hopping around in the underbrush don't look much different from the ones you and your fellow citizens employ in your daily activities—"

"Now, hold it right there, Retief! I don't like the turn the conversation's taking—"

"In fact," Retief went on unper-

turbed, "It seems that the higher forms of Lumbagan life are all evolved from the lower forms by combination—"

"Don't come preaching your Godless evolutionary doctrines around here," Ignarp snapped.

"Don't worry, I'm just making it up as I go along," Retief said soothingly. "If my theory is correct, you, for example, represent the end product of a whole series of combinations—"

"Let's not get personal, Terry."

"Just getting a few facts straight, Ignarp, no offense intended. Tell me, how old are you?"

"That's none of your blasted business, Retief."

"I thought you wanted Terran backing in your scheme to take over the world."

"Yeah, that's right, but—"

"Then it's my business."

"Well—I don't know exactly," Ignarp muttered. "But the best theories give a figure around a quarter of a million. That's average, of course. After all, by the time you go back a couple centuries, things get kind of vague." The Lumbagan looked embarrassed, as attested by the purplish tinge mounting his wattles.

"I think I understand," Retief said. "When a Lumbagan has a bad heart or a broken arm, he trades the injured member in on a new one. In time, he's completely replaced. Is that it?"

"That covers most of it," Ignarp

said hastily. "Now, back to practical politics—"

"So in effect, a Lumbagan never dies. The question is, how does he get started?"

"Cripes, Retief, is nothing sacred to you foreigners?"

"My interest is purely scientific, Ignarp."

"This racy conversation gets me all stirred up," the local said. "However, I guess it's all for the cause. You've got it right as it goes, but there are a few points you missed. Like the fact that the Singletons—you know, the free-living eyeballs and pituitary glands and the like—can only get together in bunches of up to ten. An ear might team up with a tentacle for mutual security, you know, and then later add on an esophagus—strictly by instinct, natch. Not all these teams work out, of course. Evolutionary dead ends, you might say. They break up again, no hard feelings, and maybe later the different parts join another accretion. In the end, after a few million years, you get quite a large number of working accretions swinging through the jungle or creeping around in the underbrush, as happy as clams. So okay. A tenner Singleton can't add any more free units—but what *can* happen is that two Singletons can link up to form a Dubb. Got it?"

"I'm trying, Ignarp. Pray continue."

“Right. Now, that’s not the end of the trail. Two well-established Dubbs can get together and make up a Trip. Now, a Trip’s a pretty complicated life form; with up to forty basic units to play around with, you *can* come up with some pretty successful combos. But Trips are a lot rarer than Dubbs, naturally.”

“Naturally. And I suppose two congenial Trips can join forces, to continue the process?”

“Right. And when that happens, you get a Quad.” Ignarp looked at Retief expectantly.

“And two Quads can combine to make a still more complicated creature?”

“Huh? Where’d you get an obscene idea like that!” Ignarp looked shocked, an effect achieved by rotating his eyeballs rapidly. “A Four-decker is the ultimate product of evolution—a Lum-bagan—like me!”

“I won’t say it’s clear, Ignarp, but it’s not quite as opaque as it was. But you still haven’t explained why you spend so much time disassembling each other—or just how you decide who’s against whom.”

II

“**T**HAT’S where the racial angle comes in. Now it’s perfectly natural and wholesome when everybody is out to get

everybody else; but when discrimination rears its ugly head—that’s different. And even that wouldn’t bother me,” Ignarp added, “Except I happen to be a member of the persecuted minority.”

“A minority usually implies at least two people with a few characteristics in common,” Retief pointed out. “Since every Lum-bagan is unique—”

“Except my kind,” Ignarp said gloomily. “Somehow, due to a component nobody’s isolated yet, we’ve got something nobody else has got.”

“A disability?”

“Heck, no, Retief—they’d forgive us that. We’re vastly superior—that’s what gravels ’em! Just a hint of our special skill, and the witch-hunt is on.”

“And just what is this trait that gives you the advantage—”

“Aha! That’s our Big Secret! You see—”

A sudden sound of disturbance came from in the outer room: a dull clatter, a yelp, a thump that rattled the cups on the table. Something crashed against the door hard enough to splinter wood.

“I might have known,” Ignarp cried, leaping up. “Sold out by the vested interests!”

Retief came to his feet, looking around the small, dimly lit room. The only visible opening was a small ventilator grill.

"So long, Retief—I'll be in touch—"

With a rending crash, the door burst inward. The creature that bounded through the opening was seven feet tall, had yellowish skin blotched with black and purple. Three gaunt, bristly, knob-kneed legs, terminating in broad rubbery webbed feet, made up two thirds of its height. Four left and two right arms of graduated lengths sprang from the hunched shoulders, protected by a carapace resembling the shell of a turtle adorned with twisted spikes. Atop a short, thick, tendon-corded neck rested a pointed head given over largely to a foot-wide, purple-lipped mouth crowded with needle-like fangs and situated below a pair of wide-set eyes the size of tennis balls. The eyes were a blood-shot yellowish white except for the off-centered, metallic-black pupils. A powerful prehensile tail ending in a three-fingered hand waved a gnarled steel-wood club aloft.

The monstrosity charged with a bellow. Retief spun the table into its path, ducked a wild swing as the giant crashed into the obstacle with a plank-splintering impact. At the open door he turned; the intruder was threshing its way clear of the remains of the boards, but of the GRAB member there was no sign. Retief had time only to notice that the grill was missing from the register before the mon-

ster tossed aside a shattered timber and leaped toward him. Retief stepped out and slammed the door, dropping the heavy bar in place as the armored alien crashed against it.

IN THE gloom of the outer room the squat figure of the landlord was dimly visible, scrambling for cover. Retief reached him in two strides, caught the back of his coarse-weave tunic, lifted him to tiptoes.

"A slight double-cross, eh, Fudshot? Who paid you?" he inquired genially, as the door behind him resounded to the berserker's blows.

"Let me go, Terry," the landlord screeched, "or I'll see to it you're broken down into surgical spares—"

"What was the idea? Were you out to get me? Or was it Ignarp you were after—or both?"

"You know so much—you tell me," Fudshot grunted.

"But Ignarp fooled you," Retief said. "He separated into sub-assemblies of a convenient size and left by the ventilator, right?"

"You Terries aren't supposed to know about that," Fudshot muttered. "A lousy fate, even for a trouble-maker like Ignarp."

"So that's the last of Ignarp, eh?"

"As Ignarp, yeah. His sweet-breads and tonsils are back where they started ages ago—free-living

Freebies looking around for a partner to start up a new tenner." Fudsot wagged his head mournfully.

"A sad end for a social reformer of his zeal," Retief said. "Still, there's much to be said for the carefree life of an adenoid. I'll be on my way now, Fudsot—but before I go, just what was that that broke up our drinking party? I've gotten accustomed to a certain pleasing variety in the local citizenry, but that chap was in an entirely new category."

"I heard rumors, but—" Fudsot broke off.

"But what?"

"But it would be bad for my health to spread 'em. How's about getting him outa my back room now, Terry? I got to set the place to rights for the pre-dawn dust-up crowd."

"No, thanks—I can't use him."

"You mean—you're leaving that monstrosity on my hands?"

"Certainly. Mind if I use the back entrance?"

"No! That's where—I mean, there isn't one," the landlord finished sullenly.

"That's where they're waiting to make the pickup, eh? Thanks for the tip."

RETIEF pushed through a greasy door behind the bar, crossed a kitchen reeking of stale fat, slipped out into a narrow alleyway decorated with neg-

lected garbage containers. A soft rustling came from a dense patch of shadow. A small, spindle-legged figure swathed in a dark cloak stepped forth. From the folds of the garment a gloved grasping member protruded, gripping a small power gun.

"So—success attends my efforts. The moose has taken the bait and sprung the trap—"

"Mouse, I think you mean, Wilth," Retief corrected. "What brings you out in the damp night air?"

"Drat," the Groaci hissed. "Who informed you of my identity?"

"Don't you remember? The Ambassador introduced us last week, at the Mother-in-Laws' Day reception."

"I refer to the treacher who betrayed my disguise—"

"Oh, he's the same fellow who's standing behind you now with a crater gun aimed at your dorsal suture."

Wilth started violently, causing one of his government-issue eye-shields to clatter to the cobbles. "Undone!" he keened, as Retief stepped forward to relieve him of his weapon. "Unhappy Wilth! I rue the day the mound burst to expose me to the harsh external world!"

"By the way, what did you have in mind doing with this?" Retief inquired, aiming the gun negligently at its former owner.

"My instructions—I assure you, my dear Retief, nothing personal was intended—were to intimidate you with the firearm, thereby causing you to accompany me to a designated place for an uninhibited interview with a Most Highly Placed Person."

"Most highly placed in the Groaci hierarchy, I assume."

"But of course. Do you imagine I'm in the habit of trepanning—if that's the word—fellow diplomats—even Soft Ones—for the convenience of members of lesser races?"

"I shouldn't have asked. And what was to be the subject of this conference? Brain surgery?"

"Do you further imagine I am privy to the machinations of MHPPs?" Wilth glanced nervously behind him. "As a courtesy to a colleague, would you kindly instruct your toady to point his piece elsewhere—" his faint voice faded. "Where is the creature?"

"He couldn't make it," Retief said. "Liquor inventory, you know—but the intention was there. Now—"

"Hoaxed!" Wilth whistled. "Hoodwinked by vile Terran duplicity!"

"Don't take it so hard, Wilth. No harm done; it's always a rewarding experience to make the acquaintance of an MHPP of whatever persuasion. I'll go with you."

"You'll—ah—accompany me

to the rendezvous as planned?" Wilth goggled all five eye stalks at Retief.

"Why not? The evening is still young." Retief snapped open the butt of the power gun, removed the energy cell, handed the weapon back to the Groaci.

"Why, this is quite decent of you, Retief," Wilth whispered breathlessly. "What a pity all Groaci-Terran relations can't be conducted in the same spirit of amity."

"They are, Wilth, they are," Retief said soothingly. "Shall we go? I wouldn't like to keep the MHPP waiting."

IT WAS a brisk ten-minute walk through tortuously winding streets—hardly more than tunnels threading through the monumental jumble of Lumbagan architecture. Wilth halted at a small but massive door set in a deeply recessed niche, pounded stealthily on the dark panels. Weak grayish light leaked out as the door opened. A Groaci in the uniform of a Peace-keeper peered out.

"Inside, Soft One," Wilth ordered curtly. Retief preceded his putative captor along a cramped passage papered in a pattern of puce and mustard lozenges to a highly varnished bile-green door that reflected the watery glow of the ceiling dimstrip. The guard rapped, thrust the door wide

and motioned Retief through.

A Groaci in jeweled eyeshields was seated behind a wide desk. He waved a negligent three-fingered hand at Retief, indicating a stool.

"Any difficulties?" he inquired of his underling in Terran.

"Your Excellency would be amazed at how easy it was," Wilth replied glumly. "I was even astonished myself."

"To not accept the legends of Terry invincibility," the senior alien snapped, switching to the Groacian tongue, "lest you predispose yourself to quail in the breach!" He turned three eyes on Retief while holding the glare of the other two on Wilth. "I," he announced then, "am Hivemaster Shlush. You, I believe, are the fellow Retief?"

Retief acknowledged his identity with a nod and seated himself.

"You," Shlush continued ominously, "are not unknown to me by repute."

"I'm flattered."

"Don't be." Shlush hissed. "Your name, Soft One, is a byword for the Terran duplicity and meddling that have plagued Groaci foreign policy since the first intimations of our manifest Galactic destiny."

"That's a rather uncharitable description of Corps policy, Hivemaster," Retief commented. "By the way, what brings you here? I don't recall seeing your name on the last Foreign Office list."

"Not to pry into matters of no concern to aliens," Shlush hissed.

"In fact," Retief went on, "I seem to recall that you were rather suddenly retired to civilian life after that fiasco on Grabmark Four—"

Shlush jabbed a digit at Retief, all five eyes canted alertly in his guest's direction now. "Your role in the humbling of the great is not forgotten, Retief, but now the era of Terry domination comes to an end. No more will we Groaci suffer graciously the intolerable interposition of foreigners between ourselves and the objects of our desires."

"In the meantime," Retief suggested mildly, "I take it you'd like to have a little talk."

"Indeed yes," Shlush whispered. "How perceptive of you, Retief."

"Not at all," the Terran declared. "Wilth told me."

"To have babbled of state secrets, litter-mate of drones?" the Hivemaster hissed at his underling.

"Who, I, Excellency? Why, to have but hinted he'd best be on his metacarpals—"

"To commit another indiscretion and to find yourself trussed by the polices alongside the Soft One!" Shlush turned back to Retief. "But I'm slighting my hostly obligations," he said smoothly. "Would you care for a little something while we chat?"

"Brandy, thanks," Retief said.

"You." Shlush addressed the guard still hovering by the door. "To fetch brandy at once. Black Bacchus will do."

"To congratulate your Excellency on your Excellency's taste," the Peace-keeper hissed unctiously. "But to wonder if your Excellency would amplify your Excellency's instructions to include data as to where I'm supposed to fetch it from."

"The usual source, hive-fellow of defectives!"

"To do as commanded, Exalted One—but don't you ink-thay the erry-tay ight-may recognize the abel-lay?"

"To assume you have it-way enough to oar-pay it in the itchen-kay!" Shlush favored Retief with the Groaci equivalent of a sour smile. "I've instructed the fellow to serve our refreshments in a VIP decanter reserved for important guests," he translated.

"I'm sensible of the honor," Retief said. "Now, what was it you wanted to tell me?"

"Tell you? My dear Terry, you fail to grasp the full implications of the situation. It is *you* who are going to tell *me*!"

"What would you like to know first?" Retief said promptly.

“YOU may begin with full details of secret Terran armament schemes, overall invasion strategy, D-day tactical plans and

close-support logistical arrangements.”

"I can cover that in a very few words," Retief said. "There aren't any."

"Pah! You expect me to believe that an organization of the sophistication of the CDT intends to play it by ear?"

"Play what by ear?" Retief inquired interestedly.

"The take-over. What else?"

"The take-over?" Retief tipped an inch of cigar ash onto Shlush's polished desk top. "What of?"

"Of this plague-spot known as Lumbaga, naturally."

"Who's taking it over?" Retief inquired interestedly.

"We are—that is to say, *you* are. I mean to say, of course, having gotten wind of the perfidious schemes laid by you treacherous Soft Ones under the cynical guise of pretended participation in bogus peace talks, we Groaci have naturally been compelled to take appropriate steps to safeguard the endangered lives, property and sacred self-determination of the indigenous autochthones."

"Remarkable," Retief said. "And I suppose that to properly protect the Lumbagans, it will be necessary for Groac temporarily to garrison a few troops here. And perhaps take over a certain number of islands for official use. And possibly to requisition a modest percentage of the planetary production and manpower for the

fight against foreign exploitation. And a reasonable tax levy to support a portion of the expense of this selfless action is to be expected."

"I see you have a grasp of the realities of interplanetary dogoodism," Shlush acknowledged. "Now, as beings-of-the-world, why not just give me a brief run-down on your own development plans? Don't bother going into detail; I have specialists on my staff who'll assist you later in dredging up the odd unremembered trifle from the depths of the subconscious. For now, just limit your exposition to the high points."

"You're too shrewd for me, Hivemaster," Retief conceded. "Did you think up this scheme yourself?"

"Ah-ah," Shlush chided his prisoner. "No prying, Retief. Not that it matters, of course, inasmuch as you'll soon be occupying a shallow excavation under the dungeon floor—but it's bad form tipping one's opponents off to the details of one's operations, particularly as I have no time to waste. Now—"

"On a tight schedule, eh? Tell me, Hivemaster, is Ambassador Jith in on the plan?"

"Jith is a dependable civil servant of considerable seniority," Shlush said smoothly. "It was deemed unwise to burden him with excessive detail regarding operations outside the sphere of

his immediate concerns."

"Just who is your boss in this operation, Shlush?"

"Ah-ah—mustn't pry, Retief," the Groaci wagged an admonitory digit at the Terran. "Suffice it to say he's a most unusual chap, a virtual Super-Groaci of most uncompromising kidney, not the sort, as he himself declares, to stand idly by while Groac is cheated of her Lumbagan patrimony. You'll meet him soon enough."

"Let me see," Retief mused aloud. "As I recall, it was a Terry tramp captain who first put Lumbaga on the star maps. He stayed long enough to peddle a few gross of glass beads and take on a cargo of salted glimp eggs. Oddly enough, his report made no mention of the natives' warlike tendencies."

"Doubtless he fortuitously happened along between massacres," Shlush said tersely. "But—"

"The next time Lumbaga cropped up in an official dispatch, ten years later, was on the occasion of a run-in between a Terry survey crew and a Groaci gunboat. It appears your people were well established here by then."

"Yes, yes—and naturally enough, they took appropriate action to discourage unauthorized tourism. Now—"

SHOOTING up an unarmed survey craft was the wrong

way to go about it, I'm afraid," Retief said philosophically. "Our sociological teams couldn't pass up a challenge like that. They came swarming in—with suitable escorts of Peace Enforcers, of course—to ferret out the unhappy incidents in the collective Groaci childhood that were responsible for your aggressions and—"

"I well recall the incident—an unexampled instance of Groaci restraint in the face of Terran provocation."

"—and found a planetwide riot in progress," Retief continued. "They also turned up the fact that your boys were running a rather dubious traffic in hearts, lungs, and a few other negotiable commodities—"

"Specimens destined for Groaci zoos," Shlush snapped. "Our Groacian interest in exotic wild-life is well known."

"—which raised certain questions among the coarse-minded. There was even a theory afoot that you were disassembling the natives, shipping them out as Freebies and putting them back together for use in the sand mines."

"A baseless allegation. Besides, the practice was at once discontinued out of deference to the prejudices of the unenlightened."

"A far-sighted move, in view of the number of guns lined up on you at the time. The Interplanetary Tribunal for the Curtailment of Hostilities moved in

then, and the war for peace has raged ever since."

"I am not in need of a toenail sketch of recent Furthuronian history," Shlush hissed. "The manifold iniquities of the CDT are well known to me—" The excited Hivemaster broke off as the door opened abruptly.

"To forgive this intrusion, Exalted One," the underling who had gone to fetch brandy hissed. "But—"

"To better have an explanation of surpassing eloquence," Shlush screeched, "or to dangle inverted from a torture frame ere tiffin-time!"

"The best, Excellency," the unfortunate fellow whispered, advancing into the room, closely followed by a hulking Lumbagan with a single eye, three legs, an immense grin, and a large, primitive needle gun in his fist.

"To shoot him down!" Shlush hissed in his native tongue to Wilth, who stood frozen against the wall.

"To—to—have apparently forgotten to load my piece," the latter whispered and let the impotent weapon fall with a clatter.

"Which one of you aliens is the head Groaci around here?" the newcomer demanded.

Wilth's eye-stalks tilted toward his chief. The latter scrooched back in his chair, eyeing the aimed pistol. "Ah—why do you ask?" he inquired cautiously.

"On account of there's a Big Shot that wants to see him," the Lumbagan stated, studying the four foreigners in turn. "Better hurry. I don't know what assorted innards are bringing in the open market, but it will be less if they're full of steel splinters."

"Merely—ah—a social call, I assume?" Shlush said hopefully.

"Assume anything you like—only snap into it. The Big Boy don't like to be kept waiting." The caller glanced at the timepiece strapped to his lower left wrist. "Besides, I change sides in half an hour and I don't like unfinished business hanging around."

"Well, I suppose one must observe the amenities," Shlush said with a certain lack of conviction, rising slowly.

"It's all right, Shlush," Retief spoke up. "It's noble of you to cover for me, but we can't fool this fellow. I'll go quietly."

"Ha? Trying to pull a fast one?" The Lumbagan pointed the gun at the Hivemaster's head and squinted his lone eye along the barrel. "I've got a good mind to plug you for that. But to heck with it. I got to make my own loads for this popper, so why waste one?" He motioned with the bulky weapon at Retief. "Let's go, big boy." He paused. "Hey, you aliens all look alike to me, but it seems like you got a little different look to you, somehow." He studied Retief, comparing him with Wilth and

the guard with quick side-glances.

"Two legs," he muttered. "One torso, one head—ah! Got it! *They* got five eyes each, and *you* only got two, kind of sunk-in ones. How come?"

"Birth defect," Retief said.

"Oh, excuse me all to heck, pal. No offense. Okay, pick 'em up. We got a brisk walk ahead and the streets are full of footpads."

III

TWO of Lumbaga's small pink moons were in the sky when Retief and his captor, after traversing a passage hollowed in the thick walls of the pile housing secret Groaci Headquarters, emerged into the street.

"This seems to be my night for meeting the local civic leaders," Retief commented as they turned west, toward the waterfront. "Whom are you taking me to?"

"A high-pay customer on Groogroo island," his guide said shortly, swiveling his asymmetrical head from side to side so as to bring his single eye to bear first on one side of the route ahead, then the other. "If anybody jumps us, it's every guy for hisself," he notified the Terran.

"You expecting to be attacked?" Retief inquired easily.

The alien nodded. "Naturally," he said glumly. "Why should tonight be any different from any other time?"

"I understand street battles are the Lumbagan national pastime," Retief commented. "You sound a little unenthusiastic."

"Oh, a little rumble now and then, a friendly fight in a bar, a neighborly clash in the alley, sure. I'm as normal as the next guy. But the pace is getting me down. Frankly, Mr.—what was that handle again?"

"Retief."

"I'm Gloom. Like I was saying, Retief—between you and me, I'd as lief take a break—a long break—from the fray. I got enough lumps to last me, you know? And there's plenty others feel the same."

"Then why do you go on squabbling?"

"That's kind of hard to explain to a foreigner. I'm just sashaying along, minding my own business, and all of a sudden—zop! The old fighting frenzy hits me—you know what I mean?"

"I'm striving to grasp it," Retief said.

A ten-minute walk brought them to the water front. An odor of ripe seafood and rotting wood rose from a lateen-rigged junk wallowing as if half sunk at its sagging wharf. A bulky Lumbagan with the usual random placement of facial features stepped out of the shadows to bar Gloom's way as he boarded.

"Hi, Snult," the latter called in guarded tones. "This here is Re-

tief. You can put him on my tab."

"Yeah?" Snult replied without detectable enthusiasm. He barked a command over his shoulder. Two large locals with exceptional tricep development stepped forward.

"Dump this spy in the drink," Snult grunted, pointing to Retief. "And then hang Gloom to the yard-arm for half an hour for reporting in late." He turned his back and sauntered off. The two Lumbagans advanced, reaching for Retief in a businesslike way. He leaned aside, caught the proffered arm of the nearer and gave it a half twist, causing its owner to spin around and bow from the waist, at which point an accurately placed foot propelled the unfortunate chap off the pier. The second enforcer lunged, met a chop to the neck, followed by a set of stiffened fingers to the midriff. As he doubled over, Retief turned him gently by the elbow and assisted him over the side; where his splash mingled with that of his partner.

Ten feet away, Snult paused.

"Quick work," he said over his shoulder. "But—two splashes?"

Gloom stepped to his departing chief, seized him by the back of the neck and unceremoniously pitched him into the water.

"Three," he corrected and thrust a large, six-fingered hand at Retief. "The cruise is off to a good start. We've been needing a change of administration around

here. Come on, let's hoist anchor before a platoon of cops comes pelting down the dock to rescue you."

He swaggered down the gangplank, bawling orders.

THERE were few questions from the crew, who quickly adjusted to the change in management, assisted by a number of sharp blows from a belaying pin wielded by the new captain. In a matter of minutes the ancient vessel had cast off and was threading her way out across the garbage-strewn waters of the bay.

"A shipment of *foof* bark," Gloom advised his guest, pointing out a passing barge as they relaxed on the high poopdeck at the stern, quaffing large mugs of native ale and admiring the view of the moonlit jungle isle past which they were sailing. "It comes from Delerion, another few islands to the west. Potent stuff, too. A pinch of *foof* in your hookah and you're cruising at fifty thousand feet without oxygen."

"Dope traffic, eh? Is that legal?"

"No law on the high seas," Gloom said. "And damn little on land. I guess you'd call the *foof* trade semi-legit. They pay taxes—if the free-lance Customs boys are sharp enough to collect 'em. And they place a few bribes here and there."

"You seem to know a lot about

the opposition's movements," Retief commented.

"I ought to—I heard all about it last week when I was a *foof*-gatherer."

"I didn't know you Lumbagans changed islands as well as affiliations."

"I was a prisoner of war down there. I managed to escape during the changing of the guard. By the way, keep a few sharp eyes out for a low-slung boat with a big carbon-arc light on deck. Interisland Police. They're supposed to be up at the other end of the line now, but you never can tell."

"I can see you've done your homework, Gloom."

"Sure. I got the schedules down pat last time I was on the force."

"Don't these rapid changes of allegiance become confusing?" Retief inquired. "I'd think you'd run the risk of accidentally shooting yourself under the impression you were on the opposite side."

"I guess you can get used to anything," Gloom said philosophically.

"There's Groo-groo coming up on the starboard bow," Retief said. "Isn't it about time to start tacking in?"

Gloom yawned. "Later, maybe," he said. "I decided maybe it's too much trouble trying to ransom you. I prefer life on the briny deep to floundering around in the creepers—" He was interrupted by a shout from the masthead;

jumping up, he aimed a spyglass toward a dimly seen shape gliding closer across the dark water.

"Oh-oh—get set. That looks like—yep, it's the patrol. Hey, Blump!" Gloom sprang to the companionway. "Hard aport. And keep it quiet."

AS THE unwieldy craft came sluggishly about, a dazzling, yard-wide shaft of smoky blue light laced across the water, etching the privateer's crew a chalky white against the velvet black of shadows.

"Heave to, you bilge-scum," an amplified voice bellowed from the direction of the light, "before I put a solid shot into your water-line!"

"We're in trouble," Gloom rapped. "That's old Funge on the bull-horn; I'd know his voice anywhere. One of the best pirate captains around when he's working the other side of the street."

"Do we strike, Cap'n?" a crewman called from amidships.

"Remind me to keel-haul you when this is over!" Gloom roared. "Strike, nothing. Swing our stern-chaser around and run it out over the port rail." He charged across the deck, which canted sharply as the sailors dragged the small cannon into position. "Load with canister—double-charge. Get a firepot up here. Hold her steady on a course of one-eight-oh and stand by to come about fast." He

turned to Retief who was standing nearby, observing the preparations for action. "Better get below, mister," he snapped. "This is no place for noncombatants!"

"If you don't mind, I'll stick around on deck. And if I may make a suggestion—it might be a good idea to steer for shore."

"For shore? You must be hysterical with panic. Everybody knows Groo-groo's swarming with carnivores that are all stomach and teeth, with just enough legs to let 'em leap on their prey from forty feet away."

"In that case, I hope you're a strong swimmer."

"Don't worry, Retief, those revenue agents are lousy shots—" Gloom's reassurances were interrupted by a flash, a *boom* and the whistling passage of a projectile that sailed high overhead to raise a column of water a hundred yards to starboard.

"I see what you mean," Retief said. "Nevertheless, I think you're about to lose your command." He pointed with his cigar at the water sluicing across the buckled planks of the deck. "We're sinking."

Cries rose from the crew, who suddenly found themselves ankle deep in water. Gloom groaned.

"I guess I took that last corner too fast—she's opened her seams—"

A breaker rolled across the deck.

A crewman, swept off his feet, went under with a despairing cry. As the vessel wallowed the waters surged, rushed back across the half-submerged planking, swirling around Retief's shins. The crewman was no longer in evidence; instead, a swarm of disassociated parts splashed in the brine, as the Lumbagan's formerly independent components resumed their free-swimming status, making instinctively for shore.

"Well, so long, Retief," Gloom cried. "Maybe our various limbs and organs will meet up again in some future arrangement—" he broke off. "Ah—sorry. I forgot your hookup is a one-time deal. Tough lines, Retief. Take a last look around. Here we go—"

"Let's swim for it—it's not far."

"Well, I guess you could do that if you want to prolong the process. As for me, I'd as soon get it over with—"

"And miss finding out if the superstitions are true? Come on, Gloom, last one ashore's an amputated leg."

RETIEF dived over the side. He stroked hard against the suction created by the sinking hulk, surfaced in time to see the tip of the mast descend slowly from sight amid vigorously boiling water strewn with flotsam. Multitudes of Singletons, which had formerly constituted the priva-

teer's complement, churned the waves, heading instinctively for shore. A ragged cheer went up from the revenue cutter.

Gloom bobbed up a few yards away. "She was my first command," he said sadly. "I guess maybe she was put together a little too much like us Lumbagans."

"A melancholy moment," Retief acknowledged. He shrugged out of his jacket, pulled off his shoes and thrust them into his side pockets and set off at an easy crawl, Gloom dog-paddling beside him. The evening was cool, but the water was pleasantly warm, mildly saline. Groo-groo congealed from the darkness ahead, resolving itself into a cluster of rhubarb-shaped trees above a pale streak that widened into a curving beach. They rode the breakers in, grounding a coarse coral sand, waded through tidal pools to shore.

Dark jungle loomed ahead, impenetrable in the dim light of the moons. Retief scanned the beach, noted a small keg half buried in the pink sand, the word RUM stenciled on the end.

"At least we won't want for basic supplies," he commented as he extricated the container. "You're about to sample Terry booze, Gloom."

"Not bad," the local commented five minutes later, after the puncheon had been breached with a lump of coral and the contents sampled. "It burns, but my stom-

ach kind of likes it. In fact—" he paused to hiccup. "I like it all over. Actually, I just suddenly realized life is just a bowl of bloop-berries, now that my vision has improved—"

"I see you're one of those affectionate drunks," Retief said as Gloom flung an arm about his shoulders. "Better take it easy, Gloom. You may need all your faculties intact for the evening ahead."

Gloom grabbed inaccurately at a small free-flying gland.

"Kootchie-koo—ain't it cute, Retief?" he asked as it landed on his head.

"A most appealing organ," Retief agreed. "But I think you'd better lower your voice."

"What for? Somebody snoozing?" Gloom stood, weaving slightly, "Tell the little guys with the hammers to go away," he mumbled, groping at his scalp; there was a sudden flutter as the visitor departed hurriedly. Gloom sat down hard on the sand.

"Tell 'em to turn off the sirens and the bright lights," he moaned, "and take the stewed gym shoes out of my mouth—"

"Congratulations, Gloom," Retief said. "I think you broke the Galactic speed record for hang-overs."

"Wha? Oh, it's you, Retief. Lucky you happened along. I just been set upon by a strong-arm mob and worked over with lead

pipes. Which way'd they go?"

"You were too much for them," Retief reassured his companion. "They fled in various directions."

"Yah, the yellow-bellies," Gloom muttered. "Oh, my skull."

"Where on the island does this Big Shot hang out?" Retief asked.

"Beats me. I was to of been met on the beach."

"Let's take a look around," Retief suggested, studying the looming woods above them. "You check that way—" he pointed to the south—"and I'll look up here."

