WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION • August 1973 • 75¢

IF

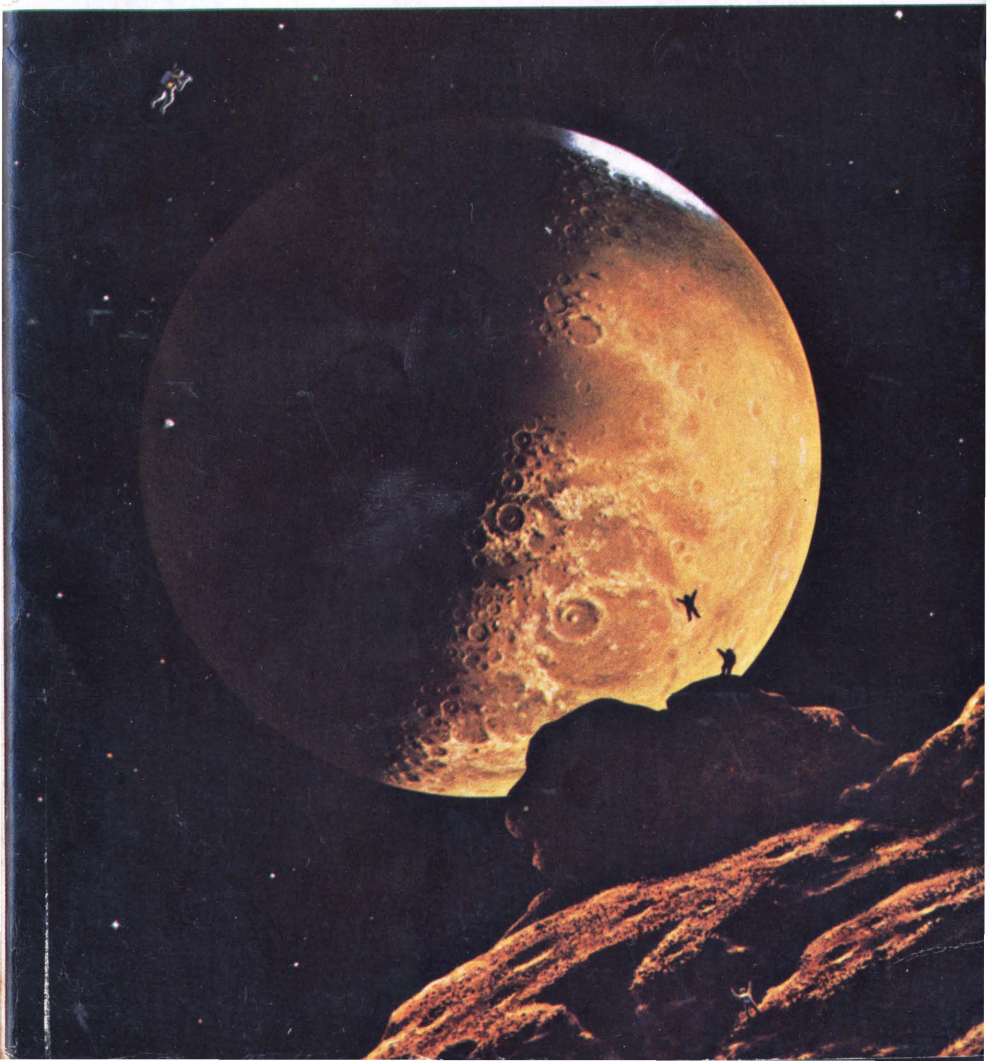
TWO GREAT NEW NOVELETTES!

THE INVADERS, Stephen Tall

PEARSALL'S RETURN, F.M. Busby

plus

Clifford D. Simak • Chelsea Quinn Yarbro
Lester del Rey • Gene Wolfe • David Magil



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WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

July-August 1973
Vol. 21, No. 12
Issue 166

ALL NEW STORIES

Cover by David A. Hardy: ASTRONAUTS ON DEIMOS

Worlds of 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. Single copy: 75¢. 12-issue subscription: $9.00 in U.S., $10.00 elsewhere.

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WHO ARE YOU?

After lo, these many years of reading WORLDS OF IF, you must know who we are. The only thing we, however, know about you is that you read science fiction. But now we need to know more about you to continue to bring you the type of fiction—and, incidentally, advertisements—that will interest you. Please fill in the following in as much detail as you can; your time will be well spent and most appreciated.

1. Male ____ Female ____

2. Age ____

3. **Student:** High School ____ College ____

4. College graduate ____ Degrees ____

5. **Income:** Under $5000 ____ $5-10,000 ____ $10-15,000 ____

   $15-25,000 ____ Over $25,000 ____

6. Profession _____

7. Own Home ____ Rent: House ____ Apartment ____

8. What magazines, other than science fiction, do you read regularly?

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

9. **Do you travel?** Business ____ Pleasure ____ USA ____
   Europe ____ Other _____

10. **Means of travel:** Plane ____ Auto ____ Train ____ Bus ____
Other _____

11. **Do your own:** Boat ____ Est. value _____ Automobile ____
Est. value _____ Hi-Fi equipment ____ Est. value _____
Home Workshop ____ Est. value _____ Camper/Motor
Home ____ Est. Value _____ Camera equipment ____
Est. value _____ Motorcycle ____ Est. value _____
Snowmobile ____ Est. value _____

12. **Interests:** Skiing ____ Fishing ____ Swimming ____
Hunting ____ Golfing ____ Tennis ____ Bowling ____
Camping ____ Flying ____ Boating ____ Gardening ____
Home repairs ____ Photography ____ Stamp collecting ____
Coin collecting _____ Other _____

13. **Affiliations:** Fraternal _____

Professional _____

Athletic _____

Social _____

Scientific _____

Other _____

14. **Are you a member of:** Book Club _____ Record club _____
Other _____

15. **Volunteer organizations:** Fire Department ____ PTA ____
Red Cross ____ Political club ____

16. **Investments:** Stocks ____ Bonds ____ Real Estate ____

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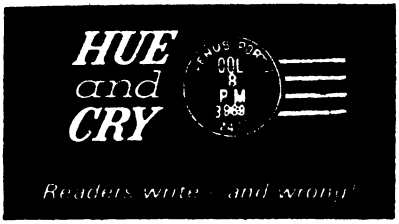


Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

I have several things to comment on regarding the April '73 Worlds of If. *I have never really enjoyed del Rey as a reviewer until this issue, but this was a review from which much can be learned. Most reviewers seldom come down hard on even a bad book, but Mr. del Rey did a fine job on* Cloning. *I like reviewers who demand a lot and let readers know when a book may not be up to par.*

I'll be paying closer attention to this column from now on.

I am about to add Colin Kapp to my small but growing list of authors who cause me to sit up all night reading. So far only Delany and Ursula K. LeGuin have managed the feat. Now Mr. Kapp has joined them. I can't remember a serial that has had me more eagerly waiting for the next installment than his last one in If. *The conclusion of* The Wizard of Anharitte *was the first thing I read in the April issue and it was good to the end—one of the most entertaining, enjoyable and best thought-out books I've had the pleasure to read in a long time.*

Another thing I'd like to bring up deals with the suddenly (to me) asinine efforts (including my own) at defining science fiction. We are madly trying to name the thing, draw its limits, say where it stops, where it starts and how far it can go. This is a little like saying that the universe is infinite, but ends four hundred miles beyond Pluto. Nuts. I think most people at least sense that science fiction is a literature without limits, so what the hell are we trying to limit it for? My feeling is that the so-called "hard-core" advocates are way off base. The argument is silly—science fiction is that form of literature that can't be defined.

So why don't we just get down to reaching out farther with our imaginations—that's what the field needs.

One last item: Does anyone know if there is a science fiction club in Vancouver? I've just moved here from the east and have been unable to find out.
Nicholas Grimshawe
Vancouver, B.C.

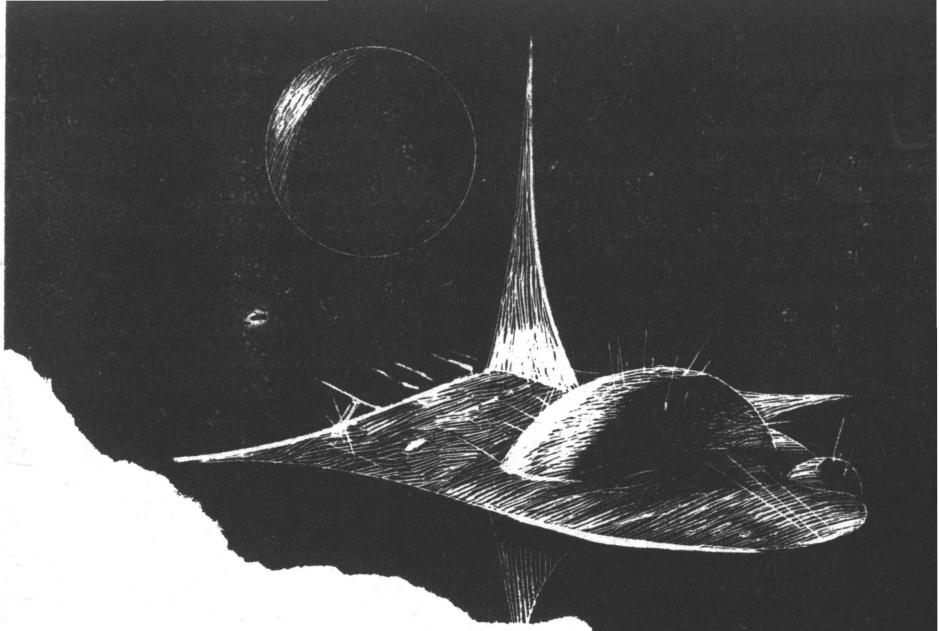
Will those in the know please reply in care of *Hue and Cry?* Mr. Grimshawe, an old and valued contributor to this department, neglected to enclose his latest address. Contributors' complete addresses are published only upon request—in this case to do so might have been in order.

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

It seems that I have entered my subscriptions at an odd date—just when the last Jack Gaughan art died away from the covers of If *and* Galaxy. *Will the old fellow ever be coming back? Oh, sure—I see plenty of his sketches inside, but none outside.*

Cover by Brian Boyle, *says an inside page. I sigh in passive sadness—no Gaughan. Ever since his weirdo covers for the lensman series I've been following his artwork all across the world of sf books and mag-*

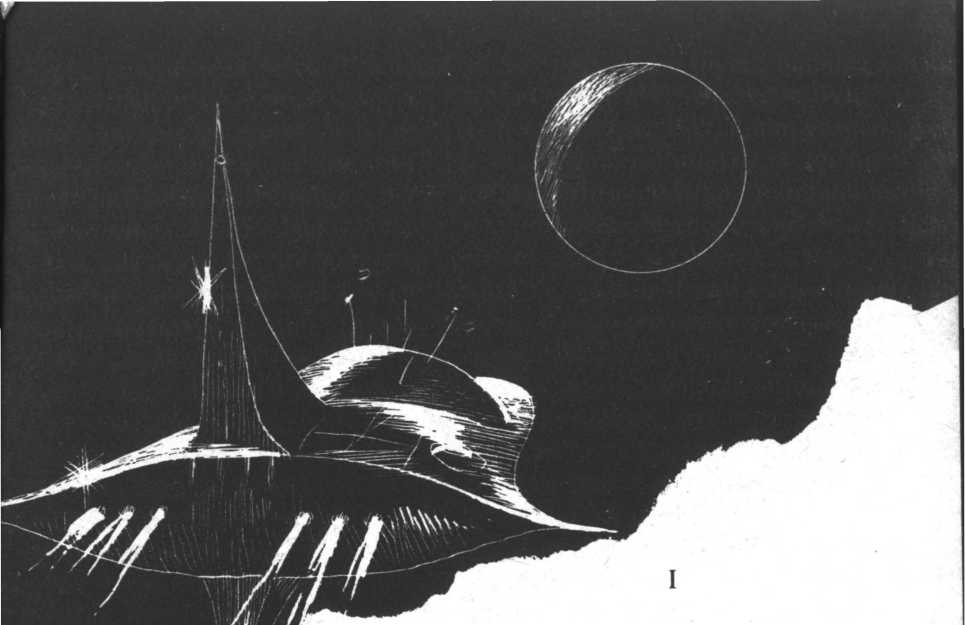
(Continued on page 174)



PEARSALL'S RETURN

He came home to an Earth where he had died—to a life he had not lived!

F. M. BUSBY



NOVELETTE

I

THE door was locked, so Pearsall rang the door chime—who carries a housekey halfway down the galaxy's arm and back, eight months by Skip Drive? It was long enough, he saw, for the white paint to have begun flaking off the door. Pearsall had applied that paint slowly and lovingly only a few weeks before *Hawk Flight's* departure. The industrial fumes evidently had been getting worse.

His wife opened the door. "Who—Woody!" She flung herself at him, arms reaching and clasping—but only for a moment. Suddenly she recoiled and staggered back, her face contorted.

"No!" She backed away through the foyer toward the living room,

hands clenching and unclenching, gray eyes wide and mouth slack with shock.

He followed, but didn't try to touch her. "What's the matter, Glenna?" Something was happening too fast—he couldn't believe her reaction, let alone understand it. "You heard the ship was in, didn't you?" Her face was pale, the fine cheekbones standing out from the faint hollows below. She shook her head. Her mouth worked but no words came out.

"You've cut your hair," he said. She had always worn it long and straight. Now it was a mass of short curls, tinted a lighter red-brown than he remembered. One curl hung loose over her right eyebrow, near the tiny black mole at the corner of her eye. Almost as tall as he, still slim, she stood rigidly defensive, angles of bone accenting her loose beige robe.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

It didn't make sense. He tried to smile but the smile died—he suppressed an impulse to reach out to her. "Well, who do I look like?" His tone was gentle. "Have I changed so much in only eight months?"

Her fisted hands stood out a little from her sides, shaking. "Whoever you are, it isn't funny! It's a cruel, cruel joke!" Now he felt the edge of panic—sweat prickled at his armpits.

She turned and ran to the bedroom, paused just inside the doorway. "Get out! You get out of here! I have a gun. My—my husband's. So you just better get out of here!" She disappeared behind the door—he heard her rummaging through drawers.

To Pearsall, his mind stalled at dead center, the chime of the picturephone came almost as a relief. Automatically he set his bag on the floor and crossed the room to flip the switch. the thought came that he'd never heard of anyone being shot while answering the phone and he almost grinned. But not quite—a bullet was not what he feared.

The chubby-faced man on the screen was familiar by sight but not by name—a junior member of the spaceport commander's staff.

"Yes," the man said, "we thought you might be there." He waved Pearsall to silence. "We've pinpointed the discrepancy noted in the records when *Hawk Flight* landed. Admiral Forgues wants to discuss that with you. Meanwhile, a John Laird urgently requests that you call him at his home. One of your navigation personnel, I believe. The young man seemed almost hysterical."

Forgues, the port commander,

moved into the picture. "I'll take it—I'll take it—" Peripherally, Pearsall saw Glenna in the bedroom doorway. She had found the old automatic pistol but the gun pointed at the floor as she watched Pearsall and the screen.

"All right," said Forgues, "let's get to the bottom of this. Who are you?"

Exasperation drove out fear. Pearsall exhaled hard. "Sir, I am Commander Elwood Jay Pearsall, first officer on *Hawk Flight*. You've known me for fifteen years at least. Is my identity in doubt?"

"It certainly is. Whoever you are you're not Woody Pearsall—and what you were doing on *Hawk Flight*, I don't know. But I intend to find out. So you might as well tell the truth. Now."

"Damn it, sir, I'm Woody Pearsall." He shook his head briskly to clear it of cobwebs. "Who the hell else would I be?"

Forgues grinned tightly. "Well, in that case we do have a problem. Because, you see, you're dead."

THE viewscreen, as Pearsall maneuvered *Hawk Flight* to its final descent, was spattered with random moving dots. He jiggled a tuning knob slightly, but saw no improvement. The knob was sticky. He made a mental note to tell young Laird that if he absolutely had to eat on watch, for God's sake to wipe his hands before touching the equipment.

The landing area showed clearly enough, but the flashing dots were a distraction. The viewing equipment was due for a full overhaul—but then, so was the entire ship. And so was Pearsall.

The spaceport looked unfamiliar, somehow. To his right, toward the nearby city, he remembered a soaring tower topping a white, shining building. Surely it couldn't have been torn down in the eight months he'd been away—the building had been almost new. Perhaps he was confusing one spaceport with another—perhaps an overdose of Skip Drive was fogging his memory. He put full attention to landing the ship. The impact was barely noticeable.

"Nice grounding, Woody." The voice over the intercom was Captain Vaille's. "Give the watch to Laird and report to my quarters, would you, please?"

Pearsall acknowledged.

"All yours," he said to John Laird. "See you next on the ground, probably. The maintenance crew will be here to relieve you as soon as our landing blast cools. When they arrive call the captain's quarters for clearance and you're home free."

"Yes, sir," said Laird. "Now re-

member, Commander, I want you and your wife to meet my family, have dinner with us, as soon as you can. You have the address?"

"Right." He tipped Laird a mock-salute and left.

The captain's quarters were one deck below. Halfway down the narrow ladder Pearsall's heel caught on a torn edge of plastic. He almost fell, but caught himself. "Damned old crock really needs some work," he grumbled. But he patted the bulkhead beside him to soften the curse before proceeding to the captain's cabin.

Vaille was big, taller and heavier than Pearsall. On his desk were a bottle and two small glasses.

"A toast, Woody? It's been a hard trip, but a good one." They raised their glasses, sipped. The liquor was an off-world product, a brandy from Harper's Touchdown. Golden flecks hung in the dark fluid.

"You're right, skipper—a good, hard trip." Eight months on high Skip-factor, never landing, only slowing a few times for fly-by reconnaissance of new planetary systems, took a lot out of men and ship alike. But the odds had been good to them—*Hawk Flight*'s unmanned one-way probes had discovered two new habitable planets, potential colony sites.

"We should be able to disembark in an hour or two," said Vaille. "All the tapes and solar-wind samples are boxed to go. I imagine everyone has his own stuff packed, or nearly. I can throw my gear together in five minutes."

Pearsall grinned. "Me, too. Or leave it—and good riddance." Vaille laughed with him. It was good to be home. Even the normally reticent captain was affected.

In due time the maintenance-and-repair crew boarded. Its chief brought clearance papers, thus accepting responsibility for the ship—red tape was minimal. Spaceport personnel began the unloading of cargo. And finally *Hawk Flight*'s crew, fifteen men and nine women, trod the catwalk to the outside gantry, rode the elevator down and touched shoe soles to Earth's concrete rind. As always, that moment gripped Pearsall's throat.

PORT Commander Forgues no longer greeted returning crews personally. Many ships came and went now and Forgues had other duties—procedures had been streamlined. Even the newspersons stayed away, making do with official handouts unless a real news item were involved. Announcement of the two new colony planets, Pearsall guessed, would soon bring them running.

He didn't recognize the subordinate who was preparing to do the honors. The man struck him as a bit of a fussbudget, with his clipboard in one hand and pencil shifted awkwardly back and forth between handshakes.

"Captain Vaille? Yes." Checkmark, shift pencil, handshake. "Welcome. Honored, sir." End of handshake. Shift pencil. "First Officer Frantiszek?" Checkmark. Shift pencil.

"No. I'm First Officer Pearsall." No handshake. The pencil wavered.

"Pearsall? Must be a mixup. Where's Frantiszek?"

Pearsall looked for Vaille to answer, but the captain was talking with someone else, a few feet away. "I replaced Frantiszek when he broke his leg skiing, a week before we left. Funny you didn't get the correction." The mishap had boosted Pearsall to First Officer a year or two before he had expected the promotion.

Erase checkmark, scribble note. "All right—we'll check it out," the man said and moved along to the next person. No handshake for Pearsall. Bored, he withdrew his attention while the man checkmarked and handshook his way down the list.

A tone of exclamation broke his reverie. "Laird? My roster shows

no John Laird. What is your position on this ship?"

"Junior navigator, sir," the boy answered. "On commander Pearsall's watch."

"Pearsall, eh? Neither of you is on my roster." He harumphed. "We'll check it out." No handshake for Laird either.

They were escorted to a nearby building for a quick, perfunctory medical check. Orin Teague, *Hawk Flight*'s own medical officer, had made thorough examinations and certified the ship's complement as free of alien infection, but the minimum formality was still observed.

Then they were free, the two dozen, to go where they would and do what they could. "Report back Tuesday morning," said the man with the discrepant list. "Oh-eight hundred sharp. That gives you seventy-two hours, less a few." By Tuesday, Pearsall thought, their reports would be analyzed—the reports they had prepared during the past in-flight months. Until then *Hawk Flight*'s crew was superfluous. That suited him just fine.

He shook all the hands he could find, waved goodbyes and left to catch a city-bound tube train. On arrival he used his spaceman's priority card to rent a ground car. He checked its fuel-cell reading and set off for Fisher's Landing, the small neighboring town that was home. He didn't call first—it had never been his habit.

During his absence some street routings had been changed. He found his usual access to the throughway was one-way in the wrong direction. Rather than taking time to solve the new layout, he settled for an older, secondary arterial and soon made his way out of the city into a countryside of rolling hills.

It was that time of autumn when leaves turn color but have yet to fall. One small maple, yellow and red, so entranced him that he pulled over and stopped—just to look, to make it part of him.

He left before he was done with his tree, because now he was so near that he could no longer wait to see Glenna. Married to him for almost twenty-five years, more than half his life—she still brought all his senses alive.

Either the signs had been changed or he had daydreamed—he missed his turn-off. But he circled, found an unfamiliar road with the proper designation. Soon he was back on his homeward route and entering Fisher's Landing. Until he turned into his own street he didn't realize he had been driving faster than usual.

He parked in front and paused a moment to look at the house, savoring the weathered wood. Ivy

was growing to cover the bay window again—it needed cutting back. A brick, maybe more than one, was missing from the chimney top—he tried to remember if he'd seen it before. He couldn't be sure. No matter—he'd have to fix it anyway.

He got out of the car and locked it, taking only his bag, leaving his other luggage for later. He strode up the flagstone walk, finally giving impatience its head.

By habit he reached into his pocket for the house key. Then he laughed and rang the door chime.

"DEAD, sir?" Pearsall stared at Forgues' blue-tinted image and shook his head. "One of us has to be crazy."

"That's possible," said the admiral. "Why else would you pretend to be a man who was killed more than a year ago? Tube train failure—you must have seen it in the news. The propelling field collapsed. Cars smashed out through the girders. At least seventy dead."

"Not me, though." Now he remembered the disaster. "I missed that train."

"Obviously," said Forgues, "but Pearsall didn't. You look like him—or like his twin if he had one—but you can't be Woody. I attended the funeral myself, damn it! So who are you?"

To Pearsall none of it made sense—but somewhere there had to be a handle, a place to apply logic and twist hard.

"Ask the captain," he said. "Captain Vaille—he can vouch for me."

Forgues shook his head. "Can't locate him. He and his wife went off somewhere, left no word."

"But any of the other officers—or the crew?" The admiral's head still moved side-to-side, his face stony in negation. "Or even—the fussy fellow with the clipboard. He saw me come off the ship—"

"But he didn't see you get on. Or where you got on." Abruptly Forgues' face went stiff, his eyes wide.

At first Pearsall didn't get it—and then he did. He laughed. "*Hawk Flight* made no outworld landings, Admiral. We didn't even have occasion to use the airlocks. Run the telemetry tapes through your computers." Faced with questions that had answers he felt his mind coming alive, working surely.

The admiral's grin was sheepish. "All right, that's easy enough to check. We can scratch the suggestion that you're some kind of alien. But that doesn't tell me who you are. So you tell me."

Pearsall shook his head. "I've done that. Sir, with all due respect, we're wasting time. There's a mistake somewhere—I don't know

what it is. I'll report Tuesday as ordered. Meanwhile I have a couple of personal problems to attend to—urgent ones." He hit the cutoff switch before the admiral could reply. He caught himself worrying with a fingertip the spot at the crown of the head where his hair was thinning and took his hand away.

And what of Glenna? He turned and saw her standing near the bedroom doorway, the old handgun hanging loose in her hand. She stared at him, but now in puzzlement rather than outrage.

"Well, Glenna? Am I me—the man you married?"

"You can't be." He could barely hear her words. "Woody is dead—I saw him buried." She winced. "Oh, you look like him, talk and act like him—but you can't *be* him." The gun dropped to the carpet. "I wish to God you could. But you can't." She put her hands to her face—leaning back against the wall she slowly sank to the floor and sat there, sobbing.

Knowing he must not touch her, Pearsall moved to squat facing her, not close enough to threaten. Quietly he spoke.

"Glenna—Glenna." Again: "Glenna." Repeating her name slowly until she raised her head and looked at him.

"I am Woody," he said, "Woody Pearsall. I look and talk and act like him—and love like him—because I *am* him. I'm me, Glenna, nobody else. A long time ago we married each other—remember?" Blankfaced, her head shook slowly.

"The tube train didn't kill me that night because I missed it. I was late for dinner. You were really angry when I finally got home—until we saw the news of the wreck. I've been gone eight months on *Hawk Flight*. Before I left you and I had a champagne dinner—more champagne than dinner, I'm afraid. Then we took a boat out near the middle of Lake Fisher and made love there. Don't you remember?"

"I'd like to. Oh, I'd like to!" Then her voice went dull. "But I can't—because it didn't happen."

"To me it did. And you were there. You were all of it. Try to remember."

"I'd like to," she said again. "But I saw my husband dead." Facing him, she was like a blank wall.

"I'm dead and I'm not dead." He spoke more to himself than to her. "We made love on the lake and we didn't. I was on the ship but I wasn't. The admiral helped bury me—but I'm not buried. Glenna—" His tone snapped her alert. "I don't know what's wrong,

but if there's any way I can do so I'll find out." He sighed and touched her hair gingerly, as though it might electrocute him. "I have to leave now for a while. But try to know who I am. Will you?"

She managed no words, but nodded, then fled, crying.

JOHN LAIRD'S line was busy. Pearsall calculated—it was less than an hour's drive—best to go now, without calling ahead. And better, he thought, not to stay in one place too long—Forgues might decide to have him pulled in rather than wait until Tuesday. The front-door key was on its usual hook in the kitchen. He took it.

Dusk had come, the time of beauty that is dangerous to drivers. Pearsall drove fast but with full concentration and alertness—officially he might be dead but factually he was alive and determined to remain so.

He passed an apartment high-rise—it loomed gray, square and ugly, but the massed upper windows reflected the last of the day's sun as molten copper. The glow fit his mood. He watched until it passed to the side of his vision.

The Laird home was hidden in a semi-suburban housing cluster, a puzzle-piece of contrived curving streets that changed names at every

jogging. By backtracking and persistence Pearsall found the address he sought.

In the dim light the house both sprawled and soared. Its style of architecture had bloomed rapidly and dated almost as fast. He parked in the double-width driveway and approached the huge, oval front door. Finding no pushbutton, he knocked.

An older, heavier version of John Laird opened the door. "All right, what do you want?" The man sounded as harassed as he looked, with his rumpled hair, high color and heavy breathing.

"I'm looking for John Laird."

"You found him. What do you want with me?"

"The John Laird I know is younger. Your son, perhaps?"

"No—Christ, no! But maybe you'd better come in, at that. You might be able to help."

"Help? How?" But Pearsall thought he knew.

"A young man came here. He says he's my son, claims to be named John Laird. I came home this afternoon—my wife was half-crazy. This boy we never saw was calling her 'mother'—and then me, 'father.' And damn it, we never saw him before—"

"How do you figure I can help?"

"Sounded as if you said you knew him. If you do, maybe you can get some sense out of him. He locked himself in the bathroom and won't come out. Come on—I'll show you the way."

Pearsall was led into a large living room, past a plump, wide-eyed woman, a boy about twenty and two teenaged girls—he was introduced to none of them—along a hall, to a door. Closed, it was—closed, and inscrutable.

Laird nodded. "He's in there."

"All right." He raised his voice. "John Laird. This is Pearsall."

II

"COMMANDER." The voice was muffled. "Thank God you're here—someone who knows I'm real. I thought I was going crazy. Or that everybody else was."

"I—think I know how you feel, John." Pearsall grinned briefly, a ticlike twitch. "Why don't you come out now and talk it over? Let's see if any of this makes sense. All right?"

"You won't let them send me away?"

Pearsall thought—he couldn't speak for the Laird family. "If you can't stay here, John, you can come with me. Will that do?"

"I guess so." The door opened. Young John Laird, looking both sheepish and defiant, emerged. Pearsall shepherded the two Lairds

to the living room, where the others sat stiffly, as though posing for an old tintype.

"I'm Commander Pearsall," he said, "First officer of the ship *Hawk Flight*. As you may have heard, we've just returned from an eight-month mission." He turned to the older man. "Would you introduce me?"

"All right, Commander. You know my name. This is my wife, Bonita—my son Charles—my daughters Mildred—" he nodded at the older girl "—and Irene."

Pearsall smiled and performed the ritual courtesies. "And now," he said, "may I introduce this young man, who for the past eight months has served as my junior navigator? He is listed on the ship's roster as John Laird, Jr.—of this address."

"I can't believe that," Mr. Laird said.

"The roster isn't classified—I can get you a photostat if you like." Impatiently Pearsall shook his head. "But right now—Laird, men on watch together pass the time by talking and they talk of home. Young John here has spoken often of you. He has described this house to me and many pleasant recollections of it.

"Tell me," he said, "do none of you recognize him at all?" He saw only blank stares. "Are you saying that it's some kind of delusion that he believes himself to be your son and brother?"

Bonita Laird spoke, her voice low. "I have two sons: James and Charles. Two daughters: Mildred and Irene. There would have been a John, but—"

"*I* have two brothers," said young John Laird, breathing in gasps, as though at high altitude. "Two brothers—James and Charles—and a sister Mildred." He turned to the younger girl. "I don't know what you're doing here—I don't have any sister Irene." She shrank away.

He reached a hand toward her. "Oh, wait—I'm not saying you shouldn't exist—I won't do that to you. You're here. I don't understand it but I won't tell you not to be here, the way Dad's been telling me—" He frowned. "I just don't know *why* I'm not supposed to be here—that's all. Because I *live* here. I've lived here all my life with all of you—except Irene. And James was here, too—where's my brother James?"

"Your brother James," Mr. Laird began, "I mean, my son James—was married last spring. He and his wife live north of here about forty miles, in the Horizon Hills complex." He hunched his shoulders for a moment, let them relax again. "I don't see what this

has to do with your barging in, claiming to be my son. I should know how many children we have—"

Pearsall suddenly felt pity for them all—and some for himself. "Mrs. Laird, you said a moment ago that there would have been a son named John. Could you explain that, please?"

Color flooded her cheeks. For a moment he could see the pretty girl hiding behind the armor of fat—the ultimate disguise for beauty afraid of itself. "Mr. Pearsall—Commander Pearsall, I mean—it's not really any of your business, but if it will help this young man—well, when my James was two I had a son born dead. And his name would have been John."

"But James was two when I was born," young Laird protested. "And I grew up here and we all—you don't *know* me? You don't know me at all?"

Five heads shook as one.

Gently Pearsall said, "Don't any of you see a family resemblance—a possible relationship? Couldn't you start as cousins or something and work up?" He knew he was pushing too hard on something he didn't fully understand, but his own needs were eating him. And some wild guesses were beginning to take shape. So he laid it on the line and hoped. "Can't you try something?"

He lost. "We can't take a stranger into our home," said the elder Laird. Bonita Laird's mouth twitched, but she did not speak. Of them all, it was Irene who protested.

"*I* wouldn't mind if he stayed," she said. She shook back her fair hair, fallen forward over one shoulder. "I like him."

"Out of the question." Her father's face showed fear. Fear of what?

Pearsall knew when to cut his losses. "Let's go, John." He gave the obligatory handshakes.

Young Laird looked at each person in turn. He paused at Bonita but shook his head. He spoke only to Irene. "Thanks," he muttered and touched her hand briefly. Pearsall took his arm firmly and led him away. The boy's luggage was at the front door—Pearsall picked it up and got the two of them out and safely away.

In the car, before starting it, he said, "You're not insane, John. You're up against a problem that's totally new, that's all. And so am I."

PEARSALL had nowhere to go but home—and there only if Glenna allowed it. If she did—he supposed Laird could stay also. What effect the boy's presence

might have he couldn't guess. To learn that the universe held other confusions, other entrapments, might help her.

Driving through the night, his headlights carving a dark-walled tunnel as the road skirted a swamp, Pearsall explained his own problem.

"So, to her," he finished, "I'm an impostor. I have to be—she saw me dead." He made a wordless sound. "I suppose I should find my grave and pay my respects."

"We're in the same boat, aren't we?" said Laird. "Except that your wife knows at least that she was married to you. My family simply doesn't believe I exist—or ever did. I can't understand it—what's happened to everybody?"

"We happened to them. Otherwise they're all perfectly sane, sensible people."

"Then we're what's wrong? Or has the whole world gone crazy?"

"No, we're fine, John—just fine. So far anyway. And as worlds go, this one is sane and good."

"Then what is wrong?"

"Don't you get it yet? Well, I'm not sure I do, either, in detail. But one thing's clear—this perfectly good world isn't our world."

"You mean this isn't Earth?"

"Of course it's Earth. But—different, somehow. Probably more so than we've realized."

"You mean, my family back there—it isn't really the one I grew up with?"

"Almost, but not quite. They had a son born dead, so they're not the same people they'd be if he had lived. The difference isn't much—except to you, who happen to be that son. You see?"

Silence for a time, then: "Yes, I think so." Then, after another brief pause: "This seems a funny thing for me to be worried about—but do you think they'll ever accept me?" Laird's voice shook.

"Eventually, I imagine, when they understand what has happened—when they're told by someone who can speak with authority. Keep your hopes up, but be patient—it may take a while."

"I'll do that," Laird said grimly, "and thanks. But what did happen?"

"I'm afraid that's the question of the century. I wish I could answer it."

They were silent for the rest of the drive. An unfamiliar car was in Pearsall's driveway. He parked at the curb. He took his remaining luggage from the car and motioned for Laird to bring his, also. This time, at the door, he used his key—once inside, luggage and all, his position would be stronger.

As they went through the hall to the living room he heard conversa-

tion that broke off as they entered. Pearsall recognized the small, dark woman with Glenna.

It was Glenna who spoke. "You're back, I see." Her voice was stiff and forced, close to the breaking point. "Well, maybe you can explain to Ludmilla here, where her husband is. She's been asking me—and of course I don't know."

"I don't understand," Pearsall began—but suddenly he did understand and realized he should have foreseen the complication.

Ludmilla Frantiszek rose and faced him. Her hands were clenched tightly across her chest. The heavy black braid that fell forward over her left shoulder to her waist swayed with the slow agonized shaking of her head.

"Where is Miro?" Her voice was low and ragged. "What have you done with my husband, you dead man who walks?"

She stared blankly at him.

Pearsall tried to answer, but could say only, "Milla—"

"Aw, you know me, do you? I knew you, too. And Miro knew you. We grieved at your funeral. And then Miro was gone a long eight months with *Hawk Flight*. I was not here when *Hawk Flight* returned—I was with my troupe in London, dancing. You remember that I am a dancer?"

"Yes, Milla. And a very good one."

"Yes," she nodded. "That is true—I am. When I heard, I returned. To the port. *Hawk Flight*'s crew was gone, scattered to reunite with families for three days. They will be back on Tuesday, the fat-faced man said." Pearsall nodded—he knew the one she meant.

"But Miro," he said, "has not come back. Instead there is you, who are dead. Tell me—you must tell me! How can this happen?"

"Milla—Milla, I don't know. Miro was not on *Hawk Flight* with me. He'd broken a leg skiing and was grounded while it healed. I took his place—he stayed at home. And somehow I have returned to a world in which you've seen me dead and Miro, not I, left on *Hawk Flight* as first officer. That's all I know Milla. It's not much help, but it's true."