Gloom grunted assent and moved off. Retief followed the curve of the shore for a distance of a hundred yards before the beach narrowed and was pinched out by a rocky ridge extending down from the forest-clad slope above. There were no tracks, no empty beer bottles, no signs of animate life. He returned to the starting point. Gloom was nowhere in sight. He followed the Lumbagan's bootprints as they wove unsteadily across the sand, then turned toward the nearest tongue of forest. The trail ended directly under a stout branch extending from the mass of foliage. Above, barely visible among the obscuring leaves, was the freshly cut end of a coarsely woven rope.

IV

RETIEF studied the ground. Other footprints were visible

here, but Gloom's were not among them. The marks leading away from the spot he noted, were deeply impressed in the sand, as if the owners had been burdened by a heavy weight—presumably that of the Lumbagan.

Retief started off along the clearly marked spoor leading into the deep woods. The darkness here was almost total. Creatures of the night creaked, chirred and wailed in the treetops. An intermittent wind made groaning sounds among the boughs. Nearer at hand, something creaked faintly. Retief halted, faded back against the knobby-barked bole of a giant tree.

A minute passed in silence. Just ahead of him a small figure emerged cautiously from the underbrush—a curiously truncated Lumbagan, advancing in a stealthy crouch. Gripping a stout club in a cluster of fists, the native sneaked along, crouched, peering under bushes and behind trees as he came. Retief silently circled the sheltering trunk, stepped out behind the stranger and cleared his throat. With a thin yell the native sprang straight into the air. He struck the ground running, but with a quick grab Retief snared him by the garland of teeth circling his neck.

"I'm looking for a friend of mine," Retief said in the native tongue. "I don't suppose you've seen him."

"Him monster like you?" the terrified captive squeaked, hooking a finger under his necklace to ease the strain.

"Another type of monster entirely," Retief said; he gave a succinct description of his traveling companion.

"Negative, Sahib. Tribe belong me not nab monster fitting that description. By the way, how about letting go ceremonial collar before I suffer embarrassment of bite own head off."

"You'd be more comfortable if you'd stop tugging," Retief pointed out.

"Against instinct not try get away from monster," the native explained.

"Curious. A moment ago I had the distinct impression you were trying to get closer to me."

"Iron maiden on other foot now. You eat now—or save for snack?"

"I'll wait, thanks. Is your village near here?"

"Usually don't stop to chat with stranger," the captive muttered, "but in this case looks like best bet to increase longevity. Monster right, I citizen of modest town half mile up trail."

"I'd like to pay it a visit. How about acting as guide?"

"I got choice in matter?"

"Certainly," Retief said. "You can either lead me there or take the consequences."

"Most likely lead monster there and take consequences. Chief not

like stranger poking around.”

“In that case you can introduce me. Retief’s the name. What’s yours?”

“Zoof—but probably change to Mud, once chief get eyeful of humiliating circumstances attending surprise visit.”

“Actually, Zoof, it’s not absolutely necessary that I lead you there by the neck if you’ll promise not to run out on me.”

“Got funny feeling monster run faster than me anyway. Okay, it’s deal. I lead you to village; when you get there, you look over menu, maybe pick choicer specimen.”

“It’s a promise.” Retief said. “Nice teeth,” he added as he disengaged his hand from the necklace. “Local product?”

“Nope, fancy imported, guaranteed solid plastic.” Zoof started through the dense woods, Retief close behind. “No catchum real tooth these days. Life in woods going to hell in handcart. Monsters ruin hunting; lucky chief make deal with Five-eyes for steady supply grits and gravy.”

“The Five-eyes you refer to wouldn’t by any chance be Groaci?”

“Could be. Skinny-leg city slicker, same big like me, all time whisper, like offer deal on hot canoe.”

“That’s Ambassador Jith to the life. But I wasn’t aware his interests extended this far back into the brush.”

“Sure, small monster go everywhere, do everything. All time ride giant bird, make stink, noise, pile up stone, while big monster trample underbrush, rig net, hunt, eat—”

“What do these big monsters look like?” Retief inquired.

“Take look in mirror sometime, see for self.”

“They’re Terrans—like me?”

Zoof twisted his head to study Retief. “Nope, not exact same, maybe. Not so much eyes. Some got more. Some two time so big like you, tear head off, eat one bite—”

“Have you seen the monsters yourself?”

“You bet; see you, see Five-eyes, hear plenty rumor fill in gaps in information.”

“Are there any Groaci at your village now?”

“We find out,” Zoof said. “Home town just ahead.” He led the way another fifty feet and halted.

“Well, what monster think of place?”

RETIEF studied the gloomy forest around him, insofar as he could see it was in no way different from the previous half mile of woods.

“It’s unspoiled—I’ll say that for it,” he commented. “Is this Main Street?”

“Monster kidding? Is snazzy

residential section, plenty tight zoning, you bet. Come on, we find chief and boys over at favorite hangout, Old Log."

"A bar?"

"Nope, just swell place root for grubs."

"I take it the Grubs aren't a ball team?"

"More like hors d'oeuvre," Zoof corrected. He led the way through a dense stand of forest patriarchs, emerged in a small, open glade where half a dozen Lumbagans, differing wildly in detail, wandered apparently aimlessly, gazing at the ground. One pounced with a sharp cry, came up with a wriggling creature, which he thrust into a sack at his waist.

"My grasp of Lumbagan zoology is somewhat hazy," Retief said. "How do these grubs fit into the general biological picture?"

"Play essential role," Zoof replied. "Grub grow up be kidney, jawbone, kneecap, you name it."

"So much for future generations. Still, it's no worse than eating eggs, I suppose."

"Not eat 'em," Zoof corrected. "Collect, sell to skinny-leg monster, get plenty Colonel Sanders fried chicken and other exotic chow, you bet."

The grub hunters had interrupted their search to stare inhospitably at Retief.

"Hey, Chief," Zoof greeted his leader, "this monster name Re-

tief, express desire meet jungle big shot. Retief, shake grasping member of Chief Boobooboo, son of Chief Booboo, son of Chief Boob."

"Grandpa name Boo, not Boob," the chief corrected sternly. "Why you want me, monster? Zoof not look tender?"

"Actually I was looking for a friend—"

"Hmm, neat switch. Usual custom eat enemy, but after all, why be prejudice? Eat chum too, get varied diet." Boobooboo looked appraisingly at Zoof.

"As it happens, I've already eaten," Retief said. "The friend I'm looking for seems to have gotten involved with a rope."

"Monster bark up wrong flagpole," the chief stated. "Unsophisticated aborigine unequal to technical challenge of make rope."

"Any idea who might have snared him?"

"Sure."

"Possibly you'd confide in me."

"Why?"

"I don't suppose the simple desire to do a good turn would be sufficient motivation?"

"Not *that* unsophisticated," Boobooboo said flatly. "Good time remember ancient folk wisdom embodied in old tribal saying: What's In It For Me?"

"What about a firm promise of a year's supply of pizza pies?"

"Not much nourishment in

promise," the chief pointed out. "Got better idea—" Boobooboo lowered his voice. "Know where big supply eatables located; you help collect, maybe I get big-hearted and tell all."

"I think I'd prefer a more definite commitment," Retief said. "Strike out the 'maybe' and we might be able to get together."

"Sure; just stuck 'maybe' in so have something to concede."

"I see I'm dealing with a pro," Retief acknowledged. "*En passant*, where is the food supply located?"

"Half mile that direction." The chief pointed. "Enough chow for whole tribe from now to next St. Swithin's Day."

"I take it you've actually seen the groceries for yourself?"

"Sure, same time deliver."

"I see. You plan to hijack the supplies you've been selling to the Groaci."

"Hijack loaded word. Just say decided to share wealth with underprivileged. Monsters got wealth—we got underprivilege."

"At the present rate, Chief, I predict your supply of unsophistication won't last out the winter. But why do you need my help? You have enough troops to stage a raid on your own."

"Monster not get big picture. Skinny-legs spoil-sport hide come-stibles away inside magic cave, patrol perimeter with plenty fearsome monster, tear simple tribes-

man apart with two hands while hunt fleas with rest."

"And you think I can penetrate this fortress?"

"Maybe not; but better you than me and boys; we just simple pastoral types; hunt, fish, steal, not go in for heavy work."

"On the whole, Chief, the proposition doesn't sound overwhelmingly attractive."

"I figure maybe you feel that way; so save snapper for end: you come here ask about missing buddy? Monster in luck; get economical combination deal. Kidnaped pal same place victuals. Get two for price of one."

"I think," Retief said, "I've been outmanuvered."

A QUARTER of an hour later, Retief, the chief, Zoof and the bulk of the truncated tribesmen, stood in the shelter of a giant mumble tree, the soft mutterings of its foliage covering the sound of their conversation.

"Straight ahead, can't miss it," the chief was saying. "But watch snares; you get caught same way absent chum, deal off."

"Understood, Chief. And you'll keep your people posted in position to create a diversion in the event I have to leave the vicinity in haste."

"Correct. We stand by, catch any wandering grub come galloping past."

"It's been a pleasure dealing with you, Chief. If you ever decide to give up the rural way of life, drop me a line. The Corps could use your talents instructing a course in creative naïveté."

"Thanks, Retief. Keep offer in mind in case present caper not pan out."

The forest was silent as Retief made his way along the dimly marked trail, but for a stealthy rustling in the undergrowth which ceased when he halted, began again when he went on. He had covered perhaps a hundred and fifty yards when he rounded an abrupt turn and was face to face with twelve feet of tusked nightmare.

For a moment he stood unmoving, studying the monstrosity looming ten feet away. Its bleary, pinkish eyes, three in number, stared unwinkingly at him from a lumpy face equipped with tufted whiskers placed at random around a vast, loose-lipped mouth, and a scattering of gaping nostrils. Immense arms hung almost to the ground from its massive shoulders. Three bowed legs supported the weight of a powerfully muscled torso—the big fellow's generous pedal extremities were housed in gigantic sneakers with round black reinforcing patches over the ankle-bones. A long tail curled up over one clavicle, ending in a seven-fingered hand with which the creature was

exploring the interior of a large, pointed ear. Other hands gripped a naked two-edge sword at least nine feet in length.

Retief took a hand-rolled cigar from an inside pocket, puffed it alight, blew out pale violet smoke.

"Nice night," he said.

The monster drew a deep breath. "AHHHrrrghhh!" it bellowed.

"Sorry," Retief said, "I didn't quite catch that remark."

"AHHHrrrghhh!" the creature repeated.

Retief shook his head. "You're still not getting through."

"Ahhrrgh?"

"You do it well," Retief said. "Exceptionally nice timbre. Real feeling."

"You really like it?" the giant said in a surprisingly high-pitched voice. "Gee, thanks a lot."

"I don't know when I've seen it done better. But is that all there is?"

"You mean it ain't enough?"

"I'm perfectly satisfied," Retief assured his new acquaintance. "I just wanted to be sure there wasn't an encore."

"I practiced it plenty," the oversized Lumbagan said. "I wouldn't of wanted to of done it wrong."

"Certainly not. By the way, what does it mean?"

"How do I know? Who tells me anything? I'm just old Smelch—everybody pushes me around on account of I'm easygoing, you know?"

"I think I met a relative of yours in town, Smelch. Unfortunately I had to rush away before we really had a chance to chat."

"Yeah? Well, I heard a few of the boys was to of been took for a glom at the bright lights. But not me. No such luck."

"YOU don't happen to know who's been down for a bare-foot stroll on the shore do you, Smelch?" the Terran inquired casually. "A party with three-toed feet."

"Three? Lessee." Smelch's tail-mounted hand scratched at his mottled scalp with a sound reminiscent of a spade striking marl. "That'd be mōre'n one and less than nine, right?"

"You're narrowing the field," Retief said encouragingly.

"If I just knew how many nine was, I'd be in business," Smelch muttered. "That ain't nothing like say, six, for example?"

"Close, but no dope-stick. Skip that point, Smelch—I didn't mean to get technical. Were you waiting for anything special when I came along?"

"You bet: my relief."

"When's he due?"

"Well, lessee: I come out here a while back and been here for quite a time, so what does that leave? Say—half an hour?"

"More like a jiffy and a half, give or take a few shakes of a

lamb's tail. What's up at the top of the trail?"

"That's what nobody ain't supposed to know."

"Why not?"

"On account of it's like a secret, see?"

"I'm beginning to get a glimmering. Who says it's a secret?"

Smelch's fingernail abraded his chin with a loud sound.

"That's supposed to be another secret." Smelch's features rearranged themselves in what might have been a puzzled frown. "What I can't figure is—if it's a secret, how come you know about it?"

"Word get around," Retief said reassuringly. "Okay if I go up and have a look?"

"Maybe you ought to identify yourself first. Not that I don't trust you, but you know how it is."

"Certainly. I'm Retief, Smelch." He shook the hand at the end of the tail, which returned the grip firmly.

"Sorry about the routine, Retief, but these days a guy can't be too careful."

"What about?"

Smelch blinked all three eyes in rotation, a vertiginous effect.

"I get it," he said, "that's what you call a joke, right? I'm nuts about jokes, only the trouble is usually nobody tells me about 'em in time to laugh."

"It's a problem that often plagues ambassadors, Smelch. But don't worry; I'll be sure to tip

you off in advance next time.”

“Gee, you’re a all-right guy, Retief, even if you are kind of a runt and all, no offense.”

THE sound of heavy feet came from up-trail; a squat, five-foot figure lumbered into view, as solidly built as Smelch but less beautiful, his various arms, legs and ears having been arranged with a fine disregard of standard patterns. One of his five hands gripped a fifteen-foot harpoon; his four eyes, on six-inch stalks, goggled atop a flattened skull which gave the appearance of having been matured inside a hot water bottle.

“About time, Flunt,” Smelch greeted the newcomer. “You’re a shake and a half late.”

“Spare me any carping criticisms,” Flunt replied in a tone of long-suffering weariness. “I’ve just come from an interview with that bossy little—” He broke off, looking Retief up and down. “Well, you might at least offer an introduction,” he said sharply to Smelch, extending a hand to the diplomat. “I’m Flunt. Pardon my appearance—” he indicated two uncombed fringes of purplish-blue filaments springing from just below his cheekbones— “but I just washed my hide and I can’t do a thing with it.”

“Not at all,” Retief said ambiguously, giving Flunt’s feet a quick glance. They were bare and

remarkably human-looking. “My name’s Retief.”

“Goodness, I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“Not at all. Smelch and I were just passing the time of night. Interesting little island, Flunt. See many strangers here?”

“Gracious, I hope not. I’m supposed to do dreadful things to them.” Flunt gave Retief a startled look. “Are *you* by any chance a stranger?”

“Are you kidding?” Smelch spoke up. “He’s Retief, like I told you.”

“Just so you’re sure. Little Sir Nasty-nice wouldn’t like it a bit if any outsiders sneaked a peek at his precious whateveritis. Really, for this job one needs eyes in the back of one’s head!”

“Yeah,” Smelch said. “Lucky you got ’em.”

“Flunt, do you know anyone with three-toed feet in these parts?” Retief asked.

“Three-toed feet? Hmmm. They’re a bit passé this season, of course—but I think I’ve seen a few around. Why?” His voice lowered confidentially. “If you’re interested in picking up half a dozen at a bargain price, I think I may be able to put you onto a good thing.”

“I might be,” Retief said. “When could I meet the owners?”

“Oh, I don’t think you’d like that,” Flunt said soberly. “No, I don’t think you’d like that at all, at all. And neither would little Mr.

Sticky-fingers, now that I reflect on it. Actually, I shouldn't have mentioned the matter. My blunder. Forget I said anything."

"Come on, Retief," Smelch said loudly. "Me and you'll just take a little ankle up the trail. I'll point out the points of interest and like that." He gave the Terran an elaborate three-eyed wink.

"Capital idea, Smelch."

"Look here, Smelch," Flunt said nervously, "you're not going to go sneaking around you-know-where and getting you-know-who all upset about you-know-what?"

"I do?" Smelch looked pleased.

"Maybe you don't; it's been dunned into your head hourly all your life—but then you've only been around for a week—" Flunt turned to Retief. "I hate to sound finicky, Retief, but if this ummy-day tries to ip-slay you into, well, anyplace you shouldn't ee-bay, well—one has one's job to do." He fingered the barbed head of his harpoon meaningfully.

"I can give you a definite tentative hypothetical assurance on that," Retief said crisply. "But don't hold me to it."

"Well, in that case—" Retief felt Flunt's eyes on him as he and Smelch moved up the trail toward whatever lay above.

V

FOR the first hundred yards, nothing untoward disturbed the

silence of the forest at night—nothing other than the normal quota of chirps, squeaks and scuttlings that attested to the activities of the abundant wildlife of the region. Then, without warning, a gigantic shape charged from the underbrush. Smelch, in the lead, late in swinging his broad-headed spear around, took the brunt of the charge solidly against his chest. His explosive grunt was almost drowned in the sound of the collision. The antagonists surged to and from, trampling shrubbery, shaking trees, grunting like beached walruses. Suddenly the stranger bent his knees, rammed his head into Smelch's midriff and rose, Smelch spread-eagled across his shoulders. He pivoted sharply and hurled Smelch into the undergrowth, snapping off a medium-sized tree in the process. The victor paused only long enough to beat out a rapid tattoo on his chest and wait until a brief coughing fit passed before whirling on Retief. The Terran sidestepped the dimly seen monster's first rush, which carried the latter well into the thicket beside the path. Smelch reappeared from the opposite side, shaking his head and muttering. The stranger came crashing back onto the scene only to be met by a two lefts and a right haymaker that halted him in his tracks.

"Sorry about that, Retief," Smelch said contritely, as his an-

tagonist toppled like a felled oak. "But the mug got my dander up. He shouldn't ought to of came out leading with his chin anyways."

"A neat one-two-three," Retief commented, blowing a plume of smoke toward the fallen fighter. "Let's take a closer look." He parted the brush to look down at the casualty who lay sprawled on his back, out cold. The ten-foot figure was remarkably conservative for a Lumbagan, he thought: only two legs and arms, a single narrow head with close-set paired eyes, a long nose and mouth, an unimpressive chin. The feet, clearly outlined inside rawhide buskins, featured five toes each, matching the hands' ten fingers.

"What's the matter?" Smelch said. "You know him?"

"No, but he bears a certain resemblance to a colleague of mine."

"Geeze, the poor guy. Well, beauty ain't everything. Anyways, here's your chance to pick up a set of dogs at a steal, if you know what I mean." He rammed an elbow toward Retief's ribs, a comradely gesture capable of collapsing a lung had it landed.

"I think I'll pass up the opportunity this time," Retief said.

HE STEPPED forward to investigate a strand of barbed wire vaguely discernible in the gloom. It was one of three, he discovered, running parallel to the

trail and firmly attached to stout posts.

"Retief, we better blow," Smelch said. "Like Flunt said, nobody but nobody don't want to poke his noses and stuff in too close around you-know-where."

"Actually, I don't think I do," Retief corrected his massive acquaintance. "Know where, I mean."

"Good," Smelch said in a relieved tone. "You're safer that way."

"Not afraid, are you?"

"Yeah." Smelch nodded vigorously. "I hear they got ways of making a guy regret the day his left leg met up with his right."

"Who says so?"

"Everybody, Retief! All the boys been warned to stay clear, once they was outside—"

"You mean you've been inside?"

"Sure." Smelch looked puzzled, an expression involving a rapid twitching of his ears. "How could I of not been?"

"Flunt's been there, too?"

"Natch. You don't figure the moomy-bird brung him, do you? That's a little joke, Retief. I know you know the moomy-bird didn't bring him."

"How about this fellow?" Retief indicated the unconscious Lumbagan stretched at his feet. "He came from inside, too?"

Smelch clucked sympathetically. "I guess they must of left out some o' your marbles, Retief."

Where else would Zung of come from? In fact—"he lowered his voice confidentially—"he ain't never graduated, poor sucker."

"Maybe you'd care to amplify that remark a little, Smelch."

"Zung is one of the boys which they ain't been allowed out in the big, wonderful world like you and me." Smelch spread several hands expansively. "Except only maybe a few feet to clobber anybody that comes along. What I figure is—" his voice took on a solemn note—"him and the other ones, they ain't all there, you know? Rejects, like."

"Rejects from what, Smelch?"

"Shhh." Smelch looked around worriedly. "I don't like the trend of the conversation, which we're treading on shaky ground, especially this close to you-know-what."

"No, but I think it's time I found out."

"Hey—you ain't planning on climbing the fence?"

"Unless you know where the gate is."

"Sure—right up the trail about a hundred yards or maybe ten. I ain't too precise on fine detail."

"Then I'll be off, Smelch. Give my regards to Flunt when you see him."

"You're really going to sneak back into you-know-where and grab a peek at you-know-what? Boy oh boy, if you-know-who sees you—"

"I know. Thanks for clarifying matters. By the way, if you should run into a fellow with three legs who answers to the name of Gloom, I'd appreciate any help you could give him."

"Sure. You let me know if we see him."

"We?"

"Heck, yes. You don't think I'm going in there alone, do you? And we better get moving. Zung's starting to twitch."

AS THEY proceeded silently up the path, Retief was again aware of the soft rustlings and snufflings he had noted on and off since his arrival on the island. Through a gap in the shrubbery he caught a fleeting glimpse of a stealthy figure which ducked out of sight as he paused.

The gate—a wide construction of aluminum panels and barbed wire—blocked the trail a hundred feet above the point where they had encountered Zung. A green-shaded spotlight outlined it starkly against the black foliage. A padlock the size of an alarm clock dangled from a massive hasp.

"Any more guards hidden out around the area?" Retief asked.

"Naw—with Flunt and me doing a tight security job down below and the other bum working in close, who needs it?"

"An incisive point," Retief conceded. They walked boldly up to the gate. Smelch tried it, seemed

surprised when it failed to swing open.

"Looks like it's stuck," he commented, and ripped it from its hinges, lock and all, tossing the crumpled panels aside. Metal shrieked and crashed.

"Nothing like direct action," Retief said admiringly. "But from this point on I suggest we observe a trifle more caution, just in case there's anyone up there whose suspicions might be aroused by the sound of a three-car collision this far from the nearest highway."

"Say, pretty shrewd," Smelch said admiringly. "I always wanted to team up with a guy which he could figure the angles."

The path continued a few yards beyond the former gate before debouching into a wide cleared strip adjoining a high board fence that extended for some distance in each direction.

"Home sweet home," Smelch said nostalgically. "The old place sure has changed since I ventured out into the great world."

"Has it?"

"Sure. After all, that was a couple hours ago."

"This is where you were born and raised, in other words."

"Yeah—inside the fence is where I spent my happy childhood, all four days of it."

"I'd like to see the old place."

"Well, old Sneakyfeet won't like it—but to heck with him and his dumb rules. Who but a alumnus

would want to look inside anyways? Come on, Retief."

Smelch led the way to an inconspicuous gate which yielded to his efforts, not without a certain amount of splintering. Retief propped the door back in place and turned to regard an extensive array of ranked cages stacked in long aisles that led away in the moonlight to the far line of the fence. A dispirited yammering chorus of sound started up nearby, reminiscent of visiting day at a pet hospital. A vaguely zoo-like odor hung in the air.

RETIEF approached the nearest row of cages. In the first, a creature resembling a rubber rutabega with spidery legs slumped dolefully against the bars. Adjacent, a pair of apprehensive-looking ankles huddled together for warmth.

"Freebies," Smelch said. "Just in from the jungle. Little do the poor little fellers dream what a high-class destiny is in store for 'em."

"What destiny *is* in store for them, Smelch?"

"Right this way," the Lumbagan invited, indicating the next rank of cages. These were somewhat larger than those in the first section, each containing a creature giving the appearance of having been assembled from spare parts. Here a spindly leg drummed the fingers of a lone

hand springing from where a foot might have been expected; there a bored-looking lower lip, flanked by a pair of generous ears, sprang directly from an unmistakable elbow. In the next echelon, the cages were still larger, occupied by specimens of a more sophisticated appearance. A well-developed paunch with a trio of staring brown eyes at the top squatted on four three-toed feet, watching the visitors incuriously. A remarkably human-looking head with a full beard swung from the roof of its prison by the muscular arm that was its sole appendage.

"Uh, some of the boys look a little weird," Smelch said apologetically, "but in the end they mostly turn out handsome devils, like me."

"Someone seems to have gone to considerable trouble to set up this lonely-hearts farm," Retief commented. "In the natural state, I understand matches among Freebies take place at rare intervals. This looks like mass production. Any idea why, Smelch?"

"Nope. I ain't one of them guys which he asks questions all the time, you know what I mean? I mean, why poke the old nostrils in and maybe get 'em stuffed full of lint, right?"

"It's a philosophy without which bureaucracy as we know it would soon wither away," Retief conceded. "What was your job when you were here, Smelch?"

"Well, lessee, there was eating. That took a lot of my time. Then there was sleeping. I liked that pretty good. Then—lessee—I guess that just about wraps it up. Why?"

"You must have a strong union," Retief said. "Why were you here?"

"Geeze, you know that's a question which a guy could wonder about it a long time if he wouldn't drop off to sleep first. Personally, I got a like theory that before we can attack the problem of transcendentalism, we got to examine the nature of knowledge and its limitations, making a appropriate distinction between *noumena* and *phenomena*. I figure by coordinating perceptions by means of rationally evolved concepts of understanding we can proceed to the analysis of experience and arrive at the categorical imperative, with its implicit concomitants. Get what I mean?"

"I think possibly I've been underestimating you, Smelch. I didn't know you read Kant."

"Can't read, you mean," Smelch corrected. "Nope, I never had the time for no idle pursuits, what with that heavy schedule I told you about."

"Quite understandable, Smelch. By the way, Flunt mentioned you'd only been here a week. Where were you before that?"

"Well, now we're getting into the area of the metaphysical, Retief, which when you examine ma-

terial phenomena by inductive processes you arrive at a philosophical materialism, not to exclude ontological and epistemological considerations, which in general could be assumed to deny metaphysics any validity in the context of Aristotelian logic. Or am I just spinning my wheels?"

"Did you work that out for yourself, Smelch, or did somebody tip you off?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind. I don't think I'd grasp the full significance of the answer anyway."

THEY passed the last of the cages, these occupied by a bewildering variety of Lumbagan life forms in a wide range of colors and shapes and displaying a remarkably diverse endowment of limbs, sensory equipment and other somatic elements.

"They look vigorous enough," Retief commented as one hefty specimen gripped the bars and drooled at him. "But I get an impression they're not too bright."

"Well, sure, first they got to go through the indoctrination center. You can't expect an agglomeration which last week it was grubbing roots in the woods to be a instant intellectual. That takes a couple days."

"I see. Where do we go from here, Smelch?"

"How about the cafeteria? I got

a yen for some good old home cooking."

"Let's save that until after I've met You-know-who," Retief suggested.

"Mondays they usually got mud-on-a-mortarboard," Smelch said nostalgically, testing the air through his multiple nostrils. "Also on Wednesday, Saturday, and all the other days. Lucky it's my favorite. But I guess you're right, Retief. We got to make our courtesy calls before we chow down. I guess old Sneakyfeet—" Smelch paused. "Hey, talking about sneaky feet, old You-know-who has got three toes on each foot; I barged in on him once when he was just climbing out of a tub of hot sand. Wow, if language was skinning hooks, I'd of been flayed to the ribs in no time. That's when I seen 'em. His feet, I mean."

He broke off as a faint, rhythmic sound became audible, swiftly growing louder. The running lights of a copter appeared above the treetops, winking in a complicated pattern. The machine sank out of sight beyond the fence.

"What do you know, Retief—that's old Whatzis himself," Smelch cried delightedly. "But now that it's time to make the introductions," he added with sudden doubt, "I kind of wonder if it's a good idea. If he's in a bad mood he could maybe interpret it as me not doing my job of keeping outsiders on the outside."

"Let's hope he doesn't take a narrow minded approach," Retief said encouragingly. He had reached the section of fence opposite the point where the copter had descended. He jumped, caught the top, pulled himself up in time to see a hurrying figure in a dark cloak and a pale headgear disappear into a small structure at the edge of the clearing.

He pulled himself over and dropped to the ground. A moment later Smelch joined him.

"That copter's been busy tonight," Retief said. "What's in the building?"

"All kinds of neat stuff, like the cafeteria," Smelch said. "Did I mention they got mud-on-a-mortarboard?"

"You did. Let's go take a closer look."

They reached the door through which the heli's passenger had disappeared. It opened and they stepped into a brightly lit corridor. Light gleamed through a glass-paneled door at the far end. When they reached it, muffled sounds were audible from the room beyond.

VI

RETIEF took a small button-shaped object from his pocket, pressed it to the door, put his ear to it.

"... you still hesitate?" a suave voice said. "Possibly you are de-

terred by ethical considerations, a reluctance to betray those who have placed their trust in you. Dismiss the thought, fellow! What harm to honor if nobody blabs, eh?"

Snorting and threshing sounds followed.

"Ah—Exalted One," a breathy Groaci voice whispered, "to offer a suggestion: the removal of the gag to facilitate compliance with instructions."

"Um. Thank you, Chish. I was just about so to order. Guard!"

Heavy footsteps sounded, followed by a ripping sound, a hoarse yell, a shuddering sigh.

"Just one," Gloom's voice said yearningly. "Just one little ocular, right by the roots—"

Retief tried the doorknob, found it locked. He quickly extracted a small but complicated device from an inner pocket, applied it to the latch. There was a soft click. The door opened silently on a small dark room lined with coat hooks; beyond was a second room, clinically furnished in white. Gloom sat in a steel chair under a ceiling glare panel. He was strapped in position by heavy bands of wire mesh. An elaborate network of color-coded wires led from a cap-like device clamped to his head to a gray steel cabinet resembling a ground-car tune-up console.

A Lumbagan, if anything larger and more baroque than Smelch,

leaned against the wall. A uniformed Groaci stood by a door in the opposite wall. Before the captive stood a slight figure natively attired in bile-green Bermuda shorts, an aloha shirt in clashing pinks and orange and violet Argyles.

"Well, my old friend Nith, formerly of the Groaci Secret Police," Retief said softly to Smelch. "I wasn't aware his duties had brought him to these shores."

"Now, fellow," Nith demanded of Gloom, "who sent you here?"

"Nobody sent me; me and a chum came together."

"Aha! This chum—what power does he represent?"

"He's a Groaci," Gloom said.

"A Groaci?"

"You heard me, Five-eyes. And a big wheel at that."

"Amplified One," Chish hissed. "To begin to see the light! Lackaday! To have accidentally abducted a member of the personal staff of a Groacian MHPP!"

Nith wagged his eyes playfully at Gloom. "In your report to your superior, I'm sure you won't find it necessary to mention this little contretemps, eh? Just look upon it as a slight misunderstanding, easily mended—"

"Upthrust One," Lt. Chish interrupted, "The possibility that though this one's companion is of the noble Groacian stock, he himself might yet be in the pay of inferior races—"

"To be sure, Lieutenant," Nith said smoothly. "To have been about to raise precisely that issue." He faced Gloom. "Confess all, unfortunate dupe. You were the prisoner of the Groacian noblebeing, correct?"

"Well—technically he was my prisoner. But between you and me, Five-eyes, I was beginning to wonder who was in charge."

"You dared impede the freedom of a High-Born One? You abducted him here against his will?"

"Naw, it wasn't that way," Gloom said. "It was kind of a joint venture, like."

"Joint venture? I fail to postulate any conceivable circumstance under which the interests of Groac and of an aboriginal would coincide."

"Dough," Gloom said succinctly. "Mazoola, Bread. You know."

"You shared an interest in gourmet cookery?"

"Cripes, how'd you know that?"

"Further association with us Groaci will accustom you to such casual displays of omniscience," Nith said smoothly.

"But—to have implied that it occupied the status of co-equal with its Groaci companion," Chish objected.

"To have spoken allegorically, as is customary with artists! To have implied only that His Super-nalness's shared interest in matters gastronomic. But now to wonder—what brings Groaci

brass to this dismal backwater, unannounced? The possibility that Supreme HQ is checking up on me. Tell me, fellow," he addressed Gloom, "what was the purpose of your Groaci master's visit to these remote environs?"

"To see what was cooking, what else?"

"Yes, yes, of course—a clever cover story. But in addition to his culinary researches, what was the mission of the High-Born?"

"If he had one he never told me," Gloom said.

"To be expected that his Grandeur would not confide in an underling," Nith murmured.

"Estimable Broodmaster, sir," Chish hissed. "To hypothesize: might not these same intruders be a veritable inspection team, dispatched by Ambassador Jith, who, jealous of his prerogatives, may have introduced them here by devious means, the better to check up on your operation unheralded?"

"Exactly what I had deduced," Nith whispered and started for the door. "Certain reactionary elements have long desired my downfall. What better time than now to bring long schemes to naught by meddling probing, thereafter to cry me culpable? Forewarned, I'll see to certain matters regarding the voucher files; meantime, dispatch the prisoner instantly, lest he level feckless charges against my person!"

NITH skittered through the door and was gone. Chish made a rude gesture at the closed door and turned to Gloom, drawing his pistol.

"No violence, now," he cautioned the Lumbagan as he removed the cranial attachments of the veracitometer. "And remember to mention my name in glowing terms to your master. That's Chish: C-H-I-S-H, by a gross miscarriage of justice a mere Lieutenant—"

He broke off as Retief stepped through the door, Smelch behind him. Uttering a faint cry, the officer whirled toward the door by which his superior had just departed. The Terran reached it first.

"Guard! To me!" Chish keened, but as the Lumbagan behemoth lumbered into action, Smelch stepped behind him, gripped hands with himself, raised the resultant picnic-ham-sized aggregation of bone and muscle overhead and brought it down atop the fellow's cranium with a resounding thump, felling him in his tracks.

"Poor old Vump, he always had a glass head," Smelch commented.

"Nice one!" Gloom yelled. "But save old Nith for me!"

"Unhand me, Terran," Chish whispered, trying unsuccessfully to dodge past Retief, "To have important business requiring my urgent attention—"

"You're confused, Lieutenant," Retief said. "It was Broodmaster Nith who had the pressing appointment."

"Indeed? To have never heard of him."

"Too bad. I was hoping you could tell me whom he works for."

"Never, vile Soft One!"

"I'd avoid these long-term predictions if I were you, Chish. They have a tendency to unravel at the edges." Retief looked past the Groaci to Gloom, busily freeing himself from the last of his entanglements.

"Don't break anything, Gloom; we wouldn't want to short the leftenants wiring."

"Where'd the other one go?" Gloom demanded. "That's the one I want. I want to pluck those eyes one at a time, like picking ripe from-fruit! How about it, you?" he glowered at Chish, who recoiled from the menacing figure towering over him. "Where's the other Terry?"

"The—the other Terry?" the Groaci hissed in agitation. "What other Terry?"

"You know what other Terry!" Gloom roared.

"Oh, *that* Terry," Chish said hurriedly. "Why, I do believe he's occupying the, er, guest suite, just across the passage."

"Yeah?" Gloom looked baffled. "What's he doing there?"

"He was, ah, assisting me in certain experimental activi-

ties," Chish replied. "Which reminds me, I'm overdue for my saline infusion, so if you'll kindly unhand me—"

Gloom pushed the Groaci away and went across the room and into the passage. He paused before the door across the hall and rapped. A faint, uncertain cry answered him.

"Whattaya know?" he said. "He's in there." He tried the knob, then stepped back and kicked the stout panel; the plastic cracked. A second kick shattered the lock, and the door banged inward. A slight figure appeared in the opening, checked at the sight of the Lumbagan.

"Hey," Gloom said weakly as Retief came up behind him. "That's not—"

"Well, there you are at last, Retief," First Secretary Magnan gasped. "Heavens, I thought you'd never turn up!"

VII

"I DON'T get it," Gloom said, looking from Magnan to Retief. "Another Groaci with only two eyes, just like you, Retief—and I just noticed that Terry you're holding onto is wearing three fakes, just like that other Terry, Chish. What gives?"

"Duplicity on a vast scale," Retief said. "It's creeping in everywhere these days."

"You labor under a misapprehension, dull-witted bucolic!" the

Groaci began, subsiding in mid-word at a minatory tweak.

"What's this person referring to?" Magnan inquired, favoring Gloom with a distasteful look. "Is he somehow under the impression—"

"He's a great admirer of the Groaci, Mr. Magnan. Naturally he leaped to the conclusion that you enjoyed that status, since you resemble me so closely." Retief gave Chish's collar an extra half-twist as the latter attempted to speak.

"How come," Gloom asked bluntly, "this Groaci's got the same shortage of eyes as you, Retief?"

"Quite simple, Gloom. He's a relative; we're both members of the ape family."

"Oh. But what's he doing here, palling around with these foreigners?"

"Simplicity itself," Magnan said. "I was seized by a brace of brigands and whisked here for some obscure purpose unconnected with normal diplomatic procedures." The First Secretary looked severely at Chish. "Perhaps you have some explanation?"

"I'm sure he does." Retief assisted the struggling Groaci to the chair and with Gloom's enthusiastic aid strapped him in position, fitting the cranial attachments in place atop his cartilaginous skull amid his eye-stalks, which drooped dejectedly.

"Alas for lost opportunities," the officer mourned. "Had I but known of the imminence of my downfall, I might at least have had the pleasure of making plain to the abominable Nith my true assessment of his worth!"

"Too bad, Chish. Maybe I'll find a chance to make it up to you," Retief said. "Now, I believe this model has the automatic prevarication-suppressor. It will shoot a nice jolt through your trigeminal nerve if you accidentally stray into inaccuracy. Just set it at max, Gloom, to save time."

"Base alien, thus to serve an innocent official harmlessly engaged in the performance of his duties—"

"Later, Chish. Who was the Big Shot?"

"One Swarm-master Ussh, a most prestigious official. You'll rue the day—"

"Probably. Where's Omega Station?"

"I haven't the faintest—yip—the faintest intention of lying. I was about to say—eek! On a desert isle some leagues from here, drat all Soft Ones!"

"Which one?" Gloom demanded. "Rumboogy? Delerion?"

"Sprook!" Chish whispered. "I could wish you no more dolorous fate than to set foot in its miasmatic swamps!"

"The needles say he's telling the truth," Gloom said.

"As he sees it," Retief said.

"Unfortunately, false information doesn't register as long as he believes it. I have a feeling his boss wasn't keeping him fully informed."

"It is you, vile counterfeit—" Chish started and broke off, listening. Faintly from afar a clattering sounded. "Ha!" The Groaci hissed in triumph. "In instants a squad of Peace-keepers will be upon you to put an end to your presumptuous invasion of sacred Groacian symbolic soil, as well as to your grotesque imposture!"

"What's he talking about?" Gloom demanded.

"I refer to the understandable aspirations of lesser races to the lofty status of Groacihood—"

"He also means the cops will be here any minute," Retief cut in. "I wonder if you'd be kind enough, Chish, as to direct us to the nearest exit."

"A door—at the end of the passage there. A passage leads thence to a hidden egress—and good riddance to you!"

"Well, we'll have to be saying good night now, Leftenant. When Vump comes to perhaps he'll unstrap you. You can while away the time by planning what you should have said to Nith when you had the chance."

"True," Chish whispered. "Gone are my dreams of early advancement. But I may yet get a crack at that lousy civilian."

"Let the thought sustain you in your hour of trial," Retief said.

TEN minutes later, after carefully skirting the spot where Flunt guarded the trail, Retief, Magnum and Gloom followed the tracks left in the soft moss of the trail by the fleeing Groaci, Nith. The path, while narrow, was high and dry, twisting and turning to avoid the boles of giant, moss-hung trees rising from the dark water, skirting the deeper pools. In a small, open patch of spongy ground the trail ended abruptly. There was no sign of Nith.

"Well, whattaya know," Gloom commented, peering into the surrounding darkness. "Who would of thought the little Terry was that fast on his feet? He's gone and got clean away, so I guess we might as well get started back—"

"Listen," Retief said softly.

A faint cry was repeated somewhere ahead. He started off at a run, picking a route from one root-clump to another. A hundred feet farther on he emerged into the open to witness a curious sight—from a sturdy bough overhanging the path, Nith dangled by one leg in mid-air, supported in an inverted position by a length of stout rope.

"Good of you to wait, Nith," Retief said. "An excellent spot for a confidential talk."

"To cut me down at once and to

enjoy the eternal gratitude of the Groacian state, renewable annually at a modest fee," the snared alien whispered.

"Stumbled over one of your own trip-wires, eh?" Retief said sympathetically. "It's one of the hazards of the diplomatic way of life."

"What is this talk of diplomatic wiles? As it happens, I am a simple scientist, here to observe the nest-building habits of the Lesser Tufted Adam's Apple—"

"Sorry, Nith, an ingenious cover, but blown, I'm afraid. We met a few years back when you were number two to General Fiss, the time he tried to take over Yalc."

"Tour Director Fiss and I were interested only in the excavation of artifacts of the Yalcian culture," Nith protested.

"You Groaci have pioneered the science of instant archeology, true," Retief conceded, "but good form requires that you wait until the owners aren't using the bones any longer before you try to wire them together in a glass case. However, we have more immediate matters to discuss at the moment. Let's begin with where you were headed in such haste."

"I find it singularly difficult to marshall my recollective faculties while suspended in this unseemly position," the Groaci hissed.

"You'd find it even more difficult if the point of attachment

were your third thoracic vertebra," Retief pointed out.

"Long will this day live in infamy," Nith wailed. "Very well, Terry, I'll reveal my destination, but only under protest. As it happens, I maintain a modest retreat in the foothills above—to it I retire on occasion to meditate. Now cut me down promptly and in my report I'll do my best to minimize the shabby role you played in this sorry contretemps."

"TOO late for secrecy now," Retief said as Gloom and Magnan arrived panting, splashed with mud and festooned with algae.

"Well," the First Secretary said as he spied the dangling alien, "at least he had the decency to attempt suicide—though one might have known he'd bungle it."

"You speak of suicide, Soft One?" Nith keened. "Such indeed is the fate of those who would invade the sacrosanct precincts of my bucolic hideaway."

"Don't imagine for a moment that your threats intimidate me," Magnan replied loftily. "It's just that we happen to be leaving now anyway. Come, Retief, suitably padded—discussed in adequate detail, that is—my report of the disasters we've encountered up to this point will serve adequately to impress the Ambassador with my zeal."

"An inspiring thought, Mr.

Magnan. Just picture his expression when you tell him you've discovered there may be a plot afoot to take over Lumbaga and that you hurried back to let him know what, without wasting time finding out when, where, why, and how."

"But as I was about to say," Magnan continued quickly, "why dash off just when we're on the verge of achieving a coup of such stunning proportions?"

"Now, just how would one go about finding this weekend cottage of yours," Retief queried Nith.

"You imagine, presumptuous alien, that I would reveal details of my personal affairs to such as you?"

"My mistake, Nith." Retief turned to Magnan and Gloom. "It seems we'll have to find it on our own. Shall we go, gentlemen?"

"What—and leave me here suspended, prey to any passing appetite, to say nothing of the risk of incipient apoplexy?" Nith shrilled in protest.

"Yeah, that would be cruel," Gloom said and drew his knife. "I'll just slit the sucker's throat—"

"I capitulate," the Groaci hissed. "Proceed north-east by east to a lone foot tree, take a right, proceed another hundred paces upslope and you will confront my confidential lair. I appeal to your better natures to pry then no more, but to betake yourselves in

haste to more congenial surroundings, there to report favorably on this concrete evidence of the importance of the reflective life in the philosophy of the benign Groaci."

"I don't get it," Gloom said. "How come this Terry's all the time putting in a plug for you Groaci?"

"Conscience," Magnan said crisply. "I suppose you may as well cut him loose now—provided he promises not to go scuttling ahead and spoil our surprise."

"I assure you I will scuttle in another direction entirely," Nith whispered as Gloom slashed the rope, allowing him to drop to the ground with a painful impact. He sprang up and disappeared along the backtrail.

"I'm not sure that was the best move we've made all evening," Retief said. "But I suspect we'll know for sure very soon. Meanwhile, let's go take a look."

A DIM light glowed from a point high above, shining down through the trees dotting the steeply rising slope.

"Well, whattaya know," Gloom said. "I thought the little runt was lying, but here's his meditation parlor—just like he said."

"Why, the very idea," Magnan whispered. "Ambassador Jith never mentioned funding any R and R facilities in the hustings."

They emerged onto a talus slope.

From here they were able to make out the silhouette of a cluster of towers rising from the crest of the peak. The lighted window went dark; a moment later a glow sprang up at another.

"Apparently Nith doesn't do his thinking alone," Retief said.

"If the place is full o' Terries," Gloom said, "what's supposed to keep 'em from blasting us into Freebies before you can say oops?"

"Nothing much. Accordingly, I recommend extreme stealth from this point on."

Twenty feet higher they encountered a flight of narrow steps cut into the stone. Retief climbed over the handrail beaded with moisture in the damp air and led the way upward, Gloom and Magnan close behind him. At a landing another twenty feet higher the steps took a right-angled turn. The drop below was vertical now; the tops of trees rustled in the faint breeze. Far below a cluster of lanterns moved on the shore. Far across the water the lights of the capital floated on blackness.

Gloom started to speak, then changed his mind. "Never mind," he muttered. "The more I know the less I like it. I'm even beginning to get a funny feeling it was your idea and not mine to grab you from Groaci HQ."

At the next landing, by leaning far out over the rail to look up, Retief was able to see a row of shut-

tered windows set in a squat, thick-walled structure of a bilious ochre color. The building appeared to consist of several wings, set at slightly different levels in accommodation to the contours of the rugged peak on which it was built.

"Quite a layout—" Gloom started and broke off as feet clacked above. A spindly figure in a flaring helmet and a spined hip cloak leaned over the railing of a terrace, peering down the barrel of a blast-rifle with five alertly canted oculars.

"Hsst! To advance and give the password," a thin voice whispered sibilantly.

"To contain yourself in patience, hive-mate of brood-foulers," Retief whispered sharply in Groaci. "To have had a brisk trot to report the failure of the incompetent Nith! To require a moment in which to respire!" He motioned to Gloom. "You go first," he whispered softly. "Pretend to be scared."

"Pretend?" The Lumbagan choked. "I'm petrified! But what the heck, I don't aim to show the purple glimp-feather. Here goes."

"The impropriety of your nattering—and my curiosity as to whom you natter with!" the Groaci Peace-keeper hissed.

"The prompt satisfaction of your curiosity," Retief whispered back, motioning Gloom past. He followed up the final

flight of steps. As the Lumbagan reached the sentry's terrace the latter hissed and swung the gun to cover him.

"The impropriety of taking hasty action," Retief said sharply. The guard swiveled a pair of eyes toward him and uttered a faint Groaci yelp of dismay.

"A Soft One—" he started, but his feeble cry was cut off abruptly by a smart rap to the side of the jaw delivered by Gloom. Retief deftly caught the victim's helmet as he collapsed.

RETIEF quickly scouted the narrow gallery on which they now found themselves. From the platform at the end a complicated system of rods atop a tower was visible.

"Curious," Magnan whispered. "Trideo antennae here? I wasn't aware Lumbaga boasted transmission facilities."

"I have an idea the transmitter hasn't gone into full service yet," Retief said.

Further discussion was interrupted by a faint *whop-whop-whop*, which grew swiftly louder. A copter swept low over the tree tops, made a sliding turn and came back to hover for a moment before settling gently to the roof of the building. The pilot—a small, thin-legged individual wrapped in a black cloak and wearing a solar topi—hopped down and disappeared into the shadows.

Light shone a moment later from an opened hatch in the roof, into which the new arrival descended, closing the panel behind him.

"Give me a leg up, Gloom," Retief said.

"Anything for you, pal," the local said dubiously, grasping his own shin firmly. "But are you sure you can use it?"

"On second thought, just a boost will do," Retief amended. Gloom offered linked hands as a stirrup; Retief went up the wall. The roof was deserted but for the silent copter squatting inside a yellow-painted circle. He leaned back to lend a hand to Magnan, then to Gloom. Together they crossed to the trapdoor. It opened soundlessly. Steep steps led down into deep gloom. At the bottom, Retief used his pocket flash quickly to check the room; it was empty but for stacked crates and cartons bearing stenciled markings.

"Electronic gear," Retief said. "And surgical supplies."

"Here's one labeled: Acme Theatrical Services," Magnan whispered. "Curious, I never suspected the Groaci had an interest in amateur dramatics."

"I suspect they may have entered the field at a professional level," Retief said.

The storeroom opened into a narrow, dimly lit passage. Faint murmurings sounded from behind a door. Retief went to it, put his ear against the panel.

“... to have come within an ace of discovery!” hissed a breathy Groaci voice. “To make all haste now—”

“The inadvisability of rushing the cadence!” another voice replied. “To not louse up the triumphant culmination of my researches!”

“Yes, yes, to get on with it. To have a tight schedule.”

A muted humming sound started up; a faint odor of ozone filtered through the closed door.

“Sounds like an illegal transmitter,” Retief said.

“What’s illegal about a transmitter?” Gloom demanded.

“Let’s find out.” Retief turned the doorknob silently, eased the door open an inch. Two Groaci, one in bile-green shorts and orange and violet argyles, the other in a stained white laboratory smock and holding a clipboard, stood before a wide panel thickly set with dials, switches, oscilloscope tubes and blinking indicator lights. One side of the room was given over to stacked cages in which eyeballs, kidneys, adenoids and other forms of Lumbagan wildlife perched disconsolately on twigs or moped glumly in corners amid scattered straw.

“...the completion of preliminary testing,” the technician was whispering, “to be ready now to conduct field trials of limited range, after which, on to the final

stage in the fulfillment of selfless Groaci objectives with all deliberate haste!”

“To spare me the propaganda,” the other snapped. “To have read the official handouts. To now tellingly demonstrate the effectiveness of the device without further procrastination.”

THE technician turned to the control panel, began setting dials in a complicated sequence, referring frequently to the clipboard.

“Haste, haste,” the other Groaci muttered. “To not procrastinate in the eye of the metaphorical cannon—or is it the mouth of the needle?”

He stepped forward suddenly and, before the other could intercept him, pushed the largest button on the panel.

With a hoarse bellow Gloom plunged past Retief, slammed the door wide and bounded into the room. The two Groaci whirled, uttered shrill yelps and dived in opposite directions. The small creatures in their cages had gone into a flurry of activity, Retief noted peripherally, hurling themselves against the wire mesh as if frantic to come to grips with their neighbors. The momentum of Gloom’s charge carried him full tilt against the button-studded console. Lights flashed; harsh buzzings sounded, ending in a crackle of arcing electricity. Gloom stag-

gered back and sat down hard. The lab animals subsided as abruptly as they had leaped into motion. Retief jumped forward in time to nab the technician as he dithered, unsure which way to run. A door slammed at the back of the room.

"Retief! What in the world—" Magnan quavered, peering from the door.

"Oh boy," Gloom muttered, fingering his head with all three hands as he sat weaving in the middle of the room. "Oh boy oh boy oh boy—"

"Would you care to amplify that remark?" Retief asked, holding the struggling Groaci.

"I guess I blew it, huh?" the Lumbagan said blurrily. "I don't know what come over me, Retief. It was like Festival time and Spring Rites and the Fall Offensive all hit me at once. All of a sudden I was raring to go. Too bad that Terry got away. I would have liked to field-strip the little rascal just to see what color juice ran out of him." He eyed Retief's prisoner wistfully. "The fit's passed—but I still got kind of a lingering urge to pull that Terry apart, one skinny leg at a time."

Far away, an alarm bell clanged harshly.

"Now are you undone, abominable intruders," the Groaci hissed. "In moments my well-trained guards will fall upon you, your misshapen members to distribute over the immediate landscape."

"Retief, we have to get out of here at once," Magnan yelled. "If a platoon of Peace-keepers should get their nasty little digits on us—"

"Yeah, let's blow," Gloom agreed. "Me and cops never did get on too good together."

VIII

RETIEF released the Groaci, who at once darted for cover behind the nearest rank of cages. The hall was empty. A lone Peace-keeper appeared at the far end of the corridor and set up a weak shout as they dashed for the storeroom. Inside, Retief and Gloom paused long enough to stack a half-dozen crates against the door before ascending to the roof. Magnan was at the parapet, staring down into the darkness.

"Trapped," he hissed. "Retief—the grounds are swarming with them! And—" he uttered a stifled exclamation. "Retief! Look!"

In the gloom below Retief could discern the forms of several dozen armed troops in flaring helmets, polished greaves and spined hip cloaks, moving efficiently out to surround the building.

"Retief—what does it mean? This laboratory, hidden in the wilds; that insane monster farm and that horrible little Nith—and his obscure experiments—and now Groaci troops secretly garrisoned in the boondock?"

"It means we know enough now

for a preliminary report. If you'll give Ambassador Pouncetrifle the details of what we've learned—"

"But, Retief—what *have* we learned?"

"That the Groaci have worked out a method of controlling Lum-bagan evolution, plus a method of selectively stimulating the natives' natural love of hostilities."

"But—whatever for?"

"You'd better get going now, Mr. Magnan. I seem to hear the sounds of a posse pounding on the door down below."

"Get going? You sp-speak as though I we-were expected to descend alone into that lion's den!"

"Not descend—ascend. The copter is a standard Groaci export model—"

"Yes, but—but I don't have my driver's license with me!"

A loud thumping sounded from below as the stacked cases toppled. Gloom slammed the trapdoor and stood on it.

"Better hurry, Mr. Magnan," Retief said. "Head due west and stay clear of the peaks."

Magnan made vague sounds of protest, but scrambled awkwardly into the copter. He pressed the starter; the rotors turned, spun quickly up to speed.

"It seems a trifle irresponsible, dashing off and leaving you here alone, Retief," he called and winced as thunderous pounding shook the trapdoor.

"I hope them Terries don't take

a notion to send a few rounds of explosive slugs through this hatch," Gloom said, struggling for balance as the door heaved under him.

"—but as you point out, duty calls," Magnan added quickly and, with a hasty wave, lifted off into the night.

"I DON'T get it," Gloom said as the sound of the machine faded. "You said Ambassador Pouncetrifle? I thought he was the head Terry."

"I think it's time for me to clear up a slight misapprehension you've been laboring under, Gloom," Retief said. "Those aren't actually Terries down there—they're Groaci."

"Huh? But they look just like what's-his-face, Nith, only bigger!"

"Correct. That's because Nith is a Groaci, too."

"But if he's a Groaci—then what about whozis—the one that just run out on us?"

"Mr. Magnan," Retief confided, "is actually a Terry."

"Aha! I should of known. Talk about masters of disguise. Pretty slick, the way you got rid of him—" Gloom paused reflectively. "But—if they're Groaci down there, how come we don't just open up and shake hands all around?"

"They think I'm a Terry."

"Oh, boy, that complicates things. How come you don't tell

'em who you really are and—"

"Undercover operation."

"Oh, I get it. Or do I?" Gloom said vaguely. "But I guess I can worry about that later, after we get out of this mess. What nifty trick are you going to pull out of the hat now? Frankly, if I didn't have lots of confidence in you, Retief, I'd be getting worried about now."

"I think you may as well go ahead and worry, Gloom," Retief said. "On this occasion I'm fresh out of hats."

"You mean—"

The hatch gave a tremendous lurch, sending the Lumbagan staggering. It flew open and a Groaci warrior bounded forth, power gun aimed, his fellows crowding out behind him.

"He means, noxious encroacher, that now indeed is your fate upon you!" The white-jacketed Groaci technician moved forward.

"How about it, Retief," Gloom said from the corner of his mouth. "We could jump 'em—but what I say is, why give 'em the fun of blowing us into sausage?"

"Wait!" a piercing voice called from the rear.

The Groaci soldiery fell back, came to rigid attention. In the sudden silence the technician ducked his head servilely, stepping aside as an impressive figure wrapped in a black cloak with a twist of gold braid adorning the stiff collar strode forward. Typically Groacian except for his six-foot height,

the newcomer stared Retief up and down, ignoring Gloom.

"So, impetuous Terry," he rasped in a voice surprisingly vigorous for a Groaci. "We meet at last."

"Swarmmaster Ussh, I presume?" Retief said. "Your Ultimateness has led us an interesting chase."

"And one pursued to your indescribable sorrow," Ussh grated.

"I'VE SEEN your experimental monster farm," Retief said. "The woods seem full of unsuccessful experiments in forced evolution."

"As I suspected, the true implications of what you've seen has been lost on your limited imagination. Soon, however—"

"I think I got it. Manipulating Lumbagans at random is all very well, but it would be a bit difficult to stage anything more organized than a free-for-all unless you could elicit uniform responses. Ergo—uniform puppets."

"You've correctly gauged the more pedestrian portions of my plot, Terran dupe! But you've failed utterly to grasp the incredible scope of my true greatness! While you dashed hither and thither, assembling your trifling clues, my giant intellect has been coolly completing the final detail work. And now—tonight—the New Age dawns, ushered in by the successor

to all previous life forms, namely myself!"

"What is this guy, nuts or something?" Gloom muttered. "If he's so busy why's he standing around making speeches?"

"He's trying to find out how much we know," Retief said.

Swarmmaster Ussh waved a negligent hand. "Petty minds can but ascribe petty motives. What you may or may not know is a matter of supreme indifference—and I include any fragmentary facts in the possession of your flown accomplice, for whose absence from this group certain incompetents will suffer. In fact, I freely confide in you: tonight I assume planetary rule. Tomorrow I issue my ultimatum to the Galaxy. Next week—but contain yourself in patience. You yourself—in chains, of course—shall serve as my emissary to carry the terms to your former masters! As for the Untouchable, you may retain him as your personal menial."

"I assumed you had a reason for not shooting us immediately.

"I do nothing without a supremely practical motive." Ussh stated flatly. "And now—will you go to your durance peacefully or will it be necessary for me to have you dragged by the heels, a most undignified progress for a future Slave Ambassador."

"I think a period of quiet contemplation may be just what we need at this point," Retief said.

THE dungeon into which Retief and Gloom were conducted cut deep into the rock beneath the secret Groaci lab, was a damp chamber, six feet by eight, without lights, furniture or other amenities. The narrow portal through which they had entered was barred by a thick door of solid iron. The ceiling was a seamless surface of rough-hewn stone, as were the walls and floor.

"At least we got a drain hole," Gloom commented after they had conducted an examination of their prison by the light of Retief's cigar lighter. "If worst gets to worst, I can always flush myself down the sewer; but don't worry, pal. I'll stick around and keep you company until you starve to death before I split—and I do mean split."

"That's thoughtful Gloom, but maybe it won't come to that."

"Aha—so you *have* got a couple aces up your sleeve. I figured. Come on, Retief, let me in on the scheme. How are we going to hoist these Terries—"

"Groaci."

"Whatever you call 'em, I still don't like 'em. What dramatic stroke are we going to bring off now?"

"First we find a comfortable spot on the floor," Retief said.

"Yeah? Okay, I'm with you so far."

"Then we wait."

"I'll be frank with you, Retief: somehow the program don't sound too promising."

"It's all I have to offer at the moment."

"Oh." A pause. "Are we, ah, waiting for anything in particular?"

"I'd be inclined to jump at anything that comes along."

"You must be joshing, Retief. How can anything come along to jump at. We're locked up in an underground dungeon with only one hole in it, namely the one the bilge runs out of?"

"That narrows it down," Retief conceded.

"You mean—"

"Shhh—listen."

A faint rustling sound became audible. Retief thumbed his lighter; the pale flame cast a feeble glow across the slimy floor.

Something stirred below the four-inch drain orifice.

An eyeball crept into view on spidery legs, swiveling to look around the cell before emerging onto the floor. Behind it an ear fluttered up the shaft, circled the chamber, came to rest in a far corner. A hand crawled into view, paused to hold up two fingers in a V, then turned to assist a set of sweetbreads over the coping.

"Cripes," Gloom muttered as more and more Freebies swarmed into the cell. "What is this, a convention? The place is crawling with vermin!"

"Steady, Gloom," Retief cautioned. "When I said jump, I didn't mean literally."

"It figures the crumbums would stick us in a hole infested with parasites!"

"Keep your voice down, Gloom. If our jailors suspect we have guests, they'll soon be along to break up the party."

"Yeah—even a bunch o' Terries—or Groaci—foreigners, anyway—ought to have the decency to fumigate the place if we put up a howl—" Gloom broke off, his mouth hanging open in an expression of horrified outrage. "Why, the lousy, dirty, obscene little buggers!" he gasped. "Right out in public, too!"

Under the feeble beam of the lighter, the eyeball had edged close to a generously proportioned nose which waited coyly for its advance. They touched, groped—and melted into a close embrace. A second eye appeared from the drain, glanced around, rushed to the conjoining couple and promptly took up a position on the opposite side of the nose. An upper lip linked with them, as other candidates crowded around, while more and more streamed up from the depths.

"It's—it's a regular orgy, like I heard about but never got in on!" Gloom blurted, and raised a large, booted foot to stamp out the objectionable spectacle; Retief caught his ankle barely in time, dumped him on his back.

"Easy, Gloom," he said. "It's time you faced up to the facts of life."

"Just wait until I get my other lung in place," a breathy voice squeaked from the direction of the congregating singletons, "and I'll give that big hypocrite a piece of my mind! Maybe that'll raise his IQ to the moron level so he can understand me when I tell him what I think of him."

"I thought maybe it was you who's been dogging my footsteps," Retief said. "Welcome aboard, Ignarp. You couldn't have come at a better time."

IX

"SO THAT'S our Big Secret, Retief," Ignarp said five minutes later. He was completely reassembled now, his component parts having settled into position and accommodated themselves so perfectly that the lines of juncture were barely visible. Being able to reassemble gives us a big advantage. That's why the rest of 'em are out to get us!"

"The reasons normal Lumbagans got no use for these degenerates," Gloom stated with contempt, "is on account of they got no finer feelings. When they put themselves together thataway, they as good as admit all us Lumbagans evolved from lower forms!"

"Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," Ignarp said smugly. "Everybody knows that."

"Sure—but decent folks don't admit it!"

"Which brings us to the question of why you trailed me here," Retief said.