Black eyes wide under furrowed brow, she gazed at him as if trying to memorize him cell by cell, Finally she nodded. "I believe you. I don't understand all you say, but I never knew you to lie, Woody, while you were—alive." She was trying not to cry, but could not stop her tears. "I will go now."

She turned away. Pearsall moved toward her but Laird waved him back and took her arm, guiding her out. He did not return im-

mediately. Pearsall decided he was making sure she was in fit condition to drive before letting her go.

"THEN I was right," Glenna said, suddenly breaking silence. "You're not my Woody at all, are you? You're some kind of Woody Pearsall, all right, but you never saw me before today. Nor I, you. You're a close match. I can't see any differences yet—maybe I never will. But you're simply not—*my* Woody!"

Tears welled—it was Pearsall's night for weeping ladies.

"Oh, I wish you were!"

He passed off the thought that her wish, literally taken, would make him dead—he knew her true meaning. "So do I, my dear," he said. "You have no idea how much I wish it."

She ignored his words. "I should have known—I did know—when you said I'd cut my hair. Because I haven't worn it long for nearly six years. I cut it when I had the role of Helen in that play—what was the name of it? I can't remember—" Pearsall couldn't recall her ever acting in any play at all. "And somehow I never got around to growing it long again. Though I should, really. But you didn't know. So you can't be my Woody, can you?"

She asked the question as though it had an answer, so he gave her the best he had. "No, I'm not," he said. "And you're not quite my Glenna, either. But—" and now for the first time he moved and touched her, took her by the shoulders to hold her facing him— "we are each the best—the best Woody and the best Glenna—that either of us is ever going to find."

She came to him and clung, sobbing, but by the feel of her he knew it was still no good between them.

At least, he thought, she had accepted him as a friend.

III

PEARSALL and Glenna shared the same bedroom that night—Laird had the guest room—but not the same bed. Lying awake, he heard her slow, sleeping breath. He had steeled himself to being aroused and frustrated by her nearness, but within him no excitements stirred—he was as much disappointed as relieved. The thought came to him that his need to establish identity was stronger than his need for sex.

When on a mission he schooled himself to celibacy. Some men and women formed shipboard liaisons—he did not. Early on he had considered the idea—but apart from Glenna's unorthodox monogamist convictions he felt the plea-

sures did not compensate for the risk of jealousies and impaired morale. He took no moralistic position, but felt that as a ship's officer it was unwise for him to invite possible trouble.

At home, though, his urges were strong and frequent, not much diminished by age. And so were Glenna's—in the world he remembered they were well matched.

He had to get away from that thought. Instead he considered what Glenna had said after Laird had returned from seeing Ludmilla Frantiszek safely on her way.

"Admiral Forgues called," she had told them, "just before Milla came here. Everyone from *Hawk Flight* is to report back to duty tomorrow morning."

"Sunday?"

"Yes. He said it's important."

"I'm sure it is. I wonder—" *if it's really everyone,* he thought, *he wants there tommorow—or only me*

"Wonder what, Woody?"

He hadn't answered her. Anything he could have said would have sounded as paranoid as he had begun to feel.

Now, lying alone as though he were on the ship and Glenna light-years away instead of a mere few feet, he still wondered.

Sleep came eventually, much later than he wished.

Next morning Glenna was cheerful in an impersonal way, as she served the two men breakfast. "I'll expect you both home for dinner," she said, "so call me if you can't make it. And do let me know if you learn—well, anything that explains anything, won't you?"

"Of course, Glenna." He wanted to say more, but it was no time to crowd his luck. Besides, Laird was there.

Laird looked more at peace with himself. The night's sleep must have helped. He said little, but smiled occasionally.

AT THE spaceport he took a shortcut to the Administration Building—rather, to where he remembered it to be. The building wasn't there. In its place stood an old dilapidated warehouse.

Now he remembered—the soaring tower he had looked for and hadn't seen when he had been making his landing approach, was the new Administration building. He should have known before he had ever touched ground that this was not his world.

He stopped the car and searched through memory.

"What's the matter?" asked Laird.

"Nothing. Well, yes—something is, in a way. John, do you remem-

ber the Ad Building and its tower?"

"Of course. Why?"

"Well, this is where it was. Now it isn't. Let me think a minute. We'll have to find the old building, the one *our* Space Service tore down,"

Laird's face went blank. He blinked rapidly several times. Pearsall shook his head—just now he couldn't afford to worry about Laird.

The old building had been vacated two or three years ago—he should be able to remember. Yes, he knew where to go.

He was right. The building that he had seen razed was where it had been. He parked and used an elbow to nudge laird. "Come on, John. The admiral doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Inside the building Pearsall said, *Hawk Flight—"* at each checkpoint and was passed through to Forgue's receptionist without having to show identification. One desk removed from the admiral's presence he repeated the name and added: "Where do we go?"

"You are?" The girl was blond and pretty. A blue eye, her left, that aimed slightly outward, accented her piquancy. It would be unwise of her, thought Pearsall, to correct that defect.

"First Officer Pearsall," he said. And pointing a thumb at his companion, "Navigator third John I-forget-the-initial Laird. We're a little late. Where do we go, please?"

"Oh—yes, sir. The small conference room just off the admiral's office, to your right. You know it?"

"Yes. Thank you." He guided Laird along. They entered the room.

From his seat at the end of the long table, Forgues peered up at them. At first look his head always seemed too large for his small frame, but Pearsall was accustomed to the discrepancy and adjusted automatically. A quick count told him that he and Laird were the last to arrive. The dead, stuffy air of the drab room was heavy with anxiety.

"Sorry we're late, sir," said Pearsall. "No excuses. But I think I have part of the answer to some of the questions you'll be asking."

"No doubt," was the dry-toned answer. "You're an intelligent man. You must have reached the same conclusions we have."

"I don't understand. I thought—"

"You thought you were the only odd fish in the soup. Please find a seat, Commander—you too, Laird—and we'll get down to it."

Confused but alert, Pearsall sat.

"Let's not waste time," Forgues began. "I've heard some of your

stories. I believe them. We'll get to your individual problems a little later.

"About six hours after you disembarked I knew as a certainty that your ship was not the *Hawk Flight* we sent out eight months ago. Unfortunately, Commander Pearsall, I did not have this knowledge when I spoke to you at your home. But moments later the maintenance crew ran into a few problems—some of their testing procedures wouldn't work. It took us a while to find out why, but when we did the answers told us a great deal.

"Shortly before *Hawk Flight* left this port, the labs sent us a new set of modifications to improve control efficiency. I put crews on overtime and got the work done in time for liftoff. Our repair crew's problem turned out to be that on your ship these changes had not been made. We checked and found that the departure date in your log is three days earlier than our records show. It is not the same ship—you are not the same people. There have been a number of repercussions "

PEARSALL saw a small, iridescent, green insect crawling along the upper edge of the admiral's collar, never quite touching his neck. Unable to look away from the little tightrope-walker, he felt akin to it—he wanted it to survive.

"We have," said Forgues, "three gross anomalies. Commander Pearsall, who was dead before *Hawk Flight* undertook its mission, is now returned alive to us. My congratulations, Commander. Commander Miro Frantiszek was first officer of the *Hawk Flight* I know—your records show he was never aboard. And ours make no mention of Navigator Third John Laird, who is indisputably present.

"Of the remaining twenty-two—many of you have encountered problems of your own. If you wish to discuss any of these, now would be a good time." He looked around the table. "Prentice?"

Second Officer Miles Prentice rose—a tall man, stooped and lean—and spoke in a low, intense voice. "I went to my address—someone else lives there. When I finally found my wife, she said we've been divorced more than three years. She's remarried and has two new children. I don't know what to do," Shaking his head, he sat down again.

Forgues looked at him but said nothing. He acknowledged a raised hand. "Chandri?"

"I was married, too. But now I find that my wife—I said goodbye to her only eight months ago—has

been dead nearly five years. It's insane, that's all. Or I am."

"You're not," said the admiral. "Only—misplaced."

The testimony continued. "Gehring—Lena Gehring. I was a widow with a son in boarding school, a married daughter and a grandson. Now I'm a childless spinster. I'd rather be dead."

"Cheng here, second pilot. Last year my wife and I moved to a new house—but somehow it turns out we didn't. Nothing else is much different."

"Johnson. I was a bachelor, but now I seem to have a wife and two kids. I'm not complaining—I like it."

"Lightfoot. I drew good cards. My husband was a hopeless drunk—and I do mean hopeless. Here he's been dry for the last four years."

"Ramirez. I went home. It wasn't my place and never has been. My wife's folks never heard of me and she's married to somebody else. So I looked myself up in the directory. I have a wife I never saw before. It's a little scary, but I think it'll work out okay—she's pretty nice."

"Timon—Aldred Timon. There are some minor differences but nothing serious. It doesn't bother me any."

"Parelli, it says on the roster. I have a different husband but I probably would anyway by this time, even if I'd stayed home. I always seem to marry the wrong type. I think maybe this one is a little better than average."

"I'm Red Sarchet, drive tuner. I live with my folks, like always. But down at the corner bar they all let on I was one of the gay guys. I'm not—I don't have anything against them, but I'm not. I had to fight one fellow. I'm not going back there."

"Gerard, communications. I didn't have anybody before and I still don't. I live in a new place. What's the difference?"

"Vaille, captain. I found some problems to be worked out, but nothing insurmountable."

On and on it went, all through the twenty-two. One short, fat man said only, "I pass." Looking at him, Pearsall recalled his name, Crawford, and his job, supply clerk. Nothing more came to mind. from eight months on the same ship.

Poor Crawford, he thought.

The consensus was almost evenly divided between those adjusting successfully to the changes and those finding them from distressing to intolerable. What could anyone do for Chandri or Gehring?

Forgues muttered into the intercom—the pretty blonde came al-

most immediately with a big pot and a tray of cups. As the coffee ritual began the admiral spoke again.

"Your attention, please." The green insect was gone. Pearsall hadn't seen it go, didn't know whether or not it was still circumnavigating the admiral. "For what help it might be, I'll tell you as much as I understand of what has happened.

"It seems we didn't know enough about the Skip Drive. Of course the press stories, that it beats lightspeed by going through hyperspace, are a lot of horse puckie—there's no such thing as hyperspace. But all we had to know—in operations—was that it works. It took us there and it brought us back. For ten years, on the shorter hauls our power sources could handle, we had no trouble. So last year when we got the Krieger power units, we pushed performance as high as we could.

"Now, I had a two-hour lecture last night, by a top man from the labs. I won't take two hours to tell you, because I didn't understand that much of it. But I'll tell you the parts I did get."

THE little bug reappeared, sitting like a tiny epaulette on the admiral's left shoulder. Pearsall was glad to see it.

"The trick is that space and time are quantized. If you don't know what that means, wait and ask me later. Mainly, the universe doesn't exist continuously. It pulsates—appears and disappears at a rate much too high to measure. So when you move you do it by vanishing at one point and reappearing at the next—normally.

"Ordinarily, in moving we hit every point along the way. Skip Drive suppresses our appearances at most of those points. We beat lightspeed because it's the ins and outs that use up time and energy, not the motion itself."

"Excuse me, sir." It was Captain Vaille who spoke. "Was it explained how the relativistic effects are avoided? That's one thing I've never understood and it bothers me."

"I can't give you the math for it, Captain—" Vaille smiled and shook his head— "but the way Dr. Kunda at the labs put it, velocity has to do with the number of appearances, not the distance between them. So at a Skip-factor of ten your theoretical limit is ten lights, not one. And of course we never push that limit—our instruments are redlined at ten per cent time-mass variation, which we've found acceptable.

"Nice, isn't it? We thought we had the universe by its short hairs.

So we sent you out at top Skip-factor—well over a thousand, I believe—and instead of coming back to where you once belonged you came here instead.

"Kunda told me why. There are more worlds than one—more than we could count, I expect. There have to be—to explain what's happened. They run side-by-side in time and ordinarily you stay in your own rut—no way to get out of it. But on high Skip-factor, with the checkpoints fewer and farther between, so to speak, you can drift into a new and different set of probabilities. The higher and longer you Skip the farther you may drift from the world you know. That's why you're here instead of there.

"And you can't get back."

"Huh?"

"Why?"

"Why not?"

Several people were speaking at once. Pearsall remained quiet. And the little green insect had vanished again.

"You could try," said Forgues. "go out again and take your chances. But you'd probably find a set of circumstances even more strange to you. effects on any one trip appear to be random, but may well be cumulative. You might come closer to your original world—then again, you might not. The odds aren't necessarily favorable. In fact, indications point to the contrary."

"Then where do we stand?" someone demanded. "What are we supposed to do?"

"I don't know," Forgues said. His voice was flat, deliberate. "When I do, I'll be sure to inform you."

Pearsall spotted his small green friend. It had flown, while he wasn't looking, to a window ledge. He felt himself released from an anxiety he hadn't consciously noticed.

"Sir," he said, "is there anything more for us to do here, now? Or may we leave?"

As Forgues began to answer, the door opened. The fey-eyed receptionist failed to block the entrance of the aide Pearsall had seen on his picturephone. The chubby man spoke.

"Admiral, sir, a ship has landed."

Pearsall thought Forgues would explode into harangue, but he said, level-toned, "Thank you, Abbott, for the information. But ships land here quite often, I believe. This is an important conference. Why did you interrupt it?"

"Sir, I thought you might want to know immediately about this particular landing. The ship is *Hawk Flight*."

IV

FORGUES broke the intent silence. "Is it ours this time?"

"It seems to be—or as near as makes no difference. At least the roster checks out. And the time of departure."

Forgues sighed. "My friends, it seems we have a whole new ball game. I have no idea how to cope with it. I welcome any suggestions."

"Just a minute, sir," said Pearsall. He turned to the chubby newsbearer. "Are all crew members alive and well?"

"Yes, they are," the man said. "Why?"

"Excuse me, Admiral." Without waiting for a response, Pearsall walked into the receptionist's office, closing the door gently.

"May I use your phone?" The girl nodded. He punched the remembered number—after a few seconds a picture lighted.

The woman's eyes were swollen but dry. Her black mass of hair swung loose. Her right hand held a brush.

"Milla," he said. "The other *Hawk Flight* has landed, the one that belongs here. Miro has come home."

The brush dropped unnoticed. Her eyes filled. She smiled like a very young child seeing the antics of clowns. "Miro? Miro! Oh, how wonderful! You have just learned?"

"About thirty seconds ago. I called you, first thing."

"Oh, thank you, Woody—thank you! You have seen him?"

"Not yet. But all crew members are reported alive and well."

"Shall I come there?"

"I—I don't know Milla. Does Miro usually call from the port, when he lands?"

"Yes. Always."

"Then I'm sure he will now, as soon as he can. Why don't you wait for his call, then decide between you where to meet?"

"Yes, that is best. Though waiting will be very hard."

"Yes, Milla—I know. But it's not for long now." *My God,* he thought—*she looks ten years younger.* "Look, Milla—I'd better get off this line so Miro can get through to you as soon as he has the chance. And I'm very happy for you."

"Yes. Thank you. I hope also for *your* happiness. And now, goodbye."

Shutting off the phone, Pearsall thanked the receptionist for its use and returned to the conference room. It stank of desperation.

"Has anything been decided?" he said.

"Where the hell have you been, Pearsall?" Forgues snapped.

"Telling Ludmilla Frantiszek

she has her husband back, sir. I thought somebody should."

"Oh, yes—yes, of course! Sorry, Pearsall. Glad you thought of it."

"It's all right, sir. Does anyone know what comes next?"

"Not so you'd notice it. The other crew should be through medical check before much longer. I'll have to talk to them, explain the situation—I suppose they've heard a garbled version from someone and are feeling anxious, to say the least."

Forgues scowled. "I should have thought of that and issued instructions."

"When?" asked Pearsall. "Begging your pardon, but none of us anticipated this landing until it happened—and then the first people to talk with the ship would naturally let out the whole story."

"What?" The admiral's preoccupation was evident. "Oh, yes, you're right." He rapped on the table for the group's attention. "Well, I'd better give the situation readout as I see it." He looked around at all of them. "For some of you this new development must be one blow too many. Having to readjust to living someone else's life was bad enough, terrible in some cases. And now the someone else has come to take up his or her own life and you must live with that, too."

He sighed and shook his head. "One thing is clear—your careers are secure. You're all competent people in your own right. Despite the fact that someone else now shares your name there will be a place for you. We'll find a way to straighten out the records. You needn't worry about any of that. I'll take care of it."

He frowned. "Now, your personal lives. Each case will need its own unique solution, I expect. Some of you may have to give up your families—and no help for it. Or your alter-ego may want out of his current life situation and bow out in your favor—it's not impossible, but don't count on it. Or some of you—and your doubles and your families, might agree to share your lives—multiple marriages aren't common, but they are legal. And it could be arranged for any pair of doubles to ship out alternately, if that would help. The service will make counseling available to any who feel the need for it. Don't hesitate to ask. I'll see that the red tape is bypassed." Forgues looked at his watch. "Please remain here while I speak to the other crew. I'll arrange for lunch to be brought in. Then I want to be present at the first meeting of each pair of doubles, in privacy—maybe I can help you accept each other's existence a little more easily.

"I realize the procedure will be time-consuming, but at the moment I can't think of a better one. Your welfare is my responsibility and I intend to discharge that responsibility as best I can. That's all I have to say at this time. I'll have somebody hustle that lunch for you."

"Sir," said Pearsall. "Laird and I have no doubles to meet. But we do have personal problems of our own, each of us. May we have your permission to leave now?"

"What? Oh, yes. And Frantiszek, in the other crew. I'll call and have him released if Abbott hasn't thought to do so—which I doubt." The admiral turned to leave. As Pearsall and Laird followed him out, they paused to wave restrained goodbyes. In a way Pearsall felt like a deserter—but what more could he do here? He hurried to catch up with Forgues.

"When do you want us back here, sir?"

"Tomorrow morning. No, make it after lunch. I may be up most of the night with those twenty-two pairs of doppelgangers—and I'll need some sleep."

They parted. Outside, Pearsall noticed a new gouge along the side of the drab little rental car. Some things never change, he thought—he remembered his grandfather complaining about "damned idiots in parking lots." And throughout most of his childhood young Elwood thought "idiots" were strange creatures who lurked in parking lots and lived only to ravage the cars of innocent grandfathers.

The vagrant memory eased his tension. He found himself smiling.

THE morning drive had been hectic. Homeward bound he drove more leisurely, wondering what he could do or say to help his cause with Glenna. Not much, he decided—she had all the pieces and would have to put them together herself. Neither he nor Laird spoke during the drive. He didn't know what the boy was thinking and, just then, he didn't want to know. He'd think about Laird's problem later and help if he could.

Before they reached home he was sweating—the morning had been cool, but now it was past noon and Indian-summer hot. He'd have to take time, he thought, to turn in this rental contraption and get his own car out of storage.

Glenna greeted the two men cheerfully enough. She wore lightweight halter and briefs in a colorful print pattern. Pearsall went straight to the refrigerator and was pleased to find a pitcher of daiquiris cooling, as in earlier, happier

times. He took a little in a glass and sipped it, before taking a cool shower and changing into shorts and sandals.

Glenna, when he rejoined her, was setting out cold cuts and salad. The sound of running water from the basement shower indicated that Laird was also cooling off. Pearsall poured himself a full glass from the pitcher and sipped from it between bites of cheese, liverwurst, salad and crackers. He kept the silence until she broke it.

"Woody—Laird told me what happened."

"That *Hawk Flight* came back? The one that belongs here?"

"Yes. Why didn't you tell me? And what does it mean? What happens now?"

"I wanted us to take our time talking about it. And I needed that cold shower first. Mind?" She shook her head. "Well, first it means that most of my crew have doubles and may be excess baggage on this world." He summarized Forgues' conclusions, then added: "Tomorrow, after he's talked with all the pairs, we'll have a better idea of how they're reacting. It's not going to be easy for most, I'm afraid."

She was rubbing a knuckle alongside her nose, looking steadily over it. "But, then Miro Frantiszek is back. Does Milla know?"

"I called her immediately, as soon as we heard."

"Yes—you would. You were always thoughtful—in my world."

He had to speak. "It seemed that I—that my *Hawk Flight*—ever since we landed, had been doing nothing but make people unhappy. I guess I jumped at the chance to make somebody happy for a change. I think it did me as much good as it did Milla."

He touched his cold glass to his right ear—the chill was refreshing. Changing hands, he gave the other ear the same treatment and grinned at Glenna. She began to smile back at him. The door chime interrupted.

"I'll get it." She rose and went to the door. From where he sat, Pearsall couldn't see whom she greeted.

"Yes, he's here. Please come in." What did they want with him now? But into the room Glenna ushered Bonita and Irene Laird.

HE STOOD and saw them seated, offered and served drinks, returned to his own chair. The two Lairds weren't talking, so Pearsall took the plunge. "You're here to see John? He should be coming soon. He's been showering, but the water stopped running a minute ago."

Mrs. Laird leaned forward. "The problem was my husband,

you see—not me. This thing is like a superstition or something with him. I wouldn't have turned young John away—he needed us. I could see that." She rubbed her hands together. "But my husband—he's John, too, of course; I suppose I'd get used to that—he wouldn't have it. Charles and Mildred never could stand up to him any more than I can, except just once in a while. James and Irene have all the family spunk." She smiled tentatively and fell silent.

"Yes, Mrs. Laird?" said Pearsall. "Go on."

"Well. After you left Irene wouldn't let it go. She just kept on—didn't you, honey?" The girl blushed and nodded. "I agreed with her that we should have taken the boy in, but John—*my* John—never listens to me unless I throw a fit and a set of dishes. Well—not quite that bad, really. Usually things aren't important enough and I let him have his way. This time, though, I stood with Irene. Any time she ran out of steam I came in for her. But still my John wouldn't have it." Now she sat upright. "Then James called on the phone. It was late by then. He'd seen the news about *Hawk Flight* and the John Laird who wasn't on the records. They showed a picture of him and told his address on the ship's books—our address. So James called us, even that late."

"What did he say?" If he could keep her talking, Pearsall thought, sooner or later she'd get to the point.

"He asked had we seen the news? My John said we'd seen more than that—the man had come here saying we're his family. James asked, well, where is he? John said he'd sent him packing. And James called his father some names—very disrespectful, James was."

Pearsall raised his glass to hide a grin. "And then what happened?"

"James said he didn't understand it, but when he saw young John's picture his spine went cold. That he knew he couldn't ever have seen him before, but he felt he recognized him. Then he said if we didn't take the boy in, he would."

"And I said, good for them." Irene spoke for the first time. Her voice was low and clear. "And I asked James did they have room for me, too?"

"That's right, honey—you did. And right there I had enough. I love my John, but sometimes—I shouldn't say it, though it's true—he's a pigheaded fool! I'd carried a son nine months, I said, and lost him—a woman never gets over that. Now somehow I had a chance to get him back alive and I'd be eternally damned if anyone

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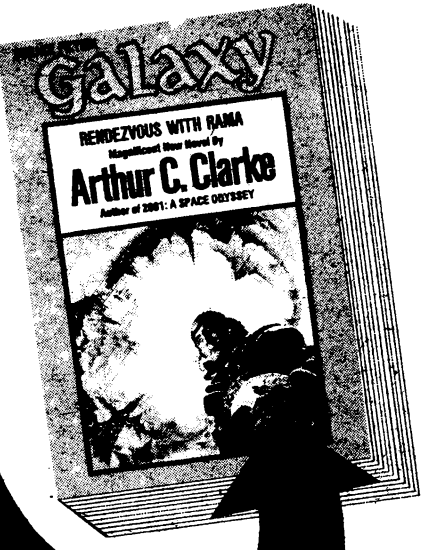

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was going to take that chance away from me! We argued late, to daylight—didn't get up until noon today. John missed work, first day in years. But he finally agreed last night and stands by it today. He still complains a little but that's just show—he does hate to lose an argument. So here we are, Irene and I—if the boy still wants anything to do with us."

Pearsall walked back along the hall to the basement door across from the kitchen. He shouted down the stairs.

"Laird. John Laird, get your lazy carcass up here. You're going home."

"Yes, I know." Coming from the kitchen, behind Pearsall, the voice sounded thick, as though issuing from a constricted throat. "I heard."

THE Lairds, all three, had gone. Pearsall felt wrung out. Into a short glass he poured bourbon over ice—daiquiris were all well and good, but at the moment he wanted a little more bite.

"Well, that's two happy endings today." His voice and smile were gentle. "Care to try for three?"

Glenna stiffened noticeably. "Woody, I can't take that—not just now. Couldn't you have waited? I was coming to like you—I do like you—but now you've brought it all back. That you're not my real husband."

"Your real husband is dead." Maybe a little shock treatment would work. "You saw him dead—you said so. Now tell me—hadn't you ever thought of remarrying? Were you going to waste the rest of your life mooning over a rotting corpse?"

She shrank visibly into herself. Her face paled. He could see the light dusting of freckles normally masked by her healthy coloring.

"I—I might have remarried. I had no one in mind, but of course I've thought of it. But not like this—you're asking me simply to let you move in here in place of my Woody. That's not remarriage." She shook her head. "You know my beliefs, my monogamist upbringing. You accepted all that when you married me. Didn't you?"

He overlooked the gaps in her logic. Yes, he thought, he'd accepted her views—perhaps more thoroughly than she knew. All right, he'd play it her way.

"Well, then Glenna. will you marry me?"

"No, I won't." Instant, level-voiced anger. "You're making fun of me."

He took a deep breath and exhaled carefully, stifling the words that would estrange her beyond re-

call. In his mind he rephrased what he would have to say next—win or lose.

"Glenna—isn't this all a bit pretentious? I mean, it's not as though there had never been anyone else for you—besides the Woody who is dead."

"What do you mean?" Gripping the arms of her chair, she started to rise. "Of course there has been no one else. I came to you a virgin—don't you believe that now?"

"You are surely mixing up your Woodys, now aren't you? Yes—certainly I believe it. That's not what I'm talking about."

"Then just what are you talking about?"

He sighed. "All right. I'd never intended to throw it up to you—never thought I'd have to—but we both know you broke your own special rules after I had come to accept them. I knew about you and Piers Carlton when he was directing the Little Theater in Spring Harbor."

She stood frozen, mute—he had to go on. "It doesn't matter now, Glenna. After the miscarriage I could understand—you needed something I couldn't give you. And I judged that Carlton wasn't the sort who would ever be unkind to you. So I endured it and never held it against you—until now, when you turn me away."

Wide-eyed, she shook her head. "But I didn't, Woody—I didn't! No, listen—let me talk. I thought of it, yes—I played around with the idea. In a way it fascinated me. You're right—I needed something. We had had all those years of hoping—and finally I was pregnant. And then the miscarriage and the doctor said I could never have the child I'd come so close to having. I think I was a little crazy, Woody, for a while. And I did flirt with Piers Carlton—that's true. But he got me interested in the theater, instead. So then I found what I needed—but on the stage, not on the casting couch."

It was Pearsall's turn to shake his head. "Glenna, don't bother to lie to me."

"Lie? I'm not lying! Why should I lie to a man I'm rejecting?"

"I have no idea. But, you see—I caught you. I came home and found you together on the bed. You didn't see or hear me—I went out again and stayed away until he was gone. Afterward, until I was sure it was over, I took care to give fair warning of my comings and goings and to make it easy for you to find excuses to meet him."

She was frowning, intent. "Why would you do that?"

HE SHRUGGED. "I'm not sure. I suppose—I thought

you'd be having enough problems with guilt without my piling shame on top of it." He was getting off the point—oh, yes! "But another thing, Glenna—you were never in a play or on the stage in your life. Why do you try to tell me such things?"

She stared at him silently. Then she laughed—and laughed and laughed. Finally she stopped and wiped her eyes.

"Oh, Woody! To paraphrase you—you're mixing up your Glennas. Your Glenna may have done all you say—since you say it I'll believe you. But I didn't. And I did act on the stage. I have my keepsakes, the theater programs. Would you like to see them?"

He was trying to comprehend, to absorb what she had said. "I'd like to later, yes. But now I'll take your word for them, though what you tell me is hard to understand. But I'm still interested in only one thing—where do we stand, you and I?"

A vertical crease formed and deepened between her brows. "Separately, I'm afraid." She paused. "You can sleep in the guest room tonight—now that Laird has gone—but tomorrow you'd better go somewhere else. Or I'll leave if you insist. I need to be apart from you."

"Why?"

"Because we do mix up our Woodys and our Glennas. You think you know me, but you don't. And every time I come to feel that I know you I find I don't, not at all. How many more pitfalls are there in our separate pasts that we'd stumble into if we tried to make a future together? I don't know. And I'm afraid to find out."

Frustration bit at his nerves and muscles like electric shock, bringing him perilously near the edge of violence. He took a deep breath. Then, forcing himself to sit still while looking at his not-wife, he said, "All right. I'll leave in the morning. I'll take my luggage and I won't be back. You can ship the rest of my stuff—anything that's still around here—when I have a place for it. I'll let you know and pay the freight. This place is yours. It was silly, Glenna, for you to offer to move out."

"No. It's only legally mine. You have as much right to everything as I do."

"But not to you?"

"No—not to me."

There was nothing he could say. He looked at his watch—it was mid-afternoon. Suddenly he couldn't face staying in this house through all the hours until dawn. He rose to his feet.

"I might as well gather my travel gear and go now, Glenna."

She stood, also. "What do you plan to do?"

"Ship out again, I suppose." He could still muster a grin. "Next time I may come back to a world I'm better suited to."

He was ready to leave in a few minutes. Awkwardly, encumbered by his three pieces of luggage, he paused in the living room. Silent and withdrawn, she looked up at him but did not speak.

He made no move to set down the luggage or to touch her.

"Goodbye, Glenna."

When she made no answer he started to move away. Then she said, "Goodbye, Woody—" and looked away again.

Outside, he stowed his gear in the car. He looked up at the broken chimney that someone else would have to repair. Then he slid under the wheel and drove toward the city.

He registered at a hotel near the spaceport. He could have taken quarters at the port itself, but he didn't yet feel up to mingling with service personnel. He needed to be alone.

He had dinner, but didn't eat much. He bought a book but, back in his room, read very little. He had a bottle, also, but drank sparingly. He went to bed early.

It was the longest night he'd ever known.

HE AWOKE dull-brained and heavy-eyed. A shower helped and the automatic routine of morning soothed him. He rummaged for clean clothes—in some cases he was down to his last item. Some things were missing. Glenna must have laundered them, he thought and had forgotten to tell him. He dressed as best he could.

In the hotel's restaurant he had breakfast—steak and eggs, with more black coffee than his nerves needed.

Outside he felt the sun's warmth, though it shone vaguely through ground haze. Two blocks away he found a store that carried clothing. He bought a few things he needed. He walked back to the hotel, got his duffel together and checked out.

Through mists that lessened as the sun burned them away, he drove to the port. He registered for quarters and moved his luggage into a clean, featureless cubicle. He placed his shaving kit and some other trivia on the dresser top to identify the room for him next time he entered it.

He looked at his watch: 1040. The Administration Building was less than two miles away—it would make a nice walk, he decided, and headed in that direction.

At 1115 hours, wide-awake now but not overheated, he approached

Admiral Forgues' office. He rated a smile from the receptionist with the entrancingly off-track eye. She wore an electric-blue dress. With her pale skin and hair it made her look like a child playing grownup. Pearsall liked the effect—momentarily he wished he could shed half his birthdays.

Through the thin office door the admiral's telephone voice rumbled unmistakably. Pearsall raised his eyebrows toward the sound. The girl nodded and he entered the admiral's presence just as Forgues said, "Well, do it, then," and shut off the phone.

"Morning, Pearsall. You're here early."

"Yes sir. I'm anxious about some of our people and wondered how the interviews came out. If you're not busy—"

"Not especially. Most of the talks went faster than I'd expected. I got almost enough sleep—as much as I usually get, anyway."

"Congratulations, sir."

"The situation is not as bad as I feared, Pearsall. To begin with, at Captain Vaille's suggestion I had as many spouses and other family members brought here as I could reach on short notice. I included them in the interviews once the initial meetings were over. I think their presence helped a great deal in a number of cases.

"Vaille himself was no trouble—in either of his identities. When the two met, one said, "Do you suppose our wife will agree that she can't have too much of a good thing?' They both laughed—then Mrs. Vaille came in. At first it bothered her that she couldn't tell them apart, so your Vaille took scissors and trimmed his mustache short. Then she relaxed and rapport between the three was good. In fact, I prevailed upon them to stay for the rest of the interviews and I think their example was of help to others who were less secure."

"Yes, sir—that's the captain, all right. He doesn't talk much, stays out of the limelight—but he's never at a loss."

"True. Well, then, not to bog you down with details—eight other triangular households are launched successfully, including three with the wife duplicated. In six cases your shipmate was displaced by his or her twin and in three the other crewman was displaced. Leaving—let me see—" he referred to a scribbled list—"four pairs of 'twins' who, for one reason or another, are quite adrift in this world. So we have seventeen who are effectively 'displaced persons.' I hope we can find some way to help them." Forgues scowled. "No, I forgot—make that sixteen. Your

version of Lena Gehring killed herself during the night. I'm sorry—did you know her well?"

Shaking his head, Pearsall felt a pang. He hadn't known her at all. If he had, could he have helped?

"But you'd better make it seventeen again, sir," he said. "I qualify."

"Oh?" Forgues raised his eyebrows, started to speak, but shook his head and began again. "Sorry to hear that. And how about young Laird?"

"He'll be all right. The family decided to give him a try."

"Good. And Frantiszek's in safe harbor, too. The only problem is that I can't reach him—he's disconnected his phone."

Pearsall laughed. "I can't say I blame her."

"What? Oh, yes—of course. Well, that's the wrapup. Unfortunately I can't do much about the loose ends just now—they've saddled me with another insoluble problem."

"Another, sir?"

"The courier ships—were those on the boards in your world before you left?"

"Hmmm—yes, sir. Little two-person cans, weren't they? With Skip-factors into five or six figures—the idea was to provide faster communications between here and the colonies. And expedite the high-priority small cargo."

"That's right. Well, the ships are built—almost ready to deliver. We put a lot of money into that project. And now we can't use the damned things!"

"Can't use them? Oh, of course—I see."

"Yes. Who'll pilot a ship that can't come home again? And what good are messages to an alternate world?"

After a moment, Pearsall did see. Oh, God, *how* he saw! "Sir—I think—your two problems solve each other!"

"How's that? What do you mean?"

"The difference between one world and another may be important to individuals, sir, but on the larger scale—politics, economics, commerce—it would be minor, even unnoticeable. Every version of Harper's Touchdown is going to need new counter-agents against the cyclic insect mutations, for instance. And—well, draw your own examples, sir—you have more data on the colonies than I do. And communications dealing with overall problems rather than individual ones will still be valid—especially if the first messages explain the multiple-world concept, to alert everyone to be on the lookout for discrepancies. "If our thinking is careful, sir, the courier ships can do

almost exactly the job they were planned for."

"But who will run them?"

"I will, for one—and probably most of your other displaced persons will volunteer. You see—it's our only chance to find a world we can live in."

"But, Pearsall—you know how little chance you have of finding what you have lost."

"Yes, sir—I do know. But, what about a world in which I have no illusory ties that don't really work? Where I never met Glenna and never will? In a world like that I could feel free to make a new start. Here I can't."

For a time Forgues was silent. Then: "Yes—I see. But how do we run a courier system with seventeen people—seventeen who will work at it only until they find a place to call home?"

"How many other ships—after *Hawk Flight*—went out long-haul at high Skip-factor and that aren't back yet? And from how many worlds? I'm afraid our seventeen are only the first of many. And think of this, too—the possibilities of exchange of information between worlds. It will be random, but over the long haul the law of averages will make it work. Too, you'll find people attracted to the program for the adventure of it. Younger men particularly."

"Hmm—it might work. It just might, at that. For a time at least, until someone comes up with a better idea." He paused. "Pearsall, before you go looking for your better world I want you to help me get this thing organized." He stood. "Now let's get on with our next conference. At least, thanks to you, I have something to say there—besides a lot of platitudes."