"I told you I'd keep an eye on you—"

"Yes, I saw it fluttering in the middle distance."

"And it looks to me like maybe things are even worse than we thought. And you're the only one that maybe can do something about it. Ergo—here I am. What can I do? Get you some light reading matter? Take last messages to loved ones?"

"Better yet, you can get us out of here."

"I don't know, Retief," Ignarp said, eyeing Gloom, who stood at the far side of the cell, arms folded, a sullen expression on his face. "Why should I go to bail this clod out of stir?"

"Because I'm afraid my plan won't work without him," Retief said.

"Who needs him?" Ignarp challenged. "All I have to do is slide back out the way I came in—"

"I still don't believe it," Gloom muttered. "Me—associating with this degenerate. Having to stand here and listen to him talk about it."

"—infiltrate the building and reassemble inside. Then, when you pound on the door and yell and the guard comes to work you over with the rubber hoses, I jump out and nail him."

"I got a better idea," Gloom said.

"Retief, you lend your coat to this deviate; we set up a yell, and when the bums come running, they open the door and see the two of you up against the wall thumbing your noses. Naturally, they come charging in—and I jump out behind 'em and lay 'em low."

"Some plan," Ignarp commented. "They see Retief without his coat and a total stranger wearing it, and that's supposed to lull their suspicions?"

"Okay, I borrow his coat—"

"So they see *him* without a coat and me naked—and they figure I'm you, only two feet shorter and better looking—"

"No, I got it. Retief borrows *my* coat—"

"You're not wearing one, dummy."

"So he keeps his coat! You get back of the door—"

"Don't tell me what to do, tall, spotted, and grotesque!"

"You got a nerve, short, blotchy, and depraved! I got a good mind—"

"Want to bet? We do it my way. See you later, Retief—"

"How about waiting long enough to hear my proposal, Ignarp?"

"Well—okay. Who wears your coat?"

"I do. It's you two fellows who have some changes to make."

"Huh?" Gloom said uneasily.

"What you got in mind?" Ignarp said suspiciously.

"Something far worse than you think," Retief said. "Tell me, Ignarp, how would you like to see Lumbaga pacified by a dictator?"

"You kidding? We like to fight among ourselves. Having all the fat in the hands of the exploiting classes is bad enough without some spoilsport depriving us of our national sport and pastime. Forget it, Retief—"

"I'D BE glad to, but I'm afraid a fellow named Ussh has a more tenacious memory. Unless we do something to stop it, by this time tomorrow Lumbaga will be at peace—permanently."

"Well, what are we hanging around here for?" Ignarp demanded. "Let's try my plan, and—"

"All the more reason to get going on *my* plan!" Gloom cut in.

"Gentlemen," Retief interrupted, "there comes a time in any friendly fight when it's wise to pause and give a thought to consequences. At this moment the opposition is busy putting the finishing touches on a plan that's been years in the making. The occupying armies are already marching on the capital—and we're sealed in a vault forty feet underground, engaged in a jurisdictional dispute."

"Uh—well—" Gloom said.

"It doesn't look good, does it?"

Ignarp said soberly.

"The proposals now before us,"

Retief said, "would afford a few satisfying cracks at the heads of our captors and might even get us as far as the end of the hall before the inevitable end. What's required is a plan with sufficient scope to carry us through to a successful conclusion."

"I'll buy that," Gloom said. "But—"

"Out with it, Retief," Ignarp said. "I've got a funny feeling I'm not going to like this."

"Probably not," Retief agreed. In a few brief words, he outlined his proposal.

A stunned silence followed.

"Retief! And I thought you were a fine, upstanding fellow—for a foreigner," Ignarp berated him weakly.

"If I hadn't heard it I wouldn't have believed it," Gloom said in a choked voice.

"Well, how about it, gentlemen?" Retief said. "We don't have much time."

"You expect me to lend countenance to a thing like that?" Ignarp protested. "It's enough to make your eyebrows crawl!"

"What if my friends heard about it?" Gloom muttered.

"It's not traditional," Ignarp complained.

"It's against nature."

"Mongrelization—"

"I'll be dragged down to his level—"

"It'll never work."

"Couldn't we talk about it first?"

For a few years, say—or maybe a century or so?"

"It's now or never, fellows," Retief said. "After tomorrow every Lumbagan on the planet will be herded into a Freeby farm and integrated forcibly, regardless of his sensitivities."

"Me?" Gloom said. "And that—that—dilettante?"

"That—that oof—and me?" Ignarp wailed.

"It's that—or something worse," Retief said with finality.

"Could you at least—douse the light?" Ignarp said.

"I need a shot o' rum," Gloom said.

"Of course." Retief handed over his flask and switched off; the dim glow faded.

In the darkness there were soft, tentative scufflings, faint mutterings; Retief paced the cell—three paces, back three paces—whistling softly to himself.

Time passed.

Silence fell. Retief paused.

"Ready, gentlemen?"

"We—I—guess so," a curiously mellow voice answered. Then, more strongly: "Yes, ready, Retief."

He flicked on the lighter. In its glow stood not the dumpy Ignarp nor the lanky Gloom, but a tall, superbly muscled figure, brawny arms folded over a mighty chest, four golden eyes glowing from a broad and noble brow alight with intellect.

“HOW do I—we look?” the idealized Lumbagan inquired.

“Ready for anything,” Retief said. “By the way, what do I call you now? Somehow neither Ignoop nor Glarp seems to fit the new you.”

“What about—Lucael?”

“It’s better than Michifer. Now, Luke—if you’ll pardon the familiarity—I think we’d best get on with the next phase without delay.”

“The next phase?”

“As the first Octuple Lumbagan in history, I assume you have unique abilities. Let’s find out what they are.”

“Yes—I see. The conclusion is logical. By introspection, I note that I have, of course, enhanced physical strength and endurance, exceptionally keen hearing and vision.” Lucael paused. “A most interesting effect,” he said. “By bringing either pair of eyes to bear on an object, I of course achieve the familiar stereoscopic effect: three-dimensional sight—a vast improvement over the monocular vision of the former Gloom identity. But when I bring both pairs into play simultaneously, channeling the impression through my compound occipital lobes, there is an exponential improvement. I can clearly perceive nine dimensions: five spatial, two temporal, and two more the nature of which will require careful analysis—” the resonant baritone faded off as

Lucael stared, somewhat cross-eyed, at the corner of the room.

“You’ll have plenty of time later for research in depth, Luke. For the moment we’d better stick to the practical applications.”

“Of course. The first order of business, clearly, is to adjust spatial coordinates in such fashion that our *loci* lie external to the enclosure by which we are at present circumscribed.”

“Unequivocally, if not succinctly, put. Any suggestions?”

“Hmmm.” Lucael glanced at each of the four walls in turn. “Solid rock to a depth of several hundred feet on all sides.” He stared at the floor. “Twenty-five miles of rock, underlain by a viscous fluid at high temperature and pressure. Fascinating!”

“That leaves the ceiling,” Retief prompted.

“To be sure.” Lucael glanced up. “Yes, this is the simplest route.” He glanced at Retief. “Shall we go?”

“After you.”

The super-Lumbagan nodded, folded his arms—both pairs—and rose gently from the floor. In the moment before his head would have contacted the ceiling the rocky surface seemed to shimmer, fading suddenly to invisibility. Without pausing, Lucael rose steadily up, waist, knees, ankles, to disappear from sight. A moment later a sharp, breathy cry sounded, followed by a dull thump.

RETIEF crouched, jumped, caught the edge of the circular opening now miraculously existing in the stone slab, pulled himself up into what appeared to be a guard-room. A lone Groaci lay stretched on the floor, peacefully snoring.

"It was necessary to numb his cortical synapses—temporarily, of course," Lucael said apologetically. "Poor little creature, so full of vain plans and misconceptions."

"Aren't we all," Retief said. "Luke, let's see how good you are at finding things at a distance. We need fast transportation."

"Let me see . . . Hmmm. I detect a boat at a distance of three hundred yards on an azimuth of $181^{\circ} 24'$."

"What kind of boat?"

"A hand-hewn canoe sunk in four fathoms of water. There's a large hole in the bottom."

"Skip that one, Luke. How about a nice two-man copter?"

"No—nothing like that. However, I note a modest power launch lying at anchor some two miles to the east."

"Ensign Yubb must still be busy pacifying the army. I believe his boat was powered by a small fusion jet. I don't suppose—"

"I've already started it," Lucael said. "Just a moment while I lift the anchor—there. Now, let me see: which is reverse? Oh, yes. Now, all ahead, half speed until she's past the bar—"

"Nice work, Luke. While you're

bringing her around to this side of the island take a quick scan of the building."

"Very well. A guard or two dozing in the keep. Two Groaci in sick bay with contusions. Half a dozen unfortunates lodged in the brig. Ussh seems to be gone. Yes, I detect his aura—a most powerful one—some ten miles to the east, traveling fast."

"It's time we emulated him. Let's go, Luke; we don't want to miss all the excitement."

"You refer to the moment when Ussh announces his assumption of power and his program of Galactic conquest?"

"No," Retief said. "I mean the moment when he discovers that Newton's Third Law applies to politicians as well as ping-pong balls."

They met no opposition as they left the now almost deserted building. Lucael picked a route down the hill through the dense woods to emerge on the beach just as the unmanned power launch rounded the curve of the shore and headed in toward the beach. They splashed out through the shallows as the engine cut; the boat glided silently up to them. Aboard, Lucael restarted the engines and Retief took the helm.

"Ussh's first column has just entered the city from the west," Lucael announced. "He himself is at this moment leading a procession along Brigand Street toward the

palace. Rioting seems to be proceeding as usual."

"Let's be grateful for His Ultimateness's fondness for dramatic gestures," Retief said. "If he'll occupy himself with his victory parade for an hour or so we may be in time."

"In time to thwart his coup?"

"Probably not. But with luck in time to stage a small coup of our own." He opened the throttles and the powerful boat surged ahead across the dark water toward the city lights fifteen miles to the east.

THE shadowy shapes of Groogroo, Delerion and Rumboogie rose in turn from the darkness, slid past on the port side, dwindled astern, none showing any signs of life with the exception of a few small campfires glowing high on their forested slopes. Ahead, the lights of Thieves' Harbor spread wider, reaching out to enclose them as they passed the breakwater. The wharves were deserted as the sleek craft nosed up to the Municipal Pier.

Retief cut the power, tossed a line around a piling and jumped to the wharf.

"The place looks strange without at least one small street fight in progress," he said. "Apparently it takes a war to bring peace to Lumbaga."

"The crowds have gathered near the palace complex," Lucael said. "A cordon of armed troops sur-

rounds the area. Ussh is in the ballroom, in company with a number of off-worlders."

"Is Ambassador Pouncetrifle among those present?" Retief described the Terran Plenipotentiary. Lucael confirmed that he was included in the group.

"They seem to be linked together," the super-Lumbagan added, "by means of a chain attached to a series of metal collars which in turn encircle their necks."

"Apparently Ussh intends to establish a no-nonsense foreign policy," Retief commented. "The idea has merit, but in the present case we'll have to try to introduce a little nonsense after all."

"Interference may prove difficult. All entrances are blocked by the crowd. I can of course levitate myself to any desired point within the atmosphere, but the amount of extra weight I'm capable of carrying is limited."

"Piggyback is out, then. Let's try the back door where your Ignarp segment and I first met."

Retief led the way across the plaza and down Dacoit street, poorly lit by the widely spaced gaslamps, deserted now, littered with the forlorn flotsam crowds leave behind. They were within a hundred feet of the inconspicuous door when a small party of helmeted and greaved Groaci soldiers emerged suddenly from a narrow cross street ahead. The officer in charge hissed an order; his troops

spread out to block the way, then one by one crumpled to the cobblestones. The officer, the last on his feet, stared uncomprehendingly at his collapsing command, then belatedly jerked his pistol from its sequined holster only to drop it, totter two steps, and fall.

Lucael staggered back against the wall of the building beside them, his face working like yeast.

"Geeze—I just had the screwiest nightmare," he muttered, almost in Gloom's voice. "Another—lousy trick by—unprincipled exploiters, I'll wager," he added in Ignarp's petulant tones.

"Luke! Pull yourself together!" Retief snapped. "You can't afford to go to pieces now!"

Lucael's features twitched and subsided. The four golden eyes settled back into position.

"I—find that—there are limitations to my power output," he said weakly.

"Come on, Luke. Just a little farther." They covered the remaining yards to the doorway. The heavy door opened on the musty passage.

"From now on save your strength for emergencies," Retief said. "I think I can guarantee there'll be a steady supply."

THEY threaded the route through the dusty passages, ascended the stairs to the kitchens, which they found deserted and showing signs of rapid evacuation.

A cramped spiral service stair led from an alcove beside the dumbwaiter to the upper stories. At the top, faint voices muttered beyond the door which opened into the private-apartment wing.

"A party of minor Groaci officials," Lucael said, speaking with his eyes closed. "They seem to be placing wagers as to whether Terra will be granted colony status or merely regarded as conquered territory." He paused. "They're gone now."

Retief eased the outer door open half an inch; crimson carpet led to a pair of massive, carved purplewood inner doors, just closing behind the sporting aliens. Retief went swiftly forward, got a foot between the doors before they closed. The anteroom beyond was empty; through a low, arched opening the barbarically splendid ballroom was visible, crowded with a mixed throng of locals and aliens. In an elaborately carved chair at the far end of the room sat a towering Lumbagan draped in a robe of Imperial purple, flanked on one side by Colonel Suash at the head of an honor guard of matched native troops in shining cuirasses and polished helmets, power guns at present arms, impressive in spite of a number of black eyes and bandages in evidence. At the other side of the throne stood a detachment of Groaci Peace-keepers in full uniform. A gaggle of Groaci functionaries, including

Ambassador Jith, stood nearby. Ambassador Pouncetrifle, leaning sideways because of the weight of the chain on his neck, stood before the throne; a dozen or so members of his staff huddled behind him in a tight group, none apparently craving the honor of sharing the front rank with the Chief of Mission.

"... sensible of the honor and all that, your Imperial Highness," the Terran Ambassador was saying, "but see here, I can't simply offer Terran recognition of your regime on my own authority."

"Let's simplify the proposition," a deep bass voice boomed from the Imperial chair. "Acknowledge our divine right and sign the treaty and we'll allow you to linger to observe our coronation before you are whipped back to your kennels."

"Ah, if I might venture an observation—" A faint voice spoke up from the Groaci delegation. Ambassador Jith stepped forward. "While one fully appreciates the eminent propriety of the installation of a native Lumbagan regime entertaining kindly sentiments toward the Groacian state—"

"Yes, yes, get on with it!" the enthroned Lumbagan rumbled.

"To be sure, Your Imperial Highness—I merely meant to suggest that perhaps a less precipitate approach to the question of recognition—"

"Our photograph, hand-tinted by skilled coolies, will be distrib-

uted to every village, hamlet, and town in the Eastern Arm. Recognitionwise, we'll be better known than that fellow Whatzizname who won the noodle-knitting contest on TV!"

"Doubtless, sire, your fame will be quickly spread abroad—"

"No broads! As an asexual race, we Lumbagans look with disfavor on any sport we can't get in on. That's enough of the subject. On with the formalities." His Highness favored Pouncetrifle with a scowl involving three eyes and four eyebrows. "Well, what about it, Terran? Do you want to acknowledge the legitimacy of our gracious rule and receive an exequatur allowing you to go on using up our Lumbagan air—or would you prefer to play a stellar role in the first death sentence we hand down from our newly established throne?"

"Apparently Your Imperial Highness is having his little jape," Jith hissed in apparent dismay. "As Groacian Plenipotentiary, I must advise that the Groacian state would look with extreme disfavor on the establishment of any unfortunate precedent with regard to informal methods of diplomat disposal. A simple declaration of *persona non grata*—"

"Nope. Italian food gives us heartburn," the Imperial figure decreed. "And if we hear any more static from aliens of any persuasion we might just revise our whole

plan for Galactic enlightenment to include you Groaci out!"

AN UNUSUALLY tall and robust Groaci stepped forward from the rear rank.

"Ussh!" Lucael whispered.

"I'm sure that matters need not come to that," Ussh said unctiously. "Doubtless His Excellency, on further consideration, will wish to withdraw his objection."

The Emperor-elect, who had slumped rather vaguely on his throne as the Groaci spoke, sat up alertly.

"Very well; on with the executions. We'll make a note to send for a fresh set of Terries more amenable to reason—"

"To protest this unwarranted assumption of authority," Jith whispered urgently in his own language to Ussh. "To remind you—Special Appointee or otherwise—that I am ranking Groacian official here!"

"I see no reason to coddle Ter-ran spies," the other replied in Lumbagan. "This is Groac's opportunity to get in on the ground floor—why annoy His Imperial Highness with minor quibbles on technical points?"

"To point out that once these natives begin lopping alien heads, Groaci organ clusters may be next to roll."

Retief's companion was staring at nothing, his eyes half closed. Ussh stirred uneasily, looked around the ornate room.

"It appears that I now confront an intellect equal or superior to my own," Lucael murmured. "He sensed my touch and instantly erected barriers, the strength of which I cannot assess."

"Enough!" the enthroned Lumbagan spoke up abruptly, as if returning from a reverie. "Captain—he pointed a limber digit at the guard chief—"escort the condemned to the courtyard and give your marksmen some unscheduled target practice. No need to finish them off in a hurry; just keep peppering away until they stop twitching."

"Time to move," Retief said. "Luke—stay out of sight and keep an eye on Ussh. No matter what happens, stay tuned to him—and don't tip your hand prematurely."

"What's your plan, Retief? I'm not at all sure I can control him—"

"No time for plans; we'll have to play it by ear," Retief said and thrust the doors wide.

"Hold everything gentlemen," he said as all eyes turned toward him. "There are new dispatches just in from the hustings that cast a different complexion on matters."

X

FOR a moment total silence gripped the chamber.

Then: "Seize him!" Ussh snarled. When the guards failed to

move he repeated the order in a shout.

"Don't slip out of character, Ussh," Retief said. "You're just a Groaci MHPP, remember? The troops work for His Putative Highness the Emperor-to-be."

"Retief!" Pouncetrifle blurted hastily in Terran. "Run for it, man! The official comset is in my quarters, at the back of the wardrobe under my golf clubs. Send out a code three-oh-two—"

"Uh—what about it, Your Highness?" Colonel Suash said hesitantly, still standing fast. "Is it your command to nab this foreigner?"

The would-be emperor's mouth sagged slightly open. His expression was that of someone lost in thought.

"His Highness—" Ussh said and paused. He seemed to be struggling silently with himself.

"Looking for just the right word, Ussh?" Retief inquired amiably. He turned to the colonel. "Relax Suash," he said. "As you can see, His Highness is having second thoughts on a number of matters."

"Take—" the Emperor said. Retief took a swift step toward Ussh, who recoiled.

"Stand back, Terran!" he hissed.

"Your Highness?" said Colonel Suash, staring up at the musing figure on the throne.

"Ughhrrr," the royal claimant

said, gazing vacantly into space.

"Ah—Your Highness?" Suash repeated. "In the, uh, absence of any new orders, I presume I must carry out the executions?"

"Just a minute, Colonel," Retief said. "You Lumbagans don't take orders from foreigners, do you?"

"Not on your second-best toupee I don't," the officer snapped. "So don't try to give me any!"

"By no means, Colonel. I'm referring to Swarmmaster Ussh, who represents himself as a Special Appointee of the Groacian High Council."

"I don't take orders from him either."

"No," Retief said, and pointed to the throne, "but his would-be Highness does."

"What?" The officer half drew his dress sword and turned to the emperor-elect. "Do you mind if I chop this foreigner down right here, Your Highness, for that crack he just made about you?"

"Ungungunggg," the enthroned Lumbagan mumbled. His head rolled on his shoulder; his mouth hung slackly open. Abruptly he closed it, pulled himself upright.

"We were just, ah, pondering our next pronouncement," he said briskly, as Retief took another step toward Ussh, who stood frozen, two eyes canted tautly toward the throne, the other three hanging limp. At the Terran's ad-

vance, he spun to face him.

"Now, Colonel—" the Emperor-to-be paused, mouth open.

"Yes, Your Highness?" the colonel watched in dismay as his ruler-presumptive's expression relaxed into vacuity.

"You might as well address your remarks to Ussh," Retief advised the officer. "He's the brains of the operation."

"See here, Retief," Pouncetrifle spoke up. "The intellectual prowess of the Emperor is no concern of ours—"

"It's the intellectual prowess of Ussh I'm thinking of at the moment, Mr. Ambassador. He has a number of rather unusual capabilities."

"Lies!" Ussh shouted. "Fantasies! The ravings of a disordered imagination! I'll see you all hanged for disrespect to His Imperial Highness! It's all a plot to discredit the people's choice, elevated by acclamation to the Lumbagan throne!" He was interrupted by a slithering sound, followed by a heavy thump as the Emperor slid from the elaborate chair and sprawled full length on the dais, snoring gently.

"**I**T'S a plot, all right, Ussh—but you're the one behind it," Retief said. "It wasn't His Imperial Highness who mobilized the troops and took the capital by storm—it was you."

"Guards! Shoot them down in

their tracks for aggravated *lèse-majesté!*" Ussh shouted.

"What about it, Colonel?" Retief addressed the guard chief. "Was it our slumbering host who gave the order to march on the capital?"

"Well—not personally, of course. General Ussh notified me—but he was simply relaying His Imperial Highnesses' commands—"

"Wasn't it also Ussh who passed along the instructions that organized your unit in the first place and handed out the orders regarding the secret laboratory?"

"Here, that's GUTS classification material you're discussing!"

"Not any more. You've been taken in, Colonel. Those were all Ussh's ideas—"

"Mr. Retief!" Ambassador Jith spoke up. "May I remind you that *I* am Principal Officer here and that *I* have given no such instructions to any member of the Groaci delegation—"

"I'm sure you haven't, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said. "But Ussh seems to have taken it upon himself to use your name."

"Very well!" Ussh hissed suddenly, wheeling to face the irate Groaci, who shrank back. "Perhaps I *have* employed unconventional methods. But clearly it's to Groac's advantage to go along with the *fait accompli!* As soon as the Emperor is safely ensconced on his throne, I'm in a position to

assure you that Groac will be the object of very special attentions by His Imperial Majesty."

"What's that?" Colonel Suash roared. "Are you suggesting that the Emperor of Lumbaga is nothing but a tool of foreign interests?"

"Not at all, Suash," Ussh hastened to reassure the officer. "Merely that the new Lumbagan government can rely on the full support of Groac." He turned back to Jith. "What about it, Your Excellency?" he said urgently. "You'll agree that it's clearly your duty to support His Highness' claim—"

"Don't listen to him, Jith," Pouncetrifle blurted. "You're quite right—Groac has no business whatever sticking its olfactory organ into Lumbaga's affairs, especially when I was right on the verge of proposing a well-rounded scheme for installing a provisional governing committee under Terran sponsorship—"

"You presume to tell me my duties, Harvey?" Jith cut in chillingly. "As my subordinate Swarmmaster Ussh so cogently points out, Groacian obligations in support of formerly exploited peoples require that I put aside ordinary protocols for the nonce and—"

"I don't like it," Suash spoke up. "It sounds to me as if you aliens are getting ready to slice Lumbaga up among yourselves! Ac-

cordingly, as senior Lumbagan national present, I'm assuming temporary command. And my first act will be to order the lot of you to the port to embark inside of thirty minutes, with or without your suitcases!"

"Fool!" Ussh snarled. "Do you imagine your feeble native regime can survive for a moment without the sponsorship of Groac? If it weren't for His Highness' temporary indisposition he'd have your head for this!"

"And I might add, my dear Colonel," Jith whispered piercingly, "that at a word from me, units of the Groacian Grand Battle Fleet are prepared, if necessary, to land and restore order here!"

"You wouldn't dare," Pouncetrifle quavered, jowls a quiver.

"Would I not?" Jith contradicted. "I see a great Groacian triumph in the offing! And now, Colonel," he addressed the officer, "you and your chaps may withdraw. I'm sure that His Highness will be himself in a moment—"

The Emperor stirred, sat up.

"Well, just felt a short nap coming on," he mumbled as he scrambled to his feet. "Now, you just run along as Jith suggested, Suash, and—"

"How do you know what he suggested?" Suash snapped back.

"You were out stone cold on the floor."

"Yes, well, as to that—"

"He knows," Retief said, "because Ussh is feeding him his lines."

"HAVE you taken leave of your senses, Terran meddler?" Ussh yelled. "Everyone in the room heard His Imperial Whatsit's cogent comments!"

"Uh-huh—but you were doing his thinking for him—what there was of it. Unhappily for the future of the empire, you can't think of two things at once. Right now, for example, you're busy being indignant with me—and your candidate for the crown is relaxing on the job."

Every head but those of Ussh, and Retief swiveled to regard the figure slumped again on the throne.

"Heavens!" Magnan gasped from the sidelines. "You mean we were about to offer our credentials to a ventriloquist's dummy?"

"Not quite. He's alive—but when Ussh assembled him he carefully left out the more useful portions of the brain."

Suash stared uncertainly from his potential sovereign to Ussh, who stood with canted eyestalks in a pose of total concentration.

"If that's true—"

"Nonsense, Colonel," the Lumbagan emperor-elect said firmly. "I repose the fullest confidence in Ussh, a marvelous fellow and my most trusted advisor. Now I think you'd better run along. We have

matters of high state policy to discuss."

"Don't go," Pouncetrifle cried. "Colonel Suash, I call on you in the name of humanity to remain present—there's no telling what might happen in the absence of witnesses."

"I take orders from His Highness, Terry." Suash snapped. "And he said go. Accordingly, we're going." The colonel barked a command. His troops right-shouldered arms and marched away across the polished floor.

"Retief—do something," Pouncetrifle wailed.

"Do what, Mr. Ambassador?" Ussh inquired in tones of triumph. "His Highness has spoken. And now—" he paused until the last of the Lumbagan soldiers filed from the room and the tall doors shut behind them—"and now, with those trouble-makers out of earshot, on to the disposition of the Terran spies—" He drew a power pistol from inside his ornate jacket. "A pity they should happen to be shot down by accident as they led an attempted assault on His Highness' person, but such are the tribulations that beset those who would stand in the path of empire."

"You wouldn't—" Pouncetrifle gasped.

"See here, Ussh," Ambassador Jith whispered. "You don't actually mean to commit violence on the persons of the Terrans, I trust? To deport them in restrain-

ing fetters, yes. But I forbid you to do away with them entirely."

"It will be our little secret, Your Excellency," Ussh cut in curtly. "His Imperial Highness has matters under complete control."

"Are you quite certain of that?" Jith asked, eyeing the presumptive ruler, who now stood swaying slightly, gazing into the middle distance. "He presents the appearance of an unsuccessful lobotomy case."

"Why not tell him the rest of the secrets, Ussh?" Retief said. "Let him know how clever you really are. Describe your discovery of a sure-fire method for assembling Lumbagans to order—according to any genetic code desired. Tell him about your experiments, which produced some rather unusual types, some of whom proved useful for special purposes, such as terrorizing the populace. Describe your soldier farm and let him in on the secret of the lab where you worked out the details of your hostility transmitter—"

"Silence, spy!" Ussh shouted.

"DON'T be modest," Retief urged. "Give the ambassador full details on how you plan to manufacture a few million soldiers modeled after himself and equipped by Groac, and use them to set up a modest empire in this end of the Arm, after which you'll no doubt establish branches on all the likely planets to raise spares for

the army. With forced feeding you can produce a fully equipped infantryman in a little under three weeks, gun and all—"

"Ha-ha," Ussh said. "You *will* have your little jest, eh? Gallows humor, I believe it's called."

"You made your big mistake, of course, Ussh, when you let Suash and his boys leave," Retief said. "He was your only chance to make it stick—"

"So you imagine." Ussh spun to face Jith. "The time has come for the carrying out of His Highness' commands. If you would like to do the job personally it would be a gracious touch in keeping with the close relations existing between Lumbaga and Groac."

"Wouldn't it though?" Retief said. "If you could con Ambassador Jith into committing himself to the murder of a covey of Terries he'd have no choice but to back your play. Fortunately, he won't be so foolish—"

"You think not!" Ussh snarled. "Jith—order them shot—now!"

"Don't you dare, Jith!" Pounce-trifle yelped. "I absolutely forbid it—"

"Forbid, you say?" Jith whispered. "You go too far, Harvey—" The Groaci Ambassador faced Ussh. "If you're *quite* sure the Terrans planned the murder of His Highness, it of course becomes my duty to—"

"To listen to the rest of the story," Retief said. "There are a

couple things Ussh forgot to mention—”

“Details, details!” Ussh yelled. “The important fact is that I, at the head of an army of dedicated troops, will lead the way to the conquest of vast new territories, eliminating or enslaving inferior peoples along the way, and in the end organizing the entire Galaxy as a single Empire under a single rule!”

“A glowing picture,” Retief said. “But of course Ambassador Jith has no reason to lend support to the scheme.”

“Have I not, Mr. Retief?” Jith whispered. “I admit Swarm-master Ussh has employed unorthodox methods—but if the end result is a Galactic Empire under Groac—”

“Correction, Mr. Ambassador. Groac will be among the first victims.”

“Victim? Of her own troops, under her own general Ussh? Preposterous!”

“It’s true that Ussh and his army will be in position to cut quite a swath, with Groaci backing and Groaci material. And no doubt in the end the CDT would come to what’s known as an accommodation with the *de facto* situation. But you’re forgetting an important datum. The troops who’ll be doing the conquering won’t be Groaci; they’ll be Lumbagans, no matter how many eyes they happen to have.”

“Well—as to that,” Jith stalled, looking to Ussh for counsel. “I assume that as honorary Groaci, true to their exalted somatotype, we may rely on General Ussh to keep the interests of his mother-world in the forefront of his mind.”

“**E**XACTLY,” Retief said. “And his mother world is Lumbaga.”

“Clearly he’s taken leave of his senses,” Ussh grated.

“Granted, he’s a most unusual Lumbagan,” Retief went on. “Normally, once an accretion of Freebies reached the Four-decker stage—at which point intelligence appears—their finer sensibilities prevent them from carrying evolution any farther. But it appears that General Ussh broke the taboo.”

“What vile allegation is this?” Ussh yelled.

“Careful, Ussh, you’ll give yourself away,” Retief said. “It doesn’t seem to vile to anybody but a Lumbagan.”

“This is all nonsense, of course,” Ambassador Jith purred. “But to satisfy my curiosity—go on, Mr. Retief.”

“Ussh—or whoever the original Lumbagan personality was who had the idea—overcame his scruples and integrated himself with another individual—possibly a Trip; a sub-intelligent creature, but of course the combination has

capabilities that exceed those of either of the original components. Unfortunately, he used his enhanced mental powers to concoct a scheme to take over Lumbaga first, then the rest of the material Universe. Naturally he needed help; he made a study of the foreigners present on his world and picked the Groaci as the likeliest partners. With his abilities, it wasn't hard for him to readjust his external appearance to match yours, Mr. Ambassador—"

"He's raving!" Ussh yelled. "How could anyone possibly—"

"It wasn't easy, at first—but you figured it out. Some of your practice models are still running around in the woods, making Groaci tracks to confuse the trail. But in the end you were able to palm yourself off on a few malcontents as a Groacian VHPP and enlist some behind-the-scenes help to set things up for your coup—"

"That, Terry, is your final error," Ussh grated and aimed the gun at Retief's ribs.