AS HE followed Forgues, Pearsall almost felt good. It wasn't every day, he thought, that a mere commander heard two sets of problems from an admiral and handed him the answer to both—on a platter, with an apple in its mouth. Yes, he felt almost good.

The cute cockeyed blonde smiled up at him as he passed her desk. He returned the smile absently and continued in the admiral's wake, but she called after him.

"Commander Pearsall?" He turned. "I have a message for you—please call your wife. You may use this phone if you like."

He called to the departing admiral. "Sir? Excuse me—I'll be along shortly." Forgues waved assent.

What, thought Pearsall, could Glenna possibly have to say to him now? It had all been said. What further excuses, rationalizations, could she offer? He punched out

the number and waited until the screen lit.

"Woody?" Her robe hung awry. Her hair was tousled.

"More or less," he answered. "What do you want?"

"I have to ask you something. After—after Carlton, were you and your Glenna happy together?"

He thought about it. "Yes, I think we were."

"You were able to forgive her? You didn't resent what had happened?"

"Of course I resented it—at first. Then I accepted it, and after that it didn't count any more either way—it was over and done with. But why do you ask? What difference does it make?"

"I couldn't sleep last night for thinking. My Woody—he was kind, like you, but not easily forgiving—I don't think he could have done what you did. That may be why I—*didn't*, after all—you see? For I might have lost him. Do you understand?"

"No, Glenna. I don't think I do. What do you mean?"

"I mean, come *home*, Woody! You were right—we're the best Woody and Glenna we can find. Maybe an improvement on the originals. We can try, anyway!"

At first he couldn't breathe—and then he could. "Yes, Glenna. I may be a little late for dinner, but I'll surely be there."

Her smiling lips quivered. "I can wait," she said and on the screen the picture died.

For a moment he stood still, his mind worlds away. His own Glenna—there had never been any real chance of his finding his way back to her, but this decision made the separation final. So she was widowed. But this Glenna had survived widowhood.

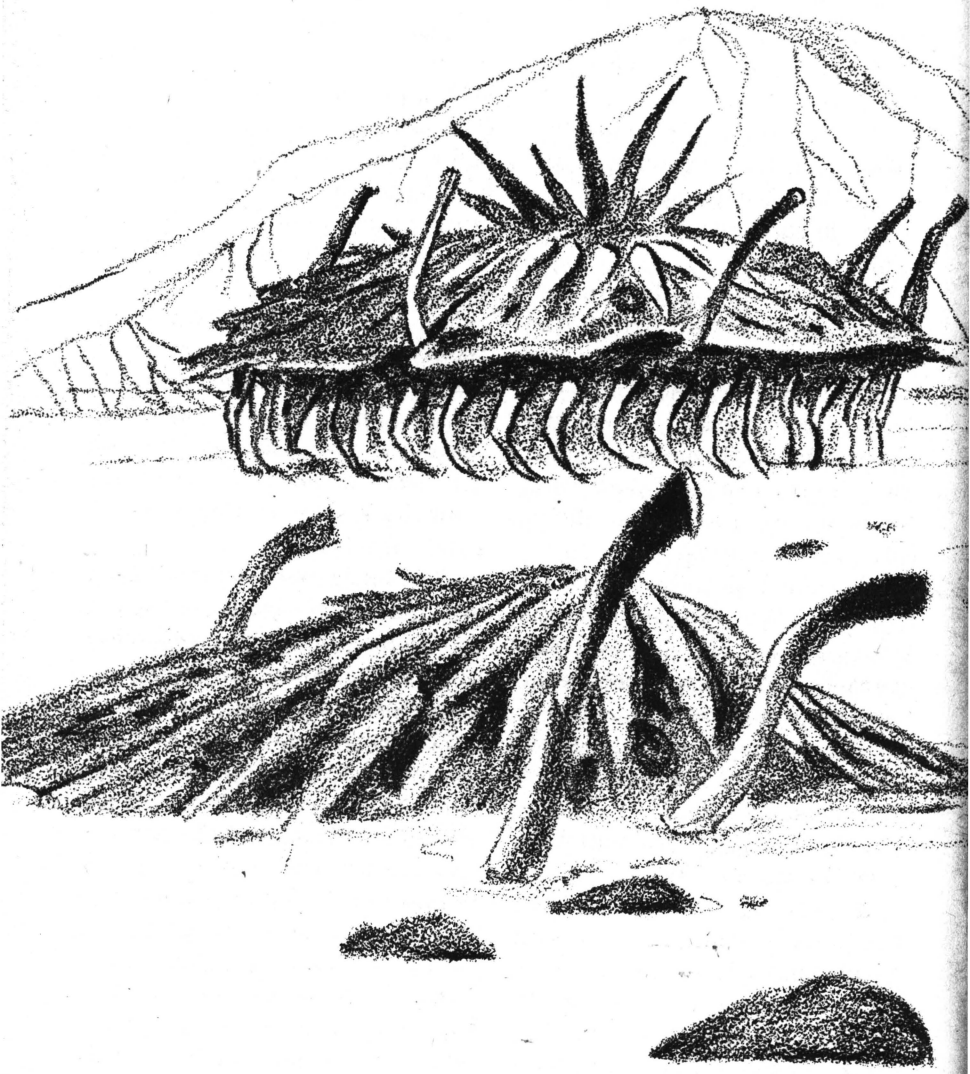
How many worlds? How many Woodys and Glennas—some with the right mates, some with the wrong? Some with none and maybe some with two. But for him and her, here—he shook his head and came back to one framework of time and space.

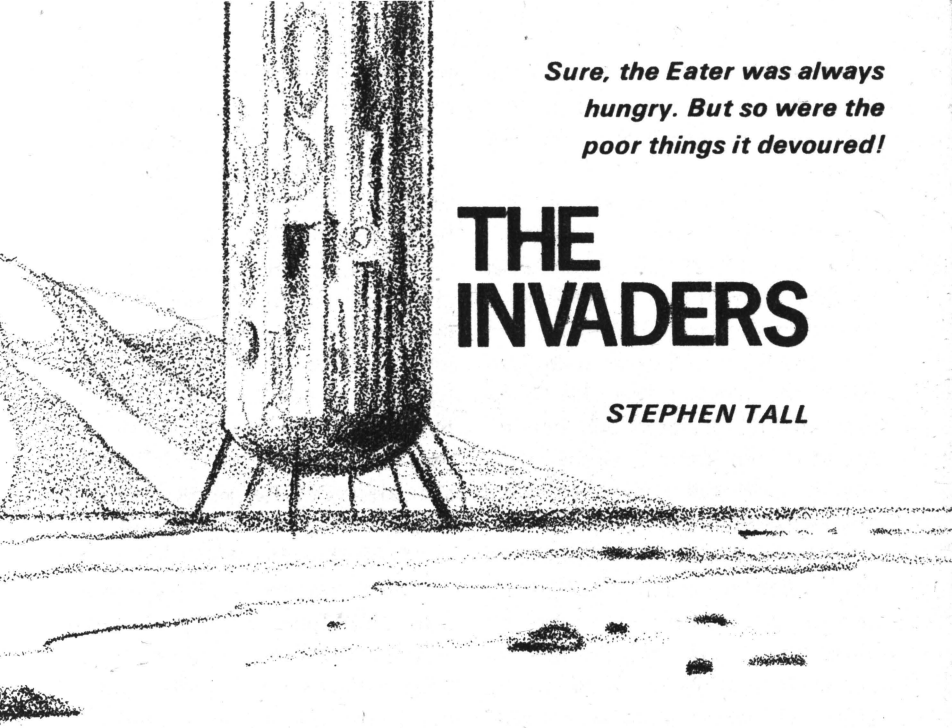
The blonde looked quizzically at him, but Pearsall merely winked at her as he left. In the conference room a discussion was under way. Unceremoniously, he cut into it.

"Excuse me, Admiral," he said. "Your displaced-persons roster—you'll have to cut it back to sixteen." Forgues' raised eyebrows wavered between surprise and annoyance at the interruption—then he grinned. Pearsall smiled back.

"I'll be glad to help initiate the courier program, sir," he said, "but I'm afraid I can't ride in it. I'm taking no chances of losing this world of yours. I seem to have found a home here." •

NOVELETTE





Sure, the Eater was always hungry. But so were the poor things it devoured!

THE INVADERS

STEPHEN TALL

I

THE call came to Red Spine and to the others of his shelter cluster as they rested deep in the cool corridors, insulated by many thicknesses of sand and soil from the harsh radiation of the blazing sun. It was the normal time of repose. But the call came and Red Spine and his fellows responded. Help was needed, help to save life. And life was sacred.

"The information is not good," Red Spine projected. "Great masses of rock have closed the portals and smashed the corridors. Many have ceased to live." Red Spine spoke from his mind, from his thought centers. Since his projection was open, it was detected by the many canceroids that formed the long line of slowly spinning beings that stretched out across the shimmering desert.

"It has always been a poor location for a shelter cluster," Yellow Stripe said. "The Scaling Hills have not been called the Scaling Hills for nothing."

"The mountains shook." Purple Fringe's thought pulse came from far up near the head of the column. "This has not happened for many

molts. There are projections of many beings in pain. I fear that there will be much food for the Eater."

"It, at least, will welcome tragedy," Red Spine murmured. "To satisfy it becomes ever harder. Sometimes I wonder—" he left the thought unfinished.

There was no response up and down the moving line. He knew that all had detected and had responded, but their thoughts were shielded. It was always so when anyone spoke of the Eater.

In his life span Red Spine had never seen so much death. Canceroids from shelter clusters all along the desert's edge toiled together to remove the rock, to dig under the great slabs that could not be moved, a cold, steady, passionless effort to free the unfortunate victims of the shaking land. Yellow Stripe had observed truly. It had not been a good place for a shelter cluster.

As the smashed bodies were removed, often piecemeal, they were laid aside neatly, in tidy piles. The piles, in turn, were steadily diminished by those who had elected to serve as bearers. Each individual did what seemed most to need doing, so there was order, though no being directed. Thus another line wound back across the desert toward the high-peaked, disklike hill in the distance that was not a hill at all.

There was communication. Meaningful patterns pulsed from thought center to thought center. Such was conversation as canceroids knew it, soundless, concise. And in every reception center another projection throbbed and hummed, dully, monotonously. None answered it. It could not be answered by speech. It could only be interrupted or stilled by the carriers of the pieces of broken bodies.

"Food! Food! Food!"

The irritating, endless projection of the Eater was a part of canceroid life. None could remember when it had not been there. To feed the Eater was a responsibility of every canceroid. None contested it. None challenged it. It had always been so.

RED SPINE moved rock. His peaked carapace, a sturdy disk ten feet in diameter, thick and resistant, was balanced on sixteen pairs of armored walking appendages. His cold stalked eyes peered from under heavy chitinous sheaths. He enjoyed his strength.

Others dug sand. Still others carefully moved the living bodies as they were freed. If there was no vital hurt these would be removed to the corridors and repose cham-

bers of other shelter clusters. There they would sit and be fed by their hosts until they had regenerated all that had been injured or lost. The ruined shelter cluster would be dug and built again, with symbionts donated from other communities, but next time it would not be located where the mountains could fall on it.

Cleanly, neatly, every scrap of broken body, every cast appendage, even the fragments of shattered carapaces were gathered up. All went to feed the Eater. There could be no wasting of biomass. It was becoming precious. But this time, at least, it was abundant. The Eater had bodies and more bodies, as many as even its capacious gut could welcome and digest. And after two days the telepathic mumble of its incessant food call slowly subsided and became still.

"The Eater is satisfied," Blue Dot projected. "I do not ever remember this happing before. This is good."

"I am from an earlier hatching than you," Red Spine said. "I remember an earlier time. And it is not good."

"How can it not be good? The flesh is dead. Only life is sacred. If the Eater is filled, we do not have to feed it. To me, that is very good."

"Watch. If I am wrong, I will correct my statement. When the Eater calls for food again, life will be harder. Watch."

With all the food, the vast mound that was the Eater became torpid. In the memory of the oldest canceroid it had never walked, for its nourishment was supplied at its mouth opening and its wastes were removed from behind it. But now, under its thick and radiation-scarred carapace, on which lichens and sponge masses grew tall and dense, changes were taking place. Its incredible expanses of tissue filled with fluids—it writhed and shifted for half a day. Then the whole great skeleton ripped asunder. A red, pulsing, monstrous thing crept feebly from it, pulling limp appendages from the rigid cylinders that had protected them. It dragged itself clear of the vast skeleton, inching, almost flowing along, then lay inert, cringing and shuddering in the hard radiation of the brilliant light of day.

But this was something that happened. To the monstrosity it was normal. It was a creature of the radiation and could tolerate it. It did not die.

SLOWLY a new carapace formed over the acres of shift-

ing, rippling flesh, thickening and darkening, becoming more and more the color of the expanse of sand around it. Its appendanges stiffened as armor sheathed them. Around the great dome of its body they then reached outward, groping, huge pincers clashing.

They found what they searched for. The discarded skeleton, a great split crumpled mass, was seized and slowly dragged to where the creature's staring stalked eyes could study it. Massive chelae pulled it to the mouth opening, wide palps savored it and for hours the splintering crunch of its mandibles sounded as it devoured its previous covering to the last morsel.

Then it settled itself ponderously into the sand, drawing in the many pairs of appendages and burying them deep. The carapace had finished its hardening. Ridges ran from its edge to the high peak of its center, like rain furrows from the top of a cone-shaped hill. Its eyestalks drew back under their heavy protective overhangs. It sat, quiescent, thirty thousand times the size of any canceroid that fed it. It could have been carved from the stone of the nearby hills. No watcher would have suspected it to be alive. The sponge clusters and crust-like life forms invaded and began to grow again, camouflaging the new carapace.

The Eater lay in a deep stupor, maturing its tissues, consolidating the increase in size that came with every shedding. When the outcry, which was not sound and which only a canceroid could detect, began again, it would be stronger, more insistent than ever before.

"The Eater has molted and now it does not call for food." Knobbed Claw exuded pleasure. "This is a marvelous thing. Perhaps it will not need to eat again for many starshines."

His pulse of relief was reinforced from many thought centers and Red Spine, who knew better, shielded what was in his mind. They would know soon enough.

And all this happened only days before the Invader ship came in.

IT CAME gently, slowly, quietly, an enormous glittering cylinder, featureless, having no openings and no appendages. There was nothing to show why it should fly through the light atmosphere of Cancerol as though it were a flutterby. But fly it did without effort, cruising low over the wide stretches of open country, swinging with silent ease over the piled masses of the Scaling Hills.

Red Spine watched it. Flattened in the sand, his appendages drawn under him, his eyestalks extruded, he stared with a cold intelligent wonder. For Red Spine had speculated on things such as this. But his speculations had never included such size, such implications of advanced competence. He had no basis for the concept of a ship. On Cancerol all beings were their own transportation. So he thought that the Invader ship was a living thing and down in his cold consciousness a fear began and grew.

"If it must feed," he thought, "it will require living things. When we feed ourselves and keep the Eater satisfied, not much remains. Therefore it will eat—us!"

Canceroids were not prone to panic, but Red Spine felt unaccustomed agitation when the strange object finally drifted down. It came to rest on the stretch of open sand where the members of Red Spine's shelter cluster always played at pebble tag. Only a few minutes' journey away, sloping under the nearest hill, was the wide, low main entrance of the shelter.

As it happened, not many members of the cluster were abroad when the great cylinder touched down. It was the time of rest. Most were in repose in the cool dark chambers of the shelter. When the sun Cancer was hidden, when the radiation dropped, this was their normal time of activity. They could tolerate the savage sunshine, but they did not require it. The day was the time of the sponge masses, the green and red and yellow producer beings that dotted the sandy plains and clung even to the raw faces of the vertical cliffs. They reveled in the sun. While it shone they grew, sucking moisture from the dry air and from deep in the soil, building succulent masses of tissue that formed the food base of the planet. Not only the canceroids, but a wealth of other life preyed on and continually pruned the ever-growing mounds.

More often than most of his fellows Red Spine prowled in the bright radiation. He was concerned with the speed at which the sponge beings grew, with the amount of food for canceroids that they produced. He watched the other forms that fed on the sponges. These, too, could be eaten by canceroids, but only the body parts that could be regenerated. On Cancerol there was one law and all things respected it. Life must not be destroyed.

So Red Spine watched the invader land. He was appalled by its bigness and deeply concerned

that it might not respect the law. For how could it know? Why should it care? It was an unbelievable shape and greater in length even than the Eater, which lay like a cone-shaped hill a short run away.

Red Spine settled deeper into the sand, his stalked eyes glittering like brilliants. And a strange thing happened.

A hole opened in the side of the Invader. Out of the hole small beings swarmed, beings unlike anything ever seen on Cancerol. They were white, shiny white, bouncing back the sunlight. They had appendages, but only two pairs, placed at opposite ends of the long bodies. One pair they used for locomotion, the other they waved about in random patterns, or used to hold what seemed to be artifacts. A large round head sat atop the body column. One glistening eye covered half the head, and always faced in the direction of the creature's locomotion.

Red Spine understood. It was a hard thing to grasp, but he dealt with facts, and there was no doubting the evidence of his eyes. The Invader was an artifact. It was a made thing. Presumably the beings spewing out of it had made it, used it for shelter and locomotion, used it to bring them out from the blue mystery of space.

Red Spine was well camouflaged. The rippling colors that could flow along his carapace ridges were extinguished. His appendages were buried. He could have been simply a symmetrical boulder lying among the stones that were scattered everywhere. But they found him quickly and unerringly.

II

THEY surrounded him, teetering on their single pairs of walking appendages. They held out small objects with their holding chelae. And they communicated continually—by sound! Primitive. Still, Red Spine knew that these beings were not primitive. They were different. And probably they were danger. How, in what fashion, he did not know. His thought centers grappled coldly with the problem. And promptly he decided what he would do.

The ring of white figures widened when he rose slowly and majestically from the sand, standing high on his sixteen pairs of appendages. Every spine that stippled his high-crowned carapace, far greater in diameter than the height of the tallest alien, glowed with a ruby light. He extruded his eyes to the extreme

length of their stalks, folded his palps decorously over his mouth opening. Then, with dignity, he flashed the peace sign with his cold light.

The beings teetered backward swiftly and a babble of sound came from them. They held out long objects in their holding chelae, cylinders with the ends pointing at him. The high sharp noises were not intelligible, but their meaning was plain, just the same. They were fear noises. Somehow, they had misunderstood the signs of friendship. The cylinders were menace.

Red Spine was incapable of sound. He could communicate only with the awareness waves of his kind and with these beings he felt that they would be useless.

Still he tried.

"Do not panic," he projected. "We are different, but that is no cause for fear." And because courtesy required it he again flashed the peace sign.

The sounds now came from one being, while the others held out the cylinders.

"Easy does it," the being said. "No radiation in that flash. It's as cold as firefly light. That thing is saying something."

"Yeah," another vocalized. "Get off my world or I'll blast you! That's what it's saying."

There was rumbling sound from the first being.

"Good old Pegleg! Your faith, as usual, is touching. Look at it! If it had a tail, it would be wagging it. There's no menace there."

A third being, a smaller than the rest, made a higher, shriller sound, most unpleasant to Red Spine's receptors. Yet in spite of this he could sense the friendliness in it.

"I agree, Roscoe. It means no harm. It may even be frightened. It must have seen us land."

Again the rumbling sound from the first being.

"That could have brightened up its day. Let's back away and see what it'll do. If it's really aware it'll think of something."

"Do you mind," said the other maker of deep sounds, "if I keep my laser pointed in its general direction? Just in case what it thinks of isn't what you had in mind?"

"If there were danger I'd feel it," the high sound said. "There!" And it placed the cylinder it had been holding into a slit in its carapace.

"Grandstanding," the deep sound grumbled. "Lindy, little friend of the galaxy. You only have to be wrong once, you know."

The sounds receded as the beings teetered backward on those single pairs of appendanges, al-

ways keeping the large eye toward him. Red Spine felt a sudden twinge of pity as he watched. Such flimsy, unstable creatures! But then he turned his stalked eyes toward the huge artifact that had brought them there and his pity died. These were advanced beings. Whence they had come, how they moved through space, why they were here—no canceroid could imagine. The sounds that they made were varied and Red Spine knew that they were complex speech. He had recorded them all in his memory tissues, so that later, in a thought period, he could bring them back and analyse their components, searching for keys that would reveal their meanings.

The beings continued to move away, so Red Spine flexed his many pairs of walking appendages and began to rotate slowly, first in place, then drifting across the sand like a great spinning top. The invaders became small white dots in the distance. The canceroid had but one thought suddenly—to get back to the shelter cluster and tell this strange tale. He felt sure that he was being watched, so he took a long and devious route, zig-zagging among the boulders, and finally spinning around the mighty cone-shaped mass that was the Eater. With its bulk between him and the distant beings he sped for the shelter opening like a desert dust-devil.

OTHERS had seen the alien carrier come to ground. Half a dozen elders, the largest and at times the most brightly colored of the cluster, sat inert on prominences, their stalked eyes fixed on the long cylinder of the distant artifact.

"We feared you were destroyed." one projected. It was Right Twist. Red Spine respected him. Right Twist was old and learned.

"The creature came out of space," Right Twist continued. "We saw it come. It had many pairs of stalked eyes and its mouth opening glowed red. No doubt it has come to feed on us."

"Your vision is better than mine," Red Spine thought courteously. "I was quite closer and I did not see these things. But it settled near me and I learned."

"What did you learn?" Yellow Stripe showed no color now. His carapace was sand gray, as were the others.

"I learned," Red Spine projected, "that it is not a creature at all. It requires no food. It is an artifact."

He could sense the polite disbelief from half a dozen thought cen-

ters. For a brief time span there was no other communication.

Then Right Twist projected gravely: "There are facts to support this statement?"

"There are facts," Red Spine acknowledged. "The thing is a carrier of many small beings. An opening formed in it and a number of them came out and walked on the sand. They have white carapaces and one great eye. They locomote on a single pair of appendages. And," he paused, for the point was an impressive one, "they communicate entirely by sound."

"Primitives!" The pulse burst from Yellow Stripe.

"This is unlikely." The projection came from Blue Dot, who occupied the highest prominence. "To build and use a carrier such as this is not primitive."

They all sat. An aura of puzzlement and frustration seemed to hang in the air, but to have no particular origin. They all contributed to it.

"You accept Red Spine's facts?" Right Twist thought at Blue Dot.

"My vision is good," Blue Dot said, "and I sit above you. There are small bits of white about the thing and they are moving."

"Their eye is very large," Red Spine said. "It may be that they also see us."

"We have no ways of measuring what they can do," Right Twist decided. "They are alien. Whence they came we cannot imagine. Why they are here we cannot even speculate. Our rules will not apply to them. We can only watch."

"And be watched," Blue Dot thought drily.

"And hope." Yellow Stripe's fear throbbed in his projection. From the very egg he had been timid.

"When the sun is gone," Red Spine thought, "when the radiation drops and the only light is starshine, we can look closely at the artifact. The aliens will be inside. It is likely that they come out only in the day."

"But not certain," Right Twist cautioned. "We must use caution."

"They were very near me and examined me carefully and I came to no harm. And when I rose and flashed the peace sign, they showed fear. They pointed cylinders at me and walked away backward, the large eyes always on me. And the sounds seemed disturbed."

"Nevertheless, we will wait," Right Twist decreed. "I agree that the time of starshine is best. We will go then."

While he had no power to make decisions, because of his age he

was respected. They waited. The intelligence of the landing of the strange carrier was projected into the shelter opening, where it was passed from thought center to thought center by hundreds of canceroids in dozens of chambers and corridors and repose cubicles. Each being sat quietly wherever it received the news. There was no rush to the shelter opening or to emergency exits to see for themselves. There was nothing more to be done or learned until starshine. So they waited.

AND as they waited it began again. Whether the unusual mental activity of the canceroids disturbed it or whether simply the renewed peristalsis of its vast gut—empty after the rigors of molt and new skeleton formation—roused The Eater mattered not. What did matter was that when he sulky, petulant rumble began, it must be fed.

"Food! Food! Food!"

Each canceroid understood, with an almost inherited wisdom, that the Eater should not move. Red Spine had wondered in moments of meditation if it could move for any great distance, after all the eons of remaining in that one location among the boulders on the hot sandy plain. Even its wastes were removed from behind it. Canceroids carried them far and wide, burying them under the sand. And at these spots the sponge clusters grew with unusual vigor and provided more and better cuttings of food pieces.

Still, the Eater did move—if only a little way—as it flowed out of its armor at each molt. These happened rarely. Red Spine could recall but two in his life span. They occured just after the creature had had great masses of food. Only some great destruction of life, such as the fall of rock just past, could provide enough.

"Food! Food! Food!"

The mindless pulses became stronger, clearer. The Eater's patience was not great.

Right Twist flashed a call into the shelter cluster. When the first canceroid emerged, he himself led the way out to where the sponge clusters were best developed. Other shelter clusters, each in its traditional turn, would be sending out food gatherers to placate the Eater's endless hunger. There was no resentment. It had always been thus. Only Red Spine wondered, deep in his contemplation centers, if this should be.

"The Eater will require more food than ever before," Blue Dot projected. "Some of it must come from very far away."

"I wonder," Red Spine thought, "if all the canceroids from all the shelter clusters can provide enough. The sponge bodies are pruned as closely as we dare. We bring to it all dead bodies of all beings, however small. And still it cries."

"We must give it more," Blue Dot said.

"There isn't more. Our own food needs must be remembered. The symbionts of the shelter clusters must eat. The little beings that live under rocks, the flutterbys of the air, all must feed. Life cannot be destroyed even for the Eater."

"Then," Blue Dot said, "perhaps the Eater will go searching for its own nourishment. It does not know that life must not be destroyed. If we do not feed it, it will devour anything in its path. It will leave nothing of the sponge beings to regenerate. It will tear apart the shelter clusters. It will feed on—us."

"And then, having destroyed all the food, it will die," Red Spine said. "There is no benefit here for anything. All life will be destroyed to no purpose. Cancerol, the home world, will have no inhabitants."

Blue Dot swiveled his stalked eyes toward the long cylinder of the alien carrier, far across the desert.

"Others will come," he prophesied. "There is proof, that carrier out there. Beings from space will take the world that has been ours since the beginning."

RED SPINE shifted his many appendages restlessly. This talk disturbed him. Something was wrong here. His sense of justice was offended. It was legend that the Eater had always been there, slowly growing bigger, and that canceroids had always fed it. But why? What did it contribute? Its wastes were not enough. Without it there would be food in plenty. There would be time for thought, for contemplation. With it, extinction threatened.

"I sense your thoughts," Blue Dot projected. "You should shield them. They are not worthy of you."

Red Spine said, "All sides of a problem should be considered. Even this one. Why should we feed the Eater?"

"It has always been done."

"That is not enough. For everything else there must be a reason. Why must I not challenge this?"

"No one ever has," said Blue Dot.

"And so we must die. Is this reasonable? Do you deny my right to question?"

The bright blue spots of Blue

Dot's carapace slowly faded until he was again the color of the rocks around. He withdrew his eyestalks into their sockets. Nervously his appendages tossed a pebble back and forth.

"You disturb me. Such thoughts have always been buried deep and have never been unshielded. But you have the right to question."

Red Spine felt satisfaction. "Do we know that the Eater can move and destroy all life? It never has. Why may it not use more energy in moving than it gets from the food it finds? Then it will grow weaker, find less food."

"And finally die," Blue Dot finished. "That is not defensible. Life cannot be destroyed."

"It is defensible. All living beings must feed themselves. If they do not they die."

"The Eater is different. It has never fed itself."

"And now," Red Spine projected boldly, "I wonder why. You have admitted my right to question and you cannot tell me why."

Doubt and dismay swirled around the big canceroids as they sat unmoving on the prominences. Yellow Stripe and Purple Fringe and Plain Shell and Knobbed Claw and Blue Dot were completely without their distinguishing color patterns. Even a good eye could scarcely have told one from another.

But Red Spine had never been brighter. The tip of every spine sparkled crimson. The six eyes at the ends of their extended stalks glinted pale crystalline blue. He raised and lowered his glowing body disk, half spinning as the appendages shifted. An idea that had been buried deep in his consciousness since his growing molts had finally emerged. It was heresy, but it was reasonable. That the Eater was given the food that should have been the right of all living things everyone knew. But the thought had never been allowed to surface. It had never been expressed before.

Red Spine was stimulated, elated.

"I may die," he projected, "but I will not be the cause. I will no longer take food to the Eater."

"But—" the soundless pulse burst from five thought centers—"it must be fed!"

"Why?"

"We are repeating," Blue Dot said. "We cannot insure that you will feed the Eater. But we can remove your appendages, to give you time to reflect while they regenerate. This has been done."

"True," Red Spine mused, "but I do not agree that this is required.

Therefore, I will resist. And if I do, you will lose appendages as well."

"But no one has ever resisted!" Yellow Stripe's thought pulse quavered.

"True. And no one ever before decided not to feed the Eater. I have long felt that this is just. I also feel that it would be reasonable to protect my appendages."

"You have the right to believe this," Blue Dot said reluctantly. "We will wait for the wisdom of Right Twist."

Red Spine rocked on his appendages.

"He also is fallible," he stated. "When the alien carrier came down he saw on it appendages and many stalked eyes. Now I was near it, on the sand, and it had none of those things. It was his fear that saw."

Stalked eyes emerged again from carapace sheaths. For a brief while they had forgotten the aliens. The insistent food call of the Eater had subsided into a sulky murmur, so they knew that food was being piled before it. While it ate the hunger pulses grew less.

III

THE sun had set. Overhead the stars grew steadily brighter, a black canopy stippled with sweeps and swirls of yellow points. The time of starshine was beginning. The radiation had receded. It was the pleasant time.

"The small white beings will go back into the carrier," Red Spine said quietly. This will be the time to look closely at the artifact."

"I must feed the Eater," Blue Dot said hastily. "It is my turn."

"And mine! And mine! And mine!"

"I am free," Yellow Stripe admitted. "I will go, but not too near. We should not frighten them—if they are small, as you say."

"I will go also," a thought pulsed from distance. "It may be that I did not see eyes and appendages. If there are none, I will correct my statement."

"We will meet you," Red Spine projected. "Then we can agree on what is there."

It was the first of many visits. The canceroids approached the great ship carefully at first, but on succeeding nights—in succeeding times of starshine—they gradually grew bolder. They paced the distance from end to end of the ship, a distance greater than the longest corridor in the largest shelter cluster. They marveled at the smooth curving sides of the huge cylinder. In those glistening walls, openings could appear,

sometimes small, to allow the beings to come through, sometimes so large that gleaming, pointed artifacts were spat from them, to cruise far and wide in the air over the deserts and mountains and finally return and be received into the openings again.

One thing was discovered early. The beings were not confined to the sunshine. Like the canceroids, they soon realized that the night was the better time. And, added marvel, when they came out into the starshine they were different. What appeared to be a carapace was not a part of the beings at all. When the sun was gone they emerged pliant and slender, the great eye replaced by two tiny ones and a mouth orifice studded with small white stones in rows. The false carapace was simply a shielding structure against the radiation and was readily removed.

By sunlight and by starshine, Red Spine watched. Almost always he was near the carrier, impressing every wonder onto his memory tissues. Since he no longer fed the Eater, he had time. And soon he was deeply disturbed at what the aliens did.

They looked closely at all life. Nothing escaped their attention. They had strange means of locomotion, leaping far across the desert at a single bound, or rolling along in a device into which several of the beings fitted. To Red Spine these things were merely curios. But the beings' lack of regard for the right of all beings to live was quite another thing.

To take a portion of an organism for food was proper and necessary. But even in direst situation enough of the being must be left to regenerate. Otherwise life would not continue.

This basic understanding was completely ignored by the aliens. They took entire individuals and placed them in confinement and would not allow them the freedom of movement that had always been the right of all things. In rows and rows of enclosures they imprisoned beings both large and small. They climbed the hills, lifted the rocks, dug under the sand. Even flutterbys beat their flying appendages helplessly against cleverly woven wall meshes of bright metal.

RED SPINE communicated what he saw. The elders of the shelter cluster sat long in rapport, discussing what was known. As always they listened to Right Twist, because greater age gave greater wisdom.

And Right Twist, after much meditation, finally offered his

conclusion. He spoke first to Red Spine, as they lingered near the carrier in bright starshine.

"These creatures, no matter how advanced, have brought to the homeworld an ancient barbarism. They destroy. Therefore they must themselves be destroyed."

"A life for a life solves nothing." Red Spine took philosophical opposition. "First it must be understood why they do these things. They must be prevailed on to desist."

"Why?" Right Twist questioned. "Will this release the forms they have imprisoned? Will it bring back those they have destroyed? Will it prevent them from destroying more? We have speculated on life from the stars, but who could have imagined that it would have primitive, exterminative ethics?"

"Perhaps they are not really alive," Red Spine speculated. "In many ways they seem artificial. They could be merely devices, controlled by the Ultimate Wisdom from unimaginable space. They could have been sent to test the strength of our convictions, the consistency of our beliefs in the sacredness of life."

Right Twist picked up a pebble, passed it from appendage to appendage around the entire circle of his carapace, a swift, facile gesture of irritation.

"They are alive," he projected. "Their metabolism involves food and energy release and excretion. They are affected by the radiation. Note how quickly they have adjusted to the starshine cycle. Their carapaces are artificial. But they are alive."

Red Spine knew this. He simply made use of the practices of debate while he thought. It was ethically necessary to refute an idea before a discussion could progress. Red Spine was a true fundamentalist in his thinking and to destroy an organism totally was, admittedly, not defensible. But Right Twist, from another view, was showing alarming signs of instability. Perhaps he should be deprived of all his appendages, to give him time to reflect and to become more rational while they regenerated. This was a mere passing thought pulse, shielded deep in his contemplative centers, and while Right Twist could not detect it, he probably shrewdly speculated that it was there.

"I propose that we approach them directly," Red Spine thought, in his dulcet frequencies. "We cannot judge them by their actions. We must know their motivation."

"I do not care to be collected," Right Twist thought drily. "I have no intention of having my movements restricted by an enclosure. These are alien, savage life forms. Undoubtedly they are searching for a life space. Ours is the ideal planet. They will take it unless we prevent them—and in the taking destroy us all."

Red Spine was becoming more than disturbed. He was appalled. He had not realized the extent of Right Twists's thought deviation. It was he who was the primitive, savage form. To suspect the aliens of needing a life space was a proposition not worthy of a larva. Obviously their technology was almost unbelievably advanced. It would be far more reasonable to meet them as equals, welcome them as guests, touch their strange centers in friendship.

"Compared to them," Red Spine offered, "we are large. They would not try to dismember or imprison us. They will treat us with respect."

"They control enormous energies," retorted Right Twist. "Size is meaningless. I propose that we take one when it strays from its group, remove its appendages and observe how it regenerates. This should provide some clue as to their possible potential to harm us."

THE sharp projections along the radiating lines of Red Spine's carapace glowed a brighter, a faintly pulsating scarlet. His six stalked eyes glistened like blue jade.

"Unwise," he projected. "These beings are connected by a communications net. Injure one and the others will know. Further, I feel sure that they do not regenerate. Of the many from the carrier, not one lacks an appendage from the two pairs that are all they seem to have."

"Then how do they feed? Can it be that they consume entire bodies and use their gonads alone to produce more? Disgusting!"

"They are merely different," Red Spine thought soothingly. "Consider that they came from the depths of space. They are both a challenge and an opportunity. Not, I think, a menace."

Red Spine himself was actually more disturbed by the invaders than he wished Right Twist to know. They exhibited, indeed, a frightening adaptability. In a space of ten rotations of the planet, of the glorious homeworld Cancerol, the Center of the Universe, they had shown quick understanding of how living things were fitted to conditions and distributed as to space. These beings also, knew untold things that a

canceroid could only suspect. They had come from space. They knew what was out there.