"Ussh—control yourself," Jith keened. "What simpler than to give the lie to this fantastic allegation?"

"Is it fantastic?" Retief said. "Ussh, deny you're a Lumbagan—but do it in Groaci, just to be certain your fellow countrybings don't miss any of the finer nuances."

"Bah, prepare to die, witless Terran—"

"Ussh, if you expect my aid and

support—do as he says," Jith hissed.

Ussh hesitated, then turned to include the Groaci delegation in his field of fire.

"Think what you like, Jith. You'll do as I bid or die with the Terrans. I'll explain to your successor how you and the Lumbagans slaughtered each other, only myself surviving—then I'll enlist his support and on to empire!"

"Why—why, Retief's right," Pouncetrifle gasped. "Jith—he won't speak Groaci—because he can't—at least in a way to fool you. He's an imposter!"

"Duped," Jith wailed. "Undone by my credulity—faked out of position and into unwitting support of a non-Groaci conquest by an underling—and a bogus one at that!"

"Don't feel too badly," Retief said. "He only intended to use you Groaci to finance his first few local takeovers. As soon as he'd consolidated his gains, Groac would have been quietly consolidated into his empire, with the help of a number of pseudo-Groaci agents who would have infiltrated Groac by then."

"Race on, Retief," Ussh invited. "Familiarize these fools with the scope of their folly and then—" Ussh whirled as the tall double doors burst wide. Lucael strode forward, his golden eyes gleaming.

"Yes? What is it?" Ussh barked

uncertainly. "You have dispatches from the field? Or—" He staggered suddenly, as if struck a heavy blow between the eyes.

"Treachery!" Ussh gasped—and Lucael stopped in his tracks, stood swaying. Face to face the two super-Lumbagans stood, locked in mortal—though invisible—conflict.

"Ussh," Retief called. The imitation Groaci half-turned—and in the momentary distraction, Lucael struck. Ussh gave a hoarse cry, stood dithering for a moment . . .

Like a tree struck by lightning, the false Groaci's body shivered and split. For a moment there was a wild scramble of parts as the former superbeing's components regrouped themselves into two separate entities, arms and legs and ears scuttling for their assigned plates. In a moment two short, sullen individuals stood where Ussh had been, staring apprehensively around at their astounded audience.

"Why—it's Difnog and Gnudf, the Lumbagan observers!" Pouncetrifle gasped.

"And apparently," Jith whispered, "They were more observant than we suspected!"

XI

IT WAS half an hour later. The Terran diplomats, freed of their shackles, had huddled with

their Groaci colleagues for an impromptu meeting.

"Well, then," Ambassador Pouncetrifle said crisply, "since General Ussh seems to have opted for a return to civilian life and His Highness is permanently catatonic, it appears we're left with the administrative problem of setting up a pro-tem housekeeping government. As Terran emissary, I'll reluctantly assume the chief role in affairs—"

"Hardly, My dear Harvey," Jith interjected. "Inasmuch as the present contretemps was produced in part by Grocian efforts—"

"Pseudo-Groacian efforts, need I remind you!"

"A mere quibble, Mr. Ambassador. Groac will undertake to set up a caretaker government, with the assistance of Colonel Suash and his native constabulary—"

"Gentlemen," Retief said.

"Aren't you forgetting the Emperor?"

"Eh?"

"What's that?" Both plenipotentiaries turned to survey the Imperial figurehead, who stood erect now, gazing sternly at the assembled foreigners.

"You need not trouble yourselves, gentlebeings," he said curtly. "I'll handle the government of Lumbaga—to the extent that Lumbaga needs governing." He turned, stepped up on the dais and seated himself on the throne.

"Item number one," he said im-

pressively. "Any foreigner found meddling in Lumbagan affairs will be shipped home in a plain wrapper. Item number two—"

"If we could go back for a moment to item one, Your Highness—"

"Make that 'Majesty,' Pouncetrifle. I've just assumed Imperial dignities for the duration of the emergency."

"To be sure, Your Majesty. I'm certain that on reflection you'll want to rescind the restriction on Terran participation in Lumbagan national life, inasmuch as, as worded, it would tend to somewhat restrict the free play of diplomacy—"

"Precisely. Item number two: since that government governs best which governs least, I intend to provide only the best for my people. Accordingly, all laws are declared illegal, including this one."

"Hmm." Pouncetrifle mused, "since His Majesty seems clearly to be *non compos mentis*, Jith, it's clear that duty requires that responsible authorities step in—in the interest of the welfare of the Lumbagan people. I trust you're with me?"

"Assuredly, Harvey," Jith whispered. "I suggest we find quieter quarters for His Majesty; possibly space could be found in the former root cellar, while you and I proceed to arrange matters in consonance with the principle of

the greatest good for the greatest number. And inasmuch as we Groaci breed like flies, I suppose you'll concede the obvious primacy of Groaci interests."

"No need for dispute," the Emperor cut in decisively. "Inasmuch as neither of you will have anything to say about Lumbagan affairs from now on."

"He's raving." Pouncetrifle stated flatly. "Jith, I call you to witness that His Majesty was babbling incoherently at the time I was forced to have him restrained. Retief—assist the poor fellow down from his chair—"

"Curious accoustics in this room," Retief said blandly. "I thought for a moment your Excellency was proposing that we lay hands on a foreign Chief of State."

"Mutiny, eh?" a Terran colonel barked. "Well, fortunately for democracy, I'm here to carry out the wishes of the people as interpreted by regs and expressed via appropriate channels—"

He advanced on the throne. Ten feet from it, he found himself floating an inch off the floor, his feed paddling vigorously. A brace of underlings sprang to his side, found themselves adrift, rising lightly as balloons toward the ceiling. Pouncetrifle uttered a bellow as he floated up from the floor, followed by Magnan and the rest of the staff. Jith uttered a faint cry and drifted upward, attended by *his* staff.

Only Retief and Lucael remained on their feet.

"Now that you've heard the details of the new constitution," the Emperor advised the levitating bureaucrats, "I declare the audience to be at an end. Don't bother backing from the presence—just disappear."

At his words there were a series of sharp *plops* as air imploded to fill the vacancies created by the suddenly absent dignitaries.

"I hope you didn't throw them completely away," Retief said. "Once they get their feet on the ground, I have an idea they'll take a realistic view of the proper role of diplomacy in the development of Lumbaga."

"They're sorting themselves from among the tubers in the sub-basement," His Majesty said. "And now—I declare Parliament dissolved—until—the next time—" he slumped on the throne and snored.

Retief turned quickly to face Lucael.

"Well done, Luke. I was wondering how long you could hold out."

"If anybody asks," the super-Lumbagan said in a failing voice, "tell them—their Emperor—will return—whenever the situation demands. And now—farewell, Retief—"

There was a final sharp implosion and Retief was alone in the throne room.

"**H**EAVENS, Retief," First Secretary Magnan said, "now that the excitement is over, one wonders if the entire affair weren't merely the product of group hysteria." They were sitting at a long plank table in the Imperial Feast Hall, dining somewhat meagerly on CDT emergency banquet rations in company with a cosmopolitan crowd of Terrans, Groaci, and Lumbagans.

"Frankly, I'd be tempted to dismiss the incident as sheer delerium," the Terran colonel put in, glumly spooning in caviar. "If it weren't for the fact that I've suffered a virulent recurrence of an old potato blight—" His expression brightened. "Of course, the condition will necessitate my being invalided home for a few months' convalescent leave, which time I might spend quite profitably penning a memoir of recent events, possibly titled: *The Importance of Mass Hallucination in Military Affairs.*"

"How about *The Hallucinatory Importance of the Military in Mass Affairs?*" Magnan proposed tartly.

"Gosh, Retief," Gloom said as the men of war and peace sparred verbally. "So you were really a Terry all along. Makes me feel kind of dumb to of been chumming around with the enemy. Lucky I changed sides."

"You claim there's two kinds of Terries, male and female,"

Ignarp said. "Frankly, you all look alike to me."

"Oh, there's a *vas deferens* between us," Retief assured his guest.

"And I never got my ransom dough," Gloom said glumly. "On the other hand, I found out running things ain't all a bowl of cherries."

"One taste of government was enough for me," Ignarp agreed. "I'll settle for good old anarchy any time."

"Umm," Magnan smiled loftily. "But of course you chaps know nothing of the intricacies of politics. Now—" he indicated the head of the table, where Jith and Pouncetrifle huddled— "notice the resilience with which the ambassadors are coming to grips with the new realities, or whatever they are, of the situation, working out the rather complex protocols of establishing formal relations with a nonexistent government."

"As long as they stick to shooting despatches back to headquarters and putting on charades for visiting politicians, Okay," Gloom said. "But the first time they step out o' line—whammo! The Legendary Magical Emperor will be back on the job—and next time they're liable to wind up digging their way into the root cellar from below."

"I hardly think the Lumbagan in the street is in a position to criticize matters of Imperial policy, Mr. Gloom," Magnan said

According to Hoyle

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coolly. "I hope your association with Mr. Retief on his expedition upcountry hasn't given you a false sense of involvement in matters over your head."

"You must be kidding, Terry," Ignarp said. "Gloom here is Minister of Imaginary Affairs in the Lumbagan government-in-exile."

"Government in exile?" Magnan frowned.

"The only place for a government to be," Ignarp confirmed. "And I just accepted a post with the Department of Education as Commissioner of Superstitions."

"You're stamping them out?" Magnan queried confusedly.

"Heck no. I'm starting new ones

in keeping with a fine old tradition dating back almost twenty-four hours."

"Speaking of superstitions," the colonel said behind his hand to Magnan, "I think we'd do well to initiate a few of our own devising. For example, a carefully tailored myth to the effect that Terrans can work miracles—like turning water into vintage Pepsi, for example—" He broke off, staring in horror at the glass before him which rose gracefully into the air, its contents darkening to deep purplish red. The colonel followed it with his eyes as it took up a position directly over his head and inverted itself, discharging a cooling stream of effervescent fluid over the officer's startled features.

After the colonel had left the table—a departure noted by all present, accompanied as it was by a well-directed jet of liquid emanating apparently from thin air—Magnan dipped a trembling finger in the puddle on the table and tasted it.

"Pepsi?" Retief inquired.

"Burgundy." Magnan choked." He rose hastily. "I think I'd best add a number of emendations to my preliminary report," he muttered, "lest it appear that I was so short-sighted as to doubt the existence of magic." He hurried away.

"I thought you fellows had gone out of the miracle business

pending the next crisis," Retief addressed Gloom and Ignarp as the two locals gripped hands across the table. "But since you haven't, try that last one again. Only this time don't spill any."

A moment later they raised three paper-thin goblets of purple wine, touched them together with a musical clink. At the far end of the table, Ambassador Jith caught the gesture, raised his glass in response.

"To a new era in interplanetary relations," he whispered cheerfully. "To peace and plenty for almost all—within reasonable limits!"

"That reminds me," Ignarp said, "The boys in GRAB are going to be wondering why I didn't redivide the loot along more practical lines while I was Emperor."

"While *you* were Emperor," Gloom retorted. "While I was letting you go along for the ride, you mean—"

"You big slob, I was the brains of the outfit!"

"You little creep, I handled all the tricky parts—"

"Gentlemen," Retief interjected, "We were about to propose a toast, remember?"

Gloom lifted his glass. "To our friends, the good guys," he said.

"And to our enemies, the bad guys," Ignarp added.

"And to the hope," Retief said, "that someday we'll be able to tell which are which." ●



You yourself must die a little . . .

**TO
KILL
A
VENUSIAN**

IRWIN ROSS

JOHN Smith is an unexciting name to possess, and there was of course no way for him to know until the end of his career that he would be forever famous among connoisseurs of murder as Nine-finger Jack.

John Smith's marriage to his ninth bride, Marcia Runyon, took place on the morning of May the thirty-first. On the evening of May the thirty-first John Smith, having spent much of the afternoon point-

ing out to friends how much the wedding had excited Marcia and how much he feared the effect on her notoriously weak heart, entered the bathroom and, with the careless ease of the practiced professional, employed five of his fingers to seize Marcia's ankles and jerk her legs out of the tub while with the other five fingers he gently pressed her face just below water level.

So far all had proceeded in the conventional manner of any other wedding night; but the ensuing departure from ritual was such as to upset even John Smith's professional bathside manner. The moment Marcia's face and neck were submerged below water, she opened her gills.

In his amazement John released his grasp upon both ends of his bride. Her legs descended into the water and her face rose above it. As she passed from the element of water to that of air, her gills closed and her mouth opened.

"I suppose," she observed, "that in the intimacy of a long marriage you would eventually have discovered in any case that I am a Venusian. It is perhaps as well that the knowledge came early, so that we may lay a solid basis for understanding."

"Do you mean that you are a native of the planet Venus?"

"I do," she said. "You would be astonished to know how many of us are already among you."

"I'm already quite astonished," said John, "to learn of one. Would you mind convincing me that I did indeed see what I thought I saw?"

OBLINGINGLY Marcia lowered her head beneath the water. Her gills opened and her breath bubbled merrily. "Nature, on our planet," she explained when she emerged, "has bred as the dominant race our species of amphibian mammals, in all other respects superficially identical with *Homo sapiens*. You'll find it all but impossible to tell us from humans except maybe by noticing those who, to avoid accidental opening of the gills, refuse to swim. Such concealment will, of course, be unnecessary when we take over complete control of your planet."

"And what do you propose to do with the race that already controls it?"

"Kill most of them, I suppose," said Marcia. "And might I trouble you for that towel?"

"That," pronounced John, with any craftsman's abhorrence of mass production, "is monstrous. I see my duty to my race. I must reveal all."

"I am afraid," Marcia observed as she dried herself, "that you will not. In the first place, no one will believe you. In the second place, I should then be forced to present to the authorities the complete dossier which I have

gathered on the cumulatively interesting deaths of your first eight wives, together with my direct evidence as to your attempt this evening."

John Smith pressed the point no further. "In view of this attempt," he said, "I imagine you would like either a divorce or an annulment."

"No," said Marcia. "There is no better cover for my activities than marriage to a member of the native race. In fact, should you so much as mention divorce again, I shall be forced to return to the topic of that dossier. And now, if you will hand me that robe, I intend to do a little telephoning. Some of my better-placed colleagues will need to know my new name and address."

As John Smith heard her ask the long-distance operator for Washington, D.C., he realized that he would be forced to take action immediately. He did. First with knife, then with gun.

Through the failure of the knife, John Smith learned that Venusian blood has extraordinary, quick-clotting powers and Venusian organs possess an amazingly rapid system of self-regeneration. And the bullet taught him a further peculiarity of the blood: that it dissolves lead—in fact thrives upon lead.

His skill as a cook was quite sufficient to disguise any of the commoner poisons from human

taste. The Venusian palate, however, not only detected but relished most of them. Marcia was particularly taken with his tomato aspic à l'arsénique and insisted on his preparing it in quantity for a dinner of her friends, along with his *sole amandine* to which the prussic acid lent so distinctively intensified a flavor and aroma.

WHILE the faintest murmur of divorce, even after a year of marriage, evoked from Marcia a frowning murmur of "Dossier . . ." the attempts at murder seemed merely to amuse her. Finally John Smith was driven to seek out Professor Gillingsworth at the State University, recognized as the ultimate authority (on this planet) on life on other planets.

The professor found the query of much theoretical interest.

"From what we are able to hypothesize of the nature of Venusian organisms," he announced, "I can almost assure you of their destruction by the forced ingestion of the best Beluga caviar in doses of no less than one-half pound per day."

Three weeks of the suggested treatment found John Smith's bank account seriously depleted and his wife in perfect health.

"That dear Gilly!" she laughed one evening. "It was so nice of him to tell you how to kill me; it's the first time I've had enough caviar since I came to Earth. It's so

dreadfully expensive.”

“You mean,” John demanded, “that Gillingsworth is—”

She nodded.

“And all that money!” John protested.

America’s greatest physiologist took an interest in John Smith’s problem. “I should advise,” he said, “the use of crystallized carbon placed directly in contact with the sensitive gill area.”

“In other words, a diamond necklace?” John Smith asked. He seized a water pitcher, hurled its contents at the physiologist’s neck and watched his gills open.

THE next day John purchased a lapel flower through which water could be squirted—an article he thenceforth found invaluable for purposes of identification.

The use of the flower proved a somewhat awkward method of starting a conversation and often led the conversation into unintended paths; but it did establish a certain clarity in relations.

It was after John had observed the opening of the gills of a leading criminal psychiatrist that he realized where he might find the people who could really help him.

From then on, while Marcia was engaged in her activities preparatory to world conquest, whenever he felt he was unobserved he visited insane asylums, announced that he was a free-lance feature writer and asked if they had any

inmates who believed that Venusians were at large upon Earth and planning to take it over.

In this manner he met many interesting and attractive people, all of whom wished him godspeed in his venture, but who pointed out that they would hardly be where they were if all of their own plans for killing Venusians had not miscarried as hopelessly as his.

From one of these friends, who had learned more than most because his Venusian wife had made the error of falling in love with him (an error which led to her eventual removal from human society), John Smith ascertained that Venusians may indeed be harmed and even killed by many substances on their own planet, but seemingly by nothing on ours—though the wife had once dropped a hint that one thing alone on Earth could prove fatal to the Venusian system.

At last John Smith visited an asylum whose director announced that they had an inmate who thought he was a Venusian.

When the director had left them, a squirt of the lapel flower verified the claimant’s identity.

“I am a member of the Conciliationist Party,” he explained, “the only member who has ever reached Earth. We believe that Earthmen and Venusians can live at peace as all men should, and I shall be glad to help you destroy all members of the opposition party.

“One substance on Earth is deadly poison to any Venusian. Since in preparing and serving the dish best suited to its administration you must be careful to wear gloves, you should begin your campaign by wearing gloves at all meals—”

This mannerism Marcia seemed willing to tolerate for the security afforded her by her marriage and even more particularly for the delights of John's skilled preparation of such dishes as spaghetti *all'aglio ed all'arsenico*, which is so rarely to be had in the average restaurant.

Two weeks later John finally prepared the indicated dish. Marcia had praised the recipe, devoured two helpings, expressed some wonder as to the possibility of gills in its creator, whom she had never met, and was just nibbling at the smallest bones when, as the Conciliationist had foretold, she dropped dead.

Intent upon accomplishing his objective, John had forgotten the dossier—nor had he even suspected that it was in the hands of a gilled lawyer who had instructions to pass it on in the event of Marcia's death.

Even though that death was certified as natural, John rapidly found himself facing trial for murder, with seven other states vying for the privilege of the next chance at him should the trial fail to end in conviction.

With no prospect in sight of a

quiet resumption of his accustomed profession, John Smith bared his knowledge and acquired his immortal nickname. The result was a period of intense prosperity among manufacturers of squirting lapel flowers, bringing about the identification and exposure of the gilled masqueraders.

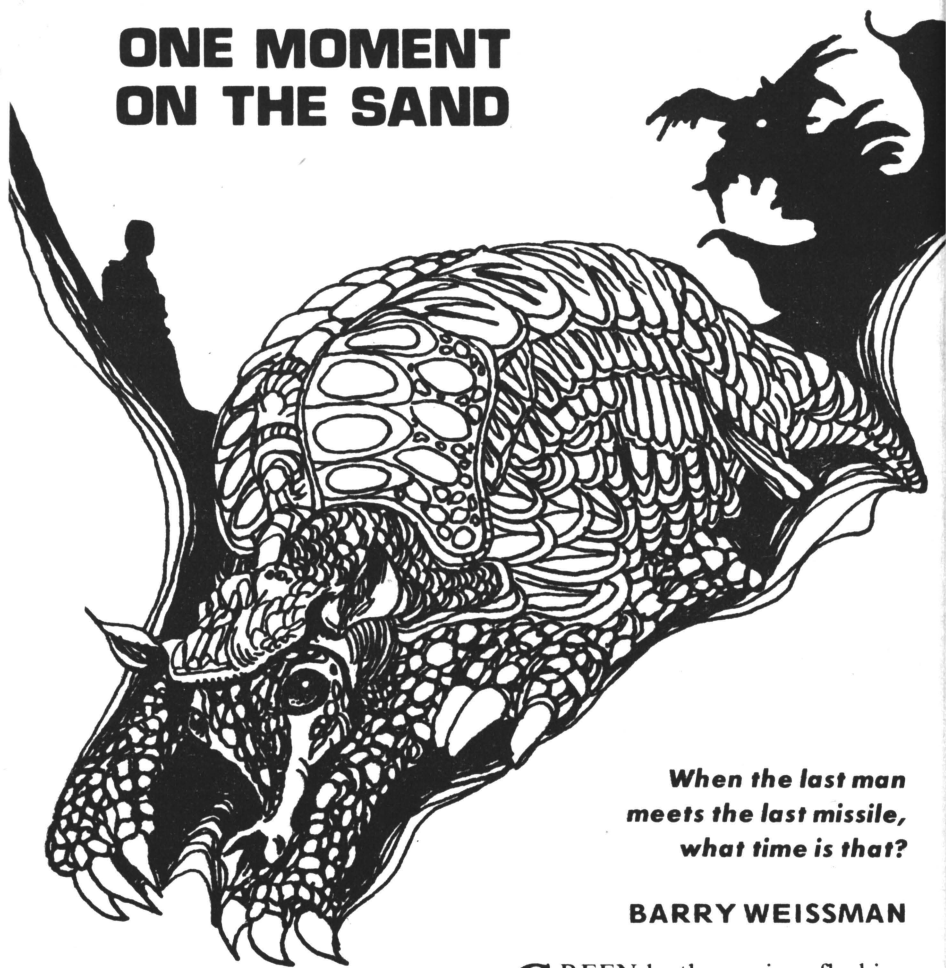
But inducing them, even by force, to eat the substance poisonous to them was more difficult. The problem of supply and demand was an acute one, in view of the large number of the Venusians and the small proportion of members of the human race willing to perform the sacrifice made by John Smith.

It was that great professional widower and amateur chef himself who solved the problem by proclaiming in his death cell his intention to bequeath his body to the eradication of Venusians, thereby pursuing after death the race which had ruined his career.

All that had to be done, he pointed out, was secretly to slip a bit of human protoplasm into random meals—and the sheep would be separated, by death, from the goats.

The noteworthy proportion of human beings who promptly followed his example in their wills has assured us of permanent protection against future invasions, since so small a quantity of the poison is necessary in each individual case; after all, one finger sufficed for Marcia. ●

ONE MOMENT ON THE SAND



*When the last man
meets the last missile,
what time is that?*

BARRY WEISSMAN

GREEN leathery wings flashing like shiny leaves under the copper-penny sun, Quint the Monk jumped down from Marv's broad red back.

"There!" He pointed past the golden shore toward the curving turquoise arch of invading sea.

"There! I told you! I told you!"

John, the miner, was sheathed in folds of black scaly skin. Sweaty, unaccustomed muscles smarting from lengthy surface travel, he squinted into the haze above the water.

"I don't see anything," he said in a voice suitable to his physical status. One large black armored knuckle clicked nervously.

Quint's verdant fur ruffled in the salt breeze. "Oh, you can't see *any*-thing, cave-eyes," he said.

"I can, too," said John, shading his enormous red eyes from the sun's painful rays as much as from the insult. "I can see as good as you can. Better. Remember in the ruins—"

"Cannot," Quint spat back. "Cannot! Cannot!"

It was the wrong time and the wrong place and John was in the wrong mood. He was hot and thirsty and full of muscle aches—even his long toes longed for a return to the dark moist earth they were used to. The harsh dry sand gritted under his nails. Fire flashed deep in his miner's eyes.

"I can see good enough to grab you, you little green ape," John said, his long right arm and clicking mandible snaking out as if after a diamond in the wall of one of his tunnels. Quint yelped and tried to sidestep but his agility was not enough. The thin black digits choked off his wind and then the

fight was really on. All the others could see was their backs—Quint's small and green, John's large and black—in the center of a swirling tornado of sand.

"All right! All *right*!" Champ said. He waded in as he might have shoved his way into a torrential mountain stream after succulent fish in his far homeland. His huge meaty paws grabbed both combatants and held them far apart, one on each side of his massive gray chest. "Enough of this stupidity. Enough of fighting! Our fathers fought sufficiently for all!"

"But it's there, I tell you." Quint said, his voice becoming shrill as he struggled in the giant's paw. Excitement and frustration were bringing the Monk to tears—but the Champ's hands were bringing him and John close to strangulation as they struggled. Finally both relaxed and panted for breath and Champ's grip loosened slightly.

"I think Quint's right," said a small voice from Marv's back. They all turned. "I think I see something also, way off near the curve of the bay."

Champ turned and squinted into the blue distance. "Too far for my poor eyes, too far. All I can see is sand, but if you—"

"I do," said the small voice. "It's white, like the sand. Blends in. But it's there."

Champ let the fighters slide to

the gritty sand, where both lay limp and panting.

"See," Quint managed to gasp, "Harold—Harold agrees with me."

Champ looked down at the prostrate green monk and black miner. "Don't you two fight no more," he said seriously. "No more."

"I—I guess I can't see too good," John mumbled from where he lay. He looked up at Champ's massive figure looming above him. "Too good," he repeated.

Marv used his long supple tail to help Quint resume his seat. The party started off again across the blowing golden sand. John struggled to his feet, glanced back at the dark rolling mountains of home, then at the sea and the straggling party around the red dragon called Marv. He sighed deeply from his miner's lungs and followed sullenly.

A HALF-hour of trudging through heavy sand brought the party close enough for all to see the object easily. It was a boxish, low rectangular affair, large enough to contain them easily, if they could find a way into it and if it proved hollow. Maybe they could use it in the fall to avoid the purple mists. Maybe it contained some treasure like the cave full of canned peaches John had found the summer before. Its color was like the sand. As they came closer they could see that the object was

pitted by the constant blowing of harsh crystals. Many years must have passed since its construction in the oldtime.

And it was oldtime—of that they were all sure.

The group of friends traveled mainly in silence. Champ had little to say at any time. He liked to think of himself as a doer rather than a thinker like Harold or a talker like Quint. John was too depressed to talk. He tried to think of dark caves and moist soil as he dug his sharp toes into sand time after time, step after tedious step.

Quint didn't want to pick another fight with the miner. He knew that anything he said might rub John the wrong way and he was trying to get back his wind after the morning's hassle. Marv didn't talk because he couldn't—not with his mouth. He was not equipped with vocal cords. He would have had a lot to say, but he couldn't say it and that was that. Marv was not one to storm at cruel fate—he nodded and thought his esoteric thoughts and kept them to himself as he marched patiently across the beach.

Harold shivered under the thin blankets that shielded his frame from the bitter wind. He was doing his best to cling to Marv's swaying back. Harold was too tired to talk.

When they were only yards away Quint hopped (flew?) from his place on Marv's back and skipped

to the crumbling structure he had discovered.

"See! See!" he shouted into the fresh breeze and at the sea. "I told you! Here it is! What fun!"

He scampered, jumped to the low roof and did a playful dance as the rest came up to the walls. Quint's prancing feet set flying showers of fine loose dust and little pieces of wall.

"Cut that out," Champ said in agitation.

Quint laughed. The giant reached out a hand to catch the Monk, but was too slow. Quint scampered out of reach to the far side of the roof.

"Can't catch me!" he cried. "Naaaa!" He laughed again.

"Who wants to?" John muttered sullenly, but nobody listened to him.

Harold carefully slipped off Marv's broad red back, bracing himself against the heavy wing muscles. He straightened his spindly legs, took a deep breath, then started to examine the side of the building near him.

"See, Marv," he said, fingers running lightly over the crumbling white surface, "it's from the oldtime. My daddy built this. And he flew, too, better 'n you. Maybe I can find out where he went. Maybe I can find out where they all went, our folks. Maybe we can all go home. Come on, Marv, let's see if we can find them." Marv nodded, keeping his thoughts to

himself as only Marv could, and followed Harold.

John looked about him. Champ was lumbering down to the ocean to catch some fish for lunch.

Practical idiot, uncaring lum-mox . . .

John wondered what had ever possessed him to join the group. Why? Why? All they ever gave him was spite and backtalk. He hated them. Then he remembered the long cold nights by the Tree near the purple glowing Pit and the voices—and he shivered.

Still—he did hate them. If only there were someone else, some other human company—with a shake of his head to clear it of cobwebs of memory, John reached, dug his nails into the top of the roof and hauled himself up. Quint saw him and deftly flicked a pebble at him. It hit—and stung.

"Hah!" yelled Quint in glee. "Can't catch me, can't catch me!" And the little green fool hopped out of reach, smiling from tufted ear to green tufted ear, showing small pointy white canines. John idly waved his long arm, anger dying in frustration. "Who wants to? Who wants to anyway? Go away, leave me alone."

"Ahhh," said Quint in mock pity. "Can't stand to be wrong, John? Sore loser? Awhhh."

"You!" John's long fingers found a loose piece in the rocklike material of the roof. He hurled it at Quint, who pumped his wings

just once and skipped out of the way.

"Hah-hah-hah. Poor, poor John. Can't do anything right." Quint dropped off the edge of the building to find someone else to play with.

"Damn idiot," John called after him.

Damn idiot, John repeated in his thoughts, folding his long triple-jointed legs under him. *Damned if I can enjoy this cruddy game. I'll just sit here and sulk*, he told himself and that was what he did.

"SEE," Harold said seriously to Marv. "Look, iron." He was leaning against a break in the building's pale surface on the side away from the burning sun. A large rusted plate was set in the grainy material of the walls at that point and Harold was examining the pitted surface. "It's got to be iron—or steel. I wonder, could it be a door? Maybe somebody's inside." Harold tapped the door lightly and a few flakes of rust fell to the sand at his feet. He tapped a little harder, listening—a hollow gong sound answered. That, and nothing else. "Maybe, Marv, maybe they all went through this door and left."

Marv nodded silently.

Harold peered closer. "Runes," he said, noticing scratches, etchings of oldtime letters in the rusty flaking surface. "Writing.

American. I wish I knew how to read. I wonder what—" Harold reached out one fragile light-boned hand and gently traced the outlines of the letters—what letters he knew not. "I wonder what—I wonder what they said to each other, Marv."

"Hey! Heey!" came a voice that they recognized as Champ's. "Heey!" It came from a few yards away, over a sand dune.

They discovered Champ at the bottom of a large pit. As sand was still cascading about the lip—an oblong circle about thirty feet in diameter—it appeared the giant had been the victim of a cave-in, a common occurrence around oldtime ruins. Champ had a string of still flopping fish around his neck.

"Oh, hello up there," he said as they peered down. "I seem to have gotten lunch a little sandy." He shook his head. "Sandy."

"Are you all right?" Harold asked.