Suddenly Red Spine felt the need for meditation, for solitude. He turned his disk slowly, flashed the peace sign with his cold light and went spinning away across the sand toward the shelter cluster. He enjoyed the exercise, enjoyed the exhilaration of the flexing muscles in his sixteen sets of appendages. Out of sheer well-being he spun faster and faster, leaving a blurred, looping trail across the sand.

Right Twist followed him, but more slowly, scuttling along in a straight line, his stalked eyes directed back at the great space vessel of the aliens.

Red Spine felt amusement. Right Twist now had no friendship for the creatures, but there was in him a healthy respect for what they might do. He was not disposed to remain near their ship alone.

DAY followed day. The elders of the shelter cluster stabilized their attitudes toward the aliens, but they kept their thoughts shielded. There was not the rapport that had always existed before, for the points of view were too far apart. Red Spine communicated and soothed and counseled friendship whenever he felt a mind open to him. This was not often. But he was aware of the feelings of most and worked quietly to modify them.

Yellow Stripe, he knew, feared the invaders, as he always feared any unknown thing. He felt sure that Right Twist was plotting, deep in his own consciousness, to conduct his regeneration experiment if ever he could lay holding appendages on a specimen. Blue Dot remained aloof, coldly watching while the aliens went about their taboo-breaking, blasphemous activities. And Red Spine himself kept his stalked eyes on them all.

He felt satisfaction that the aliens had made no attempt to imprison a canceroid. Instead, they also seemed to be watching, using recording artifacts. They made many sounds, waved their appendages in strange ways, emitted energies in wave-lengths most distressing to the canceroid nervous system. Red Spine interpreted this behavior, he felt, correctly.

"It is justice," he projected. "While we are studying them, they are beyond doubt studying us. They recognize the nonthinking forms for what they are. Us they treat differently."

"We are large," Yellow Stripe said fearfuly. He kept his ener-

gy pulses to lowest intensity, so that his thoughts were hard to detect. "Only our size prevents them from destroying us."

"I feel that this has little effect," Red Spine thought. "They have energies we could never counter. Instead, it seems likely that they are trying to communicate. The sounds, the waving appendages, all indicate this. It is in this fashion that they communicate with each other."

"This is evidence of low intelligence level," came from Right Twist. "Only primitive forms use sound."

"You are thinking with our measuring devices. They came from space, in a vessel wider and longer than any burrow in any cluster on the homeworld. This is not primitive. It is very advanced. We could not do it."

"We would not wish to," Right Twist said stubbornly. "We have here the best of all possible worlds. Why should we leave? While they, having nothing to compare with Cancerol, have come to wrest it from us and live here always."

It was then that Red Spine began to realize that he had a responsibility to sustain something far more basic than a difference of opinion or philosophy. Deep in the cold recesses of his thinking structures the conviction grew that these creatures, these invaders, with their mighty space vessel and unbelievable artifacts, must not be given cause to become antagonistic. What Right Twist plotted was dangerous. The senseless fears of Yellow Stripe might result in senseless behavior, actions the aliens would not understand. That was the real hazard. Lack of understanding.

For these beings did not covet the homeworld. They were too different. The conditions that existed on Cancerol, so satisfying to the radiation-resistant native life, actually caused them grief. So it followed that they would not stay. As they came, so they would go. But they must not be challenged as long as they caused no deliberate harm, no widespread destruction.

IV

RED SPINE himself had caused another problem, another stress in the age-old pattern of canceroid life. His refusal to feed the Eater was communicated from cluster to cluster. Rapport groups throughout the range of his kind gave it deep consideration. His own cluster debated it again and again.

"The Eater cannot move," Blue Dot finally decided. "Why should it then eat my food? I think Red Spine has wisdom."

"Would you suggest that we, too, cease to feed it?" Knobbed Claw asked.

"I will go further," projected Blue Dot. "Henceforth I will gather only for the shelter cluster. Let the Eater provide for itself."

"Madness," Yellow Stripe protested. He twiddled his palps nervously. "We live the best of all possible lives because we have always fed the Eater. It is the price we pay for our existence. If we stop we will certainly die."

"And we die if we continue. Food can no longer be brought fast enough. No—if I must die, let it be a new way. I bring no more food."

"This is a reasonable position," Knobbed Claw said. "I will reflect on it."

It was a point of view that suddenly became contagious. From other shelter clusters fewer and fewer workers streamed in with biomass for the endlessly hungry mountain-thing. Higher and ever more frantic grew its telepathic screams.

"Food! Food! Food!"

After eons of unconfused, peaceful living—wherein all things were known and predictable—the homeworld was in turmoil. Out in the desert the invader ship lay unmoving, inert, but the beings that inhabited it scurried and hopped and walked and flew like an all-pervading plague. They were everywhere. And always the Eater's ravenous projections frazzled nerve-ends.

The aliens had early discovered that the Eater was a being—that it was alive. They gave it much attention. Red Spine could always find some of them near it, watching, making their varied sounds. And he was there when three of them climbed to the peak of the great carapace, drawing themselves up the steep slope by clinging to its gnarled spines and by bracing their appendages in the cracks and striations that seamed it. They paused to study the sponge clusters and the lichen forms which so encrusted it that it appeared little different from the distant hills.

These three were known to Red Spine. He passed them often and when he flashed the peace sign they always waved their appendages in answer. He had seen them watching, probably with wonder and astonishment, the continual carrying of food and the removal of wastes. Now as they climbed, he studied them in turn.

THEY made the sounds of communication often. Red Spine recorded these in his memory tissues as usual, though he wondered now if he would ever have the leisure and the peace to try to decipher them.

One of the beings spoke deeply. "I've ridden whales on Cetus I and dinosaurs on Aldebaran II, but I do believe this is the first time I've climbed a living hill—"

Its smaller companion made the high trilling sound so irritating to Red Spine's detectors.

"Anyhow, Roscoe, this one won't throw you. It must not have moved for ages. It probably can't."

"It has appendages," the third being vocalized. "They look like buried redwood trunks. It's adapted to move. And," it added maliciously, "if it moves, Roscoe falls. He has ridden things—but he hasn't ridden 'em far!"

It was starshine, and the aliens were without their clumsy coverings. They swung nimbly from spine to spine, chattering as they climbed. Finally they stood on the very peak of the giant carapace. They appeared small against the star canopy, but their sounds came clearly to Red Spine on the plain below.

"All that food! Roscoe, give us the ecological justification for that. It looks like these creatures are starving themselves, using up their own feeding time and substance, just endlessly stuffing this thing. How do they profit?"

"I think they don't, Pegleg. They're losing ground. They must have been doing it for many years, for certainly the creature grows. Notice how rushed they seem."

Red Spine got no meaning from the sounds. Still, he was watching the hurrying canceroids with their loads of food, and a cold concern was building in his thought centers. For he could detect, as the aliens could not, the mindless outrage of the Eater that its hunger was not being satisfied. Red Spine knew he was right. The Eater should not be fed at all. Perhaps it never should have been—but now it was no longer possible. They could not bring enough.

"I'm going down to the intake end," the larger of the deep-voiced aliens sounded. "There are probably eyestalks under those crags down there. All of a sudden I think I know what this thing is!"

"It's steep," the high sound said. "I'll go back the way we came. Meet you at the bottom, Roscoe. Come on, Pegleg."

"I think I'll just sit a spell and watch you both," the other deep sound said. "First hill I ever

climbed where I couldn't chip the rocks. A chiton-covered mountain! Wild!"

Red Spine's eyestalks were fully extended. Puzzlement grew in him as the alien climbed down the Eater's carapace, paused at the giant eyestalk sheaths, then swung from spines above the almost vertical drop to the cavernous mouth opening below.

Canceroids brought food. It was sponge tissue, the basic food, and the Eater swept it in with one great pedipalp. But it did not satisfy. What the Eater wanted, though probably it did not know it, was flesh. Meat. And its next move filled the watching Red Spine with cold horror. Yellow Stripe moved up in front of the great gaping maw, staggering under a food load. As canceroids had done for untold years, he deposited it the conventional distance from the mouth, turned to spin away. But the Eater could not wait. The huge pedipalp darted out, the long curved hooks gripped and both Yellow Stripe and his load were dragged against the enormous mandibles that ground like giant millstones.

The canceroid gave a single despairing telepathic pulse, then the clashing gastric mill reduced him to crushed biomass.

Red Spine flashed a warning to other food bearers coming in across the desert.

"Go back!" he projected. "The Eater destroys life! The Eater kills!"

And as the living juices flowed into its gullet, the Eater, too, responded. Its telepathic food cry changed, became savage.

"Food! Food! Food!"

HIGH on the top of the carapace the single alien grasped a spine and held on as the hill began to rock. The mighty, buried appendages lashed free of the sand. The Eater lunged upward. It was only one movement of the locomotor limbs, but it threw the hill forward many diameters of a canceroid. Two food bearers understood too late. The pedipalps darted, the mandibles clashed. The carriers and their loads followed Yellow Stripe.

The small alien had completed its descent. In spite of its single pair of appendages it ran swiftly. But it did not run away. It circled the Eater, looking up to where the third alien clung to spines above the Eater's mouth opening.

"Climb back, Roscoe," it shrilled and for once Red Spine did not mind the sound. He understood that it was doing what he had done. It was warning its own kind.

The being above was struggling strongly. It pulled itself up spine by spine while the Eater ingested the food bearers. It was safe. Then the huge stalked eyes emerged from their sheaths, each far larger than the alien, and swung back and forth as the Eater sought further prey. The alien was swept from its hold and went plunging down to land heavily on the sand.

The Eater reacted slowly. The being lay a short distance from its mouth opening, but it had come from above and the mindless monster was confused. But only for a moment. The pedipalp darted, but it swept over the being lying prone, flattened against the sand. It had no second chance.

The small alien leaned against a boulder. Its slender body seemed to be shuddering. But in one holding appendage it grasped a tapered cylinder, the artifact that none of them was ever without. The pedipalp moved again and a pale thin beam lanced from the cylinder. The base of the pedipalp glowed red. Smoke rose from it. Then with a violent, involuntary spasm the Eater cast off the appendage. It lay twitching on the sand and where it had been attached a raw, seared stump dripped a dark viscous blood.

Red Spine poised on his running appendages. His eyestalks protruded with wonder. The pale beam switched to the other pedipalp—and again the violent autotomy resulted. The Eater cast the appendage. Its telepathic projection was no longer a food call. It screamed with rage and pain.

"Hurt! Hurt! Hurt!"

It reared high and flung itself backward. It was as if a mountain moved on the landscape.

The alien that had fallen rolled over and rested on its bent walking appendages. It held out its own cylinder. The thin beam from it flashed directly into the wide and working mouth of the vast monstrosity, the mouth through which so much food had passed for so many ages. This, its last meal, was a knifing ray of pure, ripping energy.

Red Spine's receptors vibrated with a great pulse of agony. For a moment it came with terrifying volume—then it began to fade, to grow gentle. It ended almost as a sigh. And the canceroid knew, without knowing how he knew, that a whole era had ended on the homeworld. He knew that the Eater was dead.

The two aliens clung closely, their holding appendages wrapped around each other, their mouth orifices pressed together, and from the smaller one came

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broken, sobbing sounds. Red Spine dutifully recorded everything on his memory tissues. Later, he promised himself, he would decide what it all meant.

Many pairs of stalked eyes followed steadily as the three aliens walked slowly away from the mountain of carrion that had been the Eater, walked toward the ship that loomed across the plain under the stars. As the sounds of their vocalizing grew faint with distance Red Spine shook the sand from his appendages and scuttled furtively after them. He intended that his record of sounds should be complete, though the thought of the energy of the cylinders rested cold in his memory. He followed until an opening in the ship closed behind them. Then he settled himself in the sand, studying patiently.

V

BUT he did not know when, later, one of the beings settled itself into a small square space, like a repose cubicle, inside the great carrier. It rested on an artifact constructed to fit its bent walking appendages and curved body. In a holding chela it grasped a small stylus, with which it rapidly drew symbols on a thin layer of white material resting on another artifact before it. Had he had opportunity to see, it would have been one more wonder to Red Spine, for he would have recognized it as a record, an artificial device for remembering.

And had it been possible to imprint what he saw onto his memory tissues, symbol by symbol, his recall would have been thus:

THE LOG OF THE STARDUST

Earth Calendar A.D. 2125. Log entry 41. Roscoe Kissinger, Ecologist. Also Dr. Linda Kissinger, Microbiologist and Dr. Pegleg Williams, Geologist.

Twenty-sixth day, post landing.

Well, we did it.

It was a judgment thing and maybe we bent the letter of the ISC ruling that says: *No interference with the lives or the activities of an aware species.* For they are aware. No doubt about that. More than aware. Highly intelligent, with a social structure undoubtedly satisfying and effective.

They have an ecologically balanced economy that Earth might take note of. And they had—note had—an economic problem.

And that's where we bent the letter. We solved it for them.

Technically we have an out, I suppose. Without any interference three crew members would have had to move lively to save the skin of at least one of them. Being that one, I'd have to say that it would have been tricky. But Lindy is good with that laser.

We didn't have to kill the thing. Our hand lasers could have—and did—cause it to cast off appendages. Like its normal species-mates, it probably would have regenerated them in time. But that would have called for more food. And that, I think, was the problem.

The thing was a mutant, a mutant crab-being. How old it was is an interesting speculation, but we have no data at all. Undoubtedly it grew in proportion to the amount of food they brought it and every molt upped its requirements for nourishment. And finally its need was greater than the environment could produce. That was why it ran amok.

I think we saved a race from serious damage or destruction—a civilization of sorts. I agree that that's no part of our function. The galaxy must be full of disintegrating ecosystems. And it could be that maybe we just postponed destruction, because the intense hard radiation in the sun's rays must cause many a mutation. They may recognize these and do something about them. If so, the giant got away from them.

Maybe he developed unusual size before they understood. Maybe they fed him first from admiration —or to prevent him from bullying them and taking what they had collected. Maybe they worshiped him, thought he was a god. I'm speculating, Dr. Rasmussen, brainstorming, but it seems reasonable to record everything. You like a full log. So do I. So you're getting it.

I believe that the crab people, the sand-dollar people, as Lindy has called them, understand about us. I think they know that we are not of this planet, that we constructed the *Stardust,* that we came out of space. I know they try to communi-

cate. Those blasted firefly lights! They symbolize something and I'm not sure what. Whatever it is, it's friendly.

There's one, the big fellow with the long-spined carapace who can show red on every spine, that has haunted us, followed us around, watched us as carefully as we have watched them. He knows me. Whenever I'm close to him I give him a special arm-wave. He flashes his light. And he talks to me. Oh yes, he does! I can't understand it—I can't even hear it, but it's there. I'll prove it—I think.

When old Red Spine sits in front of me his eyestalks out as far as he can push them, those thirty-two appendages rimming his carapace like an ornate fringe on a sombrero, he seems almost to be demanding that I listen to him. But I can't, of course. There isn't any sound. There's just one clue. My energy detector is sensitive to a faint stimulus when he comes near and especially when he insists on communicating with me. It's strongest then.

So here's more speculation. They're telepaths. I'm picking up the energy of a mental projection. And I know they listen when we speak. They're probably just as frustrated as we are.

It may be judged interference, but I'll never regret the demise of the mutant. If the International Space Council rules that we've exceeded our mandate we'll just have to take our lumps. What do they know? A varmint as tall as a hill, with a diameter as great as the length of a football field, sopping up the biomass of a whole ecosystem and giving nothing but its wastes in return—uh-uh! If the aware life of this part of the planet were to survive he had to go. He couldn't have persisted much longer anyhow. His need for food was greater than his ability to gather it for himself. But he would have caused fearful havoc before he died. I think we arrived here at the critical molt, the molt that broke the balance. Up to now the crab people could feed him. After that molt they couldn't. He was too big.

I had thought that they might eat the body, but you'll

note in the tapes that they're not doing so. Today we counted more than five thousand of them, streaming in from all directions, some from colonies hundreds of miles away. They're taking apart that incredible cadaver, dissecting it into transportable parcels, carrying them away and burying them. But they're not doing it the easy way. They're not using a limited area for a cemetery. They're spreading him out over many square miles of sand and desert. In effect, they're putting him back where he came from.

Where those chunks are buried, the sponge clumps will grow faster and bigger. When they are pruned and harvested, they'll regenerate more swiftly. There'll be enough food for everybody. Sure, I'm interpreting. Does anyone want to debate it? Look at your film, your charts, your records. Look at Ursula's paintings.

I think I'll go out and say good-bye to Red Spine, if I can find him.

THE days and nights of labor were ended. Where the enormous bulk of the Eater had always been now there was nothing. For the first time in the memory of the oldest canceroid the sensors could not feel the sulky pressure of the creature's insatiable hunger. Their nerve ends had quivered for the last time to the mindless, endless cry of "Food! Food! Food!."

"They are going," Red Spine projected. "They have watched us dispose of the Eater. They know how we live, what we eat, how we die. It is, I think, their function to learn such things."

Red Spine had scrambled up the sloping surface of a large boulder. Now he sat well above the desert floor, his stalked eyes flicking back and forth restlessly, his spines glowing.

Across the desert, from every direction, the canceroids were coming. Each carapace glittered and flashed with the pattern that made every individual different. As the yellow sun Cancer dropped behind the uptilted range, the colors brightened.

Since it had landed—many starshines ago—the great bulk of the carrier had lain inert, unchanging, unmoving. It had, indeed, often opened holes in itself, through which the invader beings came out and went in. In the radiation of the sun they were always covered with the white cara-

paces, each showing the one large eye. In the starshine they were different. The carapaces disappeared—the beings were slender and pliant, their appendages thin. The one big eye was replaced by two small ones, without any stalks at all, and below these a mouth opening where all the sounds came out. Yet they were the same beings. They carried on the same activities, made the same sounds. It was possible to distinguish one from another by size and by the depth and the pitch of their noises. Red Spine had come to know several of them rather well.

"They destroyed the Eater with ease," Knobbed Claw signaled. "Are we wise to assemble here? Why should they not destroy us as well?"

"What would be their purpose? They do not require a homeworld. With their carrier they can go wherever they choose, perhaps to the very stars themselves. No," Red Spine insisted, "they mean no harm to us. They wish us well."

"They wish us well," Blue Dot echoed. "They destroyed the Eater. We assemble here to thank them."

"They wish us well!" The message pulsed from thought center to thought center, on out to the edges of the sea of great disks that spread over much distance and in all directions around the alien craft. The sun was gone. In the starshine

each carapace glowed ever brighter as the signal was repeated. The desert was a shimmering, shifting pattern of multicolored lights.

The carrier responded. Its vast dark bulk began to show openings, more and more openings, and into these spaces the aliens crowded, their small eyes peering out onto the wide-spread gathering of canceroids. The aliens waved their appendages, their mouths opened and closed and Red Spine knew that they were making the noises of speech, though the clear substance that covered each opening did not allow the sounds to be heard.

But then a sound did come, a great sound that was speech, as though the carrier itself spoke, and canceroids yet miles away heard it plainly. Red Spine still had no clues as to the meanings of the sounds, but he recorded all that he detected. In quieter times, when meditation and thought were again possible, he promised himself that he would learn to understand them.

So he recorded the great sound, the last he was to hear.

"Goodbye, crab people! We hope you're here to show gratitude, but if instead we've destroyed your god, we're sorry. It seemed sort of necessary at the time. Anyhow, whether you know it or not, you're better off."

Then another voice came, one well known to Red Spine.

"So long, Red Spine old buddy! I've met a lot worse citizens than you. We wish you well!"

The openings vanished. The carrier lay, a long, black forbidding shadow, showing no life at all. Then slowly, gently, silently, it began to rise. It swept easily in a huge circle over the thousands of canceroids, its dark bulk blotting out the starshine. High and higher it spiraled, the greatest marvel the homeworld Cancerol would know for countless ages.

Red Spine atop his boulder felt a surge of feeling and he knew it was regret. He reared himself high on his many appendages. He fixed his stalked eyes on the distant spacecraft—and flashed the peace sign. Others around him followed the example. Ten thousand pale golden beams lanced upward against the stars.

The ship swung around once more. From it a cone of light flashed downward, light of the same quality as the small beams of the canceroids.

The beings had learned the peace sign. They were civilized, after all.

Red Spine sat alone on his boulder and thought—and wondered. ●

Where a world may perish, a word may not—if somebody remembered to write it!

THE MEANING OF THE WORD

CHELSEA QUINN YARBRO

I SAW something odd, fuzzed with the sand glimmering in the coral sunlight and I began to slog my way toward it.

"Jhirinki, get back here!" Wolton ordered from the skiff. He was sounding angrier by the minute.

"There's something out—" I tried to tell him but Almrid cut me off.

"Let him alone, Wolton. Your jurisdiction goes no farther than the skiff." Then, with scarcely a change in tone, he said to me, "You stay here until camp is set up. I want to know where everyone is."

Wolton gave him a sour smile and motioned me away. But it was important that they know about that irregularity. I tried again. "I saw something out there. It doesn't look—"

"Wait until the camp is set up. We need to get some more definitive readings before we go exploring. And—" Almrid added to Wolton— "we can't get those without the prowler."

Wolton jerked the hatch of the skiff open. "All right. Here's the prowler. You know that it can't get any better data from the surface than the monitors can."

"Look, Almrid—" I began.

"Not now, Peter. We'll talk later. When we have more accurate material to work from." This last was, of course, for Wolton.

It was useless. I stepped back as Wolton reluctantly put the prowler in action, letting it scuttle out over the hazy sand, scanners clicking contentedly to itself.

Sumiko Hyasu had barricaded herself behind her equipment, preparing to run soil tests. She and Langly, the biochemist, worked in silence, the remote sounds of their breathing murmuring in my earphones.

On the other side of the skiff I knew Parnini and Goetz were furling the sails of the weather unit. I could hear them swearing occasionally. They were busy. Wolton and Almrid were still arguing. My eyes were dragged back again to that irregular spot in the sand that might be what I wanted. That might be digs.

"I'm calling Captain Tamoshoe," Wolton declared to anyone who would listen. "I'm going to give him a status report."

"That is your responsibility," murmured Almrid as he watched the prowler set zig-zagging in a widening spiral. His heavy head was even larger in the Class Eleven uniform. His hands hung like paws, wholly unlike what one expected in a virologist. It was hard to think of him doing the minute manipulations that were the mark of his work—it was like trying to imagine Caliban or Quasimodo making watches or microcircuitry.

A yawning breeze wound a bit of dust on its finger and then sank back, too tired to hold it. That was the feel of the whole place—drowsiness. The wind barely breathed. The plain was heavy with dreaming, the sky unmarred by clouds where the greater of two suns hung about fifteen degrees above the horizon, a platter of polished copper. Our presence intruded on this somnambulistic landscape where even the rocks

were softened and sometimes crumbling and in place of dirt there was sand that was not sand flickering in the monochrome stillness.

Yet I wondered and hoped. There had been indications of structures from the monitors on the *Nordenskjold*. I knew my digs were here to be found, if only I knew where to look.

"Jhirinki's been wandering around," Wolton was reporting and the sound of my name brought me back to the camp. He added in response to the captain's garbled question, "It was Almrid's idea to bring along an archeologist. Not mine. Ask him."

In the slow heat of the opalescent afternoon work was sluggish. There was nothing for me to do but stare at the one odd spot in the distance—and wish.

Goetz swore in my earphone as his equipment toppled for the second time, victim to the treacherous shifting of the sand. "Need help?" I asked him, not reluctantly.

"What I need is a foundation," came his answer, the words bitten out in frustration.

"According to the monitors," Almrid said icily, directing the insult at Wolton, "there's all kinds of rock around here. Or, maybe not rock. Maybe it once was buildings."

"Look, Almrid—" Wolton began.

Then, unexpectedly, Sumiko Hyasu cut in. "Leave him alone, Franz," she said softly to Almrid. "We have work to do."

"It looks like you've wasted your trip, Peter," Almrid said to me, a certain morose satisfaction in this statement. "Why don't you ride up tonight and forget it? There are other planets."

I wondered if my disappointment showed so much.

"I think I'll stick around for a while," I said.

"I DON'T know, Sumiko," I was saying as we watched the second skiff settle onto the sand. "I can't give up the thought that there's something here."

Absently she made some answer.

"Don't you feel that?"

"I suppose so." She was only half-listening. This world was too unknown, too compelling for us to pay much attention to each other. Everyone of us saw it through his/her eyes only. "Is any of this real, Peter?" she asked. "Or is the planet hiding from us?"

I had felt that from the first. Something was hidden here right under our noses and we hadn't the sense to find it. But all I could do was shrug. I didn't know then what

she wanted to find, what it was she had been searching for with that terrible, fragile intensity that marked her more than her beauty.

"What do you want to find?" she asked me.

"Oh, I don't know." It was a lie and, like a lot of lies, it felt ugly. But I couldn't admit to her that I had longed for the chance to find a lost civilization here, to be the first to decipher its language. People could be known and understood by the way they used words, and to be the first to understand in that way had been an obsession with me since before I trained on the Probe Ship *Magalhaes.*

"You're going to do some exploring later?" It wasn't really a question, it was a dismissal.

"Whenever Almrid and Wolton get tired of fighting and give a general release, then, yes, I'll go exploring." Neither of them was willing to stop feuding long enough to let the expedition get moving and I was becoming riled at the delay. But Commander Markham would be in the next skiff and knowing Josh, he would put an end to the sparring that had taken up too much time already.

"Good luck," she murmured and went back to her equipment. Then, as she started adjusting the sample breakdowns, her voice sounded again in my earphones. "Why wait? Why not do what you want to do?"

BY THE time the base camp had been set up and the full complement of expedition staff had been ferried down the surface shelters were waiting. I had spent the long afternoon struggling with ring supports, emplacing the doughnut-shaped foundations for the inflatable buildings, but now it was night.

I walked away from the camp, watching the unfamiliar sky. There were more and brighter stars above me and some eleven dissimilar moons coursed overhead in a bewildering tangle.

In a while I found the irregular stone, although I had not consciously been looking for it—I had been drawn to it as surely as fur draws static. I knew that it would tell me what I wanted to know, if only I could puzzle it out before Captain Tamoshoe ordered us all back to the *Nordenskjold.* Yet, as I stood over it, not knowing where to look or what I was looking for, I could still mock myself for being so obsessed with wanting to find a language and a culture that obviously had failed in all this desolation.

What could it teach us?

So I paced the thing off nonchalantly. It was not too large,

this oblong section of rock, rather like one of the old headstones in the landmark cemeteries.

I kneeled in the sand and rubbed at the side of the block—and touched what I thought at first was a flaw or chip in the surface. Curious, I bent closer, gently blowing the clinging dirt from the slab with my sweat valve, brushing the stone clear as I worked.

And then, there it was. Without any doubt, without any ambiguity, the glyphs appeared under my hands. I drew back to get a proper look at them.

For several minutes I sat and looked at them. The stillness of the night was suddenly alien. Eight low relief marks on a rock—and I felt for the first time that all I am was justified.

I rose, wiping more of the block free of the sand, but I could find nothing more. The inexorable movement of the sand might have worn other markings away, or perhaps the stone reached deeper into the ground than I had thought at first, with more glyphs farther down. Almrid and Wolton had said something about erosion. Perhaps this had been high above the sand, once.

It seemed like a long way back to the camp just to get a shovel and some help. I stood, rubbing my hands together to free them of the dust that was clinging insidiously to them and to film of my surface suit. Was it worth it, going all the way back? I could do more here tonight even without tools. And if I went back, Almrid or Wolton would be sure to try to stop me from coming back. In the morning I could bring some of the expedition with me, but then this find would no longer be mine. I finally accepted the rationalization that left me alone with my particular dream for a little longer.

Setting to work, I scooped armloads of the soil away from the block, hoping to discover more glyphs. I felt that I had found the key to a larger discovery.

It was on the fifth armload that I fell through into the room.

DUST spread out around me like a reverse halo against the shiny surface of the floor. I tasted grit—the suit must have ruptured somewhere. As I lay on the floor I took stock. No bones broken, but some dandy bruises. I gathered my knees beneath me and carefully stood up. It was dark down here except for the shine from the moons through the hole. There was no other light.

With uncertain fingers I grabbed for my litepak and found it undamaged. Thumbing it, I found that it could hardly reach beyond the sand on the floor. After a moment of thought I turned it off and began walking slowly in an outward spiral.

On the third round I bumped into a thing, apparently of stone, about the size of a half-chair with a shoe-shaped projection. It felt smooth and solid.

"Curiouser and curiouser," I said aloud to the unechoing blackness.

Slowly I wandered back to the sand haze on the floor, the site of my fall. I looked up at the rent in the roof. The realization rushed in on me then that I was truly cut off from the expedition. I had left my commkit at the camp and my litepak's trickle of a beam could not have been seen by anyone at that distance. The sand filtered down through the hole, whispering.

And the light was failing. Two of the moons had set since I had fallen into my find and I could not get out without light.

Let's leave that alone for the moment, Jhirinki, I told myself for comfort.

Then, as I watched, the great heavy stone I had loosened by my fall gave a kind of sigh and, with deceptive languor, tumbled end over end to crash and shatter on the floor. If it had fallen straight down, that would have been the end of Peter Jhirinki.

Badly shaken, I went back to the object I had walked into earlier. My hands shook when I reached out to steady myself, and I drew them back.

Perhaps I should touch nothing here until I knew what had made that great stone fall. Were other stones still in the ceiling above me?

Anxiously I pulled out my litepak again and played its feeble beam over the ceiling. But the fact that I saw no other blocks of stone was actually small comfort. This room was an important find and I was without means to see it—and now too isolated to get the help I needed. I also remembered there was a tear in my suit, which might or might not mean anything on this planet.

Again I wandered back to the place beneath the hole, taking care not to get near the gently falling sands.

"Peter!"

For a moment I didn't believe the sound in my suit phone. Then, as my name was called again, I realized that I had been missed and that a party was searching for me.

"Yeo!" I yelled, full of relief.

The stream of dust into the hole increased.

"Peter Jhirinki—" Now that the voices were closer I was able to pick out Markham's among the others—a large resonant sound that no commsystem could properly handle.

"Down here—" More rivulets of the soft dust were pouring down now and I wondered how strong the roof was. "Be careful—I don't know how long the roof here will hold."

"Thanks. Markham's voice. "We'll get you out of there. Dominguiz went back for the rig." After a moment's silence Josh Markham asked, "And did you find anything down there, Pete?"

It took me a little time to answer him. "I hope so," I said finally. Then, as I looked around the dark, I didn't want to leave. "Drop me a litepak, will you?"

"Right." And in a moment Markham's litepak in its crashcase thudded to the floor. "Dominguiz will be back any time, Pete. Make it short."

BUT I knew that. I wrenched the litepak from its case and pressed the switch. The beam stabbed into the darkness, showing me the room for the first time.

It was large, low-ceilinged and shiny save for the place where I had brought in the sand. Two of the walls were a patchwork of designs, intricate embossed patterns on tilelike bricks. The other two walls .

The other two walls were covered with glyphs.

"Get ready, Pete." Markham cut into my discovery like razor into flesh. "I can't get this very steady. You'll have to guide it coming out."

There was a clank of the rig as the saddle hit the floor, then the purposeful clicking of the pulleys set in motion.

Quickly I straddled the saddle, grabbing the upper sling so that I could help control the lift.

"We're under way," Markham called as the rig hoisted me into the air.

I turned the beam of the litepak on the walls as I rose, letting the light linger on the marks for as long as I could.

I got my back scraped coming out of the hole, but I was too preoccupied to notice it until Josh Markham said, "Holy Mama, ere did you get that?"

I looked at my arm, saw nothing and shrugged.

"Your back, man, your back."

As soon as he said it, the pain hit like a hammer. "Oh. That." For a moment I concentrated on the damage and decided that it

wasn't that much. "Coming out of the hole, I think. Is it bad?"

Relieved, Josh said, "It's messy. Have Sanderson look at it back at the base. He'll want to check you for foreign bugs anyway. What the devil did you find down there?"

"Words," I said quietly. "A whole world of words."

"There are ruins down there?" He asked it incredulously, his big body slewing about in the sand. "A city?"

"I don't know about the city, but there sure as hell are words. Maybe a complete language. I'm going back down tomorrow and find out."

Markham eyed me suspiciously. "What if Wolton says otherwise? What if I say otherwise?"

"It wouldn't matter." As I said it, I knew it could make no difference what they said. Nothing anyone could say or do would keep me out of that hole now that I had seen the wall.

"All right, Pete. But don't push your luck. This place is still terra incognita as far as we're concerned."

I nodded. "That's just it. It won't be unknown if I can get a chance at that wall. There's the whole puzzle, right down there. Complete with solution."

"Hey, won't machines do as well?" Dominguiz put in, having listened to us as he stowed the gear in the crawler. "We got machines for that."

"No. I spoke harshly, but there was no way for me to say it kindly. "No machine wrote that, no machine is going to read it. That is what I'm trained for. That's why I'm part of the crew. And it's what I've wanted to do all my life."

"Sure. Sure. I don't care whether you get yourself ruined. I just want to know. Academics!" He sat down in the driving cockpit. "You two can ride in the back if you want." He didn't wait for an answer, preferring his machines to our company.

Josh Markham and I scrambled aboard as the crawler began its lurching way off through the sand. Only it wasn't sand.

"Josh," I said uncertainly as we clung to the rear platform of the crawler. "I think I know what this stuff is."

"The dirt? Damned persistent, isn't it?"

"It isn't dirt," I told him slowly, avoiding his eyes. "I think it's ash."

"SO THIS is where you disappeared to," Franz Almrid said, wiping his hands in a futile gesture to rid them of the ash.

"Yes." I was beaming with

pride. In the morning light the hole was even better than I had thought.

"What is it?" Almrid's voice held open sarcasm as he looked at the figures on the wall. "Looks like spermatozoa in formation with math symbols."

"It does at that," I admitted, determined not to fight with Almrid. The very fact that there had been something worth discovering on this planet had made him furious.

"You really think you're going to get sense out of that?" He gave a derisive laugh. "You're kidding yourself, Jhirinki."

I was spared the problem of answering him by Josh Markham, who was lowered into the hole on the new cable rig.

"Looks good, Pete," Josh said, craning his corded neck, trying to see it all without turning around. "What's next?"

"Well, that wall," I told him, pointing to the farthest one, "is probably not worth much. It's too scarred and faded. But this—" I looked at the longer wall with its bright surface and clear markings—"is a treasure."

It was as if I had finally lured a much-sought mistress into my bed. That wall, with its thousands of glyphs in neatly horizontal lines was more than I had ever hoped to have for myself.

"You're a damned romantic, that's what you are," Josh said with a chuckle. "Well, while you're busy down here, we'll just go along and dig up a few square miles of ash, in case there might be a city down there."

I'd told him that there might be, late late last night after I had reported the find. In the morning I wondered if I'd been right, but let it go. The chance was worth a look.

"If you're sure this is a building, where is the door? Or did they all tumble in the way you did?" Almrid's icy tone stopped both Josh and me.

I hated to admit it, but Almrid had a point. If this had been a building there had to be a way in and out of it. And no matter what size or shape the inhabitants a door is a door is a door.

"Maybe in the floor?" Josh suggested. "This is pretty high up, judging from the few readings we can get around here. Maybe this was an attic or a sun room." He looked at me hopefully, his big hands rubbing at the ash.

"It's possible." Looking around the room I knew there was an answer. I just had to be left alone to find it with my instincts and my pores.

"There's nothing for us peasants to do but dig," Almrid said

acidly. "All right, Professor. We'll do it your way." He went to the sling and was hauled out of the hole.

"Don't let him bother you, Pete," Josh said with all the reassurance he could muster. "He doesn't like the place and can't figure out why."

"I know."

A short silence fell.

"Well, I'll leave you to your work. Call if you need help."

"I will," I promised him as he rose through the hole.