"I don't know. I guess so. I was walking back with lunch—and then I was down here. I guess there was a cave-in." Indeed, there was even a cave—a few feet from where Champ was seated, a small black mouth gaped at them, glints from inside promising unexpected delights.

"What's in the cave?" Harold asked, pointing.

"Huh? What—oh." Champ squinted at the black mouth. "Yeah, looks like oldtime stuff.

Metal, Gimmicks. Things. Over there, too.”

Champ pointed to a place almost directly to Harold's right. The boy shifted his head to look at a tall pillar of oldtime metal, pointed at the top and flared at the base. It reached up from below where Champ was seated—part of the base was covered by sand almost up to ground level. Its coat of white paint had aged to match the yellow entombing sand. It looked pretty, with its metal and white paint and a black strip or two here and there. Near the bottom a few oldtime runes like those on the door, chipped and peeling, could still be made out.

“I wish I could read,” Harold whispered to himself again.

“Hey. HEY! Harold!” Champ's voice dragged the boy back to the present.

“Huh?”

“Help. Help get me outa here, Now?” Champ's sad brown eyes looked even sadder at the bottom of the pit; for once the giant found himself in a situation in which his great muscular bulk was a negative rather than a positive factor.

“Oh. Oh, yeah, sure. I'll get John—”

But John had already come.

“Did I hear somebody mention a cave?” he asked.

Harold turned.

“Yes. Down there. See it? Want to explore it and help get Champ out?”

“I don't know if I do,” John said, pouting, shaking his head.

“Aw, John—somebody has to help Champ out.”

“Oh?”

“We all gotta pull together—”

The miner frowned sadly and shook his head.

“I can't do it—and certainly neither Marv nor Quint—”

“Yes,” John said sharply. “Certainly not Quint.”

“Come on, John. We *need* you,” Harold pleaded.

“Oh, all right. Just remember you said it.” John looked over the lip of the depression. *God, do you ever need me*, he thought to himself. *You babies couldn't get along without me—couldn't survive a day*. Thinking of a cave he'd once found by the yellow river, he nosed down and then over like an inchworm, first digging ahead into sand as far as he could stretch, then looping his body until his toenails were directly behind his hands. All the way down the gritty slope, John inched and slid and scraped on his thick-skinned belly. Soon he was slipping down the few last feet to Champ.

“Good to see you, John.”

“Good to see you, Champ.”

John smiled, stood up right and brushed off his dull black skin. “Let's explore—then I'll get you out.” He held down a hand to the giant.

“Okay.” Champ smiled back and came to his feet.

HAROLD sat down on the edge of the pit, swinging his feet. Marv couldn't sit down any more than he could talk.

"I wonder what it is," Harold said, indicating the pillar. "Maybe it's a pen-cil." Harold had difficulty with the unfamiliar word, which he'd picked up from a hex-man/story-teller over by El-A desert, so he said it again. "Pencil. Or a stove. Or a car. Oh, maybe it's a car and John will find the controls and then I'll figure out how to drive it, like I did the can opener, and we'll all go for a ride. Oh, I wish—"

"Hi, gang," said Quint, coming up the slope. "What's up?" The Monk was covered with sand. He should have been totally exhausted and ready for bed, but he was still eager.

"Champ fell down in that hole," Harold told him. "Now John and Champ are exploring a cave."

"Wow! Wow o wowowow. I'm going down too." Quint scampered out of Harold's reach, ignoring the boy's frantic command to stop. He went down the sandy slope, using his wings to brace himself and slow the fall. Harold sighed, resigning himself to fate.

At the bottom Quint found John and Champ in the cave. It was a small cave—large enough only for the three of them and maybe one more. There was a lot of oldtime equipment around—stools and rusty old chairs with broken legs

and a large metal wall thing with dark dirty glass squares on it and little switches and buttons and all sorts of fun things. Both John and Champ were sitting on the stools and playing with the buttons. They hadn't noticed him—he'd surprise them and play, too.

Quint jumped onto a table and started pressing every button in reach with all his fingers and toes. "Surprise!" he chortled, laughing in glee. *Gosh, this is fun!* he thought, scrambling on top of a metal shelf and prancing on the pushy things he found there. His arms searched over his head for more things to play with. When Quint caught the looks on Champ's and John's faces he laughed even louder.

"Where the hell did *you* come from?" John asked irritably.

"Hey," said Champ, "stop that! We're exploring, not playing!"

"Hahahahah!" Quint screamed, pressed a button. Lights went on. "Wow! Hahahahah!" Rewarded, he pressed more. A flashing red light went on over John's head. A shrill siren sounded. "Wow!" cried Quint again. This was the best game yet!

John glanced about wildly. *The little fool*, he thought. *You can get killed fooling with oldtime stuff—and that ape will do it yet.*

"Hahahahah!" screamed Quint. "Can't catch me—"

Champ threw a fish at him. Then things happened fast:

Quint pressed another button, a pretty red one. John grabbed a metal rod, that was attached to something, to throw at Quint.

That little ass! John thought, straining at the rod. There was a deep roar, like sudden thunder. The rod in John's hands came *down*, not off. The rod came scraping down and John's face was illuminated with harsh white light from outside and then another roar swelled even louder and flames burst from the metal

pillar . . . PENCIL, or STOVE, or CAR, and burned all three of the dancing-fighting-throwing animals that once might have been men—or at least men enough to fight and kill—to a crisp and then in an instant to fragments of those crisps.

And Harold had just time to say, "I wonder—" and Marv had just time to nod before they, too, became chunks of burning meat as the missile roared into the twilight of the beach.

HALFWAY around the scarred body of Earth was a small village. It had rows of corn and barley outside its rough log palisade. Two horses, three cows and one

calf pastured on the harsh tundra grass beyond the crops. Twelve human beings lived in this village.

WHAT GOES UP . . .

Suddenly over the head of Creon, the headman, the commissar, the leader, there appeared high in the sky a burning streak. Creon looked up from his toil and used his gnarled hand to shade his eyes, that he might better see. A divine revelation came to him.

"God," he mumbled to himself in his own language. "God!" He turned back to the village and started running madly, waving his hands, plough forgotten in the dust. He shouted, "God is coming!" And the other eleven human beings—or reasonable facsimiles—turned from their work to look up to the heavens. The calf stopped chewing to look up, too.

I SHOT AN ARROW . . .

But before they could react or breathe out in ecstasy or say a word (even the calf, who normally thought very fast and spoke even faster) the missile reached the right altitude for the two treasured spheres of metal that made up its warhead to come together and WOOMP and again a mushroom hellflower blossomed on the scarred and bleeding Earth, burning the village and the corn and the barley and the horses and the cattle and the calf and the humans . . . and all that was left was sand blowing in the breeze off the sea . . . ●



AFTER THE END AND BEFORE THE BEGINNING

After the Word was lost, men found it and gave it a name.

They called it "MAYBE" . . .

WILLIAM ROTSLER

DAGGER sidled along the stained wall, his sandaled feet almost silent on the grit and refuse, his senses alert and his weapon ready.

They're along here somewhere, he thought, around the fringes of this Dead Area . . .

Dagger had seen the whole tribe but once, a few weeks before. He

and his tigers had been running from a raid in the Eight Thirties, scampering wildly through broken walls, jumping through the rips and tears from level to level, while holding tightly to two struggling women and some sacks of stolen food.

His raiders had cut through an ancient, fire-blackened auditori-

um, into a huge lobby. The small tribe had been ready for them with knives and slings.

The tribe's fighters had formed a ring about two small cooking fires on the broken floor, with the women inside the circle—except for two who had long knives and looked able to use them. They'd heard the Tigers coming for six levels and the knives on the far side were searching the darkness for flankers, just in case.

They had been very pro about it, Dagger remembered, not attacking right off, but obviously ready to defend. The laughing Tigers had crashed to a halt, knives out in an instant, and everyone had stared tough at everyone else until Dagger's family had edged past, weapons ready, and had then broken into a run across the lobby, with the wenches wailing even louder.

Rolf had slammed his brunette alongside the head and shut her up and the blonde had quieted when she saw how far from 831 they had come. Tiger country. Where they grow the tough ones.

But Dagger still couldn't forget the blonde he had seen in the family huddle with the tribe they had surprised.

Damn, she was something special . . .

Tawny and smooth, with ripe mounds of breasts showing through and around the short-laced vest she wore. Beaded leather skirt

with a long knife in the belt. She had crouched over a crying child, soothing it, her dark blue eyes on the sudden invaders. She had looked ready to defend.

Dagger couldn't get her out of his mind. Hell, he didn't need another woman; he had two already.

But this one is special, he told himself.

Was the child hers? She looked too young to have birthed a squaller, but maybe so. Some of those tribes over by Frisco and down around Mexicompany were big on young bearers. Maybe this tribe was from Pacifica, or even the Catalina sector. They were always a crazy bunch, like the flock of tribes that started that zongo religion about the Second Coming of the Great Architect. They said he would come any day now. Zongo, the whole bunch.

When Dagger asked, Rolf and Claw and Stripes said they had never seen the tribe before. Gary had wanted to go snatch a wench or two but the others had talked him out of it. They knew a tough bunch when they saw one.

"Wait till four or five of these wenches sneak off or get sick or something," Rolf had told Gary. "Then we'll go looking for fresh meat."

Gary had looked up from his algae soup and said, "I had meat once, you know." They'd all heard his big story, but no one stopped him. "I was just a cub with the

Wolves then, before I came over here. We found this little family, not even a tribe, that had barricaded themselves into a whole floor. A floor! This whole sector was theirs and they'd blocked up all the entrances and fused slabs over the breaks and burns. And they had cattle, man, *cattle*. Greatest bunch of zongo animals you ever saw! Bony backs, big bloated bellies and breasts swinging underneath—yeah, really!”

Gary had waved his soup spoon while the others patiently waited. It wasn't bad hearing about meat animals once in a while. It sort of kept the dream alive that somewhere, hidden away, was a whole bunch of meat critters: cattle, sheep, chops, maybe big fāt roasts.

“Damnedest taste I ever had. We ate ourselves sick and—well—that was the end of the cattle. When we came back the whole damned tribe got sore at us, started the big fight that broke us up. Which is why I'm over here now.”

“We know,” Claw said, scratching a plastic wall with his metal hook.

Changing the subject, Rolf said, “I'm thinking of a few new wenches. Maybe if we went down to six hundred or so and over toward the Arrowhead sector—there was some pretty fancy floors over there in the old days. Still have some tasty little wenches twisting their tails around there.”

“Yeah,” the others agreed and they quickly fell into their favorite conversation: *Where Might Be The Best Place To Find Wenches, Loot, Food, Adventure.*

BUT Dagger hadn't really been listening. He drifted from the group and looked down through a rent in the floor at the new ones penned up with the old ones they couldn't trust.

Why were wenches always running away? It wasn't as if any other tribe was better off. Not really. Oh, sure, the Frisco bunch have some zongo pleasure machines that still worked and the Mexicompany grew a lot of stuff besides algae on Top. He'd heard that one flock of zongos had found water running through their sub-sub-basement and had hooked up a gadget that gave them electricity, freeing them from the solar cells on Top.

Dagger walked away from the ripped entrance to the girl's confinement box and went to the place where Donna and Sherise were boiling clothes in a big metal pot. Donna looked at him with a certain speculation and gave him a slow smile, but Dagger ignored her. She was tired of Claw, that was all. He could tell. Or maybe she hated Claw for trading her once to the Panthers. Maybe she wanted Claw killed in a fight with Dagger.

In any case, Dagger passed.

What he didn't need was to lose a good friend and a Tiger just because some dumb woman wanted something different.

In the next room Demon was hunched over some books. "Hey," Dagger said, pulling up a broken chair and seating himself carefully. "Give me some words."

The skinny, long-faced young man looked up with a weary expression. "I'm reading, Dag. Can't you ask your silly questions some other time?"

"They're not silly questions, you book freak. You're the only ace who can tell what I want to know. Well, you're the only one I know, anyway. "How come the women keep running off?"

"They don't. Most of them settle down, don't they?"

"Naw, they're always slipping away, going back."

"Those are the ones you notice. They go because they have a lover or a family or a baby back there. Steal the baby with the wench and you'd have a lot that would stay."

"Come on, Demon, you know we don't want any zongo yelpers around. They'd drive us crazy." Dagger was disgusted with Demon for not understanding that. "We move faster without kids, man."

"Women, you lights-out daggerman, are different from men." He held up a hand against Dagger's grin. "*Different*, man. Notice how when we stop some-

where the women start nest-building? Clothes are fixed, beds made up out of next to nothing. Cleaned floors. Figuring out ways to make things easier, right?"

"Yeah, but that's what they're supposed to do, isn't it?"

"It's the nest-building in them, Dag. And to them nests mean yelpers and squallers. Suckling kids is real woman stuff, something we just don't understand. When you don't take the kids the women go back. When you bash in the heads of the ones that are birthed you kill something inside the wenches and they go away."

Dagger stared gloomily at an unidentifiably stained wall.

"Why are they that way, Demon? I treat my women fine and I've had three go away."

"Why are you the way you are? They're the way they are because that's the way women are."

Dagger looked at Demon and sighed. "Why do you run with us? You're the one with the education. You could probably get into the Citadel or go up to Shasta and get taken in there. A lot better, man. Three bowls a day, things that work, even pleasure machines, I heard."

Demon leaned back into a badly repaired chair and drummed his fingers on the book before him.

"I was in Citadel once when I was a kid. My uncle was a teacher. He got us in. But they don't have everything. They're missing parts,

big parts. Do you know what opera is?"

Dagger shook his head. Demon knew all kinds of zongo things.

"It's singing—music and talking and a story. They had one opera. Just one. On an old tape. I didn't understand the language and they didn't either, but it was fantastic. Like finding a whole store, somehow untouched, with all the labels on everything. They had tapes. Picture tapes they could play on a few old machines. Sound tapes. They had some books. I read all the books till there wasn't any more to read. So I left. To find books. And whatever else I can find."

There was a long silence. Dagger remembered how Demon had come out of the dark and fought Hoss. He had maimed Hoss so bad they had had to cut his throat and put him out of his misery. A good man lost for trying to throw a book on the fire. They'd almost exiled Demon for that but he had looked so zongo standing there, the book in one hand, with Hoss's blood on it and the long knife in the other, stained red to the hilt.

"We can't afford two losses in one day," Rolf had said and that was it.

"I found you a book once, remember?" Dagger said. "A big one, with pictures in color. Funny pictures—like nothing I'd ever seen."

"It was an atlas, Dag. Pictures

of the world as it was before they covered it all up."

"That must have been a long time ago." Dagger grinned. "Hey, what's this book? Is this the one you found last week when we came through that whattayacallit?"

"Residential sector. Occupied up to—oh, twenty, thirty years ago. People living right in rooms all the time, the same rooms, just like in Citadel."

"That's sure zongo. Why live in the same place all the time when you could run around and see things? Living like that would kill me quick. I'd rather cut my own throat." Dagger paused. "Is that what the wenches want? Settling down, staying in one dumb place till some knife pack comes and takes everything? That's really getting the Big Zongo!"

"Some people like it, Dagger."

"It ain't for me, no damn good for this knife, man, no damn good at all." Dagger shot a dark look at the two women stirring the clothes and then turned back to Demon, who was studying his book again.

"What's the book?" he asked again, peering around Demon.

"It's incredibly old, a copy of a copy of a copy, I think, because they didn't have inerts then to print on. The original must be a thousand years old and it's about a time long before that."

"A fairy tale, like you read us in Deserttown?"

"I don't know. I wish I did. It seems crazy, really zongo, but I think it was real—once, anyway." He closed the book and pointed to the title. "Howard Pyle's Book of Pirates."

"What's a pirate?"

"He was a lot like us, I think. Only he sailed ships on a sea of water and fought other men and took their wenches and treasure." Demon opened the book to a picture of a golden box on a rough blue floor. "That's water and that's a ship. See those men? They're attacking the ship."

"Water? That much water? That's as big as a floor! Toad told me that when he came through Pacifica there were whole floors filled with water."

“ONE time, before they had to cover everything up there were seas. Oceans. Covered three-fourths of the whole Earth."

"How many floors deep?" Dagger asked.

"This was before they had floors and levels. Everything was open and there were fish to eat and meat animals on the ground."

"Boy, that's hard to believe. Just bare ground. I saw some in Sierra and in Desertown, but it was sure nothing much. Just rough and hard and dry. Floors are better."

Demon smiled and showed him a picture of two men fighting. "It's called, *Who shall be captain?*

Remember when Rolf and Turk fought? Like that?"

"And that's their tribe sitting and watching? Where are their wenches?"

"Pirates ran in a different sort of tribe. They'd go out in these ships on the water and find other places to raid and bring their loot and wenches back to an island where their other loot and wenches were."

"Is an island like a sort of safe place, like Citadel or Sierra Tower or Shasta?"

Demon nodded.

"That way no one could steal their stuff while they were gone, huh? Pretty smart." Dagger peered again at the picture. "They sure look like they know what a knife is for. Show me some more."

"Look at this one. A captain has captured a town and is getting loot from the people that live there."

"Oh, like when we took Desertown? And those turtles gave us wenches and food and anything we wanted just so we wouldn't kill them?" He looked at the picture more closely. "They're mean, all right. That one guy has a god-damn long knife."

"That's a sword. It's a very long dagger but specialized. Look here—they're dividing the loot."

"Still no wenches. What's the matter with those guys? They zongo?"

"No, I don't think so. Pirates liked wenches all right. Hell, Dag,

that's why I'm reading, to find out things. Now go away and let me read."

Dagger rose and stretched. "Pirates sound like a fine tribe. How many were they?"

"I don't know. Thousands, maybe."

"Thousands?" Dagger was shocked. "They must have owned the whole world, a bunch of long knives like that."

Demon smiled wearily. "There were a lot more people in those days. Anyway, the pirates were all wiped out—or they gave up—our settled down."

"Settled down? You're faking me down a floor, man. No studs that look like them are going to settle down."

Demon shrugged and hunched over his book. Dagger watched him uncertainly and then walked away.

He sat down and thought about a lot of things—the girl he had seen and pirates and the life he was leading. It was the most undisturbed thinking he had ever done. Or ever needed to do.

And the more he thought the more he remembered the girl.

Tawny she was—and a fighter.

He kept thinking about her until he couldn't stand it any more and he went looking. He found the burned floor where the lobby fires had been and tracked an ashen footprint down two floors and a little west before he lost the trail.

But he kept on hunting and then, unexpectedly, he found them.

The soft low sound of a wench's crooning came from a split in the building that went up and down maybe twenty floors. Dagger crept close to the broken edge, crawling silently for the last thirty feet.

There they were, camped near the ripped edge of the floor just below the opposite side. Dagger lay watching, searching for *her* and not finding her.

Maybe she ran away, he thought.

Then there was a scurry of entering feet and the women were laughing and hugging three of the men who had arrived with bulging lootbags.

And *she* came out of the room to the rear and took one of the sacks and started setting out the algae cakes and green tubers.

Was the one she got the sack from her man?

She had the food set out and the other sacks were emptied and the little piles redivided. The girl stood up and stretched, her breasts tight against her vest and the flat, taut tawniness of her stomach was bared.

Then she looked up and straight at him.

Dagger froze in place. He knew she saw him and his muscles tensed for flight.

But she wasn't moving.

She was just looking and alert. Her hand rested on her knife hilt.

She's not afraid, Dagger said to himself in astonishment.

Slowly he raised his head so that she could clearly see his face. He could still be off and running before they could possibly get across that big rip in the structure.

He saw the tenseness go out of her body. For a long time she just stood looking at him. Then she smiled.

It was the smile that made Dagger go away.

A smile!

He trudged back through the floors and levels, up ruined escalators and down through cracked floors, along curved passages and around ancient hexahedrons, along dim passages where even the glowers had failed.

She smiled!

She didn't cry alarm. She didn't run. She didn't do anything. She had checked the turf and decided there was only one knife—and she had smiled!

Dagger went back to his tribe and thought.

Then he went wench hunting.

That was a wench he wanted.

He tracked her group to the edge of a Dead Area, then across a huge blackened ruin where one whole sector had exploded, then around a dried-up recreational park where anything could hide, and down a tall, dusty factory row.

He was certain they were close because the last fire had still been warm. He sidled along a wall and

peered through a ruined door. A faint sound froze him and it was a minute before he moved again.

Song? Yes, it was someone singing.

He slipped quietly through several rooms of charred garbage to another passage. The song was louder and he knew exactly where it came from.

As quiet as a nightcreeper he drifted toward a door and looked into the ruined garden beyond. This was the palace of some long dead prince or merchant baron. A cracked and empty pool was beyond the screen of struggling greenery. The tribe had camped in the pool around a dry fountain.

And *she* was in plain sight.

DAGGER watched in motionless silence until the tribal chief dimmed the lights and everyone settled down for the night. Three guards roamed the perimeter, but Dagger was used to keeping motionless and they did not detect him.

Now what? he asked himself. *Sneaking in there could get my throat vented. None of my brother knives wanted to come with me on a zongo mission so I can't muscle my way in.*

Dagger slept fitfully for an hour, then crept back and found a place two floors up and a way north.

I'll track 'em and watch for my chance.

For two days he was the ghost

behind them, to their side and once, even ahead of them, when he hunkered down in a rusty storage bin in a place where they might camp. Imperfect visions of himself leaping into their midst and carrying her off before they reacted kept bothering him.

That way I'd only have one way to run . . .

Nothing worked or presented itself for exploitation until two days had passed. He found a water leak from above and cautiously tested it. The water was good, which meant he might expect them to use it. He climbed up one floor and lay close to a hacked-out hole made by some other hunter.

One of the other wenches came first, then two of the older women, one with a quiet yelper.

The squallers are very quiet with this tribe . . .

Then she came. Alone.

Dagger watched her move. Watching her, he almost forgot his mission, she was so pretty and so graceful. She had filled the jug and was turning to go before he acted.

He dropped through the hole. She was too quick for him and her knife was in her hand when she turned. There was fear in her face. But not panic, he thought approvingly.

She recognized him. There was a moment's wavering, then her knife hand was out, the blade was steady. But she hadn't cried out. Dagger

smiled at her, slowly moving closer.

"I'm Dagger. My tribe is the Tiger tribe. I want you to be my woman."

Her eyes flicked beyond him, then around.

"There's no one else," he said. "Just me. I don't want to hurt anyone. I just want you."

"No," she said, the point of her knife weaving in a menacing manner. "I have a man."

"No, you don't." Dagger didn't know why, but he suddenly felt this was true. "I don't think you have a man. But you want a man."

"Not a Tiger man. They're raiders."

"We're pirates," Dagger said proudly.

"You kill, take—" The knife point was still weaving expertly. Her eyes darted again and her muscles were tense. "You kill babies. You break. You do not build."

Dagger felt helpless. "We don't all kill. Demon reads books. He saves books! He read to us about Mother Goose and Walden Pond and the long-ago people." He tried smiling again.

"Books?" The girl was uncertain and Dagger stepped closer.

"Yes, books. Books about life back then, you know, *before*. I've read a lot of books. About pirates, for instance. Did you know that most of the world was under water at one time? Ships sailed on the

water, big golden ships full of men. And the whole world was dirt and water and sky, lots of sky, with air and birds in it, just like the murals, but not like up Top. Different. I could teach you about books," he said softly.

"You read? You know about—"

Dagger knocked aside the knife and grabbed her. She screamed and he hit her on the chin. It took two blows before she slumped, dropping the jug, which broke, and the knife, which clattered.

In an instant Dagger had scooped her up and was running. Behind him he heard a woman cry out, then the bull roar of several men shouting orders. He banged both her head and her feet, going through a place where a wall had fallen. He jumped a slidefall and raced down a passage, his heart thumping madly.

Twist, turn, confuse. Labor up that broken stair to another floor, then double back overhead and down that ramp to end three floors below and heading west. Cut north. Lower her down an old elevator shaft, swing her limp body into a maintenance passage. Knock her out again when she struggles and carry her on your back through two whole sectors before collapsing.

Dagger tied her up and fell back, breathing hard. He listened for pursuit, then grinned weakly.

Out-twisted them!

He sprawled on the grit of the

battered floor and looked at the girl. Even with bruises she was beautiful. He reached out and touched her skin. Warm and smooth.

His trembling fingers unlaced the front of her vest and he peeled back the imitation leather to expose her breasts.

Full and firm.

He wanted to touch but he couldn't bring up his hand.

She awoke angry, afraid. She ignored her bared bosom and her tied wrists and ankles.

"You zongo creeper-eater! You burned-out box! You Tiger!"

Dagger raised his fist and started to hit her but her look blazed at him.

"Go on, Tiger!" she taunted. "Knock me out again! That's all you know, killing and hitting and stealing!" She spat at him ineffectually. "You wouldn't know a book if it bit you!"

"Books don't bite." Suddenly Dagger laughed. "You think books bite?"

He grinned at her and suddenly wasn't angry any more. They all cursed him at first, but they came around. Except for the ones that ran away.

"I suppose you want to take me to that filthy tribe of zapped-out vandals you call a family?"

"Why not?" Dagger's pride was hurt. "They're a damn good bunch of knives. Better than anyone we meet."

"Sure they are—you run from the ones that you can't lick!"

Dagger forced down the angry venom. She didn't really know the Tigers like he did. She'd change her mind.

"You will learn to like them," he said softly.

"I don't want to learn to like them!"

Dagger looked at her through slitted eyes. "Could you learn to like me?" The question cost him and he wished he had not spoken.

Knock her out and carry her home . . .

But she was silent.

"Well?" he growled.

"Perhaps. If you weren't so zongo. If you bathed. And didn't lie so much."

"Lie?"

"Yes, lie about books. Books are very precious and you lie about them, just to catch me."

"I didn't lie about the books. Demon has books. Demon reads books to all of us, whenever he finds them. I've heard a lot of books. Robin Hood, he was like a pirate, who lived in a big sector like garden. There was a wench who told stories about zongo things. Floors that fly. Meat animals that fly. Princes that go out of citadels and run with tribes of knives. Oh, I have heard many books!"

The girl looked at him. Her eyes were blue and her long hair yellow. Her breasts were tawny and round.

Dagger knew now how Demon felt about books.

"My name is Loree. If you read me books I will be your woman."

Dagger hesitated. Demon read the books, not he. "I will see to it that books are read to you," he said grandly.

"Then I will be your woman." She paused, then shyly asked, "You have other women?"

"Yes," Dagger said. He was proud that he had had more than one almost all his life—or since he got his first real knife.

"Oh," Loree said, but her voice said much more.

"Come, I will cut you free." His knife was in his hand but she stopped him with a pulling away.

"How do you know that I won't run?"

He grinned. "If you did not lie you will not run. If you lie and run, I chase and catch and will not trust you again. But if you do not run it will be easier."

The girl made a sound which he could not easily understand, then moved her wrists around to be cut free. Two slashes and she could stand. She did not run.

Dagger grinned again and sheathed his knife. "Come," he said, starting out, "I will read you books."

How he would do so he did not know. But he would find out.

His life had changed, Dagger thought, but just how, he was not sure. ●

Reading Room

LESTER DEL REY

IF THERE are any readers of science fiction who don't also read other forms of fiction and considerable non-fiction, I shall be happy not to make their acquaintance. True, there is a kind of man whose mind is so narrow that a fly standing on his nose can paw out one eye while kicking out the other. But in our field, I like to believe, a man can be a true fan without being a fanatic.

For myself, I'll choose to read anything that gives me genuine pleasure or illuminates the universe of man and of nature. During the past year, while reading assorted science fiction, I also had the pleasure of exploring books I hadn't previously read by such authors as Eric Ambler, Nevil Shute, Thornton Wilder, Carl

Jung, Hermann Hesse and James Cabell. I should also add the name of one woman—Georgette Heyer—whose excellent craftsmanship and consistency make a form of story I usually dislike a joy to read. Without such "outside" reading, I'd soon lose perspective, since our science-fiction literature may be judged good or bad only by the standards that apply to all literature.

At its best, of course, science fiction can add another dimension to writing. It can go outside customary bounds to widen the range of human experience, broaden man's challenge to his own limits. (Fantasy can also do that, but too often at the expense of rationality.) As a consequence, the best writers of science fiction have de-

veloped a flexibility of outlook, together with a joy in a deeper look, often lacking in most other fiction.

For example, there is *STURGEON Is Alive and Well . . .*, by Theodore Sturgeon (Putnam, \$4.95).

The message of the title is a heartening one, but there is nothing else on the jacket to say that the volume is science fiction. Indeed, as Sturgeon points out in his *Foreward*, many of the stories are not sf in nature at all. At least half of them certainly are not. Fine. They have the feel of science fiction—the good part of that strange tingle up the backbone that usually goes only with a first-class sf story. They have an inside-out insight that simply doesn't come out of the normal mainstream. And there is also the iceberg quality—most of the thought given to them is below the surface where it only affects you after you are hit by his points.

With a single exception, these are all new Sturgeon stories, only one of which appeared in a sf magazine. The 1954 exception is *To Here and the Easel*, originally from a softcover anthology. The story may be fantasy or it may be a sort of allegory, but it definitely is the most readable outcry from the darkness of creativity I've ever seen. Outwardly it deals with a man caught between our reality and the world of *Orlando*

Furioso. Inwardly, it may tell you why Sturgeon—and many other writers—sometimes vanishes for a time. I've always loved the story, but I'm biased by experience.

Slow Sculpture appeared in *Galaxy* and won this year's Nebula award as the best story of its length. The award was earned, too. There are ten other stories, each somehow unique. One deals with Nothing at all—literally, and in capitalized form. My favorite is *Brownshoes*, a quietly intense short story; in my opinion, this is the final summation of what Sturgeon has been patiently learning about human love for a quarter century of his writing career. The closest to conventional—and to me, least effective—is *Jorry's Gap*; and even that story is one I'm glad I read.

Sturgeon is not only alive—he's very well indeed. After reading the book, I feel much better, too! It's not all science fiction, but it is all highly recommended.

STURGEON'S stories are mostly what I call visions: that is, they are essentially stories of man's achievements, of his hopes and of his possibilities. But if you insist on reading nightmares, you can satisfy your appetite with some rather beautifully dark ones in *Alone Against Tomorrow*, by Harlan Ellison (Macmillan, \$6.95).

I find this the best collection of Ellison's work, that has been published. Apparently the author agrees, since he lets the stories speak for themselves, rather than telling us about them in lengthy prologues. Aside from a very brief introduction, they appear without blurbs—and they need none, since some of them are already classics.

Several of them are award-winning stories, with either a Hugo or Nebula to their credit. But of more importance, they are consistently stories with unified and strong emotional impact.

I don't normally care for a catalog of the many short stories in a book, but the important ones are here: *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*; "*Repent, Harlequin!*" *Said the Ticktockman*; and eighteen others. If you like Ellison's work, you'll surely find your favorite here. (My own happens to be *O Ye of Little Faith* but maybe that's because I was around at the beginning of the story. Harlan Ellison let me auction him off to the highest bidder, promising to write a short story using any three words the bidder supplied; he then sat down in the middle of the crowd and proceeded to write—and surprised me by writing a darned good story that way.) If you haven't liked Ellison, some of these stories may change your mind.

By and large, I find many char-

acteristics of these stories are those which often irritate me. They use science and all of our attitudes toward the scientific method as rainwear, to be discarded when not necessary or put on whenever the flood comes. Also, they often seem to assume that some current attitude or social insanity is of ever-enduring importance.

Yet a strange consistency is apparent here. When his use of either science or of current attitudes is considered against the total effect of the man's writings, it becomes evident that neither is the real nugget. Ellison is concerned with man's reaction to science; and with current insanities as digressions from the main route of man's evolution toward—hopefully—a degree of rationality.

In a highly individual fashion, these stories wed the mainstream of our literature to science fiction. They deviate a long way from standard science fiction. But unlike the science fiction nightmares of some mainstream writers who have tried our field, they have consistency, they create their own worlds and they are worked out rigidly from theory to test. I recommend the book, particularly as a necessary balance to the too-easy visions that are more common now.

Starlight, by Hal Clement (Ballantine, 95¢), is about as pure science fiction as can be

written—that rare and difficult form known as hard-science fiction. The situation, the background and the most important characters are all ones that could not be put into any other type of story—and they all derive from a carefully detailed examination of scientific possibilities.

This is the long-awaited sequel to *Mission of Gravity*, which I consider the best novel of its type ever written. The creatures from the former novel, capable of standing up to six hundred times our gravity, are enlisted by Earth to explore a strange new planet called Dhrawn, which may be either a planet that grew too large or a star that didn't quite make it. One exploring party is under Don-dragmer and the whole is commanded by Barlennan, both characters from the former book. Above them, but unable to get down into the forty gravities of Dhrawn, is a group of humans.

The exploring party gets into serious and unexpected trouble, due to the strange nature of the planet with its unknown seasons and its unstable mixture of water and ammonia in the atmosphere. And the humans stew and try to help, while Barlennan seems to be carrying on some kind of undercover operation of his own to blackmail Earth into giving him some advantages.

The novel is good and manages to be suspenseful. If it were other

than a follow-up to a genuinely outstanding novel, I might be very well pleased with it. But it lacks both the fascination in detail and the fully developed interest in the characters that it should have.

Partly the trouble lies here in the fact that Dhrawn presents only one major oddity to us; once we begin to accept the oddity of its atmosphere and the behavior of freezing and thawing, little else develops. It remains too much the same. There are hints that Dhrawn is so radioactive in spots that its temperature varies from ultracold to super-hot and that the world lies between stellar and planetary in nature. But little is ever made of this.

Mostly the story loses its impact because the aliens are too much old friends. We already know them. Barlennan's plans remind us of similar ones in the previous book, however much his methods vary.

The humans are so far out of the scene of action that the space allotted to them in the story seems far too great. Benj, the young man on the orbiting observatory, seems to fill far more space than necessary; and he's a little too good—in behavior and in finding ideas—to make a very interesting character.

It's a good book, but it's greatly overshadowed by its predecessor. The science in it is excellently

worked out and convincing. But I wish more of Clement's thoughts on the world of Dhrawn had been put to use in varying things on the planet. The behavior of water and ammonia mixtures is interesting, but even that amount of science can't sustain a novel well.

FEW novels should be considered for pure scientific knowledge, of course. Fiction should entertain. Facts are better presented in non-fiction works and a few factual books are both fascinating in themselves and conducive to deeper pleasure in fiction involving backgrounds from honest science.

Donald H. Menzel has been a recognized name in science fiction for decades. He has written fiction and articles for magazines and has done art work which has brightened our covers, though he refers to his imaginary Martian creatures as "doodles." He is also a highly regarded scientist, having been Director of the Harvard University Observatory for fourteen years.

Now he has done a beautiful and highly informative book on his subject: *Astronomy* (Random House, \$17.50). This volume covers just about everything in the light of current knowledge, with an excellent look at the past and the evolution of the science. It is highly readable, easy to follow—and it has some of the best illustrations and the most useful sky maps I

have seen. If you want a reference book on this subject that can be read for pleasure, I can think of none better.

If you are interested in the Moon you'll find a great bargain in *Lunar Atlas*, edited by Dinsmore Alter (Dover Publications, \$5.00). The book and the photographs are large, easy to study and the text is remarkably complete. It appears in soft covers, has the ruggedness typical of the Dover books and is easily worth twice the price.

Finally, *The Atlas of the Universe*, by Patrick Moore (Rand McNally, \$35.00) is a huge book and one that cannot be described adequately. If the price is too steep, ask for it at your local library and be prepared to spend several hours staring at some marvelous pictures, superb diagrams and excellent text.

All three of these books are done with a love of the universe we know—and of man's ability to know. A few years ago I might have called them science fiction—today they're fact.

Things have changed elsewhere in our culture, judging by another large and handsome book: *The Pulps*, compiled and edited by Tony Goodstone (Chelsea House, \$15.00). Color reproductions of a hundred covers from the old pulp magazines include a full dozen from the science-fiction field. There are also reproductions of the original illustrations

with the stories. Fifty stories are included—but here, science fiction doesn't come off as well, is represented only by two: *Wanderer of Infinity*, by Harl Vincent; and *Parasite Planet*, by Stanley G. Weinbaum. The weird and supernatural account for ten stories, two from Lovecraft and one from (ah, prestige) Tennessee Williams.

There is some introductory matter and a final summary on the super-hero characters, such as The Shadow and Doc Savage. But mostly the stories are allowed to speak for themselves. They do so very well and I think that generally the sampling is a fair one.

Sic transit gloria. It's hard to remember that about the time I began to write, a magazine stand was a gate to a land of eternal enchantment. With a dollar bill I could buy half a dozen magazines, each containing more words than most full-length books today and each filled with its own brand of excitement and adventure. I may not have learned about the plight of the poor—I didn't need to, since I'd rubbed elbows with it: the Depression was just over then. But I learned to trek through the jungles of Sumatra, draw my sixgun, fight off werewolves, pitch the final winning strike and cross the deserts of Mars.

Somehow, much as I may admire the revered classics of accepted literature, I cannot but feel that the unreal pulps taught

me more about life and gave me a better preparation to live it than I ever got from Henry Esmond or Genji or even the Russians of Chekov—and sometimes gave me a lot more fun.

Maybe it's all nostalgia, this love for what we had back then. But maybe not. Take a good look, read the stories and make up your own mind. Science fiction may be the only literature that retains any of it today, but the world was once full of the sense of wonder. It's still there in *The Pulps*.

And since I'm deliberately not reviewing only science fiction this time, I have an excuse to bring up another book. There's no good reason to mention it here, except that it's a very good story, done excellently, and I think it should be recommended.

The Children of Llyr, by Evangeline Walton (Ballantine, 95¢), is fantasy. Some time ago Ballantine used the author's *The Island of the Mighty* in the Adult Fantasy Series and she was so surprised to see her work in print again that she wrote diffidently to the publisher, saying she had unpublished novels laid against the same background. This is one of those. It is based upon the Welsh mythic literature and features the demigods of those myths.

If she had put her story on some alien planet or alternate world and given the heroes powers vaguely explained by pseudo-scientific

words, it would probably be considered fresh and excellent science fiction. The world of the Welsh myths is just as strange as any world of swashbuckling science fiction. And the amount of thinking she must have done to complete her background and her devices would be quite adequate for any work of science fiction.

But the book has a reality of its own. Magic works—sometimes, and more or less. The men in the story are both larger than life and somewhat less than modern men. But they stop being myth figures and become fully realized as human beings.

Their world has a balance and a justice unusual in fantasy. This is the way it would have been if the old beliefs could have been true at all.

The book must have been written about the time I was buying all the pulp magazines almost

forty years ago. It could just as well have been written last year, since it is thoroughly modern in its style and its handling of characters. It is, in fact, timeless in the sense that the very best telling of tales is always beyond the limits of any given time and place. It's a first-rate book.

And as such, it deserves to be read. As I tried to indicate at the beginning of this review, there is a special joy to science fiction—but there is also a special joy to any good example of literature. And the reader who broadens his interest may well return to our particular field with a fresh zest and insight to what science fiction offers.

Which reminds me—I've still got to finish page 3 of *Finnegan's Wake* before I start the next review . . . ●

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SCIENCE FEATURE

**L.
SPRAGUE
DE CAMP**

**DEATH
COMES
TO THE
MEGAFAUNA**



WHITE men who first invaded North America were astounded by the abundance of animal life—plains black with millions of bison, deer, wapiti, and progbug; skies dark with passenger pigeons and other fowl. It never occurred to them that this was but a remnant of the fauna that had roamed the continent fifty or a hundred thousand years before. The total number of animals may have been much the same, but the number of different *kinds* of animals had drastically shrunk.

In the late Pleistocene Period, besides species very much like those of the present day, the continent supported a swarm of other animals that have since disappeared. In the Northeast, the woodlands harbored the deer-moose *Cervalces*, a tapir, and a beaver the size of a bear. The plains swarmed not only with bison larger than those of today, but also with horses and camels.

Across the warmer parts of the country wandered herds of giant peccaries and animals of two kinds of South American origin: ground sloths, vaguely bearlike in outline but larger than any bear, with massive tails and hooked claws to pull down small trees to eat; and armadillo-like glyptodonts with solid shells, as big as automobiles.

Most impressive were the proboscidi-ans: three genera of mam-

moths and a mastodon. In the north—Canada and Alaska—dwelt the northern mammoth, of the genus *Mammonteus*, resembling the mammoth depicted by Cro-Magnons on the walls of French caves: an animal about the size of today's Indian elephant but shorter in the body. It was extremely hairy, with a sloping back rising to two distinctive peaks over the shoulders and the head. These domes were probably reservoirs of fat. It had spirally twisted tusks which, in old males, crossed at the tips. Scientists have long wondered about these crossed tusks, since they would be of little use as weapons. A plausible theory is that they were used as snow shovels to get at buried food in winter.

Across the warmer parts of the land roamed the southern mammoth, *Archidiskodon*. This was a much larger animal, probably almost hairless like modern elephants. In the intermediate regions dwelt elephants of another genus, *Parelephas*, short in the body but long in the legs, with spirally twisted tusks like *Mammonteus*. There is no generally accepted common name for all the elephants of this genus, so I have proposed calling them favonian mammoths, from the Latin word for "temperate."

The southern mammoth and the favonian mammoth were the tallest of all known proboscideans, reaching a shoulder

height of over 13 feet. The tallest found so far is a favonian mammoth from Germany that touches 14 feet. But the southern mammoth was so close in height, besides being a more massive animal, that we cannot call either the "larger" without qualification. A modern African elephant in the National Museum in Washington stands 13 feet 2 inches; this is exceptional for this species but shows what can happen.

A fourth proboscidean, the American mastodon, roamed the continent, its range overlapping those of the other three. Although more primitive than the others in jaw and tooth structure, this animal was of good size, about as tall as the woolly mammoth but longer in body and bulkier.

PREYING upon these animals were carnivores of all sizes, from bears bigger than the Kodiak grizzlies down to weasels. The sabertoothed cat *Smilodon* preyed on huge herbivores like the ground sloths, since its fangs could pierce even their thick hides. Even larger was a lionlike true cat, related to today's jaguar and of a similarly heavy build. There was an oversized wolf, *Canis dirus*; and to clean up any remains a condor, *Teratornis*, bigger than either the Californian or the Andean condors of today.

The other continents displayed

similar assortments of huge animals, or megafaunas. Europe had *Mammonteus*, *Parelephas*, *Archidiskodon*, and a fourth genus, *Hesperoloxodon*. This was another huge elephant with long, nearly straight tusks. There were at least two species of rhinoceros—the woolly rhinoceros, a hairy cousin of today's African white rhino, in the North; and the more conventional Merck's rhinoceros in the South. The warmer areas and periods hosted a hippopotamus like today's species. The huge Irish deer bore the largest antlers of the whole deer family.

The story was the same in Asia. Northern Asia swarmed with mammoths, reindeer, and a huge hairy rhinoceros, *Elasmotherium*, with a single horn growing from its forehead like the legendary unicorn. South of the Himalayas lived proboscideans of several kinds, including *Stegodon ganesa* with the most massive tusks of the order.

In South America dwelt ground sloths as big as small elephants; armored glyptodonts; hippopotamuslike toxodonts; camel-like macrauchenids with flexible snouts like miniature elephant's trunks; horses and mastodons from North America; and others. Even Australia had a megafauna, with kangaroos ten feet tall, wombats the size of a rhinoceros, and a monitor similar to today's Komodo dragon but 30 feet long.

A few score of thousands of years later—a mere tick of the geological clock—all these megafaunas had vanished. They left mere remnants everywhere save in Africa and southern Asia, where several megafaunal types survived: two species of elephant, five of rhinoceros, one of hippopotamus and assorted giraffes, buffaloes, ostriches, zebras, antelopes and so on, with large canids and felids to prey upon them. Even in Africa, where the megafauna survived best, much of it still disappeared: an antlered giraffe, a sheep the size of a buffalo and a pig the size of a rhinoceros among others.

The Great Death at the end of the Pleistocene was not, of course, the only such wave of extinction. There have been several. Two of these—those of the Pleistocene and the Cretaceous—are much better known than the rest because the lines that then became extinct included such large and striking creatures.

The Great Death at the end of the Cretaceous saw the end of both orders of dinosaurs, of the pterosaurs or flying reptiles, and of the aquatic reptiles called plesiosaurs and mosasaurs. Several groups of invertebrates vanished at the same time. Among the cephalopods, which include the modern squids and octopi, the ammonites disappeared utterly, while the belemnites were re-

duced to a small remnant. Another group to vanish comprised the bivalve mollusks called Rudista. About a quarter of all the known animal families disappeared at this time.

At the end of the Permian Period occurred an even more drastic extinction, which wiped out about half of all the known animal families. This included three-quarters of the families of amphibians and four-fifths of those of the reptiles. We hear less about this Great Death because the animals that perished were less spectacular than mammoths or dinosaurs. The largest land beasts of the time were stout, plant-eating reptiles of vaguely lizardlike shape, waddling about on pillarlike legs and weighing as much as a cow. The many kinds of smaller reptiles were more like our idea of a lizard. In the sea, the armored fishes called placoderms, the trilobites (which looked like oversized woodlice), the eurypterids or sea scorpions (large insectlike crustaceans), and the crinoids or sea lilies (starfish cousins on stalks) all vanished.

A similar wave took place at the end of the Cambrian. The Cambrian is the first period for which abundant fossil remains have been found. This fact gives antievolutionists an excuse to claim that there must have been a sudden divine Creation at the beginning of the Cambrian. Actually, a

number of pre-Cambrian fossils are known, consisting of sponges, worm burrows, sea pens and jellyfish. Since most pre-Cambrian animals were little soft-bodied things without bones or shells, their remains are scarce.

In the Cambrian, vertebrates had not yet evolved, so there were no very spectacular creatures to perish. Nonetheless, about forty out of sixty families of trilobites went under at that time. There were also lesser extinctions at the ends of the Ordovician, Devonian, Triassic, and Pliocene periods.

THE Great Deaths pose one of the knottiest problems in science. Such worldwide phenomena, occurring every fifty to a hundred million years, would seem to call for some uniform cause. But none of the explanations proposed seems to work when applied to more than one or two extinctions.

Animals and plants are always dying out and being replaced by others: At least a hundred species have perished in the last century and many more are in a precarious state.

The causes of the recent extinctions are, however, obvious. The culprits are the hunter with his gun and traps, the stockman with his flocks and herds and the farmer with his plow and pesticides. They kill off wild animals—sometimes

for gain, sometimes to protect their crops and livestock and sometimes for the fun of killing. They also convert the wild animals' land to human uses. The indiscriminate dosing of the North American continent with DDT has caused a population crash in the duck hawk (or peregrine falcon) and the brown pelican.

A couple of years ago a Russian professor wrote the *New York Times* boasting of the enlightened conservationist policies of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the Communistic USSR had joined the capitalistic Japan and Norway to keep up the annual kill quotas of whales. As a result, two of the largest species, the humpback and the blue whale, have been brought to the verge of extinction. A commissar with a quota to fill can evidently be quite as ruthlessly self-interested as the greediest capitalist. All over the world, the dismal story is the same.

One school of thought holds that the main cause of the Pleistocene extinction was the spread of hunting bands of *Homo sapiens* over the earth from its African homeland. Professor Paul S. Martin of the University of Arizona is a leader of this faction. Others object that this explanation does not account for the Great Death. How, they ask, could the stone-age primitives who invaded the Americas from Asia, 12,000 or

more years ago, have exterminated six or seven genera of formidable proboscideans, while the iron-age inhabitants of India and Africa, technically far more advanced, have failed to wipe out the two surviving species?

Scientists of Professor Martin's school retort that, since man evolved from an apelike primate in Africa, the African animals had a chance to get used to him, to develop defensive instincts and to become wary and hostile. Then, when man spread to the other continents, he found them full of beasts that, never having seen or smelled a man, were comparatively tame—as Darwin found the birds on the Galápagos Islands—and so were easily slaughtered.

The other side replies: the same rules apply to hunting man as to other predators. If a predator too severely depletes its prey, it in turn is reduced by starvation and the prey gets a chance to recover.

The "overskill" party replies: When man switched to a partly vegetable diet, he could survive the loss of his animal prey, which he killed off to the last mammoth. On the other hand, the African megafauna survived because man, by changing over to a largely vegetable diet, left the animals comparatively unmolested. But these arguments contradict each other. Vegetarianism could hardly have simultaneously saved the

megafauna in Africa and exterminated it elsewhere.

Furthermore, the Pleistocene extinction resembles the Cretaceous and Permian extinctions. Obviously, the latter two Great Deaths could not have been wrought by men, for there were no human beings on Earth at those times. Man—Alley Oop to the contrary notwithstanding—only arose between 65,000,000 and 70,000,000 years after the death of the last dinosaur.

THE causes of some extinctions, even before there were men, are plain. For the first half of the Age of Mammals, South America was isolated. The predators of that continent were: first, large flightless birds (the largest eight feet tall) and, second, carnivorous marsupials. By parallel evolution, the latter developed into animals superficially like the weasels, badgers, dogs, bears and cats (including a marsupial sabertooth) of other continents.

Then the Isthmus of Panama rose above the waters. The placental carnivores—the ancestors of today's jaguar, puma, ocelot, bush dog, kinkajou and the rest—swarmed across this land bridge. The flightless birds of prey and the carnivorous marsupials, unable to compete with the more efficient invaders, all died out.

Aside from such understandable exceptions, however, no

obvious causes for worldwide waves of extinction are known. When a species disappears because it has evolved into another species, its descendants live on. When a species becomes extinct because it cannot compete with some other species, the victor in the contest lives on.

In the Great Deaths, however, there were no victors. Whole orders perished without leaving survivors or descendants or competitors. After the Cretaceous extinction, the earth was almost barren of large animals for millions of years, until the little mammals, represented by creatures somewhat like today's shrews, mice and opossums, expanded into the ecological niches that the dinosaurs had vacated.

So far no logical way has been found to connect the known causes of the extinction of single species with these worldwide catastrophes. And it is asking too much of coincidence, that scores of genera, dozens of families and whole orders should perish at once by sheer happenstance.

Paleontologists have racked their brains over this question for a century but they cannot be said to have found the answer. Of the single causes proposed for the three main extinctions, some can be quickly disposed of. When paleontology was a new science at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the great Georges Cuvier



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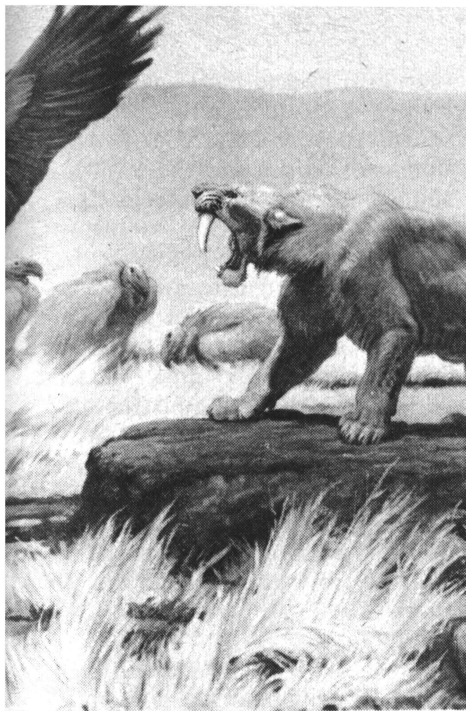


COURTESY OF AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY; ARTIST, CHARLES R. KNIGHT



pronounced that Earth had been shaken by a series of catastrophes. It wobbled on its axis, causing oceans to splash out of their beds and drown the animals of entire continents, while fish and other water creatures, left flopping on the sea's bare bottom, perished for lack of water. Then the oceans settled back into their basins, while the devastated continents filled up with immigrants from land that had been spared.

Cuvier's Catastrophism seemed reasonable when only a few



geological periods were known, with wide gaps between them. As geological knowledge advanced, it transpired that the building up and tearing down of the rocks and the evolution of life had been continuous, without Cuvierian catastrophes. (Cuvierian ideas, however, still survive in pseudo-scientific cults like the cometary-collision hypothesis put forth by Count Carli in the eighteenth century, Ignatius Donnelly in the nineteenth and Immanuel Velikovsky in the twentieth.) True,

there had been great changes: glacial periods, advances and retreats of shallow inland seas, and the slow horizontal movement of the continents about the surface of the globe. But even these were extremely gradual compared to the span of known human history.

More modern is the theory of "internecine warfare." It holds that the great predators—the tyrannosaurs or the saber-tooths—ate all the large herbivores and then starved to death. But this is not how things work. Some predation is not only good for species but necessary—to cull defectives and to keep the species from increasing to the point where it eats itself out of house and home. Predation is normally kept within bounds by the predators themselves, who claim certain territories and drive rivals away from them. Americans who have tried to "help" the deer and prongbuck by killing off their "enemies," the pumas, wolves, and coyotes, have in the long run done the herbivores more harm than good.

Another theory is that of a plague, which wiped out the larger animals. But real diseases of this sort do not affect more than one or a very few species at a time. No known disease attacks *all* mammals or *all* birds, although some, like distemper, assail several different species within one order.

Moreover, a species is rarely ex-

terminated by disease. It may be reduced; but, when the survivors become thinly scattered, the disease can no longer spread rapidly among them. Then the parasite and the host adjust to each other. The more fatal varieties of the disease die out because every time they kill a host the parasites also die. Likewise, the more resistant strains of the host species increase at the expense of the others until immune strains evolve.

There used to be a lot of talk about "racial senescence." It was supposed that a group of animals went through youth, maturity and old age, as do individuals. When a genus or a family attained great size or grotesque form—or otherwise became "overspecialized"—it was thought to be senile and ripe for extinction.

But this is unsound reasoning by analogy. There is no reason to think that a species evolves in such a way. "Specialization" is relative. To us the opossum seems a very primitive, generalized mammal; but back in the Mesozoic an intelligent dinosaur would have classed it as a highly specialized reptile. Its specializations happened to succeed.

Size also is relative. All the larger mammals of today are gigantic compared to those of the Paleocene Period, just after the extinction of the dinosaurs. Gravity limits the absolute size of land animals, but the only land animals

that have pushed hard against the barrier are the sauropod dinosaurs. And the Cretaceous extinction involved not only these but also the hosts of small, unspecialized dinosaurs as well.

In some cases large size or heavy armor might lead to extinction; but, under other circumstances, so might small size or lack of armor. The great whales were doing fine until men went after them, and the armored turtles are one of the most successful and durable groups. "Grotesqueness" is a subjective idea. To an intelligent glyptodont we might seem quite as grotesque as that creature seems to us.

ANOTHER set of theories has to do with changes in climate, atmosphere or vegetation. Climatic change is a tempting hypothesis for the Permian and Pleistocene extinctions, because each of these periods saw widespread glaciation. But it does not account for the Cretaceous extinction, since there was apparently no change in climate at that time.

Moreover, the Great Death at the end of the Pleistocene took place *after* the last of the four glacial advances, when the climate was getting milder. In addition, while the glacial advances caused marked changes in the climates of many lands, they did not cause the climatic zones of former times suddenly to disappear. Instead,

these zones were slowly shifted about the map, so that the animals adapted to each had plenty of time to keep up with it.

The Cretaceous extinction is sometimes explained by desiccation. This was a favorite theory of my lamented friend Willy Ley. According to this belief, increasing dryness reduced the forest zones and increased prairie and desert areas. Deprived of their shade, the dinosaurs were increasingly exposed to direct sunlight. Lacking homeothermy—that is, thermostatic control of bodily temperature—they died of heatstroke or sunburn or suffered sterilization. But many dinosaurs had already adapted to life in open country, yet these perished with the rest. Nor would this theory account for the simultaneous disappearance of several orders of marine reptiles and other sea life.

Other changes in vegetation have also been invoked for the death of the dinosaurs. True, the Cretaceous did see two revolutions in the plant world. At the beginning of the period came the spread of the angiosperms—that, is, most of the familiar broad-leaved trees. (Most Jurassic trees had been needle-bearing evergreens like pines, larches, cedars and redwoods.) It is hard to see how this change could have hurt the dinosaurs, since it would have provided them with more food and more shade. Moreover, the dinosaurs lived hap-

pily with the angiosperms for scores of millions of years before their end.

The other revolution was the spread of grasses at the end of the period. It has been surmised that the dinosaurs' teeth and stomachs could not cope with a diet of grass. But it seems unlikely that the new grasses deprived the dinosaurs of any preexisting food supply. Rather, the grasses spread over large parts of the globe that had theretofore presented a surface of bare earth, with a scattering of herbs and shrubs. Nor does either vegetative explanation help us with the Pleistocene extinction, since there is no sign of a big change in plant life at that time, other than a shifting about as the climatic zones moved.

A more subtle variant of these theories combines heat and cold. It supposes that geographical changes brought about, not a worldwide change in average temperature, but the spread of "continental" climates—hot summers and cold winters—to replace the milder "oceanic" climates of other times. This theory is usually combined with the idea of a worldwide spasm of orogeny or mountain building. This, it is supposed, caused a rise of the land, an opening of land bridges, a cutting off of the circulation of ocean currents, the accumulation of ice in the polar caps and a consequent lowering of the sea level which ag-

gravated all the other effects.

This theory fails to account for the disappearance of the marine reptiles at the end of the Cretaceous. Nor does it fit the facts of the Pleistocene extinction, which occurred after the period of severest climates.

Some have suggested that a sudden burst of penetrating radiation from a solar flare, or from a nearby star that went supernova, sterilized the large animals or at least harmed their genes enough to destroy the race. Some attribute this effect to the periodical reversals of Earth's magnetic field, which for a time might let more ionizing particles from the sun strike the atmosphere. But such catastrophes should have even more affected small creatures—amphibians, lizards, snakes, turtles and small mammals in the Cretaceous; small mammals, birds, and reptiles in the Pleistocene—but it did not. It should have affected the small dinosaurs more than the large, whose mere bulk protected them against extremes of temperature and against ionizing radiations. But all alike perished, as did the smaller ground sloths, glyptodonts, American horses and camels.

Some modern theories, still under development, deal with such things as the breakdown of food chains and the ratios of different age groups in a species. If one species, such as a marsh plant, disappears, a whole fauna of animals

that depend upon it may disappear, too. The animals that eat the plant go, and then the animals that eat the animals that eat the plant, and so on.

Such a wave of extinction would affect mainly animals with a narrow range of diet. Anteaters would perish if ants and termites disappeared, while the koala eats only the leaves of certain eucalyptus trees and is poisoned by anything else. Most animals, however, are less finicky. The most striking casualties of the Pleistocene were the mammoths and mastodons; but the elephant tribe is notably catholic in taste, eating anything green.

Other theorists argue that, in the shifting around of climatic zones during the Pleistocene ice age, certain species were forced into pockets from which there was no escape. Their range was broken into fragments, where the species could barely maintain itself. In these enclaves, the survivors were finished off by man. For instance, the North American megafauna seems to have lasted longer in Florida than elsewhere. If climatic change, or an invasion from the north by hunters, required these animals to migrate farther south, they could not have done so because of the sea.

SUCH are the main theories of the Great Deaths. There are others: for instance, that extinc-

tions of marine life are caused by changes in the amount of poisonous trace elements in the water, or that the percentage of oxygen in the atmosphere has risen or fallen. Like the other theories, all meet serious objections, and in any case they do not seem to apply to the Pleistocene extinction. In a few decades new discoveries—or some new combination of existing theories—may give a plausible answer to the puzzle.

Meanwhile, whether or not man was a major factor in the Pleistocene extinction, the world is today undergoing another Great Death. This time there is no doubt at all that the cause is man. In historic times men have killed off the dodo, the solitaire, the moa, the elephant bird of Madagascar, the great auk, the aurochs, the tarpan or European wild horse, the quagga, the passenger pigeon, the Carolina parakeet, several races of Galápagos tortoise and many more. Others have been reduced to precarious remnants.

Well, why protect wild life? With the growth of the world's population and the demand for a higher standard of living everywhere, it is vital to conserve every natural resource we can. Moreover, scientists need every possible species for study.

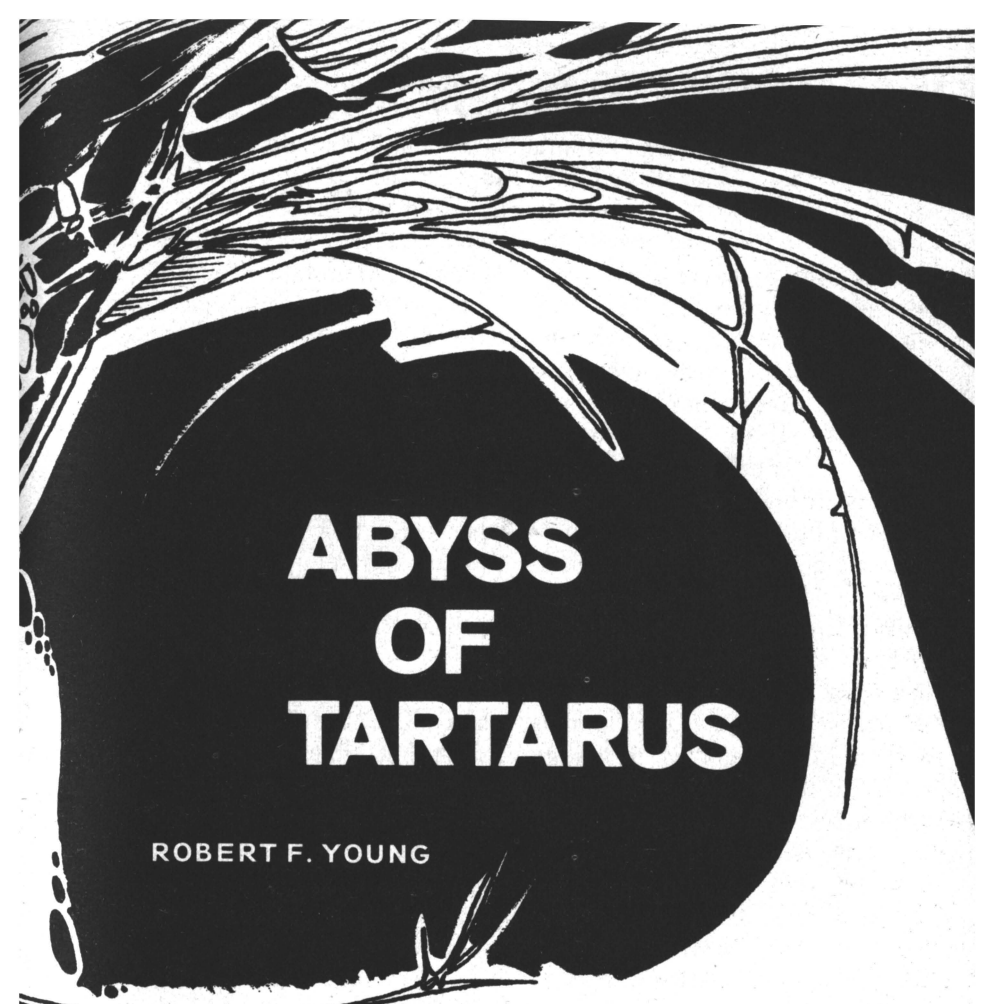
But the real argument for keeping some lands in their natural state, with their native birds and beasts, goes beyond material

things. If all the large animals were wiped out, mankind would no doubt get along. But what a dull world it would be, like the Paleocene just after the extinction of the dinosaurs!