WHEN he was gone I circled the room again, looking at the wall with the glyphs. There was a key somewhere. There had to be. I could find it if I thought about it. Again I came to the bench-like affair. Again I studied the surface of the shoe end. It was smooth and faintly luminous. For a moment it seemed to be the reflection of one of the suns—and then I realized that neither was shining down directly. This made me wonder.

I sat on the half-chair (which was a bit too low and too small for comfort). This might be the clue I wanted. In my annoyance I tapped the cool, faintly glowing sheet of—was it stone? The echo sounded unused. I went on tapping absent-mindedly as I tried to take stock of the wall and the room.

Blink.

I was so startled that I raised my hand. The light, if there had been a light, stopped.

But now I had a hope. Gently I tapped the surface again. Then firmly.

BLINK

Then I put my hands full and solidly onto the surface of the table, pressing it, willing the light to continue. "Come on, light," I pleaded with it. "Blink."

Almost ridiculously, it did. First there was a flicker, then a wavering opacity and finally a bright glow.

"What the bloody hell is this?" I asked of the air joyously. Since there was no one but me to answer, I shook my head in ignorance.

The light in the table was increasing, growing brilliant. Symbols formed on it:

"I think—" I said to the machine. Then I realized that I would have to stop thinking and be willing to learn. "Machine, you and I have a little mutual understanding to do."

The symbols faded but the light stayed on, full and strong. I hesi-

tated—then, taking my stylus, I made a small circle on the table and put nine dots leading out from it, added little points for the moons. When this was done, I drew a box around Terra and waited.

The machine buzzed.

On a guess I wiped the marks away.

In a moment the machine showed two circles and a series of dots, putting a box around the fourth one. This was the fourth planet, but the machine showed only three moons. This bothered me, but there was no way to question the machine about it. I would have to wait.

But we were on the right track.

I duplicated the Sol system diagram and boxed Terra and labeled it.

The machine made the planets again, with the puzzling moons.

"All right. Now that we're introduced, let's get down to languages."

The machine began to hum, making periodic squeaks. I couldn't have it malfunction now. I fumbled over the sides, looking for knobs or dials that might help. The hum and the squeaks merged into a rising wail.

"Wait a bit," I told it.

I moved my hands again, rubbing the sides firmly until a single dot appeared on the screen in front of me and I heard, very clearly the single word: *"Gei."*

My hands began to shake. I sensed that this was a machine intended to teach, to inform. The concept was not unfamiliar to human archeologists—men of many eras had left time capsules or other record of their passing for future centuries to find. Whoever had left this artifact had known what he was about. The implications took a little time to sink in.

The machine formed another dot directly above the first and called it: *"Shy."*

It was giving me the elements of language. Those two symbols were part of the name of the planet.

A vertical line connected the two dots and the dots faded out. *"Sti,"* said the machine in its parody of a voice.

I took out my scanner and trained it on the table top. The scanner would give the *Nordenskjold* a record of all this in case something went wrong down here.

Then I set to work, the machine reciting its language to me, showing it to me, bringing it to life.

"Pete! Pete! Answer me!" The

commkit beside me sounded put out. The voice was Sumiko's, high and overcontrolled. I wondered if she had been calling for long. I had been absorbed.

I stood up stiffly from the bench, muscles protesting, and reached for the kit.

"Pete—" it went in my ear.

"Yeo. I'm here. What is it?"

"This is Sumiko. I've finished the tests on the silt from your digs. You're right. It is ash."

"I know. Look," I said, rushing on, "I may be way off, but I think you might find some evidence of volcanic or—I don't know, earthquakes, maybe, a long time ago. There'd be a lot of them, occurring all at once or with little warning. The diagram I've found down here shows only three moons. Either we've got the wrong planet or things have changed upstairs—"

"What diagram?" she interrupted.

"There's a device down here that teaches the language," I admitted reluctantly. "It seems to be programed to communicate with strangers—I mean beings possibly alien to whoever or whatever made it, which suggests that the culture of which it was a part anticipated being wiped out. The device and I have just begun to come together on basics—I should get the rest in a few days."

"You'll let me know?" This was said too quickly.

"Sure, Sumiko." Right then, I wanted her to find what she was seeking, too. There had to be something here to compensate for the terrible hunger at the back of her eyes also.

"You'll need tools," she said decisively.

"Maybe some digging tools. Brushes for the walls. Levers and a couple of files. There's a pack in my shelter."

"Is that all? I'll bring them along."

"Thank you." There was a jealousy in me as I spoke. I was not yet ready to share my hole, my wall. Not with anyone. Not even Sumiko, the one person who might understand what I felt.

"I'll be there as soon as the captain is ready to come over."

In some surprise I asked her, "Is he down on the surface? I didn't think he was planning to come."

"He and Wolton have been going over the whole camp for about the last hour. He's had Almrid and Dominguiz in. I gave them my report earlier."

A prickle ran along my spine, a feeling that gravity had shifted, immeasurably, under my feet. The captain had gone to the soil chemist and a biophysicist before

the archeologist on a planet with digs. Something wasn't right.

"Pete?"

"What?"

"I'll see you later?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's going to be interesting." And with that I signed off.

Standing there in my hole, with the language of *Shy-gei-ath* waiting for me, I frowned, wondering what had gone wrong. No one had come in with a negative report. There had been no warnings about the virology level or the functional radiation ratings that usually got the captain on the groung long enough to get everyone back to the ship.

I remembered my scraped back from the evening before, but that couldn't figure in anything. The injury itched unpleasantly under the thin surface suit and there had been some trouble getting it to scab over. But that was hardly enough to worry about. What was Captain Tamoshoe doing down here, anyway? Why had he come?

The machine was reciting *"co-rel-sti-gei"* ▶, *"sa-che-sti-gei"* ◤, *"co-sa-che-sti-gei"* ◤, when I finally heard the noise above me. I tapped the machine on what I'd come to think of as the HOLD button and waited for visitors.

They took their time. Once I heard Franz Almrid swear, use cold words with venom I had never heard from him before.

AT LAST the sling came down, bearing Captain Nemeu Tamoshoe, black on black.

"Jhirinki," he said, turning his trademark grin on me, a display of large white teeth in a face only slightly lighter than his black captain's uniform. And in that face, which dictated eyes of obsidian, Captain Tamoshoe's smouldered the impossible blue of Aegean waters.

"What's wrong, Captain?"

But he didn't answer me, not right away. He got off the sling and began to walk around the hole. "Have you been able to decipher this?" he asked me, pointing at my wall.

I knew that there was something very wrong then. "That section you're pointing to reads from right to left: *'Thir de-lom-sti-gei jhae emh bis lom-de-sti-gei.'* Second line: *'Thu shy-ens emh thu lom-qua-fer-de-sti-gei sir-ath-gei.'*"

"Which means?"

"That is what the walls says, sir. In fact, right now I can read out loud every word up there and make the symbol for it if I hear it spoken. But I don't yet know what it means, because this machine does not have a way to tell me un-

til it has explained to me all the elements of its language. But the communications center on the ship will have records of this so I can work from them, if necessary."

Captain Tamoshoe looked at me evenly for about a minute, an eternity. "I am sorry, Jhirinki. The commcenter didn't pick up the relay. Almrid and Wolton were too busy wrangling to center the channel."

"I don't understand—" and as I said it I did understand.

"Radiology reported a variance last night. This place was hot. That little machine of yours has been running along on plutonium and the room was sealed. You fell into a vat of radon gas—" He stopped. Then: "There's isn't much danger on the surface of course, but we don't know how many of these things there are. I am sorry, Jhirinki."

"Wait—" Josh Markham appeared in the hole, hanging onto the sling too tightly, his large face drawn and his eyes heavy. "Captain?"

"I have told him what I could. You can explain it more thoroughly if necessary. Are we ready to ferry up?"

"Almost."

Again Captain Tamoshoe: "It is a pity. This is surely the find of a lifetime." He turned back to me, blue eyes hooded. "Well, perhaps you will be able to reconstruct much of this from memory, do you think? There isn't much time and it would be a shame to lose all of it."

"How do you mean, lose it?" I was frightened then, not of the radiation that had slid in through my respirator into my bones, but of leaving *Shy-gei-ath.* I had come so far. I did not want to leave.

"Looks like this one was more trouble than it was worth, Pete," Markham said, trying to keep his tone light and failing.

"No."

"Pete—"

"No," I told them again, stepping back to the teaching machine. "I've almost got it all. I'm so close to the meaning of it. It won't take too much longer. I'll be out of here in no time."

JOSH shook is head. "Can't do it, Pete. You've been exposed. We should have brought you out before now, but I knew this was damned important to you."

"Wait—" I said, licking my lips. "What is the treatment for radon? Can't I take decontamination and then come back. It's gone now—and I'd be safe."

"I am sorry, but we'll have to put the place in quarantine until we know how much potential

danger remains," Captain Tamoshoe said apologetically. "You understand the necessity, don't you? When all investigations have been made we can come back."

"But what about that?" I pointed to the wall, already hazing from the dust filtering down. "How much longer will that be here once the ash gets in? The other wall is almost useless. This one will be ruined."

"There may be others."

"And maybe there aren't." I knew I was starting to sweat. "And the machine will be ruined."

Captain Tamoshoe shook his head. "I can recommend speed and claim emergency status on the artifacts. The Navy is aware of the value of this sort of find. We might be able to have full Class Nine suits authorized."

"You've got to leave, Pete." Markham had taken a step toward me. I stepped back.

"Commander Markham," the captain said quietly.

"Take a look at your hands, Pete." Josh shot an angry look at Captain Tamoshoe as he spoke.

"What about my hands?" But as I looked down and saw what looked like varicose veins in my palms I closed the marks inside my fists.

"The skiff is waiting, Pete."

"Let it wait." And as Josh started toward me I raised the commkit over my head. "Don't try it, Josh—I will use this."

It wasn't much of a weapon, but it made Josh stop. "You stupid kid," he said dispassionately. "You're going to die."

"Am I?" I asked Captain Tamoshoe.

"Almost certainly," he answered me.

Without moving from the place I stood I said. "Get out of here, Josh. I want to talk to the captain."

Josh looked at me with an expression I had once seen in my father's eyes. Then, with a nod to the captain, he let himself be hoisted out of the hole.

"He wants you to live, Jhirinki. And you were not assigned to my ship to die."

In the stillness that followed his words I realized that he and I were the only people left here, that the others were back at the ferry, waiting to leave *Shy-gei-ath*. I felt an enormous loneliness fall over me, dark and heavy.

"Why not come back?"

I shook my head. "No. This is what I'm all about.

I've spent my life learning to do what has to be done here. To add to what men may someday have to know. I can't leave when I'm this close."

"Have you a choice?"

For just a moment I knew panic. Then: "Will I last all that much longer if I leave?"

"No. Not that much longer."

"Then I'll stay."

"But what will you do, Jhirinki?

The strange part was that I knew the answer. "As long as I can, I'll describe the forms to you, the way the machine did for me. You can leave me a skiff relay, can't you?" Not waiting for an answer I hurried on. "I'll try to translate what I've found and you can record it for the Margien Language Institute."

Captain Tamoshoe considered this. "I've always thought," he remarked absently, "that a man's death should be as much in his hands as his life. You'll get the relay."

"And food?"

He didn't answer me, so I knew. "Thank you, Captain."

"Goodbye, Peter Jhirinki," he said as he left.

"LOM-DE-STI-GEI ath dev lim-gei," I dictated from the wall to the commkit. I listened for the relay sound that would tell me they had recorded the line on board the *Nordenskjold*.

A half-dozen lines were left. Lines that wavered in front of me, milky with haze.

"Pete!"

But that wasn't my machine. It was someone I used to know. Why would Josh call me? What did he want?

"Pete, for God's sake!"

"What?"

That must have been what he wanted to hear. But I couldn't hold my commkit steady. My hands had gone funny. Purple. The tendons were soft, spongy.

" . . . translations?"

That mattered to me. That was important. More important than my strange hands. I had to tell them.

"A few words—"

"What words?"

"Shy-gei-ath." Like Terra and Terrans.

The twin suns were hot above me, but it was dark. I burned and burned and it was dark. If I looked at the floor I could see my face. But I didn't do that.

"The wall, Pete. The wall."

From here on the floor I could watch my wall as I told them about it. I knew what it meant at last.

"*Shy*, infinitive verb. To be. Active sense. *Gei*, infinitive verb. To be. Passive sense. *Shy-sti-gei*, to be alive. *Sti-gei* to exist. *Shy-sti* to conceive. They build from there." Was that sound me?

"But the wall, Pete."

It was an effort, but I began to

read. But breathing hurt and I got slower and slower. "In the time of the Fourth Moon, I sought out a high place and made it safe against the end of *Shy-gei-ath.*"

"Go on."

"Against the end it happened I found this place and required a stronghold be built. The time was short for we could see in the night in the Fourth Moon. Waters would soon rise, the mountains change and *Rel-ath-gei* would consume all." That would quiet them, the noisy ones above me. I looked at the wall through darkening eyes, turning on the floor to read the end of the story.

"Peter! Answer me!"

I kicked the commkit, laughing. "What about the place name. What does that mean? We've got most of what we need to crack it, Peter. What does the name mean?"

Reluctantly I pulled myself across the floor, feeling like a slug, not a man. Just a bit more and they'd leave me alone with my wall. I'd earned that.

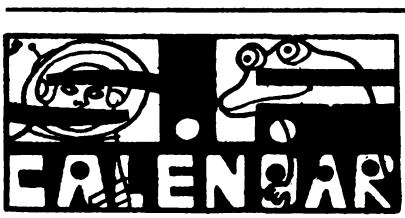
"The word?" I asked the commkit.

"Shy-gei-ath," the tinny voice prompted.

"Shy-gei-ath. This place. Here." But that wasn't quite right, I thought as I watched the ash sifting through the hole. *"She-gei-ath.* To be . to . "

"Go on, tell us. What does it mean?"

So I told them. "To be home." •



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DAVID MAGIL

Such a disorderly young lady! How come she was working for law and order?

I'M A cop. Nothing surprises me. A cop gets to see it all—too much of it and too much of it bad. The worst is death when a kid buys it. The toughest thing of all is having to look down at the body of a once breathtakingly beautiful young girl.

I'm a detective. The name's Mike Winsor. I was looking down at the body as the M.E. was getting set to do his onceover. She'd been a beauty. Age was a little tough. It wasn't more than seventeen by that good young body—the face looked even younger.

Story was simple. For some reason she'd been damn fool enough to try to cut across Central Park at night. Somebody jumped her and then used the knife. That much was easy.

I tore my eyes away from her. Doc had peeled back the shroud and it was hard to look away. Best

legs I'd ever seen and everything else she had was that good. Some guys in the department were going to save her pictures as memorabilia of waste or for other reasons. But they weren't my problem.

I had her purse. It had been found right beside her. It was new. Inside there were no cosmetics, not even a comb—yet, even after she had been jumped and killed, her hair was done neatly.

"That a wig?" I asked the Doc.

"Nope. That's all her."

No handkerchief in the purse. No change. One ten-dollar bill, new, crisp. And there were three buttons. They looked like buttons. I picked them out and looked at them. They didn't have holes in them. So they weren't buttons. Some kind of metallic substance, but what they were and what they were made of was a lab problem.

So that was it. Unless a miracle happened it was going to be one more unsolved murder. If she was a runaway or something I wondered whether we'd even find out who she was. But she had that body and that face. We might get lucky, I thought. She was worth acknowledging.

"Hey, Mike. A key. Hotel Mercury."

"Hers?"

"Could be," my partner said. "Looks clean. Couldn't have been out here too long. If she had it in her hand when they got her, maybe—"

"Okay. Doc? Anything?"

He looked up at me, his eyes slitted, brow furrow. "Body temperature's all wrong. It's normal or damn close to it."

"She's dead?"

"Look at that wound. She bled—the blood's coagulated. There's no way her temperature can be normal. Here, feel here. And look at this." He pulled up the torn skirt even further.

"So?"

"Raise your eyes, boy."

"Belly button?"

"That's right. A perfect rectangle."

"What's it mean? Anything? She a Martian?"

"Yeah. Ha-ha. I don't know what it means. No pulse. No other irregularities. But give me a call in about four hours. I'm going to give this young lady a complete physicial."

I CHECKED out the body and left the rest of the work with my partner. Then I drove over to the Mercury. It was the new hotel—expensive, a handsome place. I showed my shield, showed the key, described the body. No problem there. "Mary or Alice Smith." Both knockouts, my description could fit either one. They'd been in a week. Registration form showed no prior address. Unusual, a violation of NYCPLH679331—ninety days, fifteen-hundred-dollar fine,

and a license renewal problem.

I forgot it.

I rode up and knocked on the door. No answer. I used the dead girl's key. It was the agreement. I forgot their violation—they forgot their houseman was supposed to go in with me.

The room was empty. Two suitcases, nothing in them. Closet empty. Dresser empty. Nothing in the bathroom. Bathtub not wet. Bed not slept in. The Gideon out on the bedside table, marker in at Isaiah. Marked passage: Chapter forty-one, verse twenty-four: *Behold, ye are nothing, And your work a thing of nought; An abomination is he that chooseth you.*

What did that mean?

I went back down and asked there. The sister, apparently—the surviving one—had gone out at seven. She always went out at seven. She always came back at noon. They didn't think she'd skipped.

I asked them to give me a call and then I went over to the morgue. Doc was having a time. Our girl was still maintaining her normal temperature—she was at 98.6 and holding. She had no molars, no cavities. Teeth looked new, no wear. She had no appendix, which wasn't that unusual. What was distressing was she seemed to be lacking some sexual equipment and according to X-ray, she had multiple-chamber lungs and a unichamber heart. Blood was so far unclassifiable.

"I don't know what we have here," Doc told me. It bothered him. He didn't like mysteries.

I went back to the bureau and did my part of the report and then I put in some time on a grocery store killing. That was going to get into the the unsolved files, too.

But at noon I was back at the Mercury, knocking on that hotel room door again.

SHE wasn't more beautiful than the dead one, but she wasn't one bit less. I showed her my shield. She looked at it, confused, as if not knowing what it meant. But she smiled at me and let me in.

I asked her name.

"Andridida."

"Want to spell that?"

"Alice, I mean," she said. "It is Alice Smith."

"Where you from, Alice?"

"Uh—"

"Who were you here with? Was it your sister?"

"No, Tinna is . . . I mean Mary is just a friend."

"Your friend and you have the same name—and you're not even sure what your name is? You don't know where you come from. You runaways?"

"Please. I'm sorry. I do not know a great deal. I'm here to learn. Would it be possible for you to explain whatever situation this may be?"

I looked at her. You run into a lot of crazies. She didn't look like

she was on anything. She was a great-looking girl. "Okay. You want to sit down?"

"If you wish that of me," she said and stretched out on the bed.

"I said 'sit,' I'm on official business, girl."

"Oh? You mean in this position?"

"Right. I'm a police detective. I'm here on business. I hate having to break it to you, but early this morning we found your friend in the park. She'd been attacked. After they finished with her they killed her."

"Oh."

"Oh? That's all you have to say?"

"I'm not facile with the language. Attacked? What does this mean?"

"Violated, sexually violated. A man or men jumped her."

"Oh! And she wasn't willing?"

"We don't know that, but the assumption is she wasn't or they thought she wasn't."

She seemed to be weighing that. "And what does 'killed' mean?"

"You're kidding. It means deprivation of life without the victim's volition. She's dead."

"Oh! Why didn't you say that? Where is she? Please. Take me there. I have to see her.

I figured about then she was a crazy, but that wasn't illegal.

I tried to prepare her on the ride. I tried to get across to her that her friend or whatever the dead girl had been to her wasn't all that pretty to look at any more. She didn't seem aware of what I was saying, didn't seem to give a damn. She looked out through the car windows like a tourist on vacation in Fun City as we drove through the traffic.

They hadn't done the autopsy, just the preliminary report was in. Because of the irregularities Doc wanted some experts around for the carving. So the dead girl—Mary, call her—was in the drawer. Old Jinx, grouchy as ever, rolled it open for us.

"Now just take it easy, huh," I told Alice.

I pulled the sheet down just enough so the face was clear, not the throat.

"Hi," Alice said to the body.

I raised an eyebrow. Doc had come in with a couple of other people. It wasn't often we had someone who looked like Mary on a slab or someone who looked like Alice visiting.

"Alice. Is that your friend Mary?" I asked her.

Alice went and just took the sheet out of my hand and pulled it down to the dead girl's ankles. That rectangular navel stood out and hit you. She put her hand on the dead girl's breast—a well made one—and then, frowning, reached up and touched the ripped neck.

She said: "You dummy! Didn't I tell you that you had to be careful?" Then, to me: "Did she violate

some custom or hurt anything in your primitive society?"

I didn't believe it.

"Oh, well." She sighed. She opened her shoulder bag, got out a button just like the buttons I'd found on the dead girl. She shoved one button into the dead girl's navel.

I SAW it. Jinx saw it. Doc and the others saw part of it. The dead girl's throat clamped together—it actually moved and then it healed. In ten seconds that throat was uncut. Fifteen seconds and the girl sat up, shook her head, said: "Hi—" to Alice and climbed right off that slab.

"What were you up to, Tinna? You know how much trouble this is gonna cause."

"It was only a little mistake."

"Well, you apologize to these people and then you're going to have to go right home,"

I was bugeyed. I didn't believe it.

"Do I have to? Oh, come on, Andridida. It's wasn't my fault. I just made a little mistake."

"You violated the rules and that's the one thing you know you're not allowed to do. Now you apologize to these people and we'll just take you back and send you on home. When you grow up and are ready to behave responsibly maybe you can come back again. All right?"

"I don't want to go. I like it here."

"What. What happened last night?" I heard myself ask. I was talking to a dead girl—it occurred to me that she was a stiff.

"Oh, hi," she said to me. Big smile. "I don't know, I was walking through that nice area and suddenly one of your people—"

"Took a fancy to you," Alice whispered.

"Took a fancy to me," the dead girl informed me.

"Took a fancy to you, did he? Did you see this person?"

"Oh, it was really four persons, I think."

"You think. What did they look like?"

"I can't say, you know."

"You didn't see their faces?"

"Oh, I saw them. They were funny. All red-faced and real funny-looking. But I can't tell you exactly. All of you look just alike to me."

"All of us look alike to you? Were they tall or short, white, black, Chinese, Puerto Rican?"

"I'm very sorry, sir. But you see, I don't know those things. They all looked the same to me, very funny."

"Funny. You didn't happen to see which one cut your throat?"

"Yes. I saw him, of course. But I couldn't describe him or anything. He just looked like you."

"Like me?"

"Or like him or those men. You ancients all look the same to me."

"Ancients."

"We're very sorry, sir. And we promise it won't ever happen again. If we hurt anything or caused some irreparable damage to the fabric of your society you just tell me and I'll see that it's fixed—rectified—and just as good as newness," Alice told me. "Now you, dummy. You come on. And when you get back you'd better not lie. You tell exactly what happened. You know the damage you could wreak with something like this. Now, come on—right this minute!"

Alice took the dead girl's arm and the two of them just walked out. As an aside, the no longer dead girl was stark naked.

I'm supposed to think quickly—I get paid for it—but I just stood aside and Jinx did and Doc did and the others did.

It took me a full minute before I realized that the slab was empty and the dead girl was gone.

I ran.

The city can be pretty damned blasé, but there were enough signs. There were two wrecked cars down at the corner. People were out and arguing in front of a grocery store. When I got to them they were yelling at each other about whether they'd just seen a stark naked beauty being hauled by her ear by another girl who was the equal of the naked one.

I ran on, chased around, bumped into Blind Charlie. He'd seen them—he was only blind during working hours. He was on his lunch break.

I raced on, tracked the girls across town, ignored the policing that should have been done in their wake. I almost cornered them as they headed into the park. Missed them by seconds. What happened to them then I have no idea.

THREE weeks later, about three o'clock in the morning, the buzzer went off. I'd just finished forty-eight hours straight of trying to save a kidnaped kid—I hadn't. I crawled out of bed, got into my pants and dragged myself to the door.

"Hi," she said.

She was wearing a see-through blouse and not much of a skirt and she had a deep tan all over. If she'd come to me to report getting raped in that getup I would have slapped her in jail for provocation. It was Alice. (I just thought—the only place the name was spoken was in my head.)

"No," she said. "My real name is Andridida. I'm sorry. You see, I made a mistake and they sent me back to rectify it. You were chosen as witness to the rectification."

"Yeah? What happened?"

"Oh, she's fine. You know. It was just that she was a dummy. Oh, you mean when you followed us? Well, we went to our place and then went home."

"You'd better come in. Where's home?"

"It's in the future and it's on a distant planet. But we are descended from Earth Explorers, you know."

"How far in the future?"

"Seven thousand three hundred and thirty-nine Earth years. But that's not accurate—exactly—because Earth changed about five thousand years ago or two thousand years from now. It's a little confusing."

She looked around my ultra-modern apartment, a real futuristic place.

"Quaint," she told me.

"How did you get Mary, Tinna whatever her name to heal that way?"

"That's the sort of thing I'm not supposed to tell you. Boy, did they ever give me hell. Tinna was always a dum-dum and they said they couldn't really expect much more from her, but what happened was my fault and so they sent me back to rectify and not cause any more trouble. Okay?"

"What are you going to rectify?"

"Well, those boys who took the fancy to Tinna. They can't be. Anachronism is okay but bad ones simply aren't acceptable. So we have to attend to them."

"We have to attend to them? How? You know how many young punks are floating around this city and how many older ones? Did your friend give you any description?"

"No. She's a dummy. She really thinks you all look the same. But there's a way. Here. I have a list."

She opened her purse and gave me a fifty-page notebook. Every bit and piece of paper front and back was covered with tiny writing. She spelled badly. The way I saw it, most of the terms applied to electrical equipment.

"If this wasn't such a mess now I think I'd just go out and steal it—but, boy, would they ever give me hell if I did that and got caught or something. So, I've just been and I priced all the things I could find and in your money I need almost exactly ten million dollars. So, if you'll just give it to me I'll rectify this and then everything will be all right again."

"Ten million dollars?"

"Yes. Is that a lot?"

"Well, it's more than I have."

"Oh. I was certain you'd have it."

"'Fraid not. Sorry."

"Well. We can't do it without the apparatus, you know."

"Couldn't you make it for a hundred and twenty-five dollars? I have that."

"No. Ten million is the amount I need. Wait. Let me think for a minute."

She stood there, beautiful, maybe more beautiful with that puzzled, pensive little-girl look. And then she just dematerialized. She was there, right in front of me, and then she wasn't there any more.

THREE weeks after that I was collaring a pusher down on a Hundred and Forty-second. The pusher's neighbors didn't like him but liked me less. There were circling and closing in on me. Their faces weren't angry—they were stolid. They didn't even have to whip up their feelings about getting me. They knew they had me. And I knew the only way I'd get out was shoot my way out. With the politicians and the department scared to death of the newspapers and everyone else, I had a choice of being stomped to death right out of the department or shooting my way out and getting heaved out of the job for that.

Me and my pusher were in the center of the ring. I didn't see any way out. They didn't care if I got some of them. I was a cop and they hated cops.

"Hi."

She was there with me. Where she came from, I don't know. "I can do it for a hundred and twenty-five dollars. Will you give it to me now, please?"

"These citizens want to kill me," I explained.

"Oh?" She turned and smiled at them all. "I don't think you should kill Mike. It's not nice. Now all of you go home."

They didn't believe it. There was this gorgeous piece of meat, almost all of it on view—this kid, this piece of fluff. And she was telling them.

She shook her finger at them. "You go home right away or I'm going to get good and mad," she told them. They didn't even know what the hell she was talking about. She turned to me as if they were taken care of already. "Do you have the money? The sooner you give it to me the faster this is going to get done."

I watched them. She had magic buttons. If they got me I didn't have anything but health insurance.

"Don't worry about these people. They're all going home. Now!" She clapped her hands. A whole gang of them had been grim, mean, bent on bending me, but suddenly every face there took on an idiotic grin. They were smiling. Some of them—probably for the first time in their lives when not turned on—giggled. Like jolly zombies they turned and walked away.

"You see? You have to trust me. Now. The money. Please."

I tried breathing again. I was still alive. That was when a patrol car idled up. They had probably been sleeping it off in some alley—great police force we have. I turned my pusher over to them and then I took Andridida's arm—it was very warm and the skin was baby soft. We got into my car and I didn't even question her. I just drove us to the bank, told her to wait, walked in and emptied my account, brought out the money and gave it to her.

"Oh, good. Now, please. You have to tell me where I can find a—" she stopped and seemed to think about it—"bookie joint and then a crap game and do they have roulette?"

That was what she wanted to know. I told her. East Side Eddie ran a floating crap game. She could find him either in the furnace room of P.S. 147 or behind the 16th Precinct, in a garage there. Loose-lipped Louis was the bookie. He ran a candy store on 86th Street. As far as roulette, there was a casino over in Fort Lee.

"Okay," she said, accepting. "And please don't worry. I know I made a mistake, but I promise I'll rectify it."

"Yeah," I said.

She didn't vanish. She just got out of the car and walked away.

But I didn't lose her.

THE reports came in and I saw them.

East Side Eddie and all his friends were flat busted. All they remembered was that, even switching dice, they couldn't stop her. She came in, asked them how to play the game and then she rolled whatever they told her would win. According to East Side Eddie, who was found weeping in a bar over on Third Avenue by a gambling squad detective, they switched her onto dice that were so loaded the average guy wasn't strong enough to pick them up.

The next report was on Loose-lipped Louis. They found him in an alley. He'd been worked over and worked over hard. He kept mumbling, "Please, girlie. Please, girlie."

She'd come in and put her winnings on the least likely pair of nags in the history of flat racing. The horses were so old and feeble they weren't even allowed on a decent track. Neither one of them had ever finished better than last and twenty furlongs behind the pack. Glue factories and ice wagons used better. But there was a quote on them and Andridida walked in, put her ten thousand dollars on them (presumably the money gained from East Side Eddie and his pals) and they paid 408 to one. That should have given her four million and eighty thousand dollars. Loose-lipped Louis—a grade-school dropout—could not even imagine such a sum. He offered to give her back her money and invited her to come up to his place to see his Danish picture books. Andridida had a fit. She took him out in the alley and manhandled—really strong-armed him. Then she escorted him around town to collect. The best he could come up with was ten per cent. She took the four hundred thou but parted with Loose-lipped in an alley where she finished her expression of unhappiness with welchers. Knocked his teeth out, every one.

It wasn't a surprise. I heard the story and decided to keep the radio on. Presently the story came over the speaker: "Unidentified, beautiful young girl machine-gunned by gangsters. . " She had been walking down 16th Street and a dark limousine had cruised up. A submachine gun had spoken and the bullets had cut her down.

I drove like crazy to get there. The whole machinery of the law was there: the squad, the ambulance, the medical examiners, the witnesses, the crowd. I held my shield out front and just walked through. Those bullets had really gotten her. She was as riddled as any shooting victim I'd ever seen. I just elbowed through to her. The precinct captain was there. He wasn't my friend. He asked what the hell I was doing on his turf.

I told him to just take it easy. "It's a special case. She's a friend."

"Oh," he said, pretending to have a human concern. "Sorry about it, Mike."

"Don't worry, huh? Her purse around?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Let me see it for a minute, will you?"

He got a detective to fetch it for me. It was new, almost empty—but there were those buttons. I pulled one out.

"What are you doing?"

I knelt beside her and peeled back the shroud. If she'd worn any more clothes I couldn't have gotten to it, but before they grabbed me and hauled me back I crammed the thing into her navel.

It didn't take more than thirty seconds—and half her head had been blown away, too. She regrew the half of head while the cops stopped holding me to watch. Then she sat up, blinked those big eyes of hers, smiled that smile she had and said. "Hi."

They were all speechless. They also seemed paralyzed. I just left her there and them with her and walked away from it.

TRICKS again. By the time I got to my car, she was already in it. "You know," she told me. "I think Mr. Loose-lipped Louis did that. It wasn't at all nice."

"Yeah," I said.

"I'll fix him," she informed me.

"Yeah," I said. (As it worked out, she did fix him. Guys who'd never beat him suddenly couldn't miss. He turned loser, finally Found God or at least sanctuary in some monastic order. So because of her a monastery has a Brother Loose-lipped Louis.)

"Come on. I have almost a half a million and I only need nine and a half million more."

"Uh-huh."

She insisted and I wasn't going to cross her.

The casino in Fort Lee was shimmering and very fancy, a fugitive piece of ersatz gingerbread and tinkley tinsel from the old days. I ex-

plained the game to her and as soon as she had it she decided to ask that the limit be raised. She wanted to get it on two spins. The manager didn't trust even his rigged wheel that much. He let her bet a thousand at a spin. She liked nine black. And, not surprising me, that little ball couldn't resist it. Nine black came up ten times running and that was it. That was all the money they had.

She had a tantrum, called them cheats and bad sports and was just working her way into turning them into frogs or something when I decided it was wiser to haul her out.

So she went on with the tantrum at me. She was still short of her first million. Didn't I want the rectification? Didn't I have any interest in it? Didn't I want to help her? Wasn't I her friend?

"Now, look. You've taken less than twelve hours. You've ruined the biggest floating crap game in this city. You busted and beat up our most important bookie. You wiped out this casino and you got killed once. That's plenty for one day."

"But I have to get the money. I can't do it without money. How am I going to get the money?"

"Find an oil field or uranium mine or something."

"Are those things worth anything?"

"They're worth something."

"How? I mean, where should I find them?"

"Well, it would be best if you owned the land. Find the oil or the uranium or gold if you want, buy the land and then sell it."

"Should I find it in any special place?"

"Probably someplace where the land is cheap and not too developed."

"Where is the land cheap?"

"Deserts, maybe remote mountains."

"I should find a lot of this oil or uranium or gold?"

"A lot would be better."

"Okay. Thank you, Mike. I really do appreciate your help, you know," she told me and off she went.

The story didn't make the papers in the morning and didn't even get into the evening papers. But the next morning's headlines announced: LARGEST MINERAL DEPOSITS IN NORTH AMERICA. The early reports were, of course, typically inaccurate. The evening paper set it straight: LARGEST MINERAL DEPOSITS ON EARTH DISCOVERED.

Interestingly, she was a cheapskate. She had found the cheapest land in the country and then she bought hardly any of it. And the stuff was arranged like pipelines right down to the core. One pipe was oil, one natural gas, one uranium, one gold, one silver, one copper and more.

She got her ten million and then some.

I HAVE a one-bedroom apartment in an old building. The movers had had trouble bringing my ninety-inch sofa up on the freight elevator and the floor's so ancient it isn't sturdy enough for a waterbed.

They had put Andridida's gadget on a great flatbed truck—a gadget maybe the size of a small house. It had taken a couple of giant cranes and two teams of loaders. And then with an escort they somehow got it across town and to my freight entrance. There they checked the address again and started cursing and swearing and yelling. That was when little Andridida walked up. She touched the monster gadget, waited for it to reduce itself in size, then picked it up with one hand and carried it up to my place.

Ten million dollars' worth of that game went on. Even after all the paraphernalia had been shrunk to little and very little I could barely squeeze into my place after a while. But all the deliveries were finally made and she clapped her hands, satisfied. But her happiness lasted only five minutes. She turned morose. I asked her what the problem was. She needed a screwdriver.

What I produced wasn't what she wanted but she decided it would have to do. I offered to help but wasn't much help. The two of us sat on the floor and I watched while she worked. I had no idea what the devil she was making, but when it was finished it was about a six feet square. She talked to it or did something to it and it dutifully shriveled up and came down to about the size of a cassette recorder.

That pleased her. She was happy. She smiled at me.

So we took her ten-million-dollar toy and went to the park to the bushes where we'd found Mary or Tinna or whatever the other girl's name. We sat there cross-legged and she flipped on her machine.

I screamed. There was a Brontosaurus standing on my foot. She said, "Sorry," and the Brontosaurus went away. She made some sort of adjustment. I kept myself from yelling, but I drew my service revolver. We were surrounded by these four slope-headed hairy guys wearing animal skins with clubs in their hands. They went away. It was a long process. We were under water twice—once we were confronted by a sharklike creature. Later a gang of Indians came after us. It was just one thing after another. Happily, she turned off most of the things pretty quick. But she was a voyeur or whatever the female equivalent and from the first slopehead with his girl, through the Indian bucks and maids, through Nieuw Amsterdam's guys and girls, through the British couples, the Colonial ones, the guys and dolls. . . Well, for the first time in my life I wondered whether the place really wasn't Fun City. That

copse of bushes had to be the sex capital of the world and Andridida just loved it. I was a little embarrassed by it, myself.

Finally, after a hell of a long time, along came Tinna or Mary or whatever her name.

"Ah-ha," Andridida said and we watched the shocking rape murder in perfect focus and detail.

WHEN the act was over and the punks ran off we followed them—somehow. Andridida carried the machine and we just traipsed after the guys, I guess. It was a little confusing because it wasn't really then but it was now and so—going into the IRT, for example—we occupied real space but the four punks were just walking right through people.

We subwayed after them and then followed the punks up the steps and out into what hadn't been a good neighborhood, ever. As it worked out, as we came up, the four of them were standing in front of a pornographic bookstore. They were standing on top of themselves.

"There they are," Andridida said, clearly pleased. She switched off the machine. The four of them really were there, no double image.

Andridida walked right up to them and said, "Hi."

I was right behind her.

They saw me and they said, "Cop!"

They started to take off. I didn't even think to draw on them. For what? They had raped and murdered somebody who wasn't or hadn't been or had been buttoned out of it. What kind of crime was it? Anyway, it was Andridida's rectification.

The way I heard it, it really was a *zap* sound.

They were gone. Their clothes and shoes were just in puddles on that filthy street.

I turned to her, shrugged one more time. "Do I ask what happened to them?"

"They're being rectified. Yeah," she said nodding.

"So then, that's it?"

"Yes. I think so, unless I made another mistake. But I don't think I did."

"Well, that's nice. You wouldn't want to leave me your machine, would you?"

"I don't think I'm allowed."

"Oh."

"Well, it was very nice knowing you and I hope you'll forgive any problems I may have caused you."

"Nothing at all. My pleasure."

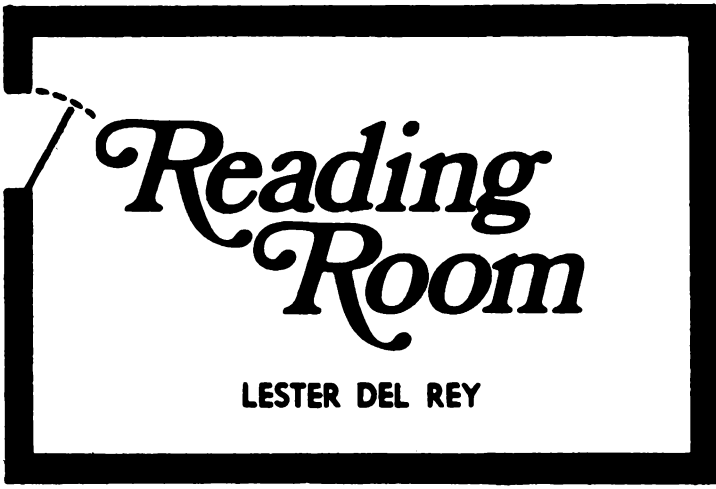
She stuck out her hand. I shook it. "Goodbye, Mike. I looked you up."

"Did you?"

"Everything's all right for you. It works out."

"Good to know. Thanks. Andridida."

She smiled and turned and walked away. I watched her until she rounded the corner. One hell of a girl. •



LESTER DEL REY

IF OLD-VALUE science fiction is on its way out nobody over at Doubleday seems to know it yet. In the past few months, the publishers have issued five giant volumes of older stories, at a total cost to the readers of $45.75! Unless publishers are losing their market sense, there must be a growing demand for fiction that was written before the new-value concept was developed fully in our field.

By old-value stories, I mean those that were essentially meant to entertain, where the emphasis was on story rather than on style or relevancy to any current situation—stories that tended to assume an expanding universe of man's destiny. These might be called reader-oriented stories, since they were written for the general reader, with no thought of appealing to the regular literary critics. The new-value stories, of course, are those which develop science fiction according to the current literary and mainstream values, with style and significance given more emphasis than story. (We need some handy labels. But the new and old "wave" labels are so involved with emotional overtones and quasi-political feuds that they have become almost worthless.)

One of these anthologies issued by Doubleday has been eagerly anticipated for some time, though its present form is something of a surprise. This is *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame,* edited by Ben Bova, made up of novellas. But instead of the expected single volume, we have two—Volume Two A and

Volume Two B, at $9.95 each.

The first volume of this series covered the shorter stories, and I considered it the finest single book of science fiction ever published, justifying its claim to be the "greatest of all time." The two new volumes make the same claim for the novellas, and the stories are certainly excellent. But I find I have very mixed reactions to the current books as an equal to the former superlative anthology.

Much of the value of the first *Hall of Fame* came from a logical arrangement of stories according to their year of publication—that year clearly indicated. This enabled the reader to fix himself in time and to get a clear perspective on the story in terms of the progress of the field. Any crudities in an early story could be easily understood and allowances therefore made. But here, for some reason (or lack of it), this logical approach has been abandoned. There is no discernible pattern, which strikes me as a rather careless way to deal with volumes meant to be definitive.

The rationale behind the selection of some stories and the use of two volumes for the novellas is sometimes also hard to discover. These stories were supposedly selected via voting by the members of the Science Fiction Writers of America under conditions governing the selection of Nebula winners—*e.g.*, these works would have merited the SFWA Nebula award, had that award existed when the stories were published. Or so I was told. In editing the first volume, Robert Silverberg followed this concept as closely as possible, listing the main votes and giving his reasons for the few deviations.

Ben Bova also lists the top ten novellas chosen by the SFWA members. Eight of these are included in the A volume. A Walter Miller story is omitted necessarily because rights were not available, and one of the two Heinlein stories is dropped to avoid having more than one story by each author. (I find myself unsure of the wisdom of this; I rather think the best stories should be used in any list of "greatest," even if half of them are by the same writer.) However, the top-rated ten authors are also listed, which adds only Poul Anderson to the list. His highest-choice novella is therefor added to Volume A. Fine, we now have nine stories. And probably the tenth expected story could have been the next highest choice below the top ten already mentioned. Maybe it is—but we don't know; there are two other novellas in Volume A and eleven stories in Volume B. These are good stories, but was it

really necessary to have a second volume? And if so, shouldn't the listing of top stories and top writers have been extended to show us why?

I also feel less than happy about the inclusion of H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* in Volume A. True, it's a great classic. But the fact remains that it first appeared at a time when not only was there no SFWA—but when there could have been no SFWA, because there was no regular field for science fiction writers. I don't know about this. In fact, I wind up with more uncertainties about the choices than certainties.

Volume Two A contains: *Call Me Joe,* by Poul Anderson; *Who Goes There?* by John W. Campbell; *Nerves,* by Lester del Rey; *Universe,* by Robert A. Heinlein; *The Marching Morons,* by C. M. Kornbluth; *Vintage Season,* by Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore; *And Then There Were None,* by Eric Frank Russell; *The Ballad of Lost C'Mell,* by Cordwainer Smith; *Baby Is Three,* by Theodore Sturgeon; *The Time Machine,* by H. G. Wells and *With Folded Hands,* by Jack Williamson. That's a good list of stories, and well worth the price. Volume B also has excellent stories, but since these are apparently second-choice stories for this purpose, I suggest you look at the table of contents when you see the book and decide for yourself whether you want to spend the money. (The Introduction is identical for both volumes, incidentally.)

I think it might have been better to restrict the novellas to the single volume originally planned; that might have had more effect in defining the best of our longer works than this vaguely demarcated double volume. (Also, perhaps then the author advance might not have been restricted to ½¢ per word—a low rate which seems very curious for a project of the SFWA—an organization that is supposed to be devoted to raising rates in our field. Since this advance is against royalties, it probably doesn't matter; but half the usual advance doesn't look good for a professional organization of this type!)

Happily, Doubleday has done a much better job with the dust jacket this time, and the books are both more dignified and easier to read than the psychedelic monstrosity on Volume One.

THE Astounding-Analog Reader, edited by Harry Harrison and Brian W. Aldiss, is another two-volume anthology (at $7.95 per volume) from Doubleday. The first volume contains fifteen stories, beginning with 1932 and end-

ing with 1946. The second volume had twenty-one stories, 1947 to 1965—all from *Astounding* and *Analog*, of course. The stories are arranged by date of publication, with a general introduction and separate introductions for each group of three stories.

The selections here were made by Harrison and Aldiss, without any voting by larger groups. Yet they don't suffer by comparison with the SFWA lists. Surprisingly, there were almost no duplicates between these volumes and the *Hall of Fame* ones; only Anderson's *Call Me Joe* and Moore and Kuttner's *Vintage Season* are shared. (And only two shorter stories are shared with the earlier *Hall of Fame* volume.)

Looking at the Harrison-Aldiss table of contents, it's hard to see how some of the stories were not selected by the SFWA: *Forgetfulness*, by Don A. Stuart—perhaps the ultimate romantic statement of man's destiny; *Farewell to the Master*, by Harry Bates; *By His Bootstraps*, by Robert A. Heinlein—the most complex of all time-travel stories; *City*, by Clifford D. Simak; *Child's Play*, by William Tenn—and a great many others that are genuinely classic in quality. There are a number of stories that I probably would not have selected—and a few I'd like to see here; but it is a list of stories that I can only consider outstanding.

Probably by the nature of the magazines covered and my own taste, I like the first volume better than the second—but only by a narrow margin.

I'd strongly recommend the Harrison-Aldiss volumes to anyone looking to see what made—and makes—science fiction wonderful. And if I had to choose between the two-volume SFWA set and the two-volume Harrison-Aldiss anthology, I'd tend to take the latter—I'd also save a few dollars, though that is incidental. Harrison and Aldiss have done a fine job of selecting and explaining the things that made *Astounding/Analog* a leader for so long!

THE fifth huge volume from Doubleday deals with the work of an even earlier period of magazine fiction than the other anthologies. This goes all the way back to original science fiction published in the magazines in 1930 and 1932. It is *Anthology: Three Novels*, by John W. Campbell (Doubleday, $9.95). All the stories Campbell wrote about the characters Arcot, Wade and Morey are included finally in this one volume—and a big, fat volume it is.

I've already discussed the stories in an introduction to the book and

there's a bonus introduction by Isaac Asimov. But this is the type of fiction that is almost certainly anathema to the literary among us—and dearly beloved by the rest of us, though it is now far in our background. Campbell took the story of man's physical mastery of science and his conquest of space as far as it could go. He piled wonder on wonder, until no more was possible. Back in 1932, he reached the ultimate limit of even such modern ideas as psi power. The effect definitely isn't literary—but man, how it moves! And I still find it fun to read.

The stories are almost legendary now. I'm delighted to know they are finally in a permanent form I can keep and browse through once in a while. Nobody writes stories like that now. Perhaps nobody should, to be honest—but I'm glad Campbell wrote them once, for all time!

THE other anthology and collection of good-old-days material are mercifully already in soft covers and hence less expensive. *Science Fiction: the Great Years,* edited by Carol & Frederik Pohl (Ace, $1.25) is a most welcome addition to all the huge volumes. I'm delighted with it particularly for two reasons; first, it brought Carol Pohl—Fred's most attractive wife—into the reading group of fans—she makes a welcome addition to the book's tone. And second, it brings Raymond Z. Gallun's remarkable *Old Faithful* back to us, among the other excellent stories included.

To a very large extent, three writers were responsible for science fiction as we know it. Two of them—John W. Campbell under the Don A. Stuart byline and Stanley G. Weinbaum—get and deserve credit for their influence on the field. But Ray Gallun began moving toward the "Golden Age" of science fiction before them and he was one of the best early "living proofs" that science-fiction writers could handle real feeling and emotion. When his *Old Faithful* first appeared in 1934, it attracted more attention than any story of its length for the year. And it still stands up after all this time. The yarn is no longer novel—too many other writers have since taken off from Gallun's inspiration—but it is just as fine to me as it always was. It is about time that some anthologist gave the attention to the story that it richly deserves.

ANOTHER writer who did some of the best-liked stories in the good old days was Ross Rocklynne. His *The Men and the Mirror* (Ace, 95¢) is a collection of

related stories. Most of these feature puzzles—men find themselves in situations where something is cockeyed and dangerous and work their way out by making the effort to understand their strange environment. The five stories in the book are all good examples of this.

Curiously, my own favorite isn't included—though it is listed on the copyright page. This is *And Then There Was One*, which I have always considered the best story of its kind ever done in science fiction. If Ace decided to omit it because of the length of the book, I think it was a serious mistake. But even without it the book is worth the price.

WE DON'T have to turn only to the past to discover old-value fiction, however. Fortunately some of the writers who loved to read the older stories are writing them today. Romance is not wholly dead—some of us still love the legendary Mars of Percival Lowell, even though Burroughs is dead and Leigh Brackett isn't writing about it any more.

The Man Who Loved Mars, by Lin Carter (Fawcett, 75¢) is in the grand tradition of such romance. Here are the dryland tribes with their exotic barbarian cultures, the ancient cities crumbling into slow and fabulous decay, the legends from the days of old and the few Earthmen who can exist among them. But Carter hasn't completely neglected what we have learned of the planet from our space shots. He may have given us an atmosphere denser than the latest theories—but it's an atmosphere that is much less dense than that of Barsoom. There are still two moons in the sky—but logically so tiny that they can't be seen without exact knowledge and luck. And there's a certain bitterness about the contact of Earthman and Martian that comes off very well indeed.

Carter also captures the color and feeling of the planet as readers know it, the little touches that bring the romance of far-off worlds home to us. And the mystery of Martians who look like Earthman isn't thrown aside, but becomes part of the plot.

This is by all odds the best showcase of Carter's writing I have seen. For this type of story, his people move naturally. The color he evolves for his world is traditional, but he has made it very much his own. And the book hangs together. It's Carter's best to date, in my opinion, and I heartily recommend it.

ONE of the old values was that of honestly trying to please and satisfy the reader. Old-value fiction

demands that the writer assume that there is no obligation on the part of his reader to understand, appreciate or finish the story—the obligation is on the writer to pay the reader back for the investment of time and money.

Without this sense of values no amount of borrowing backgrounds and methods can do an adequate job of recreating the type of adventure fiction many readers still demand.

At the Narrow Passage, by Richard C. Meredith (Putnam, $5.95), seems to be the beginning of a good adventure novel. It isn't.

Among the best of the adventure writers, up to the time of his regrettable death, was H. Beam Piper, who built a complex society around the discovery of Paratime. The Paratime stories involved a sort of side-by-side time sequence—millions of alternate todays could be reached. Meredith dedicates his book to the memory of Piper and the multiple worlds of Paratime. He's honest about his use of a similar background, happily. And I agree with him that there is much room for further adventure fiction in Piper's worlds.

The novel begins well, too, though the intrustion of nonhumans into Paratime is something I found somewhat hard to take. (The general usefulness of the rule of "one assumption, and no more" is worth noting.) But generally this one began to shape up as a good action story, with our hero—and heroine—moving into tighter and tighter jams. I enjoyed it until

Well, I began to worry when only ten pages were left, but I kept hoping for something clever. Five more pages and I began to lose that hope. And then I hit the last page. Our hero and heroine had been caught between two forces, gradually coming at them from both sides. So, they're stranded. And let me quote the last three sentences:

"Someone, somehow, must stop this hell before it destroys billions upon billions of human beings across the Lines and all the magnificient civilizations we've built. And if nobody else will do it, I guess it'll be up to Sally and me. *But damned if I know how.*" (Italics mine.)

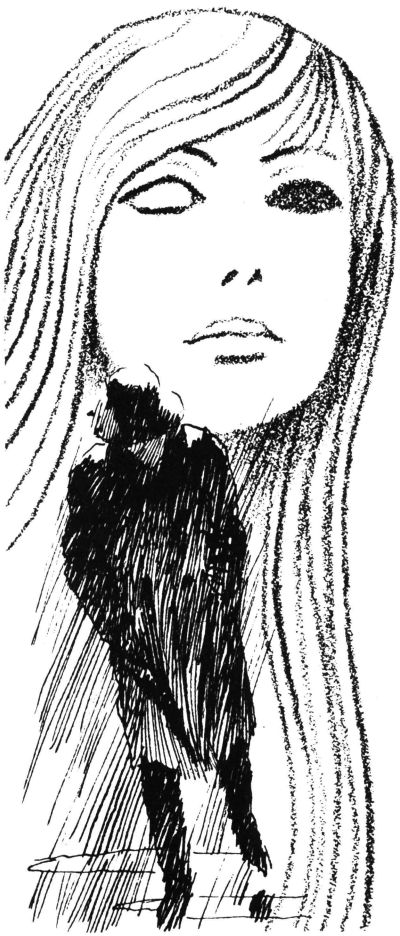
I don't care if a sequel is planned or not. I wouldn't read it if it came out, since such dishonesty, such total lack of story value as that unending, means I can't trust the writer ever again.

It's damned bad writing, and even worse editing—if the editor bothered to read it before buying it. Don't be cheated! Both old-value and new-value writing deserve their readers—but no-value writing like that deserves only contempt. •

The tyrant had one friend. The friend had none at all . . .

WESTWIND

GENE WOLFE



". . . to all of you, my dearly loved fellow countrymen. And most particularly—as ever—to my eyes, Westwind."

One wall of the steaming, stinking room began to waver, the magic portal that had opened upon a garden of almost inconceivable beauty beginning to mist and change. Fountains of marble waved like grass, and rose trees, whose flowery branches wore strands of pearl and diamond, faded to soft old valentines. The ruler's chair turned to bronze, then to umber, and the ruler himself, fatherly and cunning, wise and unknowable, underwent a succession of transformations, becoming at first a picture, then a poster and at last a postage stamp.

THE lame old woman who ran the place turned the wall off and several people protested. "You heard what he said," she told them. "You know your duty. Why do you have to listen to some simpleton from the Department of Truth say everything over in longer words and spread his spittle on it?"

The protesters, having registered their postures, were silent. The old woman looked at the clock behind

the tiny bar she served.

"Game in twenty minutes," she said. "Folks will be coming in then, rain or no rain, wanting drinks. You want some, you better get them now."

Only two did: hulking, dirty men who might have been of any dishonest trade. A few people were already discussing the coming game. A few others talked about the address they had just heard—not its content, which could not have meant much to most of them—but about the ruler and his garden, exchanging at hundredth hand bits of palace gossip of untold age. The door opened and the storm came in and a young man with it.

He was tall and thin. He wore a raincoat that had soaked through and an old felt hat covered with a transparent plastic protection whose elastic had forced the hat's splayed brim into a tight bell around his head. One side of the young man's face was a blue scar—the old woman asked him what he wanted.

"You have rooms," he said.

"Yes, we do. Very cheap, too. You ought to wear something over that."

"If it bothers you," he said, "don't look at it."

"You think I've got to rent to you?" She looked around at her customers, lining up support, should the young man with the scar decide to resent her remarks. "All I've got to do if you complain is say we're full. You can walk to the police station then—it's twenty blocks—and maybe they'll let you sleep in a cell."

"I'd like a room and something to eat. What do you have?"

"Ham sandwich," she said. She named a price. "Your room—" She named another.

"All right," he said. "I'd like two sandwiches. And coffee."

"The room is only half if you share with somebody—if you want me to I can yell out and see if anybody wants to split."

"No."

She ripped the top from a can of coffee. The handle popped out and the contents began to steam. She gave it to him and said, "I guess they won't take you in the other places, huh? With that face."

HE TURNED away from her, sipping his coffee, looking the room over. The door by which he had just entered (water still streamed from his coat and he could feel it in his shoes, sucking and gurgling with his every movement) opened again and a blind girl came in.

He saw that she was blind before he saw anything else about her. She wore black glasses, which on that

impenetrable, rain-wracked night would have been clue enough, and as she entered she looked (in the second most terrible and truest sense) at Nothing.

The old woman asked, "Where did *you* come from?"

"From the terminal," the girl said. "I walked." She carried a white cane, which she swung before her as she sidled toward the sound of the old woman.

"I need a place to sleep," the girl said.

Her voice was clear and sweet and the young man decided that even before the rain had scrubbed her face she hadn't worn makeup.

He said, "You don't want to stay here. I'll call you a cab."

"I want to stay here," the girl said in her clear voice. "I have to stay somewhere."

"I have a communicator," the young man said. He opened his coat to show it to her—a black box with a speaker, keys and a tiny screen—then realized that he had made a fool of himself. Someone laughed.

"They're not running."

The old woman said, "What's not running?"

"The cabs. Or the buses. There's high water in a lot of places all over the city and they've been shorting out. I have a communicator, too—" the blind girl touched her waist— "and the ruler made a speech just a few minutes ago. I listened to him as I walked and there was a newscast afterward. But I knew anyway because a gentleman tried to call one for me from the terminal, but they wouldn't come."

"You shouldn't stay here," the young man said.

The old woman said, "I got a room if you want it—the only one left."

"I want it," the girl told her.

"You've got it. Wait a minute now—I've got to fix this fellow some sandwiches."

Someone swore at the old woman and said that the game was about to start.

"Five minutes yet." She took a piece of boiled ham from under the counter and put it between two slices of bread, then repeated the process.

The young man said, "These look eatable. Not fancy, but eatable. Would you like one?"

"I have a little money," the blind girl said. "I can pay for my own." And to the old woman: "I would like some coffee."

"How about a sandwich?"

"I'm too tired to eat."

THE door was opening almost constantly now as people from the surrounding tenements braved

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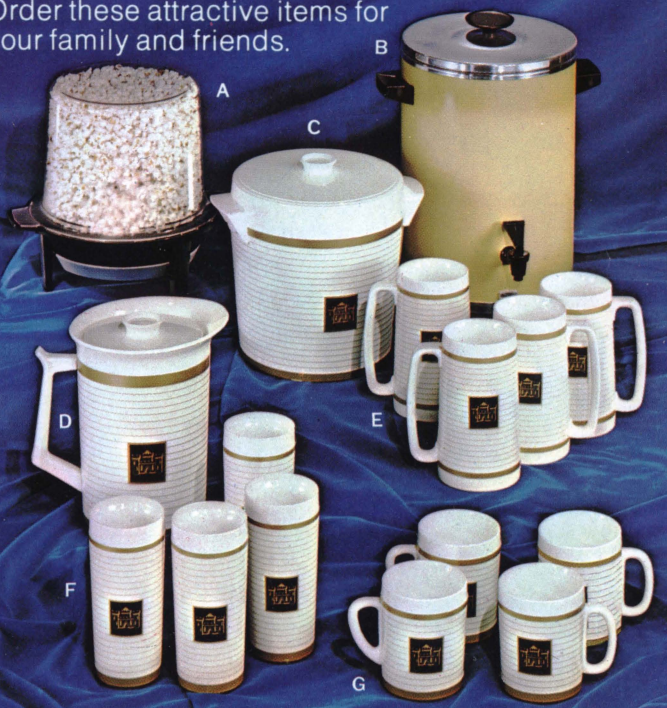

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the storm and splashed in to watch the game. The old woman turned the wall on and they crowded near it, watching the pre-game warmup, practicing and perfecting the intentness they would use on the game itself. The scarred young man and the blind girl were edged away and found themselves nearest the door in a room now grown very silent save for the sound from the wall.

The young man said, "This is really a bad place—you shouldn't be here."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I don't have much money," he said. "It's cheap."

"You don't have a job?"

"I was hurt in an accident. I'm well now, but they wouldn't keep me on—they say I would frighten the others. I suppose I would."

"Isn't there insurance for that?"

"I wasn't there long enough to qualify."

"I see," she said. She raised her coffee carefully, holding it with both hands. He wanted to tell her that it was about to spill—she did not hold it quite straight—but dared not. Just as it was at the point of running over the edge it found her lips.

"You listened to the ruler," he said, "while you were walking in the storm. I like that."

"Did they listen here?" she asked.

"I don't know. I wasn't here. The wall was off when I came in."

"Everyone should," she said. "He does his best for us."

The scarred young man nodded.

"People won't cooperate," she said. "Don't cooperate. Look at the crime problem—everyone complains about it, but it is the people themselves who commit the crimes. He tries to clean the air, the water, all for us—"

"But they burn in the open whenever they think they won't be caught," the young man finished for her, "and throw filth in the rivers. The bosses live in luxury because of him, but they cheat on the standards whenever they can. He should destroy them."

"He loves them," the girl said simply. "He loves everyone. When we say that it sounds like we're saying he loves no one, but that's not true. He loves *everyone*."

"Yes," the scarred young man said after a moment, "but he loves Westwind the best. Loving everyone does not include loving someone more than others. Tonight he called Westwind 'my eyes.' "

"Westwind observes for him," the girl said softly, "and reports. Do you think Westwind is someone very important?"

"He is important," the young

man said, "because the ruler listens to him—and after all, it's next to impossible for anyone else to get an audience. But I think you mean 'does he look important to us?' I don't think so—he's probably some very obscure person you've never heard of."

"I think you're right," she said.

He was finishing his second sandwich and he nodded, then realized that she could not see him. She was pretty, he decided, in a slender way, not too tall, wore no rings. Her nails were unpainted, which made her hands look, to him, like a schoolgirl's. He remembered watching the girls playing volleyball when he had been in school—how he had ached for them. He said, "You should have stayed in the terminal tonight. I don't think this is a safe place for you."

"Do the rooms lock?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen them."

"If they don't I'll put a chair under the knob or something. Move the furniture. At the terminal I tried to sleep on a bench—I didn't want to walk here through all that rain, believe me. But every time I fell asleep I could feel someone's hand on me—once I grabbed him, but he pulled away. I'm not very strong."

"Wasn't anyone else there?"

"Some men, but they were trying to sleep, too—of course it was one of them, and perhaps they were all doing it together. One of them told the others that if they didn't let me alone he'd kill someone—that was when I left. I was afraid he wasn't doing it—that somebody would be killed or at least that there would be a fight. He was the one who called about the cab for me. He said he'd pay."

"I don't think it was him, then."

"I don't either." The girl was silent for a moment, then said, "I wouldn't have minded it so much if I hadn't been so tired."

"I understand."

"Would you find the lady and ask her to show me to my room?"

"Maybe we could meet in the morning for breakfast."

The blind girl smiled, the first time the scarred young man had seen her smile. "That would be nice," she said.

HE WENT behind the bar and touched the old woman's arm. "I hate to interrupt the game," he said, "but the young lady would like to go to her room."

"I don't care about the game," the old woman said, "I just watch it because everybody else does. I'll get Obie to take care of things."

"She's coming," the scarred young man said to the blind girl.

"I'll go up with you. I'm ready to turn in myself."

The old woman was already motioning for them and they followed her up a narrow staircase filled with foul odors. "They pee in here," she said. "There's toilets down at the end of the hall but they don't bother to use them."

"How terrible," the girl said.

"Yes it is. But that way they're getting away with something—they're putting one over on me because they know if I was to catch them I'd throw them out. I try and catch them, but at the same time I feel sorry for them—it's pretty bad when the only wins you have left are the games on the wall and cheating a old woman by dirtying her steps." She paused at the top of the stairs for breath. "You two are going to be just side by side—you don't mind that?"

The girl said, "No," and the scarred young man shook his head.

"I didn't think you would and they're the last I've got anyway."

The scarred young man was looking down the narrow corridor. It was lined with doors, most of them shut.

"I'll put you closest to the bathroom," the old woman was saying to the girl. "There's a hook on the bathroom door, so don't you worry. But if you stay in there too long somebody'll start pounding."

"I'll be all right," the girl said.

"Sure you will. Here's your room."

The rooms had been parts of much larger rooms once. Now they were subdivided with green-painted partitions of some stuff like heavy cardboard. The old woman went into the girl's place and turned on the light. "Bed's here, dresser's there," she said. "Washstand in the corner but you have to bring your water from the bathroom. No bugs—we fumigate twice a year. Clean sheets."

The girl was feeling the edge of the door. Her fingers found a chain lock and she smiled.

"There's a deadbolt too," the scarred young man said.

The old woman said, "Your room's next door. Come on."

HIS room was much like the girl's, save that the cardboard partition (it had been liberally scratched with obscene words and pictures) was on the left instead of the right. He found that he was acutely aware of her moving behind it, the tap of her stick as she established the positions of the bed, the dresser, the washstand. He locked his door and took off his soaked coat and hung it on a hook, then took off his shoes and stockings. He disliked the thought of walking on the gritty floor in his

wet feet, but there was no alternative except the soggy shoes. With his legs folded under him he sat on the bed, then unhooked the communicator from his belt and pushed 123-333-4477, the ruler's number.

"This is Westwind," the scarred young man whispered.

The ruler's face appeared in the screen, tiny and perfect. Again, as he had so often before, the young man felt that this was his real size, this tiny, bright figure—he knew it was not true.

"This is Westwind and I've got a place to sleep tonight. I haven't found another job yet, but I met a girl and I think she likes me."

"Exciting news," the ruler said. He smiled.

The scarred young man smiled, too, on his unscarred side. "It's raining very hard here," he said. "I think this girl is very loyal to you, sir. The rest of the people here—well, I don't know. She told me about a man in the terminal who tried to molest her and another man who wanted to protect her. I was going to ask you to reward him and punish the other one, but I'm afraid they were the same man—that he wanted to meet her and this gave him the chance."

"They are often the same man," the ruler said. He paused as though lost in thought. "You are all right?"

"If I don't find something tomorrow I won't be able to afford a place to stay, but yes, I'm all right tonight."

"You are very cheerful, Westwind. I love cheerfulness."

The good side of the scarred young man's face blushed. "It's easy for me," he said. "I've known all my life that I was your spy, your confidant—it's like knowing where a treasure is hidden. Often I feel sorry for the others. I hope you're not too severe with them."

"I don't want to aid you openly unless I must," the ruler said. "But I'll find ways that aren't open. Don't worry." He winked.

"I know you will, sir."

"Just don't pawn your communicator."

The image was gone, leaving only a blank screen. The young man turned out the light and continued to undress, taking off everything but his shorts. He was lying down on the bed when he heard a thump from the other side of the cardboard partition. The blind girl, feeling her way about the room, must have bumped into it. He was about to call, "Are you hurt?" when he saw that one of the panels, a section perhaps three feet by four, was teetering in its frame. He caught it as it fell and laid it on floor.

The light the old woman had

turned on still burned in the girl's room and he saw that she had hung up her coat and wrapped her hair in a strip of paper towels from the washstand. While he watched she removed her black glasses, set them on the bureau and rubbed the bridge of her nose. One of her eyes showed only white; the iris of the other was the poisoned blue color of watered milk and turned in and down. Her face was lovely. While he watched she unbuttoned her blouse and hung it up. Then she unhooked her communicator from her belt, ran her fingers over the buttons once and, without looking, pressed a number.

"This is Westwind," she said.

He could not hear the voice that answered her, but the face in the screen, small and bright, was the face of the ruler. "I'm all right," she said. "At first I didn't think I was going to be able to find a place to stay tonight, but I have. And I've met someone."

The scarred young man lifted the panel back into place as gently as he could and lay down again upon his bed. When he heard the rattle of her cane again he tapped the partition and called, "Breakfast tomorrow. Don't forget."

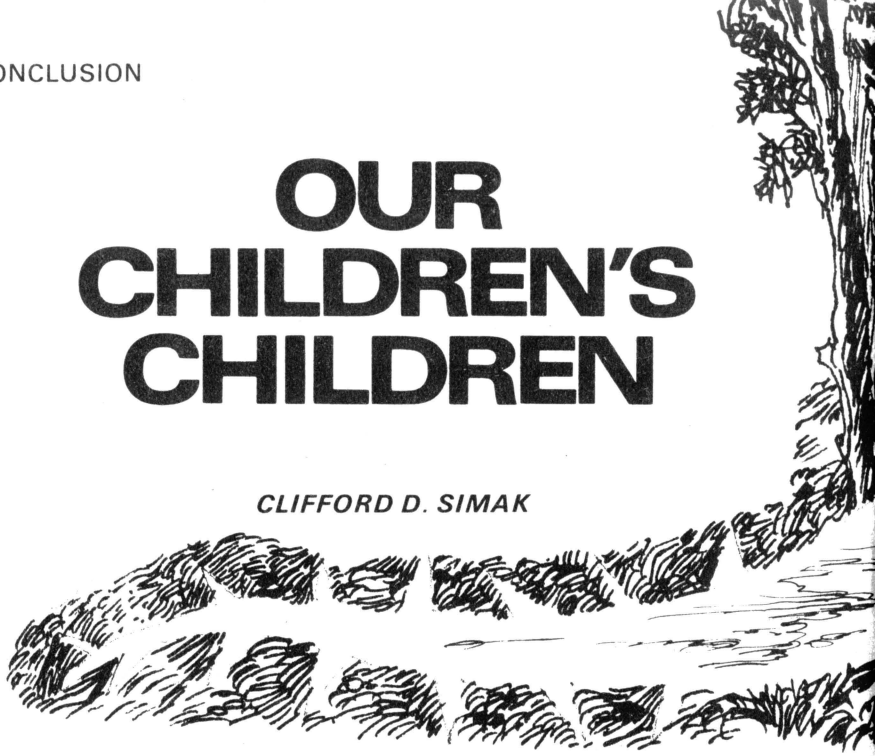
"I won't. Good night."

"Good night," he said.

In the room below them the old woman was patting her straggling hair into place with one hand while she punched a number with the other. "Hello," she said, "this is Westwind. I saw you tonight." ●

OUR CHILDREN'S CHILDREN

CLIFFORD D. SIMAK



WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

BENTLEY PRICE, Global News Service photographer, is relaxing before a Sunday afternoon backyard barbeque when a hole appears in the suburban landscape and people start marching through, four and five abreast. They are outlandishly costumed in garb ranging from long robes to buckskin, seem of all ages, peaceful and carry little or no luggage. When Bentley protests their lawn-trampling their spokesman introduces himself as MAYNARD GALE, and his daughter, ALICE. He and his followers have just come—are still arriving—from five hundred years in the future—and could the children please use the bathroom?

While a steady stream of the visitors line up to use the facility, BENTLEY becomes convinced that if this is a publicity stunt it's a dilly, phones the story in to his editor, TOM MANNING, and starts to take pictures.

MANNING notifies STEVE

WILSON, White House press secretary, as radio reports come in of other "time tunnels" opening all across the nation and people pouring out of them at a rate of approximately a million persons per hour. PRESIDENT SAMUEL HENDERSON assigns the army to handle the situation, as word comes in that the phenomenon has become worldwide—in some of Earth's poverty areas the tunnels pour out tonnages of grain as well as people.

MAYNARD GALE and daughter arrive at White House conference, tell HENDERSON they are refugees, from an alien invasion of Earth five hundred years in the future, ask that heavy artillery be placed into position to fire instantly into any tunnel, regardless of refugees, should the aliens attempt to come through. The aliens are characterized by tremendous physical prowess, instant reproduction and equally instant evolutionary adaptability to any new situation, no matter how intricate.

The refugees plan to continue their flight 25 million years farther back in time to the Miocene, ask to trade their scientific and technological skills and knowledge for help in building new time tunnels to enable them to do so. They also want tools and equipment to help them start over in prehistory, invite their hosts to join them. About two billion refugees are expected.

As the present mobilizes to cope with its instant—if temporary—population explosion some aliens do break through, spreading terror. The President declares a national emergency.