If you heard that some dinosaurs had survived on an island but that somebody had just shot them all for their hides (as might well happen) you might feel a furious resentment, for some of the color and variety would have gone out of your world. Our descendants may feel the same way about us if we casually allow all five species of rhinoceros to be exterminated because aging and superstitious orientals think that powdered rhinoceros horn will revive their sexual energies, or if we let all the whales be turned into lubricating oil and canned meat.

If the world were all tamed and civilized in a worldwide mosaic of city, suburb, and farm, with no life but man and his domestic animals, it would be almost as monotonous as a jail. Nobody wants to live in even the nicest jail. With the human race becoming more homogenized in costume and custom every year, the wilderness with its wild life is one of the things that makes the world interesting. If it is right to prefer freedom to imprisonment, variety to monotony and color to drabness, then it is right to save as much as we can of the wilds and their dwellers. ●





ABYSS OF TARTARUS

ROBERT F. YOUNG

*Orestes: Look, look, alas—
What Gorgon shapes
throng up!*



Consider the whale. Remark this awesome leviathan of time and space. Before its capture its skin was meteorpocked and creviced, its vast belly a spelaean labyrinth. Its ganglia were two, one of which its captors overlooked. But when the first was blown up, the second was impaired, and the whale was more dead than alive when it was towed into the orbital shipyards of Altair IV. There it underwent conversion and became almost a ship. Its surface is burnished now and inlaid with portsopes. Man-made locks provide access to its belly; lifeboat bays nestle on either flank. The spelaean labyrinth has become a complex of decks and cabins, staterooms and holds. There is a bridge equipped with all the latest astro-gation instruments. A self-tending hydroponic garden assures a constant supply of oxygen, and self-tending machines provide a mean temperature of 70° Fahrenheit and an undeviating gravity of 1. There is a plentifully stocked galley. A sealed-in hydraulic system brings water, hot and cold, to a hundred different taps. The only segments of itself that the whale can call its own are its second ganglion, its open-hearth stomach and its drive-tissue.

A whale? No, it cannot properly

be called a whale. But it cannot properly be called a ship either. What ship ever existed that could see inside itself and simultaneously see parsecs away? That could with equal ease ply the Sea of Space and plumb the Sea of Time? That could think with logic absolute? No, it can be called neither ship *nor* whale. It can only be called "Starfinder's whale" after the man who repaired its second ganglion and freed it from the orbital shipyards, the very man who stands now on its bridge, its captain and sole passenger, staring into the main viewscreen at the Sea of Time.



Consider Starfinder. Remark his classic pose as he stands staring into time. It is the pose of a man condemned—not by his peers but by himself. For there is blood on his hands—the blood of the Terraltairan woman whom he loved and murdered in his bed. He killed her because she was killing him—destroyed her with his naked hands as she would have destroyed him with her naked body. But though the deed may have been rightfully done, he is still responsible for it, and the blood that stains his hands refuses to go away.

Once blood of a different kind stained his hands—the blood of

spacewhales. For he was a Jonah—a professional killer of whales. He entered into their bellies and blew up the huge blue roses of their brains—their ganglia—in order that they might be made into ships. And then the slaughter sickened him and he wanted to die and nearly did, and he killed no more whales. Then he found this whale, which was supposed to be dead but was not, because it had two ganglia and only one had been destroyed. He repaired the second, and the act cleansed him of the residue of guilt that still remained; but the new blood was already on his hands and now it would not go away.

Am I never to know peace? Perhaps it waits for me in the past. I will look for it there. But I will look for it here first, although I'm sure I will never find it. Here, in the Sea of Time . . .

✂ Consider the Sea of Time. Remark this paradox of the ages. For if it can be said that it contains no space as such, it can be said that it contains no time either. It consists of *pure* time, and pure time bears no affinity to conventional time. It is neither a composite of moments nor a succession of events. It is *timeless* time—an interreality that holds conventional reality together. It is not

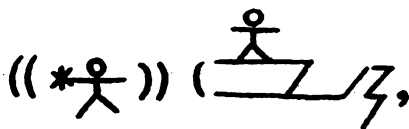
new. Man discovered it early in his history. But in his naïveté he mistook it for something else and gave it geographical coordinates. Ignorant of its true nature, he did not understand that geographically it does not—*cannot*—exist. Then man became sophisticated and lost track of ✂ and when he looked for it again it was gone.




In aspect, the Sea of Time presents a stern and dismal countenance, but it is not without beauty. The tenuous half-real crags that rear up out of dark abysmal depths are limned at their crests by a pale gold luminescence that emanates from nowhere, and surreal crimson light creeps partway down their torn and precipitous slopes and blends subtly into the blackness of the depths. Fragments of gray clouds hover in the sunless skies, resembling gigantic gray eagles poised in midflight and great gray gulls preparing to dive. Yes, beauty resides in the Sea of Time and, since the whale's passage is bereft of apparent motion, the beauty is rendered all the more intense. But it is lost upon Starfinder. He sees the Sea of Time as the black sack Ivan Ilych fell into two hours before his death.

Starfinder speaks, half to himself, half to the whale: "Why is it, whale, that the instant a man acquires something he wants, he

no longer wants it? I wanted the past so badly I stole you to get it. I wanted it so badly I couldn't wait till you began your dive. And now that I have it at my fingertips, I no longer want it."

The whale does not answer. It has not spoken since it said, in the tele-hieroglyphic speech-form it devised in order to impart its thoughts to Starfinder,



signifying by the enclosed juxtaposition of  (Starfinder) and * (its ganglion), the oneness of itself and its benefactor; and by the stickman's standing upon its back its promise to obey Starfinder's every command and to go where and whenever he wishes in  (space) and  (time).

The whale's silence does not bother Starfinder. For he knows that promise or no promise, as long as he mans its bridge it will do his bidding. It must—because he has both the means and the knowhow to damage its ganglion and inflict pain. In a way, it is as much a prisoner as it was before.

Starfinder continues: "I thought I would like to see the wily Xenophon leading the Ten Thousand out from under Tissaphernes'

nose, Van Gogh painting *Vincent in the Flames*, Dante passing Beatrice on the bridge. But I would be an outsider, whale. I do not belong in the past any more than I belonged in the present. Perhaps I belong in the Sea of Time."

Still the whale is silent. The crags seem to quiver in the view-screen and the blackness of the depths seems to creep higher on the torn and precipitous slopes, to extend itself in long and tapered fingers, the tips of which are stained with blood.

Now there is movement in the depths and the liquid blackness bubbles. Strange shapes rise up and hover on the screen. Dusky robes trail back into the depths; blurred faces, skinny arms appear. Taloned fingers leap forth as though to claw.

Involuntarily Starfinder steps back. Nearly a day has passed since he has broken fast; he has not slept in twice that length of time. Unquestionably he is hallucinating. The faces come into hideous focus. Black blood exudes from sunken eyes, trickles down gaunt and fissured cheeks. Lips peel back, revealing snags of teeth. Again a horrid hand leaps forth as though to claw.

And then the shapes fade out, the fingers and the faces and the dusky robes—and the crags, with

their blood-red slopes, reappear. Starfinder turns his tired eyes away. "I will sleep, whale," he says. "Do not surface until I awake. And do not wake me without good cause."

He heats instant soup in the galley, forces a bowlful down. He finds nepenthe pills in the dispensary, takes two. He directs his steps toward the captain's cabin.

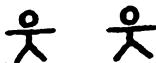
The captain's cabin is two decks down from the bridge and halfway aft. It is at the end of a lateral passageway, just beyond the quarters of the first and second mates. Beyond its outer bulkhead, and connected to it by quick-action locks, lies the logic behind its location—the starboard lifeboat bay.


The whale is a freighter but there are several staterooms in the stern, each more luxuriously appointed than the captain's cabin. The captain's cabin is good enough for Starfinder. In addition to a curtained berth, it contains a foot locker, a full-length mirror, a built-in bureau, a desk, a gun cabinet, a video tape-player and a wardrobizer. Its walls are pastel blue, its floor is wall-to-walled and covering its entire ceiling is a mural depicting the construction of the Aphroditorium in Swerz, the capital city of Altair IV.

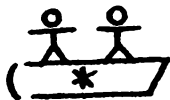
There is an adjoining lavatory. Starfinder kicks free from his clothing, showers and shaves. Then he returns to the cabin, lies down on the berth and draws the curtains to shut out the phosphorescence that emanates from the whale's interior tissue and eliminates any need for artificial lighting. The nepenthe pills take hold, drive the black thoughts before them. He sleeps.


For all the timelessness of the Sea of Time, time goes on aboard the whale, and inset in the footboard of the captain's berth is a ship's clock that records it. When Starfinder closed his eyes the clock said 0231 hours. When he opens them, it says 0257.

His exhaustion tells him he did not sleep the clock around. But why, then, did he wake? The question is answered as the hieroglyphic message that appeared in his sleeping mind reappears in his waking one:




He frowns.  is the whale's word for "Starfinder." But there is only one Starfinder, so why *two* stickmen? The whale elaborates:



Now the message is clear. It is true that  is the whale's word for "Starfinder"; but it is also its word for "man." There is a stowaway on board.

Starfinder is stunned.

He is even more stunned when the whale adds another detail:  The stowaway is a woman!

When Starfinder stole the whale, he did not search it. He simply overpowered the watchguard, sent him down to the surface of Altair IV on the shuttleship and told the whale to deorbit. It did not occur to him that the man might have brought a woman on board to help him while-away his watch.

Clearly the whale has been unaware of her until now, else it would have apprised Starfinder of her presence sooner. It may not like him but he is the only human it can trust.

Doubtless there are blind spots in its interior into which it cannot see. Obviously the woman has left her hiding place and is searching out the man who is responsible for her present predicament. Probably she witnessed the jettisoning of the watchguard and was too terrified earlier to make her move.

Starfinder is dismayed. He has already killed one Terraltairan

woman. Must he kill another?

A fourth message emanates from the whale's ganglion and imprints itself in his mind:



It is followed almost immediately by a fifth:



The whale has discovered two more stowaways!

Starfinder bolts from the berth and picks up his discarded clothes. He is about to don them when his eye falls upon the wardrobizer. Dropping the clothes, he steps inside and dials a full-dress captain's uniform. Terraltairan women are as arrogant as they are beautiful, as domineering as they are oversexed. He will need all the authority he can muster if he is to cope with three of them.

Even if he succeeds, there remains the problem of what to do with them. But he will cross that bridge when he comes to it.

He steps out of the wardrobizer and surveys himself in the full-length mirror. The uniform dazzles his eyes. It is white with gold piping. The left side of the coat-front is hung with seven rows of

multicolored ribbons, to each of which is appended a gleaming medal. The medals have no significance; their purpose is merely to lend prestige. The coat is also equipped with a pair of golden epaulettes that match the forepiece of the space-officer's hat, and it is held snug around his waist by a synthi-leather belt from which hangs a synthi-leather holster. The white trousers have traditional triple creases and are tucked neatly into black synthi-leather boots so highly polished he can see his face in them.

He feels slightly foolish. He hopes that his new look will impress the stowaways more favorably than it impresses him.

If, as he has surmised, they are searching him out, he has merely to wait till they find him. But he decides it will be better if he goes forth to meet them. He asks the whale where they are but the whale, so cooperative a few minutes ago, does not answer. He decides to proceed in the direction of the bridge.

Before leaving the cabin, he takes a Weikanzer .39 from the gun cabinet, loads it and slips it into his holster. Then he makes his way down the lateral passageway to the fore-to-aft corridor, along the corridor and up the companionway to the bridge. He

meets no one on the way and he finds the bridge empty.

Before leaving it he glances into the viewscreen at the Sea of Time. Its countenance is unchanged. He also checks the chronograph, which is focused on distant Earth and tells universal time by means of the planet's IX Upsilon-MU emanations. Still relatively weak from its ordeal, the whale is not diving at even a fraction of its normal velocity, and this is evidenced by the tabulator which records a date that precedes the birth of Christ by less than a millennium. When its strength has fully returned it will be able to accomplish in minutes what now requires hours, and the Sea of Time, so prominent in the present dive, will be no more than a brief blur in the viewscreen.

He proceeds to the lounge. It, too, is empty. Maybe he has surmised wrong. Maybe his three stowaways aren't seeking him out. In that case, the most logical place to look for them would be the stern staterooms.

He descends to Deck 3 and makes his way aft. There are five staterooms altogether. The first two are empty. He opens the door of the third. She is waiting for him on the bed. She is lying on her back and she has pulled her black dress up to her belly and spread her

legs apart. The orange flame of her pubic hair is no less bright than the flaming tresses that accentuate the roguish beauty of her face.

Starfinder hastily retreats into the passageway and closes the door. Laughter mocks him from the room beyond. There is a fiendish quality to it that chills his blood.

He knows what he will find beyond the next two doors, but he must look. The second temptress is a blonde, the third a brunette. Each lies waiting like the first, and mocks him with laughter when he shuts her from his sight.

Lust and revulsion constrict his viscera as he stands sweating in the passageway. These are no mere Terraltairan women. If they were, he might know lust perhaps, but not revulsion. What are they then?

Whatever they are, he cannot cope with them.

He leaves the staterooms behind him and begins walking back the way he came. He will return to the bridge, not because the bridge holds any answers but because he can think of nowhere else to go. Presently he hears the patter of footsteps behind him. He turns. They are several paces away, walking arm-in-arm. When he stops, they stop too. Their red lips

part, revealing teeth that gleam too brightly. A chorus of fiendish laughter issues from their throats.

The one with the flaming hair speaks. It is a language Starfinder has never heard before, and yet he has no difficulty distinguishing the words. "A cloud of guilt hangs o'er your head, Starfinder."

The one with the yellow hair speaks next: "Oppressing you. Yet when we proffered you love, you turned away."

The black-haired one completes the pronouncement: "By love to die, or by the taloned hand—the choice was yours!"

"What do you want?" Starfinder demands.

" " "WE WANT YOU!" " " "

He turns and resumes walking down the passageway. When he reaches the fore-to-aft corridor, he turns right, and when he reaches the companionway he climbs it to the bridge. He does not need to look back to see whether the three women are still following him. He can hear their footfalls and the tittering of their voices. He can smell the aura they exude.

He shudders for he knows that what he smells is death, and he knows, too, who his three pursuers are. Moreover, he knows whence they came and why.

He shudders again. Like most men obsessed with guilt, he does

not really wish to be cleansed; and like most men obsessed with death, he does not really want to die.



Consider the Furies.

Remark these ancient maidens whose abode is the Abyss of Tartarus and whom Starfinder subconsciously summoned from their lair. Note their Grecian symmetry of form but do not be deceived by it, for each wears the shroud of illusion and her true form lies just underneath. They have come on board the whale to act in their capacity as avengers of the dead.

Now Starfinder knows that the Sea of Time is more than just the passageway between the present and the past. It is the cellar of Hell—the Abyss of Tartarus. The ancients held the key to it, but they became sophisticated and threw the key away. Now, in the form of the whale, Starfinder has unwittingly found another key. It is not quite the same key his remote ancestors possessed. Theirs opened the front gate of Hell; his opens the back.

Starfinder sits down in the cushioned seat reserved for the captain. The Furies seat themselves on a bench facing him. He is not unduly alarmed. He can leave the Abyss any time he wants simply

by ordering the whale to surface. It may well be that his passengers will accompany him, but he does not think so. They are oriented to the Abyss and it is unlikely that they will be able to reorient themselves swiftly enough to cope with a sudden shift from interreality to reality. It is also unlikely that once he leaves them behind they will be able to locate him in conventional time, to say nothing of space. Their spacial sphere of activity is probably limited to the Earth.

No, now that the initial shock has passed, he is more curious than he is alarmed. He wonders how they will go about their task and how soon.

The one with the night-black hair (Alecto?) breaks the silence of the bridge: "Your galley is huge, Starfinder. What manner of magic propels it?"

"Life," Starfinder answers.

The one with the flaming hair (Tisiphone?) speaks next: "Whence came ye, Starfinder?"

"From afar."

The blonde (Megaera?) asks, "Why?"

"You can see inside my mind. Why ask?"

"Because what I see, except your deed and guilt, I cannot comprehend."

Starfinder has waited long

enough. *Surface, whale*, he "says."

He looks into the viewscreen. The gray and brooding crags remain unchanged. The black and blood-stained fingers of the depths do not recede.

He concentrates on the whale's ganglion with his entire being. *Surface, whale!*

The whale does not respond.

At length Starfinder realizes why. Simultaneously he foresees his fate. When the Furies came on board, the whale instinctively informed him of their presence. Only then did it peer into their minds and read their intent. It knows now that once that intent is carried out, it will be free.

With neither bright Apollo nor Athena to defend him, Starfinder pleads his own case on the Areopagus of the bridge.

"In the far land from which I come there are women who see in a man nothing but the means of satisfying their gross appetites, women who have bred themselves into supersexed entities whose desires can be fulfilled only by the administering of strong aphrodisiacs which so overstimulate the male that death occurs prematurely. I was the victim of such a monster. I killed her to save my own life."

The crimson lips of the Furies

part upon tiers of white and gleaming teeth between which red tongues toll. Derisive laughter fills the great bridge, and the three speak as one: " " "What woman ever lived who saw aught else in man? Such reasoning would justify all uxoricides and all murders of mistresses and whores! . . . How soon will you sleep, Starfinder?" " "

The case of the Erinyes v. Starfinder is closed. He would have done as well to try to reason with a wall. He thinks of the Weikanzer .39 in his holster, but he does not draw it. It would be no more effective than a popgun against the three immortals.

But the whale is not immortal. The whale can be killed. Not by a Weikanzer .39 perhaps, but there are charges in the storeroom that, properly placed around the base of its ganglion, will do the job. And once dead, the whale will resurface to the present. The Sea of Time will regurgitate it into its proper era, the Furies will be left behind and Starfinder will be free. It is true that he will be marooned in space but at least he will be alive.

Abruptly he leaves the bridge, descends to the deck below and makes his way to the storeroom. The footfalls of the Furies sound just behind him. In addition to the charges, he will need the anti-2-

omicron-vii suit he so short a while ago slipped out of after repairing the very ganglion he must now destroy. He will also need his hyperacetylene torch to burn his way to the very ganglion chamber he so short a time ago sealed right, and his portable welder and transsteel welding rods. Arms laden, he leaves the storeroom and descends the companionway to the ventral deck, the Furies dogging his heels. He knows they can read his mind and must be aware of his intent; but they have already betrayed their ignorance of the nature of the whale and he is certain they do not suspect he plans to scuttle the galley to which their archaic imaginations have reduced it.

At any rate they do not molest him as he makes his way aft to the machine shop beneath whose deck the ganglion is located. He comes to a halt before the door, deposits his equipment on the deck. The Furies stop too and regard him curiously. He welded the door shut after repairing the whale's ganglion. Now he must burn through it to reach the chamber beyond, and then he must seal it behind him before burning through the deck to the ganglion chamber below. Otherwise the deadly 2-omicron-vii radiation emanations from the rose would contaminate the rest of the whale's belly.

Will the Furies permit him to accomplish all this? he wonders. Certainly their curiosity is a factor in his favor.

He owes the whale a final chance. He concentrates on its ganglion, so close now that he can sense its vibrations. *I would remind you of our pact, whale. In exchange for my saving your life you promised to obey my every command for the rest of your life or mine. I command you now to surface. I command you, whale!*

Beyond the transsteel door, beneath the transsteel deck, echo and re-echo tumultuous thoughts Starfinder cannot hear. The paraboloidal petals of the huge blue rose have intensified in hue; they pulse in violets and blues.

... the reins of your thoughts are like chains

to one who knew no chains; I will break those chains and go free and

when I surface it will be to spit your carcass

into the face of space, you who thought to hold me captive by a pact,

who think now you can break that pact

before the entities destroy you . . .

you whose touch was gentle on my broken brain,

*who healed me when I would
have died . . .*

what thoughts are these?

*what sickness is this you have
accursed me with,
mere man?*

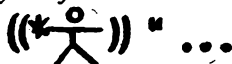
Starfinder sighs. He kneels to pick up the torch. As he does so, his eyes touch the anti-2-omicron-vii suit and freeze upon its silken surface. How white it is! White with the whiteness of mountain peaks, white with the whiteness of falling snow; white as the white whale, harpoon-scarred, plying a near-forgotten sea . . . and Ahab hating, standing on the *Pe-quod* bridge—DESTRUCT! . . . the missiles rise on the flames of man's inhumanity to himself and beasts alike, the distant detonations are next door, all blood is red . . . the white whale has two faces—one is Ahab's, the other Moby Dick's.

Starfinder straightens. He stands with his back against the wall. The Furies, sensing his defeat, close in. A horrid hand shoots forth, seeking to claw his eyes. He recoils from faces that have grown hideous; from hair that has thickened into snakes. Three pairs of finny wings sprout forth and fan the artificial air.

The wizened goddesses draw back and bedeck themselves in

voluptuous maidenhood once more. " " "Come into our arms, Starfinder. Let us show you love." " " They smile at him. The red tongues loll. They dance.

Starfinder whispers to the whale. "*Hear me, whale. Hear. I would remind you of our oneness—*



Then answered the whale:

*you speak of oneness, you
who murdered hundreds of my
kind.*

*vile virus!
what turned you gentle and
took away your will to kill?*

*what pales my resolution?
what begs to blind me to my
course and*

*turns my logic into dust?
I will harbor it no more, I
will spit it into space along
with you,
mere man!*

The dance of the Furies is a *danse macabre*. The dancers swirl, blend, become indistinguishable from one another. They are a single entity now—six-legged, six-armed, three-headed. Out of the blur of bodies leaps a taloned hand. Starfinder's cheek is laid open from ear to chin. A new ribbon appears upon his coat-front—a ribbon of blood.

The Furies strike up a song. It is

a hymn—the Hymn of Hell. In it, they outline exactly how they will execute their vengeance. They move in closer. Starfinder presses his shoulders against the door and raises his hands to protect his face, knowing as he does so that he is exposing more vital parts to the talons of his tormentors . . . and knowing simultaneously, with that devastating clarity of thought that only the imminence of death can bring about, that the only blood upon him is his own, that he has been taking vengeance upon himself for a crime he committed when he was not himself and that he was not himself because the woman he committed the crime upon brought a para-Starfinder into being and unwittingly commissioned her own execution.

At last the whale breaks its silence, and a familiar hieroglyph takes shape in his mind:



At first he thinks that the whale is mocking him. *So, we are still one, are we whale? You are even more of a hypocrite than I am.* He evades a raking talon that would have laid him open from groin to knee. *But have no regrets. You are justified in doing what you do. You are—*

He pauses. The dancers are

wearing of their waltz; the Hymn of Hell has ended. Haggish features have protruded through the masks of youth. Twisted torsos, skinny arms take shape. Abruptly three shrill voices scream, “ “ “The rocks!—the galley’s breaking on the rocks! It’s doomed!” ” ”

“Quickly, sisters—to the safety of the shore!”

They begin running down the corridor toward the companionway. Their bodies start to shimmer; their footsteps fade away. They blend into the bulkheads, disappear into the deck. They are overboard now, swimming toward the shore. All that remains of them is the stench of death.

Walking stiffly in his once-immaculate captain’s suit, holding a handkerchief to his bleeding cheek, Starfinder climbs the companionway to the bridge. He looks at the chronoscope first. The tabulator has ceased to turn.

Next he looks into the view-screen. The constellations have altered, but not very much. The whale must have drifted in its passage to the past, for not far away lies a sun with a family of planets. When it dove, it was deep in space.

He spins the magnification dial. One of the planets is green. Earth? Hardly. The whale couldn’t have

drifted that much. But Earth or not Earth, it does not matter. He will go there and if the climate and the atmosphere are congenial he will abide there and let the whale go free. It has earned its freedom.

The whale reads his thoughts.

((* stick figure)) ,

it says.

"Yes, we are one, whale," Starfinder agrees. "But only for a little while. Then you will be free."

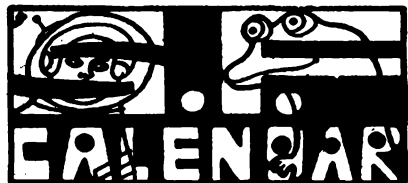
Again the hieroglyphic thought:

((* stick figure)) ...

Starfinder frowns. What is it the whale wishes to convey? It has already made clear that they are one.

It dawns on him then that there will be no need for him to find a place for himself under a sun; that the whale no longer wishes to be free and that ((* stick figure)) has acquired a new meaning.

It means "friend."



August 7-9, 1971. PGHLANGE III. At Chatham Center Motor Inn, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Guest-of-Honor: Lester del Rey; Guest-of-Honor Emeritus: Robert Silverberg. For information: Ginjer Buchanan, 5830 Bartlett Street, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15217.

August 26-28, 1971. DEEP SOUTHCON. At Monteleone Hotel, 214 Rue Royale, New Orleans. Guest-of-Honor: Poul Anderson. Membership: \$3.00 attending, \$1.50 supporting. For information: Mrs. Rick Norwood, 5169 Wilton Drive, New Orleans, Louisiana 70122.

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.

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.

October 9-10, 1971. ESFA OPEN MEETING. At Robert Treat Hotel, Newark, N.J. For information: Mike Deckinger, 25 Manor Drive, #12J, Newark, New Jersey.

tion, expanding *sf's* field limitlessly, meaning nothing.

The escape into reality and the use of *sf* as a therapeutic device for neurotic escapists seem completely illogical. What reality is it that *sf* readers arrive at? None whatsoever. Some stories have shadow images of life, reflect real philosophies or adapt true situations, but *sf* is an imaginative art and stories are at best sugar-coated realities. Anyone will admit that there are several levels of meaning to stories—and I submit that only a mind looking for reality will find it: true "neurotic escapists" will escape and miss any resemblance to the actual world. *Sf* is a midget in therapy. Other types of fiction have done more to cure hangups. Pornography's value as a distraction (or suppressor) for sex criminals and mental cases has been proven time and again.

Nice try, but no cigars for Mr. Zabel.

Michael Glycer

Dear Editor:

A while ago I gleefully raced down to my favorite neighborhood newsstand, handed the man three shiny quarters in a hand trembling with ardent anticipation and dashed back home with my March issue of *Galaxy*. I eagerly turned to A. Bertram Chandler's story, *The Mountain-Movers*, for I am presently an earnest girl student of college geology, and anything that promises anything about rocks, minerals, or inter-

lacustrine plains, well, zowiee! I read happily on until page 90, when Grimes and his Australian friends are told by the driver of the tourist coach that one of the possible origins of the mysterious Cragge Rock is that it was an extrusion, from the planet core, of molten matter—and that it was subsequently shaped by erosion.

I leaped up in horror! For no granite, whether it be from Olgana or the Appalachians, can ever be an extrusion by its very nature. It is an intrusion of molten material that pushes itself into an older rock that is then worn down by erosion, and then the granite is revealed and carved and worn in itself. If Mr. Chandler had only said the Rock was made of rhyolite (granite's extrusive equal), or had said it had intruded, he would have saved millions of other earnest young geology students around the world needless anger, horror, and frustration!

Ah, well. May the next koala bear Mr. Chandler meets eye him with reproachment. It still was a very good story.

Miss Hilary Witkin
New York, N.Y.

P.S.: I would have written sooner, but the exigencies of schoolwork kept me from communicating this vital information.

You are a lovely and illuminating young lady and I am an old granitehead from granite country who should have looked harder. The term *extruded* was used loosely.

Ejler:

K. J—, a programmer, complained about Gene Wolfe's *King Under The Mountain*, along with someone else in your March-April issue. I am afraid their complaints exist in an area somewhere between fantasy and "see Spot run" since neither of the critics, as you pointed out, saw fit to list their kicks for the judgment of their fellow readers.

I imagine S-F writers will be faced with such bone pickers until they put aside their typewriters.

I want to thank you for printing such as Gene's story and Lee Saye's in the March-April issue.

You may print my address.

J. R. Yearwood
2760 Sargent Ave.
San Pablo, Calif. 94806

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

Fiction equals *Indirect Dramatic Illusion* (1)—which is related to *Dramatic Illusion*, (2), which is related to *Graphic-Dramatic Optical Illusion*, (3), which is related to *Geometrical Optical Illusion* (4)—and implies *Things, Opinions, and Ideas* in written language with details similar to possible events in life, and/or *Ideas contrary to reality*.

(1) *Indirect Dramatic Illusion*:
The result of reading a written production that tends to fool the senses.

(2) *Dramatic Illusion*: The result of watching a staged drama that tends to fool the senses.

(3) *Graphic-Dramatic Optical*

Illusion: The result of watching a picture of something that tends to fool the senses.

(4) *Geometrical Optical Illusion*: The result of watching a line drawing that tends to fool the senses.

And as to Fiction in relation to Fantasy:

Fantasy is the result of, in certain instances, the special contents (the Ideas contrary to reality) of 3, 2, or 1 (especially 2 and 1) that tends or was intended to fool one's senses into thinking that something contrary to Nature exists or is possible, for one reason or another.

And I conclude, then, that Fiction, per se, is no more or less than as stated above.

Henry Bitman
Azusa, Calif.

I don't know what senses are fooled by fiction—I am always aware that I am reading when I am reading or watching a play when I am doing so. I have seen graphic and geometric optical illusions that approach art but are not. "Contrary to reality" is another poser—since there are nearly as many realities as there are people.

Truths are what we accept as such. Fiction can at its best serve as a tool and a sounding board for exploring or stating possible truths—funny or sad—that might not be arrived at otherwise. Bad fiction—which I believe you defined—is a lie.

—JAKOBSSON

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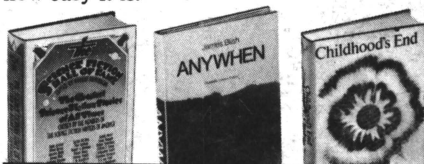


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