29. Once the men were seated around the table in the conference room, Dr. Samuel Ives opened the discussion.

"This meeting," he said, "despite the solemnity of the occasion that brings us together in the dead of night, marks what for all of us of the present must be an exciting event. Throughout our professional lives most of us have at times puzzled over the fundamental nature of time's irreversibility. A couple of us, myself and Dr. Asbury Brooks, have spent a great deal of effort in its study. I am of the opinion that Dr. Brooks will not take it badly if I say we have made little, if any, progress. While the lay person—viewing time as a philosophical rather than a physical concept—may question the validity of our efforts the fact remains that the physical laws with which all of us work are embedded in this somewhat mysterious function we call time. We must ask ourselves, if we are completely to understand the concepts we employ, both in our daily lives and our continuing investigations into many areas of science, what may be the physical interrelationships underlying the expansion of the universe, information theory and the thermodynamic, electromagnetic, biological and statistical arrows of time. In the description of any physical phenomenon the time variable is a parameter at the most elementary level. We have wondered if such a thing as universal time exists—or are we dealing only with a feature of boundary conditions? There are some of us who think that the latter may be true—that the time factor was perhaps rather randomly set at the moment of the beginning of the universe and that this concept has governed our thinking ever since. And all of us are aware that our concepts of time must be overwhelmingly prejudiced by intuitive notions and

that this may be one of the factors that have made it so difficult for us to understand and formulate any real theories about the subject." He looked across the table at the three men from the future. "I must beg your indulgence for this sort of introduction to our discussion—remarks that, in view of what you have learned, may sound somewhat silly. But I did think it important to set our own studies into some sort of perspective. Now that I have said this much, I think that it is your turn to talk. I assure you that all of us will listen most attentively. Which one of you would like to begin?"

Hardwicke and Cummings looked at one another questioningly. Finally Hardwicke said, "Perhaps I might as well. I must express the deep appreciation all of us feel at your willingness to meet with us at this unusual hour. And I am afraid that we are about to disappoint you, for I must tell you that we know very little more about the fundamental nature of time than you do. We have asked ourselves some of the same questions you have asked and have found no real answers."

"But you can travel in time," said Brooks. "That would argue that you must know something of it. You must have at least a basic understanding—"

"What we found," said Hardwicke, "is that we are not the only universe. There are at least two universes coexisting within the same space, but universes so fundamentally different from one another that neither ordinarily would be aware of the other. At the moment I will not go into the manner in which this other universe was detected or what we know of it. It is not, however, a contraterrene universe, so there is, so far as we know, no danger from it. I might add that the first hint of its existence came from a study of the strangeness of certain particles. The particles themselves are a part of our universe, but in some instances they may react to certain not entirely understood conditions in the other. We now have postulated two totally different universes—the other made up of particles and interactions that have little to do with ours. Interactions occur on so small a scale that only blind, dumb luck could bring them to one's notice.

"Fortunately our researchers experienced that kind of luck. And it was mostly luck, too, that revealed to us something else about the second universe. I often wonder if luck itself should be the subject of a study with a view to a better determination of its

parameters. As I said, we found out one other thing about the other universe—a simple but devastating discovery. We learned that the arrow of time in the second universe flows in exactly the opposite direction to the one it travels in ours. While undoubtedly in that universe it was moving from the universe's past toward its future—in relation to our universe it was traveling from our future toward our past."

"One thing puzzles me," said Ives. "You were dealing with a very complex matter and yet in twenty years or so—"

"It is not as remarkable as you think," said Cummings. "We launched a crash project, certainly, to achieve our means of coming here, but by then we were in possession of the knowledge Dr. Hardwicke has just outlined. On your old time track the second universe was discovered somewhat less than a hundred years from now. It had been investigated for almost four centuries before we finally put the time arrow of the second universe to work. As a matter of fact, much significant work had been done on the possibility of using the opposite time direction of the second universe as a time-travel medium. All we had to do was give the investigation a final push. I think the method we finally devised might have been worked out earlier—even before the invasion by the aliens—if there had been any reason for doing so. But, aside from scientific curiosity, we had little motive. Under ordinary circumstances there's not much attraction to time travel—if you can move in only one direction and there's no possibility of returning.

"By the time we decided," said Hardwicke, "that the only way we could survive was to travel back into time, much of the real work already had been done. Throughout the history of scientific inquiry a certain segment of the population has always questioned the validity of pure research. What is the good of it? How is it going to help us? What can we use it for? I think our situation is a perfect example of the value of basic research. The work that had been done on the second universe and its time flow had been pure research, an expenditure of effort and funds that seemed to offer no chance at all of either benefit or return. And yet, as things turned out, it did have a return. It offered the human race a chance to save itself."

"As I understand it, said Brooks, "what you have done is make use of the opposite time

flow of the other universe to bring you here. Somehow or other your time tunnels trap the opposite flow. You step into the reverse stream in your own present time and step out of it in ours. But to do this you must manage to speed up the time flow tremendously and be able to control it."

Hardwicke said, "The hard part of the job was the implementation theories that had already been worked out. Still, the end result turned out to be unbelievably simple to achieve."

"You think it is in the range of our present technology."

"We are sure of it," said Hardwicke. "That is why we chose your particular period. We had to select a target that held men who would understand and accept our theories—and other men who could build the necessary equipment. We also needed to reach a time whose intellectual and moral climate was such that there would be a willingness to provide us the help we needed. We also had to find a period with an economy productive enough to supply us with the implements and tools we would need to start life anew in the Miocene. Perhaps we are being unfair to hope for so much from you. We have one justification. If we had not come back to you the race of man would have ended some five hundred years from now. As it is, you have been shifted to a new time track, a phenomenon we can take time later to discuss, if you wish. For there now is a chance, although no certainty, that you can continue into a future that holds no alien invasion."

"Dr. Osborne, said Ives, "has so far taken no part in this discussion. Is there something you might like to add?"

Osborne shook his head. "All this is beyond my competence, gentlemen. I'm not a physicist, but a geologist with leanings toward paleontology. I'm simply along for the ride. Later, if some of you want to discuss the Miocene, which is our eventual destination—that is something I could talk about."

Brooks said, "I would be interested in hearing you right now. It's been proposed that some of the present population of the Earth go back into the Miocene with you. The idea might appeal to the more venturesome among us. Would you be willing to tell us what you think we might find in the Miocene?"

"I would be glad to. You must understand, of course, that we are dealing in suppositions, although we can be fairly sure of some facts. The main reason we

picked the Miocene is that grass first appeared upon the Earth then—grazing animals seem to have increased rapidly in the early part of the epoch. The climate later became somewhat more arid, although by our calculations there still would have been plenty of rainfall for agriculture. Many of the huge forest tracts gave way to grassy plains, supporting herds of herbivores. Evidence has been found of oreodonts, sheep-sized animals that may have been remote relatives of the camels. There would have been camels, too, although far smaller than the ones you know today. We could expect to find small horses, the size of ponies. We might see a number of rhinos. Some time during the Miocene, probably in its early days, elephants migrated to North America over the Bering land bridge. They would have been four-tuskers, smaller than today's elephants. One of the more dangerous animals would have been the giant pig, big as oxen and with skulls that measured four feet long—ugly customers to meet. With so many herbivores running in herds on the prairies, the Miocene could be expected to have its full quota of carnivores, both canines and felines—probably the ancestors of the sabertooths. That's only a quick rundown. There is much more. The point is that we believe the Miocene was a time of rather rapid evolutionary development, with the fauna expanding into new genera and species—the changes characterized overall, perhaps, by a tendency of animals to increase in size. There might be a number of holdovers from the Oligocene, even from the Eocene. I suppose some of the mammals might be dangerous. There could be poisonous snakes and insects—I'm not entirely sure of that. As a matter of fact, we have little evidence along those lines."

"In your estimation, however," said Brooks, "modern man could survive in the Miocene."

"We are sure he could. He could live off the land until he got started. There would be plenty of game, nuts, berries, fruit, roots. Fishing should be good. We're not as sure about the climate as we'd like to be, but there is some evidence that it would be more equable than now. The summers probably would be as warm, the winters not so cold. You understand this can't be guaranteed."

"I understand that, said Brooks, "but in any case—you're set on going?"

"We have," said Osborne, "very little choice."

30. Steve Wilson came back into the pressroom. The desk lamp was still lit, painting a circle of light in the darkened room. The teletypes muttered against the wall. Almost three o'clock, he realized. He'd have to get some sleep. Even with the best of luck he had four hours or so before he had to be on the job again.

As he approached the desk Alice Gale rose from a chair set in the room's shadows. She still wore her white robe. He wondered if it was all the clothing she had. The people from the future had carried litle luggage.

"Mr. Wilson," she said, "we have been waiting for you, hoping that you would come here. My father wants to talk with you. Will you see him?"

"Certainly, said Wilson. "Good morning, Mr. Gale."

Gale came out of the darkness and laid his attache case on the desk top.

"I am somewhat embarrassed," he said. "I find myself in a position that could be awkward. I wonder if you would listen to me and tell me how to go about what I want to do. You seem to be a man who knows his way around."

Wilson, moving to the desk, stiffened. The whole thing, he sensed, as Gale had said, had an awkwardness about it. He sensed he was going to be placed in a difficult position. He waited.

"We are well aware," said Gale, "that our coming from the future has placed a terrible burden upon the governments and the peoples of the world. We did what little we could. In areas where we knew there would be food shortages we arranged the delivery of wheat and other foodstuffs. We stand ready to supply any labor that will be required, for we represent a large and idle labor force. But the building of the tunnels and the supplying to us of the tools we will need in the Miocene will represent a vast expenditure of funds—"

He reached down into the circle of light on the desk top, unlatched the case, opened it. It was packed with small leather bags. Lifting one of these, he pulled it open and poured out a shower of cut stones that flashed and glittered in the light.

"Diamonds," he said.

Wilson gulped. "But why?" he whispered. "Why diamonds? And why bring them to me?"

"These stones provided the only way we could bring anything of value in small enough volume to be conveniently transported. We know that if they were dumped on the exchanges all at once they

would ruin much of your economy. But if they were fed into the market a few at a time, surreptitiously, they would have little effect. This is especially true if their existence can be kept secret. We have been very careful that there be no duplications—that no paradoxes are involved with their presence here. It would have been possible to have brought from the future many of the famous gems that now exist and are well known. We have not done this. All the stones in this case were found and cut in your future."

"Put them back," said Wilson, horrified. "Good God, man, can you imagine what might happen if it became known what was in that case? Billions of dollars—"

"Yes, many billions," Gale said calmly, "at the going prices in this age. They are worth much more here than they were in our time."

Unhurriedly he picked up the stones, put them back into the bag, fitted the bag back into the case, closed and latched it.

"I wish," said Wilson, "you hadn't told me about this."

"But we had to," Alice said. "Don't you see? You are the only one we know—the only person we can trust. We knew we could safely tell you—and that you could tell us what we should do."

Wilson struggled to put some calmness into his words. "Let's all sit down," he said, "and talk this over. And let's not speak too loudly. I don't think there is anyone around, but someone could walk in."

They went back beyond the circle of light, pulled three chairs together and sat down.

"Now suppose you tell me," Wilson said, "what you're really driving at."

"We had thought," said Gale, "that the proceeds from these stones, wisely marketed, could compensate in part for some of the actual costs your helping us entails. Not one government, not one people, but all the governments and all the peoples of the Earth are involved."

"In that case—"

"I anticipate your question. Why were the stones not divided and offered to the separate governments? There are two reasons this was not done. We want to keep the number of those who know of these stones to a minimum. Next, there are few governments we can trust—actually some of us felt the United Nations should be the organization entrusted with the gems. But frankly, we have little confidence in the U. N. Next I was supposed to hand the stones to

your President. I decided against this when I realized how many problems he had weighing on his mind and how often he was forced to depend on the judgments of many other people."

"I know one thing," said Wilson. "You can't keep on carrying this case around with you. You have to be placed under security until it has been put into some safe place. Fort Knox, probably, if the government is willing to accept it."

"You mean, Mr. Wilson, that I'll have to be placed under guard? I'm not sure I like that.

"Christ, I don't know," said Wilson. "I don't even know where to begin.

He reached for the phone and dialed. "Jane, you still on duty? Do you know—has the President retired?"

"An hour ago," said Jane.

"Good, said Wilson. "He should have gone to bed long before then."

"Is it important, Steve? He left orders that if anything important came up he should be called."

"No, this can wait. Do you think you can get hold of Jerry Black?"

"I'll try. I think he's still around."

The room was silent except for the teletypes. Gale and Alice sat unstirring in their chairs. Light still shone beneath the press-lounge doors, but there was no sound of typing.

"We're sorry to upset you so," Alice said to Wilson. "But we were at our wits' ends. We didn't know what to do."

"It's all right," said Wilson.

"You don't know how much this means to us," she said. "The rest of the people may not know till later, but we'll know that we did not come as beggars. That we paid our way. That's important to us."

Footsteps came down the corridor and turned in at the door.

"What's going on, Steve?" asked Jerry Black.

"We need a couple of men," said Wilson.

"I'm one of them," said Black. "I can find another."

"It'll be a favor," said Wilson. "I have no jurisdiction. I'm acting on my own. It'll be until tomorrow morning—or as soon as I can see the President."

"It's okay," said Black, "if it's for the President."

"I think," said Wilson, "that it might be for him."

"All right. What is it?"

"Mr. Gale has an attache case. I won't tell you what is in it. You wouldn't want to know. But it's important. And I want him to keep it—him and no one else. Until we know what to do with it."

"That can be managed. You think it needs two of us?"

"I'd feel better if there were two of you."

"No trouble," said Black. "Let me use your phone."

31. Dawn was graying the eastern sky when Enoch Raven sat down to his typewriter. Outside the window lay the green Virginia hills, and in the trees and shrubs a few awakening birds began their twittering and chirping.

He flexed his fingers over the keyboard and then began to type steadily and without pause. He had made it a rule these many years to have his words thought out before he sat down to write his column.

> The world today faces what may be its greatest crisis, and the strangeness of this lies in the fact that the crisis comes not by the ordinary channels. Although, when one thinks it through, it becomes apparent that the present difficulty does parallel a problem we have long recognized—overpopulation and the economic problems that could spring from it. As short a time ago as last Sunday morning, however, no one in his right mind could have imagined that a critical overpopulation could come upon us overnight.
>
> Now that it has, we are faced with a situation that must be solved, not over a long period of careful planning, but in a matter of weeks. The brutal fact is that we can feed the hordes of people who have come to us for help for only a very limited span of time. They themselves are frank in admitting that they were aware of the problems their coming would create and in consequence of this have brought us the knowledge and the tools we will need in solving them. All that remains is that we use these tools. This requires the willing cooperation of every one of us. These words are not used lightly, nor in a horatory political sense, but in a very personal way. Every one of us, each of us, all of us.
>
> What is needed from most of us is forbearance, a willingness to bear certain sacrifices, to tolerate certain inconveniences. It may mean that there will be less food—and that not so

good—for us to eat. We may have to wait for delivery of that new car. We may not be able to buy a new lawnmower when the old one breaks down. The economic energy and direction that under normal circumstances would be channeled into the production and distribution of items and services we need must be channeled not only into sending our descendants farther back into time, but into providing them with the equipment, tools and supplies they will need to build a viable culture. Detroit may be called on to turn out plows and other implements rather than cars. It may be that, voluntarily or by government decree, we may have to ration ourselves. Wise as the actions taken by President Henderson may have been in calling for a bank holiday and a price and wage freeze, a case can be made for his having taken one further step by issuing a strong warning against hoarding. While we can ill afford to deal in a bureaucratic manner with the press of events that has been forced upon us, it would seem that some move toward a strict rationing of food and other items vital to the continuing economy should be taken at once. It is quite understandable, for political reasons, why Mr. Henderson might have been reluctant to do this. But it is upon such unpopular actions—or the failure to take these actions—that we sometimes stand or fall.

It would scarcely seem necessary to point out that such actions as the President has taken should be taken by other nations as well. It is reliably understood that Britain, Russia, France, Germany, Japan, China and possibly other nations may already have made corresponding moves before these words see print. The problem we face is worldwide and for it to be solved temporary economic strictures must be imposed not only upon the larger economic units, but upon the entire world.

The appearance of the people from the future undoubtedly will call forth from the various intellectual factions a wide variety of opinions, many of which undoubtedly will be ill-

founded. This is illustrated by the public agony being exhibited by the Reverend Jake Billings, one of the more colorful of our evangelists, over the revelation that the people of five hundred years from now have forsaken religion as a rather footless factor in the lives of men. Distressing as this may be to the professional religionists, it is scarcely a consideration that has any bearing on the matter immediately at hand. Not only on this point, but on many others, profound questions will be raised, but now is not the time to expend any noticeable amount of energy in trying to answer or resolve them. They will only further divide a population which, under the best of circumstances, is bound to be divided by the basic task which has been brought upon us.

We have not yet had time, nor indeed enough facts, to form a true evaluation of the situation. While we have been made aware of some of the basics, much is yet unknown.

There is no time, of course, for deliberate consideration of the crisis—in essence, the world must act with more expediency than may be entirely wise. The very fact that expediency is necessary calls for a public forbearance that is usually not desirable when great issues are at stake. A storm of criticism and a violent putting forward of opinions at variance with official opinion and action will accomplish nothing other than an impedance to a solution which must come quickly if it is to come at all. The men in Washington, at Whitehall and in the Kremlin may be wrong on many points, but their various publics must realize that they will be acting in honest good faith, doing what they consider proper.

Democracy demands, and rightly, that all men should have a voice in their government and in governmental decisions and actions, that all viewpoints be given full consideration, that there be no arbitrary decisions counter to the public will. But today we cannot afford the luxury of such an idealistic concept. The situation may not be

handled as many of us would wish. Some toes undoubtedly will be trod upon. Certain ideas of justice and propriety may be outraged. But to accept all of this, if not in silence, at least without raising too great an outcry, is a part of the forbearance that is called for.

This commentator has no way of knowing what will happen. I cannot even guess. I am aware that there may be much that I will not like, much that I will consider could be done differently or better. In the past there has been no hesitancy on my part to place my personal opinion on record and at a later date, after this is over, I suppose I may not be above pointing out glaring errors as I may have perceived them. But from this day forward and until then I shall, as a personal contribution, exercise stern censorship upon, if not my thoughts, at least upon my typewriter. I am hereby enrolling myself as charter member in the Keep Your Mouth Shut, Enoch, Club. The membership is wide open and I invite all of you to join.

32. He had somehow climbed a tree and gotten out on a limb—for no reason that seemed quite logical—when a violent wind had come up. Now he was hanging grimly to a branch whipping in the wind. He knew that at any moment his grasp might be torn loose and he would be thrown to the ground. But when he looked down he saw, with horror, that there wasn't any ground.

From somewhere far off, a voice was speaking to him, but he was so intent on maintaining his grip on the branch that he was unable to distinguish the words. The shaking became even more violent.

"Steve," the voice was saying. "Steve, wake up." His eyes came open to a slit and he realized that he was in no tree. A distorted face swam crazily just above him. No one had such a face.

"Wake up, Steve," said a voice that was Henry Hunt's. "The President is asking for you." Wilson lifted a fist and scrubbed his eyes. The face, no longer distorted, was Henry Hunt's.

The face receded into the distance as the *Times* man straightened. Wilson swung his feet off the couch, sat up. Sunlight was streaming through the windows of the press lounge.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Almost eight."

Wilson squinted up at Hunt. "You get any sleep?"

"I went home for a couple of hours. I couldn't sleep. Things kept spinning in my head. So I came back." He picked a jacket off the floor. "This yours?"

Wilson nodded groggily. "I got to get washed up," he said. "I got to comb my hair." He rose to his feet, took the jacket from Hunt and tucked it under his arm. "What's going on?"

"What you might expect. The wires are clogged with screams of anguish over the business holiday. How come you didn't tip us off, Steve?"

"I didn't know. He never said a word about it."

"Well, that's all right," said Hunt. "We should have guessed it. Can you imagine what would have happened if the exchanges were open?"

"Any word about the monster?"

"Rumor. Nothing solid. One rumor says another got through in Africa. Somewhere in the Congo. Christ, they'll never find it there."

"The Congo's not all jungle, Henry."

"Where it's supposed to have happened, it is."

Wilson headed for the washroom. When he returned Hunt had a cup of coffee for him.

"Thanks." Wilson sipped the hot brew and shuddered. "I don't know if I can face the day," he said. "Any idea of what the President has in mind?"

Hunt shook his head.

"Judy in yet?"

"Not yet, Steve."

Wilson put the cup down on the coffee table. "Thanks for getting me up and going," he said. "I'll see you later."

He went into the pressroom. The lamp he had forgotten to turn off still shone feebly on the desk. In the corridor outside footsteps went smartly up and down. He straightened his jacket and went out.

Two men were with the President. One was General Daniel Foote; the other was one of the refugees, rigged out in a mountaineer outfit.

"Good morning, Mr. President," said Wilson.

"Good morning, Steve. You get any sleep?"

"An hour or so."

"You know General Foote, of course," said the President. "The gentleman with him is Isaac Wolfe. Dr. Wolfe is a biologist. He brings us rather frightening news. I thought you should hear it."

Wolfe was a heavy man—heavy of body, deep in the chest, stand-

ing on short, solid legs. His head, covered by a rat's nest of graying hair seemed overlarge for a man his height.

He stepped quickly forward and shook Wilson's hand. "I am sorry," he said, "to be the bearer of such disturbing facts."

"Last night," said the President, "rather, some time this morning, a farmer not far from Harper's Ferry was wakened by something in his chicken coop. He went out and found the henhouse full of strange beasts, the size, perhaps, of half-grown hogs. He fired at them and they got away, all except one which the shotgun blast almost cut in two. The farmer was attacked. He's in a hospital. He'll live, I'm told, but he was fairly well chewed up. From what he says there can be little doubt the things in the henhouse were a new batch of the monsters."

"But that's impossible, said Wilson. "The monster escaped only a few—"

"Dr. Wolfe came to me last evening," said Foote, "shortly after the monster escaped from the tunnel. I frankly didn't believe what he told me, but when the report of the henhouse episode came in from an officer of a search party out in West Virginia, I looked him up and asked him to come to the White House. I'm sorry, Doctor, for not believing you to start with."

"But it's still impossible," said Wilson.

"No," said Wolfe. "It is not impossible. We are dealing with an organism entirely different from anything you've ever known. The evolutionary processes of these monsters are like nothing you have even guessed. Their reaction to environmental stress is beyond all belief. We had known something of it and had deduced the rest. But I am convinced that under stresses such as the escaped monster is experiencing, the developmental procedures can be speeded up to a fantastic rate. An hour or so to hatch—an hour later to be hunting food. The same pressure that is placed upon the parent is transmitted to the young. For both the parent and the young this is a crisis situation. The parent is aware of this, of course—the young, of course, would not be. But in some strange manner I can't pretend to understand a sense of desperate urgency is transmitted to the egg. The message seems to read: Hatch swiftly, grow up quickly, scatter widely, reach the egg-laying stage as soon as possible. It is a genetic reaction to a survival threat. The young aliens are driven by an evo-

lutionary force that in an earthly life form would be inconceivable. They are members of a strange race that has a unique and inborn capability to use every trick in the evolutionary pattern to its advantage."

Wilson found a chair and sat down limply. He looked at the President. "Has any of this leaked out?"

"No," said the President, "it has not. The farmer's wife phoned the sheriff. The military search party had just reached the area and was talking with the sheriff when the call came in. The officer in charge clamped on a security lid. That is why you're here, Steve. We can't keep this buttoned up. It'll leak out—if not this particular incident, then others. There may be hundreds of these tiny monsters out there in the mountains. They'll be seen and reported. The reports will begin to pile up. We can't sit on all of them, nor should we."

"The problem," said Wilson, "is how to release the news without scaring the pants off everybody."

"If we don't tell them," said the President, "we create a credibility gap that will make everything we do suspect. And there is, as well, the matter of public safety."

"In a few days," said Foote, "all the mountains will be swarming with full-grown monsters. They will probably scatter. We can hunt some of them down, but not all. In any event we'll need every man we can lay our hands on to hunt them down."

"That they will scatter is right," said Wolfe. They will want to insure their chances of survival. And they can travel fast. By another day, perhaps, they'll be up in New England, down into Georgia. They will keep, at first, to the mountainous terrain because it would give them the best concealment. In time they'll begin branching out from the mountains."

"How long would you guess," asked Wilson, "before they begin laying eggs?"

Wolfe spread his hands. "Who can know?" he said.

"Your best guess."

"A week. Two weeks. I do not know."

"How many eggs in a clutch?"

"A couple of dozen. You must understand we do not know. We found only a few nests."

"When will they begin their killing?"

"Now. Right now. They must eat to grow. They must do a lot of killing. Wild animals, farm animals and occasionally humans.

Not many humans to start with. By killing men they draw attention to themselves. Warlike as they may be, they still will know they are vulnerable because there are so few of them. They may be psychopathic killers, but they aren't stupid."

"We have some troops out now," said the President. "We'll have to use many more. Get planes and helicopters up to spot the aliens. I talked to Sandburg just a while ago. He is coming in. He'll know what we can do. This means we call out the reserves, perhaps call back some troops from abroad. Not only do we have to hunt the monsters, but we have to maintain the camps for the refugees."

"We do not wish to stand idly by," Wolfe put in. "There are many thousands of us. Give us arms and we'll go in side by side with your military. We know about these creatures and we were the ones who brought them here. We have a duty and—"

"Later," said the President, "there will be plenty you can do. Getting you into the field now would be a tremendous task. Right at the moment we must depend on our own men."

"How about the people out there in the mountains?" asked Wilson. "Do we pull them out?"

The President shook his head. "I don't think so, Steve. We have, right now, all the refugees we can handle. And I'm inclined to think that at the moment our monsters may not be too aggressive. They're probably concentrating on staying out of sight. There may be some incidents, but we must be prepared to accept those. It's all we can do.

"I think you're right, sir," said Wolfe. "They are outnumbered now and must build up their strength. In any event, the young aliens will not, for a time, be too great a menace. They'll have to put on size and weight. They may know that they face deadlier weapons—and in much greater numbers—than anything we could ever bring against them. We had lived in peace so long we had lost most of the military techniques and we started from scratch in weapon building."

"You face a busy day, Mr. President," said Foote. "If there is nothing further you wish from us—"

The President rose and came around the desk. He shook both his visitors by the hand. "Thanks for coming by," he said. "This is something we must get busy on immediately."

Wilson stood up to leave. "Do I call in the press immediately?"

he asked. "Or should I wait until after you have talked with Sandburg?"

The President hesitated, considering. "I should think right away," he said. "I'd like us to be the first to tell them. The military has the lid clamped down, but it won't stay clamped for long. Some of the people from the Hill are coming in to see me. It would be better if they knew about this before they arrived."

"There's another matter, said Wilson. "You were asleep and I didn't want to wake you. There's a dispatch case full of diamonds—"

"Diamonds? What have diamonds got to do with this?"

"It's a rather awkward business, sir," said Wilson. "You recall that case Gale was carrying—"

"There were diamonds in that case?"

"It was packed with sacks. He opened one sack and poured out diamonds on the desk. He told me the rest of the sacks also contained diamonds and I'm inclined to believe him. The refugees had the idea they could turn them over to us to pay whatever was laid out to send them back to the Miocene."

"I would like to have seen your face," Henderson said, "when he poured out the diamonds. What, may I ask, did you do about it?"

"I called in Jerry Black and put Gale under guard. I insisted he keep the diamonds."

"I guess that was all you could do. I think maybe I should call in the treasury people to take temporary custody and check with Reilly Douglas about the legality of all this. Did you get any idea how much the diamonds might be worth?"

"Gale said, at present prices, perhaps billions of dollars. That is, if they can be fed into retail outlets slowly, without depressing the market. They're not, you understand, for us alone, but for the entire world. Gale wants to leave them with us in trust as it were."

"You realize, of course, how sticky this could be if word leaked out?"

"To be entirely fair," said Wilson, "we still must realize that they are only trying to be helpful. They want to pay their way."

"Yes, I know," said the President. "We'll have to see what Reilly says about it."

33. The crowd had been gathering in Lafayette Park across the avenue from the White House since early morning. It was still the quiet and watchful group that had

stood the Sunday vigil, stolid in its watchfulness. But now there were a few placards and there had been none before. One of the placards, crudely lettered, read: BACK TO THE MIOCENE. Another read: BRING ON YOUR SABERTOOTHS. Still another: LET US LEAVE THIS LOUSY WORLD.

A newsman pushed his way through the crowd, zeroing in on the whiskered youth who bore the BACK TO THE MIOCENE placard.

"Would you mind telling me," he asked, "what is going on?"

"Man," said the youth, impatiently, "it is there for you to read. It says it loud and clear."

"It puzzles me," said the newsman, "what you are trying to prove. Or don't you have a point to make?"

"No points this time," the sign-carrier told him. "In the past we have tried to prove some points and have mostly gotten nowhere." He made a thumb in the direction of the White House. "The man don't listen too good. No one listens too good."

"This time," said a girl who stood beside the sign-carrier, "we're not proving anything at all. We're simply saying what we want to do and that's go back to the Miocene."

"Or the Eocene," said another girl. "Or the Paleocene. Just anywhere at all to get away from this scruffy place. We want to leave this crummy world and get another start. We want to go back and build the kind of world we want. We've been trying for years to change this society and we've gotten exactly nowhere. And when we saw we couldn't change it we tried to get out of it. That's what the communes are all about. But the society won't let us go. It reaches out and hauls us back. It will not let us go."

"Finally," said the sign-carrier, "here's a way to get shut of it. If these people from the future can travel to the past there's no reason why we shouldn't. There aren't many people who would be sorry to see us go. Most of them would be glad."

"I suppose," said the newsman, "that this could be called a movement. Most of the other things you people have done have been labeled movements. Would you mind telling me how many of you—"

"Not at all," said the first girl. "Not more than fifteen or twenty of us now. But you write your story and let us get a news spot on television and there'll be thousands of us. They'll be coming from Chicago and New York, from Boston and Los Angeles. There'll be more of us than this town can hold. Be-

cause, you see, this is the first real chance we've had to get away."

"That's all right," the newsman said. "I can see your point. But how do you go about it? Storm across the street and pound on the White House door?"

"If you mean," said the sign-carrier, "that no one will pay attention to us, you may be right. But twenty-four hours from now they'll pay attention to us. Forty-eight hours from now they'll be out here in the street talking with us."

"But you realize, of course, there are no time tunnels yet. There may never be. Those will take materials and manpower."

"They got their manpower right here, mister. All anyone has got to do is ask. Hand us picks and shovels. Hand us wrenches. Hand us anything at all and tell us what to do. We'll work until we drop. We'll do anything to get away from here. We don't want any pay for working—we don't want anything at all except to be allowed to go."

"You tell them that," said the second girl. "You put it just the way we say."

"We're not out to kick up any trouble," said the sign-carrier. "We don't want to cause any fuss. We just want to let them know. This is the only way we can."

"We won't ask anything if they'll only let us leave," said the first girl. "We would like some hoes and axes, maybe some pots and pans. But if they won't give us anything we'll go empty-handed."

"Prehistoric men made out with stone," said the sign-carrier. "If we have to we can do the same."

"Why stand there listening to them?" asked a burly individual with a cigar stuck in his mouth. "Hell, all they do is talk. They all are full of crap. They don't want to go anywhere. They just want to stir up trouble."

"You're wrong," said the man with the sign. "We mean exactly what we say. What makes you think we want to stay here with jerks like you?"

The man with the cigar made a grab at the sign and one of the girls kicked him in the shin. His reaching fingers missed the sign. The carrier clunked him on the head with it. A man who had been standing beside the man with the cigar hit the sign-carrier on the jaw.

The scuffle exploded and the police came in and broke it up.

34. Judy was at her desk. Notes were beginning to accumulate on the spindle. The lights on the console were blinking.

"You get any sleep?" asked Wilson.

She looked up at him. "A little.

I lay awake thinking, scared. It's not good, is it, Steve?"

"Not good," he said. "It's too big for us to handle. If it weren't for the time element it wouldn't be so bad. If we only had a little time."

She gestured toward the door leading to the lounge. "You won't tell them that, will you?"

He grinned. "No, I won't tell them that."

"They've been asking when you're going to see them."

"Fairly soon," he said.

"I might as well tell you," she said. "No use waiting. I'm going home. Back to Ohio."

"But I need you here."

"You can get a girl from the secretarial pool. Couple of days and you won't know the difference."

"That's not what I mean."

"I know what you mean. You need me to shack up with. It's been like that for how long—six months? It's this damn town. It makes everything dirty. Somewhere else it might have worked for us. But it isn't working here."

"Damn it, Judy," he said, "what's got into you? Because I didn't come out last night—"

"Partly that, perhaps. Not all that, of course. I know why you had to stay. But it was so lonely and so many things had happened and I sat there thinking and got scared. I tried to call my mother and the lines were busy. A poor scared girl, for Christ's sake, running back to mama. But suddenly everything was different. I wasn't a sleek, competent Washington hussy any longer—I was a kid in pigtails in a little town deep in Ohio. It all started with my getting scared. Tell me honestly now—I had a right to be scared."

"You had a right," he said soberly. "I'm scared myself. So is everyone."

"What's going to happen to us?"

"Damned if I know. But that isn't what we were talking about."

"Monsters running loose," she said. "Too many mouths to feed. Everyone fighting one another or getting set to fight."

"We were talking about your going to Ohio. I'm not going to ask you do you really mean it—because I know you do. I suppose you're lucky to have a place to run to. Most of us have no place. I'd like to ask you to stay, but that would be unfair. What's more, it would be selfish. But I still wish you would."

"I have a plane reservation," she said. "With the phone tied up and all I was surprised to get one. The country's in a panic. In a time like this you get that terribly helpless feeling."

"You won't like Ohio. Once you get there you won't like it. If you're scared in Washington, you'll be scared in Ohio."

"I still am going, Steve. Come six-fifteen tonight I'll be on that plane."

"There's nothing I can say?"

"There's nothing you can say," she said.

"Then you'd better let the press in. I have some news for them."

35. Senator Andrew Oakes hitched himself up slightly from the depths of the chair. "I'm not right sure, Mr. President," he said, "that it's wise to bring home all the troops. We need to keep our bases manned. And it seems to me we're allowing ourselves to get flustered just a mite too soon. Some itty-bitty monsters raid a chicken coop out in West Virginia and we start bringing home the troops. It don't scarcely seem right. And I'm not sure it was too smart, either, to tell the newsmen about these little monsters. We'll get the country all up tight."

"Senator," said Congressman Nelson Able, "I think you may have gotten your protocol somewhat twisted. We were not invited here to decide whether the troops were to be brought back home, but rather to learn that they were being brought back and to be told the reason for it."

"I still believe, said Senator Oakes, "that President Henderson would want to know our thoughts. He might not agree with them, but I think that he should hear them.

"That's right, Andy," said the President. "You know that through the years I have listened to you often and almost as often have been fascinated by what you had to say. Which is not to say I agreed with you. Most commonly I don't."

"I am well aware of that," said Oakes, "but it has not stopped me from saying what I think. And I think it's plain damn foolishness to fly back the troops. It's not going to take the total strength of our military might to run down some little chicken-killing monsters."

"I think the point has been made," said Senator Brian Dixon, "that the monsters will not stay little monsters. The only sensible way for us to tackle them is to run them down before there get to be any more of them and before they have a chance to grow."

"But how do we know," persisted Oakes, "that they will really grow or increase in numbers? We're taking the word of people who came scurrying back to us because they couldn't face them. And

they couldn't face them because they had let down their guard. They had no military and they had no weapons—"

"Now, just a minute, Senator," protested Congressman Able. "It's all right for you to make your military speeches up on the Hill. You get a good press there and can impress the public. But this is just among ourselves. We won't be impressed."

"Gentlemen," Henderson said, "as I see it, this is all beside the point. With all due deference to the Senator, the military will be brought back home. It will be brought home because the secretary of defense and the chiefs of staff have told me the forces are needed here. We discussed matters very thoroughly earlier in the day. The feeling was that we cannot take the chance of anything going wrong. We may be aiming at overkill, but that is better than negligence. It may be true that we have been given poor information by the people from the future, but I am not inclined to think so. They have faced the monsters for twenty years and it seems to me that they would know far more of them than we do. I have talked with members of the Academy of Sciences and they tell me that while the characteristics attributed to this life form may be unusual they do not go contrary to any established biological rule. So I don't think you can say there has been any lack of responsibility in the reaching of our decisions. Because of the press of circumstances we have moved faster than we ordinarily would, but we simply haven't got the time to go at any of this with due deliberation."

Oakes did not reply, but settled back in his chair, grunting softly to himself.

"There was a report of a monster loose in the Congo," said Congressman Wayne Smith. "Have you, sir, any further information?"

"None," Henderson said. "We can't be sure one did get through. The reports are unreliable."

"There has been no request for aid to hunt it down?"

"No request," said the President. "Nothing official at all."

"How about the tunnels, sir? The news reports seem to be in some conflict. Some of them, we know, have closed, but I can't seem to get a clear idea of what is going on."

"You probably know as much as we do here, Wayne. Here at home the Virginia tunnel is closed, of course. Two more were closed without our intervention—one in

Wisconsin, the other down in Texas. I suppose those were shut down by the people in the future when the monsters were moving too close. Either that or there were malfunctions. Otherwise all the tunnels in the United States still are operating."

"Would you think that the two you mentioned as closing may have done so because all the people had come through? There has to be an end to all these people some time."

"We know the Wisconsin tunnel closed because of an attack at the other end. The last of the people who came through told us that. I don't know about the Texas closing. But as to the implied question of all the people having come through—yes, I would hope that soon the tunnels would start closing because they've done their job."

"Mr. President," asked Senator Dixon, "what do you know about the practical side of tunnel building? Can we build the tunnels so the people can go back into the past?"

"I am told we can," said the President. "Our physicists and engineers are working with refugee scientists and engineers right now. The refugees have picked out the sites where the tunnels should be built. One encouraging feature is that not as many tunnels need be built as were used in bringing these people here. There isn't the immediate time pressure to get them all back into the Miocene. Also, as I understand it, transportation can be used to get the people to tunnels several hundred miles away. The one problem is getting some tunnels built and the people moving out before the refugees eat us out of house and home."

"The construction of the tunnels, then, isn't beyond our capability? All we need is time, money and labor."

"That is right, Brian. Labor is no problem. The refugees represent a huge and willing labor force and just an hour or so ago I had word from Terry Roberts that our labor peple will raise no objection to our using them on what must be viewed as a federal project. Terry assures me that unions will cooperate in every way. Money is a problem. Even should industry be as willing to go along with us as labor is a vast amount of retooling will be necessary before we can start fabricating the components for the tunnels. Ordinarily retooling is a time-consuming process and a costly one. The fact that we must get at it immediately and around the clock makes it expensive beyond anything that

can be imagined. Next, the components themselves will be costly items. And the brunt of the work must be borne by the predominantly industrial nations. We, Germany, Russia, France, Britain, China, Japan and a few others must build the components—not only for ourselves but for the rest of the world. And we must build enough tunnels for there to be a fairly consistent regional distribution when they go back to the Miocene. While the population of the future is not as great as ours, it still must be scattered. The building of a new civilization in the past would be defeated if we dumped too many people in one area. And we must also furnish the refugees with the tools, livestock and seed they will need to make a new beginning. Furnishing the tools is going to call for a significant industrial capacity."

"Have you talked with anyone in the industrial community?"

"Not personally. Commerce is making some tentative approaches to see what sort of reaction is forthcoming. I have no word as yet. But it seems to me there should be some positive reaction. I should be disappointed if there weren't."

Oakes hunched up out of his chair. "Have you any idea yet, Mr. President, what all of this might cost? Any good round figure?"

"No," Henderson said, "I haven't."

"But it's going to be costly."

"It is going to be costly."

"Maybe a great deal more than the defense budget, which everyone seems so horrified about."

"You want me to say it, of course—" Henderson smiled—"so I will. Yes, it is going to be more costly than the defense budget, many times more costly. It will be even more costly than a war. It may bankrupt the world—but what would you have us do? Go out and shoot down all the refugees? That would solve the problem. Is that a solution you would like?"

Grumbling, Oakes let himself sink back into the chair.

"One thing has occurred to me," said Able. "There is the possibility that no matter what it costs us we may get value received. The refugees come from a time period where many technological problems have been worked out, new approaches have been developed. One thing that has been mentioned is fusion power. We are nowhere near that yet—it may take us years to get there. For us fusion power would be a great leap forward. I would assume that, in return for what we propose to do for

them, they'd be willing to acquaint us with the basics of their technological advances."

"It would ruin us," Oakes said wrathfully. "It would finish up the job they've started. Take fusion power—there, gentlemen, in the twinkling of an eye, the gas and oil and coal industries go down the drain."

"And," said Able, "I suppose the medical profession as well—if these people could give us the cure for cancer."

Dixon said, "What the Congressman says is true. If we had the advantages of all their scientific and technological advances—perhaps their social and political advances—we would be much better off than we are today. To whom, I wonder, would the new knowledge and principles belong? To the man who was able to acquire the information by whatever means? Or to his government? Or to the world at large? And if the last—how would the information be handled or implemented? It seems to me that at best we would have many thorny problems to work out."

Congressman Smith put in, "This is all speculation. Right now, it seems to me, we have two immediate problems. We have to dispose of the aliens and do whatever is possible to send our guests back to the Miocene. Is this the way you read it, Mr. President?"

"Exactly," Henderson said.

"I understand, Oakes rumbled, "that the Russian ambassador is coming over to have a pow-wow with you."

"You were not supposed to know that, Andy."

"Well, you know how it is, Mr. President. You stay up on the Hill long enough and you get a lot of pipelines. You get told things. Even what you're not supposed to know."

"The ambassador's visit is no secret," Henderson said. "I have no idea why he's coming, but we are trying to work closely with everyone. I have had phone conversations with a number of heads of state. I take it that the ambassador's visit is no more than an extension of these talks."

"Perhaps," said Oakes. "Perhaps. I just tend to get a mite nervous when the Russians become too interested in anything at all."

36. There was something in the hazel thicket at the edge of the tiny cornfield—a vague sense of a presence, a tantalizing outline that never quite revealed itself. Something lurked there, waiting. Sergeant Gordy Clark was quite sure of that. Just how he knew he

could not be sure. But he was sure—or almost sure. Some instinct born out of hundreds of patrols into enemy country, something gained through the sharp, hard objectivity that was necessary for an old soldier to keep himself alive while others died—something that he or no one else could define told him there was a lurker in the thicket.

He lay silent, almost unbreathing, stretched out on the little ridge that rose above the cornfield, his rocket launcher steadied on an ancient, rotted log and the crosshairs centered on the thicket. It could be a dog, he told himself, or a child, perhaps even nothing—but he could not bring himself to think it was nothing.

The drooping sumac bush bent close above him, shielding him from the view of whatever might be in the thicket. He could hear the faint mutter of the mountain brook that ran just beyond the cornfield. And from the hollow between the hills, where the farm buildings were located, came the senseless cackling of a hen.

There was no sign of any other member of the patrol. He knew several of them must be close, but they were being careful not to betray their presence. They were regulars, every one of them, and they knew their business. They could move through these woods like shadows. They would make no noise, disturb no bush or branch.

The sergeant smiled grimly to himself. They were good men. He had trained them all. The captain thought himself the one who had trained them, but it had not been the captain. Sergeant Gordon Fairfield Clark had beaten their business into these men. They all hated him, of course, and he wanted it no other way. For out of hatred could sometimes come respect. Fear or respect, he thought—either one would serve. There were some, perhaps, who had cherished the fantasy of putting a bullet through his skull. They must have had opportunities, but they had never done it. For they needed him, the sergeant told himself—although not really him, of course, but the hatred they had for him. There was nothing like a good strong hatred to hold a man together.

The farmer at the buildings in the hollow thought he had seen something. He couldn't tell what it was, but it had been pretty awful from the glimpse he had gotten of it. A kind of thing he had never seen before. Something no man could imagine. The farmer had shivered as he talked.

The thing in the thicket came out so fast that it seemed to blur. Then,

as quickly as it had moved, it stopped. It stood in the little open space of ground between the thicket and the corn.

Sergeant Clark caught his breath and his guts turned over, but even so he moved the launcher to center the cross-hairs on the creature's great paunch and his finger began the steady squeeze.

Then it was gone. The cross-hairs centered on nothing except the ragged clump of brush beyond the cornfield's edge. Clark didn't stir. He lay looking through the sight, but his finger slacked off the trigger.

The monster had not moved. He was sure of that. It had simply disappeared. One microsecond there—the next, gone. Nothing could move that fast.

Sergeant Clark raised his head, levered himself to his knees. He wiped his face and was astonished to find that his hand came away greasy wet. He had not been aware that he was sweating.

37. Fyodor Morozov was a good diplomat and a decent man, the two not being incompatible, and he hated what he had to do. Besides, he told himself, he knew Americans and his present errand simply would not work. It would, of course, embarrass them and point out their sins for all the world to see and, under ordinary circumstances, he would not have been averse to this. But under present conditions, he knew, the Americans were in no position to observe the niceties of diplomatic games and there was no way to gauge reactions.

The President was waiting for him when he was ushered in and beside Henderson as was to be expected, stood Secretary of State Williams. The President was all open blandness, but Thornton Williams, Fyodor could see, was a somewhat puzzled man, although he was doing an excellent job of hiding what he felt.

When they had shaken hands and sat down the President opened the conversation. "It's always good to see you, Mr. Ambassador," he said, "for any reason—or even for no reason. But tell me, is there something we can do for you?"

"My government," said Fyodor, "has asked me to confer with your government—as unofficially as our official positions can make possible—concerning a matter of security I would assume is of some concern to both of us—in fact, to everyone."

He paused and they waited for him to go on. They did not respond—they asked no questions. They were no help at all.

"It is the matter," he said, "of the alien creature that escaped from the Congo tunnel. There is no question that it must be hunted down. Since the Congo does not have sufficient military or police forces to accomplish this, my government is offering to supply some troops and we are about to sound out both Britain and France and perhaps other nations as well to determine if they might want to contribute to a joint expeditionary force against the monster."

"Certainly, Ambassador Morozov," said Williams, "your government does not feel compelled to seek our permission to embark on so neighborly an undertaking. I would imagine that you are prepared to make guarantees that you'll withdraw all forces after the alien has been taken."

"Of course we are."

"Then I fail to grasp your point."

"There is also, said Fyodor, "the matter of the aliens—or monsters—on your own territory. We are prepared to make the same offer to you as we will make the Congo."

"You mean," said the President, amused, "that you would be willing to lend us some of your forces to hunt down the aliens?"

"We would go, I think," said the ambassador, "somewhat beyond the word you use—willing. I would think that, unless you can guarantee absolute effectiveness in containing and disposing of the creatures, we might possibly insist. This is not a national matter—the international community is concerned. The invaders must be obliterated. If you can't accomplish this, then you must accept any help that's offered."

"You know, of course," said Williams, "that we are bringing home our troops."

"I know that, Mr. Secretary, but the question is how quickly can you bring them home. Our military people estimate it will take you thirty days at least and that may not be fast enough. There also is the question of whether you have personnel enough to cover the required territory."

The President said, "I can assure you that we appreciate your concern."

"It is the position of my government," said Fyodor, "that many more men would be placed on the ground—and more quickly—if you accepted the aid we offer—"

"Mr. Ambassador," said the President, interrupting, "I am certain you know better than to come to us with such an impudent suggestion. Surely you are aware

that if there had been genuine good will on the part of your government a different approach would have been employed. There is no question in my mind that the sole purpose of this call is to embarrass us. In that, of course, you've failed. We are not in the least embarrassed."

"I am delighted that you're not," said Fyodor, unruffled. "We thought it was only the decent thing to approach you first in private."

"I assume," said Williams, "you mean you now will bring the matter up before the U.N., where you'll seek to embarrass us in public."

"You gentlemen," said the ambassador, "persist in placing a wrong interpretation on this matter. It is true, of course, that our countries have had their differences in the past. We have not always seen exactly eye to eye. Under present circumstances, however, the entire world needs to stand together. It is quite clear to us—if not to you—that solving the alien problem quickly is in the international interest and that it is your duty to accept such aid as may be needed. We should be reluctant to report to the United Nations that you neglect your duty."

"We would not attempt," said Williams stiffly, "to suggest what you might tell the U.N."

"If you should decide to accept our offer," said the ambassador, "it would be agreeable to us to leave the initiative with you. If you should ask other nations—perhaps Canada, Britain, France and us—to supply the additional forces that you need nothing has to be said about this conversation."

"I suppose," Henderson said, "you will want to relay an answer to your government."

"We would imagine you might want to deliberate on its nature. The U.N. does not meet until tomorrow noon."

"And if we asked some of our friends among the community of nations to supply us troops and did not include your government among them you would be offended?"

"I cannot answer that with any surety—but I would presume we might be."

"It seems to me," Williams said, "that all of this is no more than official mischief-making. I have known you for some years and have held a high regard for you. You have been here among us for three years—or is it four?—and surely you have grown to know us in that length of time. I think that your heart may not be entirely in these proceedings."

Fyodor Morozov rose slowly to his feet. "I have delivered the message from my government," he said. "Thank you both for seeing me."

38. In New York, Chicago and Atlanta, mobs hurled themselves against police lines. The signs read: WE DIDN'T ASK THEM TO COME. They read: WE HAVE LITTLE ENOUGH AS IT IS. They read: WE REFUSE TO STARVE. The crowds threw stones, bricks, tin cans battered into tin shinny pucks with cutting edges, plastic bags filled with garbage. The ghetto areas roiled with violence. Some died—many were injured. Bonfires were kindled. Houses burned and when fire rigs tried to reach the blazes they were stopped by barricades. Great areas were given over to looting.

In little towns throughout the country grim-faced men talked on benches in front of general stores, at filling stations, feed stores, street corners, at coffee breaks in the corner drug store and while waiting their turns in barber shops. They said to one another: It don't seem right, somehow. It don't seem possible. It ain't like the old days, when you knew what was going on. There ain't no telling these days what will happen next. Too much is new-fangled now. The old days are going fast. There is nothing left for a man to hang to.

They said judiciously: Of course if it is the way they say, we got to do our best for them. You heard the President say it last night. Children of our children. That's what he said. Although I don't know how we're going to do it. Not with taxes what they are. We can't pay no more taxes, and them tunnels are about to cost a mint. Taxes on everything you buy. On everything you do. On everything you own. Seems no matter how hard a man may scratch he can't keep ahead of taxes.

They said sanctimoniously: That preacher down in Nashville hit it on the head. If a man loses his religion he has lost everything worthwhile. He has nothing left to live for. You lose the Good Book and you have lost it all. It don't seem possible that even in five hundred years men would have given up their God. It's the evil in the world today, right now, that's made it possible. It's big-city living. The meanness of it. Out here you could never lose your God. No, sir, He's with you all the time. You feel Him in the wind. You see Him in the color of the eastern sky just before the break of dawn. You sense Him in the hush of evening. I

feel sorry for these people from the future. I do feel purely sorry for them. They don't know what they lost.

They said angrily of the riots: Ought to shoot them down. I wouldn't fool around with stuff like that. Not for a minute would I. Those people, some of them, ain't never done a lick of work in their entire lives. They just stand there with their hands out. You can't tell me, if a man really wants to work—or a woman either—he or she can't find a job. Out here we scratch and dig and sweat and we get next to nothing, but we don't riot, we don't burn, we don't stand with hands out.

They said of the young people with the signs in Lafayette Park: If they want to go to the Miocene or whatever this place is, why don't we let them go? We won't never miss them. We would be better off without them.

The village banker said with ponderous judiciousness: Mark my word, we'll be lucky if these future folks don't ruin the entire country. Yes, sir, the entire country—maybe the entire world. The dollar will be worth nothing and prices will go up.

And inevitably some got around to whispering their blackest thoughts: You just wait and see. It's a Commie plot, I tell you. A dirty Commie plot. I don't know how they worked it, but when the wash comes out we'll find these Russians at the bottom of it.

There was marching in the land, a surge toward Washington by hitch-hiking, by bus, by old beat-up clunkers. An inward streaming of the counter-cultural young. Some of them reached the city before the fall of night and marched with banners saying BACK TO THE MIOCENE—BRING ON THE SABER-TOOTHS! Others continued through the night or rested briefly in haystacks or on park benches, wolfing hamburgers, seeking out alliances, talking in hushed tones around campfires.

In the streets of Washington bands formed around young men staggering under the weight of heavy crosses, stumbling and falling, staggering up again to continue on their way. Some wore crowns of thorns, blood trickling down their foreheads. Late in the afternoon a furious fight broke out in Lafayette Park when an indignant crowd, among them many of the hopefully Miocene-bound youngsters, moved to stop a crucifixion, with the victim already lashed to the cross and the hole half dug for its planting. Police charged in and after a bloody fifteen minutes cleared the park. When this was over four

crudely fashioned crosses were gathered up and carted off.

"These kids are crazy," said one panting officer. "I wouldn't give you a dime for the whole lot of them."

Senator Andrew Oakes phoned Grant Wellington. "Now is the time," he said in a conspiratorial voice, "to lie low. Don't say a word. Don't even look as if you were interested. The situation, you might say, is fluid. Nothing is set. No one knows which way the cat will jump. But something is going on. The Russian was at the White House this morning and that bodes no good for anyone. Something we don't understand is very much afoot."

Clinton Chapman phoned Reilly Douglas. "You know anything, Reilly?"

"Nothing except that there really is time travel and we have the blueprints for it."

"You have seen the blueprints?"

"No, I haven't. It's all under wraps. No one is saying anything. The scientists who talked with the future people aren't talking."

"But you—"

"I know, Clint. I'm the attorney general, but, hell, in a thing like this that doesn't count for anything. This is top secret. A few of the Academy crowd are in on it and that is all. Not even the military—and even if the military wanted it I have my doubts—"

"But they have to let someone know. You can't build a thing until you know how.

"The blueprints show how to build it, but that's all. Not what it really is. Not how it works. Not why it works. Not the principle."

"What the hell difference does that make?"

"I should think it would make some," said Douglas. "I, personally, would be distrustful of building something I didn't understand."

"You say it is time travel. No doubt of that? It really is time travel?"

"No doubt at all," said Douglas.

"Then there's a mint in it," said Chapman, "and I mean to—"

"But if it only works one way."

"It has to work both ways," said Chapman. "That's what my people tell me."

"It will take a lot of financing," said Douglas.

"I've talked to a lot of people," said Chapman. "People I can trust. They are interested. They see the possibilities. There'll be no lack of funds if we can put it through."

Judy Gray got on the plane and found her seat. She looked out through the window, saw the scurrying trucks mistily and

quickly put up a hand to wipe her eyes.

She said to herself, almost lovingly, through clenched teeth, "The son of a bitch. The dirty son of a bitch!"

39. Tom Manning spoke guardedly into the phone. "Steve, I have been hearing things."

"Put them on the wire, Tom," said Wilson. "That's why you are there. Put them on the wire for the glory days of dear old Global News."

"Now," said Manning, "that you've had occasion to show off your shallow sense of humor, shall we get down to business?"

"If this is a ploy," said Wilson, "to trick me into confirmation of some rumor you have heard—you know it won't work."

"You know me better than that, Steve."

"That's the trouble. I do know you."

"All right, then," said Manning, "if that's the way of it let's start at the beginning. The President had the Russian ambassador in this morning—"

"The President didn't have him in. He came in on his own. The ambassador made a statement to the press. You know about that."

"Sure, we know what the ambassador said and what you said in this afternoon's briefing, which, I might say, added very little light to the situation. But no one in town, no one in his right mind, that is, buys what either of you said."

"I'm sorry about that, Tom. I told all I knew."

"Okay," said Manning. "I'll take your word for that. It's just possible that you weren't told. But there's a very nasty story being whispered at the U.N. in New York. At least it was whispered to our man there. I don't know how much farther it has gone. Our man didn't put it on the wire. He phoned me and I told him to hold it until I talked with you."

"I don't have the least idea, Tom, of what you're talking about. I had honestly assumed the ambassador told all that could be told. There have been some conversations with Moscow and it sounded reasonable. The President didn't tell me differently. We mentioned it, I guess, but we didn't talk about it. There were so many other things."

"All right, then," said Manning, "here's the story as I heard it. Morozov talked to Williams and the President and offered troops to help hunt down the monsters and the offer was rejected."

"Tom, how good is your source? How sure are you of this?"

"Not sure at all. It's what our man at the U.N. was told this afternoon."

"You're talking about Max Hale. He's your man up there."

"One of the best," said Manning. "He's fairly good at sorting out the truth."

"Yes, he is. I remember him from Chicago days."

"Hale's informant told him that tomorrow the U.N. will be told of our refusal and a demand will be made that we be forced to admit troops from other nations. It'll be said that we are negligent in not accepting them."

"The old squeeze play," said Wilson.

"And that's not all of it. If other troops are not accepted and the aliens can't be controlled—then, the U.N. will be told, the entire area must be nuclearly destroyed. The world can't take chances."

"Wait a minute," said Wilson, quickly. "You're not putting this on the wires, you say?"

"Not yet. Probably never. I hope never. That's the reason I phoned. If Hale heard it there's a likelihood someone else will hear it and, sure as God, it will get on a wire or be published somewhere."

"There's no truth in it," said Wilson. "I am sure of it. Christ, we're all in this together. For the moment political power plays must be set aside. Tom, I simply can't believe this hearsay."

"You know nothing of this? Of any of it? There hasn't been a breath?"

"Not a breath," said Wilson.

"You know," said Manning, "I wouldn't have your job, Steve. Not for a million dollars."

"You'll hold off, Tom. You'll give us a little time to check."

"Of course. Until the pressure gets too great. Until someone else . . . I'll let you know."

"Thanks, Tom. Some day—"

"Some day, when this is all over," said Manning, "we'll go off into some dark corner in an obscure bar where no one can possibly find us and we'll hang one on."

"I'll stand the drinks," said Wilson.

He sat slumped after hanging up. Just when another day was about to end, he thought. But, hell, some days never ended. They just kept on and on. Yesterday and today had not been two days, but a nightmare-haunted eternity that seemed, when one thought of it, to have no reality at all. Judy gone. Kids marching in the street. The business community bitching because it was prevented from using the economic disruption to go out and make a killing. Pulpit-thumping preachers hell-bent to make another kind of killing. Alien

monsters running in the hills and the future still emptying its humanity upon this moment in the time track.

His eyelids slid down and stuck and he forced himself erect. He had to get some sleep tonight—he had to find the time to get some sleep.

Maybe Judy had had the right idea. Just get up and walk away from it. Although, he told himself quite honestly, there still remained the question of what she'd walked away from. He missed her—she had been gone no more than an hour or two and he was missing her. Quite suddenly he realized he'd been missing her all day. Even while she still had been here, he had been missing her. Maybe, he thought, he should have asked her once again to stay, but there hadn't been time and he hadn't known how to do it—at least how to do it gracefully. And you did things gracefully or you did them not at all. More than likely, had he known, she wouldn't have listened to him.

He picked up the phone. "Kim, you still there? I'll need to see the President. It is rather urgent. The first chance you have to squeeze me in."

"It may be some time, Steve," she said. "There is a cabinet meeting."

40. Sergeant Gordon Fairfield Clark said to Colonel Eugene Dawson, "I had it in my sights and then it wasn't there. It disappeared. It went away. I'm sure it didn't move. Like a cartoonist drawing something moving fast, lettering in a *swish*, but this was without a *swish*. When it disappeared there wasn't any motion. The first time I could see movement. But not when I had it in my sights. It didn't move then. It didn't blur."

"It saw you, Sergeant," said the colonel.

"I would think not, sir. I was well hidden. I kept still. I shifted the launcher barrel a couple of inches to aim it. That was all."

"It saw one of your men, then. It must have."

"Sir, I trained all those men myself. No one sees them—no one hears them."

"It saw something or heard something. It sensed danger and disappeared. You're sure about this disappearance, Sergeant? Absolutely?"

'Colonel, I am sure."

Dawson was sitting on a fallen log. He reached down and picked up a small twig from the duff of the forest floor, began breaking it and rebreaking it. Clark squatted to one side, leaning on the launcher.

"Seargent," Dawson said, "I don't know what the hell we're going to do about all this. I don't know what the army's going to do. You find one of these things and before you can *whap* it, it is gone. We can handle them. I am sure of that. Even when they get big and rough and mean, like the people from the future say they will, we still can handle them. We've got the firepower. We have the sophistication. If they'd line up and come at us we could clobber them. But not when they're trying to keep clear of us and not in this kind of terrain. We could bomb ten thousand acres flat and get maybe one of them. God knows what else we'd kill, including people. We haven't the time or manpower to evacuate the people so that we can bomb. We've got to hunt these damned beasts down one by one—"

"But even when we hunt them down, sir—"

"Yes, I know."

"Sir," said Sergeant Clark, "This is worse than Vietnam ever was. And Vietnam was hairy."

The colonel stood up. "Nothing has ever beaten us all the way. These aliens won't either. But we have to find out how to kill them. All the firepower in the world, all the sophistication in the world is of no use until you can find something to aim at long enough to pull the trigger."

Sergeant Clark rose to his feet, tucked the launcher under his arm. "Well, back to work," he said.

"Have you seen a photographer around here?"

"A photographer? What photographer. I ain't seen no photographer."

"His name was Price. With some press association. He was messing around. I put the run on him."

"If I happen onto him," Sergeant Clark said, "I'll tie his tail in a knot."

41. Reverend Jake Billings was in conference with Ray MacDonald, formerly his assistant public relations manager, who had been appointed within the last twelve hours to the post of crusade operations chief.

"I really do not think, Ray," said Billings, "that this business of crucifixion will advance our cause. It strikes me as being rather crude and it could backlash. As one paper had to say of the attempt at Washington—"

"You mean someone has already gotten around to editorializing about it?"

"The reaction has not been good." Billings spoke with unac-

customed heat. "The editorial called it a cheap trick and a panty-waisted effort. The editorial became facetious in tone as it described the use of thongs, rather than nails in fastening the young man to the cross."

"But they were wrong," MacDonald said.

"You mean that you used nails?"

"No. What I'm saying is that ordinarily the arms are tied, not nailed to the cross. We did some research on it—"

"Your research is no concern of mine," said Billings icily. "What I do care about is that you gave some smart-assed editorial writer a chance to poke fun at us. And in any case, I think the whole idea of a fake crucifixion stinks. You didn't check with me. How come you didn't check with me?"

"You were busy, Jake. You told me to do my best. You told me I was the man who could come up with ideas and I did come up with ideas."

"I also had a call from Steve Wilson," Billings said. "He chewed me out. There is no doubt that official Washington—the White House at least—is solidly against us. When he gets around to it, Wilson will publicly brand us sensationalists. He brushed us off contemptuously in his press briefing this afternoon. That was before this silly crucifixion business. Next time around he'll blast us."

"But we have a lot of people with us. You go out to the countryside, to the little towns—"

"Yes, I know. The rednecks. They'll be for us, sure, but how long do you think it will take before their opinion can have any impact? What about the influential pastors in the big city churches? Can you imagine what the Reverend Dr. Angus Windsor will tell his congregation and the newspapers and the world? He won't go along with solemn young men packing crosses through the street and getting crucified on a public square. For years I have tried to conduct my ministry with dignity and now it's been pulled down to the level of street brawling."

MacDonald protested. "We've used stunts before. Circus stuff. Show biz. They're what you built the business on."

"But with restraint."

"Not too much restraint. Skywriting and parades and miles of billboards—"

"Legitimate advertising," said Billings. "Honest advertising. A great American tradition. The mistake you made was to go out in the streets. You don't know about the streets. You ran up against the

experts there. These Miocene kids know about the streets. They have been there—and have lived there. You had two strikes on you before you started out. What made you think you could compete with them?"

"All right, then—what are we going to do? The streets are out, you say. So we pull off the streets. Then what do we do? How do we get attention?"

Reverend Jake Billings stared at the wall through glassy eyes. "I don't know," he said. "I purely do not know. I don't think it makes much difference what we do. I think that gurgling noise you hear is our crusade going down the drain."

42. It was the dog that did it. Bentley Price hadn't had a drink all day. The road was narrow, winding across the mountain, and Bentley, exasperated beyond endurance at what had happened to him, was driving faster than he should. After hours of hunting for it, he had finally found the army camp—a temporary stopping point by the looks of it, with none of the meticulous neatness of the military. It huddled in a dense patch of woods beside a stream that came brawling down the valley. Filled with a deep sense of duty done and perseverance paying off, Bentley had slung cameras around his neck and plodded toward the largest of the tents. The colonel had come out to stop his further progress. Who the hell are you, the colonel had asked, and where do you think you're going? I'm from Global News. Bentley had told him, and I am out here to take some pictures of this monster hunt. I tell the city editor it isn't worth the time, but he disagrees with me and it's no skin off my nose no matter where I'm sent, so leave us get the lead out and do some monster hunting so I can get some pictures.

You're off limits, mister, the colonel had told him. You are way off limits, in more ways than one. I don't know how you got this far. Didn't someone try to stop you? Sure, said Bentley, up the road a ways. A couple of soldier boys. But I pay no attention to them. I never pay attention to someone who tries to stop me. I got work to do and I can't fool around.

And then the colonel had thrown him out of there. He had spoken in a clipped, military voice and had been very icy-eyed. We've got trouble enough, he said, without some damn fool photographer mucking around and screwing up the detail. If you don't leave under your own power I'll have you escorted out. While he was saying

this, Bentley snapped up a camera and took a picture of him. That made the situation even worse and Bentley, with his usual quick perception, could see his cause had failed. He had beaten a dignified retreat to avoid escort. Some of the soldiers had called out to him derisively. Bentley had slowed down momentarily, debating whether to go back and reason with them, then had thought better of it. They ain't worth the time, he had told himself.

Now the dog.

The dog came bursting out of high weeds and brush that grew along the road. Its ears were laid back. Its tail was tucked in and it was kiyodeling in pure, blind panic. The dog was close and Bentley was traveling much too fast. He jerked the wheel. The car veered off the road, smashed through a clump of brush. The tires screamed as Bentley hit the brakes. The nose of the car slammed hard into a huge walnut tree and stopped with a shuddering impact. The left-hand door flew open and Bentley, who held a lofty disdain for such copouts as seat belts, was thrown free. The camera he wore on a strap around his neck described a short arc and brought up against his ear, dealing him a blow that made his head ring as if there were a bell inside it. He landed on his back and rolled, wound up on hands and knees. He surged erect and found that he had ended up on the berm of the road.

Standing in the middle of the road was a monster. Bentley recognized it—he had seen two of them only yesterday. But this one was small, no bigger than a Shetland pony. Which did not mean the horror of it was any less.

But Bentley was of different fiber than were other men. He did not gulp. His gut did not turn over. His hands came up with swift precision, grabbed the camera firmly, brought it to his eye. The monster was framed in the finder and his finger pressed the button. The camera clicked and as it clicked the monster disappeared.

Bentley lowered the camera and let loose of it. His head still rang from the blow upon the ear. His clothes were torn—a gaping rent in a trouser leg revealed one knobby knee. His right hand was bloody from where his palm had scraped across some gravel. Behind him the car creaked slightly as twisted metal settled slowly into place. The motor pinged and sizzled as water from the broken radiator ran across hot metal.

Off in the distance the still-running dog was yipping frantically. In a tree up the hillside an excited squirrel chattered with machine-

gun intensity. The road was empty. A monster had been there. From where he stood Bentley could see its tracks printed in the dust. But it was no longer there.

He limped out into the road, stared up and down it. There was nothing on the road.

It was there, Bentley said stubbornly to himself. I had it in the finder. It was there when I shot the picture. It wasn't until the shutter clicked that it disappeared. Doubt assailed him. Had the beast been there or not when he'd shot the picture? Was it on the film? Had he been robbed of a photo by the animal's disappearance?

Thinking about it, it seemed to him that the monster had been in his viewfinder when he triggered the camera, but suddenly he could not be sure.

He turned about and started limping down the road as rapidly as he could. There was one way to find out. He had to get to a phone, get another car. He must get back to Washington.

43. "We have made three contacts with the monsters," Sandburg said. "There are yet to be results. No one has had a chance to fire at them. They simply vanish."

"You mean," said Thornton William, "that they duck away when threatened. Some people have made more permanent contact."

"No, I don't mean that they duck," Sandburg said. "They just cease to be there. The soldiers who saw them swore they didn't move at all. They were there and then they weren't. The observers, all reporting independently, not knowing of the other reports, have made identical statements. One man could be wrong in his observation—it's possible that two could be. It seems impossible that three observers could err on exactly the same point."

"Have you, has the military, any theory, any idea of what is going on?"

"None," said Sandburg. "It must be a new defensive adaptation that they have developed. These creatures are fighting for survival. Cornered, I suppose that they would fight, but only if they had no way out. And apparently they have come up with something new. We have talked with Dr. Isaac Wolfe, the refugee biologist who probably knows more about these aliens than any other man—and this business is something he has never heard of. He suggests, simply as a guess, that the vanishing act may be only a juvenile capability—defense mechanism for the young. It

may have gone unobserved until now because Dr. Wolfe and his people have had little opportunity to observe the juveniles—they had their hands full fighting off the adult aliens."

"How are you doing with getting men into the area?" asked the President.

"I haven't any figures," said Sandburg, "but we're piling them in as fast as we can move them. The refugee camps have formed their own governing committees and that takes off some of the pressure, frees some troops. The agriculture and welfare agencies are handling transportation of food and other necessities to the refugees and that, too, has freed military personnel. We expect the first overseas transport planes to begin landing some time tonight and that will give us more men to work with."

"Morozov was in this morning," said Williams, "with an offer to supply us men. In fact, he rather insisted upon it. We, of course, rejected the offer. But it does raise a point. Should we, perhaps, ask for some assistance from Canada, perhaps Mexico, maybe Britain, France, Germany—or from some of the other friendly powers?"

"Possibly we could use some of their forces," said Sandburg. "I'd like to talk with the chiefs of staff and get their reactions. What we need, and haven't been able to manage, are some rather substantial forces for both north and south—down in Georgia and in upstate New York. We should try to seal off the aliens' spread, if they are spreading—and I suppose that is their intention. If we can contain them we can handle them."

"If they stand still," said the President.

"That is right," said Sandburg. "If they stand still."

"Maybe we should move on to something else," Henderson suggested. "Reilly, I think you have something to report."

"I'm not yet too solid on this," said Reilly Douglas, "but it's a matter that should be discussed. Frankly, I am inclined to think there may be a rather tricky legal question involved and I've had no chance to go into that aspect of it. Clinton Chapman came to see me last night. I think most of you know Clint."

He looked around the table. Many of the men nodded.

"He came to me," said Douglas, "and since then has phoned three or four times and we had lunch today. I suppose some of you know that we were roommates at Harvard and have been

friends ever since. I suppose that's why he contacted me. On his first approach he proposed that he—himself—would take over the building of the tunnels, financing the cost with no federal funds involved. In return he would continue in ownership of them once the future people had been transported back to the Miocene and would be licensed to operate them. Since then—"

"Reilly," Williams interrupted, "I can't quite understand why anyone would want to own them. What in the world could be done with them? The time force, or whatever it is, as I understand it, operates in only one direction—into the past."

Douglas shook his head. "Clint won't buy that. He has talked with his research people—and the staff he has is probably one of the best in the world—and they have assured him that if there is such a thing as time travel it can be made to operate both into the past and into the future. As a matter of fact, they told him it would seem easier to operate it forward than into the past because time's natural flow is into the future."

Williams blew out a gusty breath. "I don't know," he said. "It has a dirty sound to it. Could we conscientiously turn over two-way travel through time—if such travel were possible—to any one man or any group of men? Think of the ways it could be used—"

"I talked to Clint about this at lunch," said Douglas. "I explained to him that any such operation, if it were possible, would have to be very strictly controlled. Commissions would have to be set up to formulate a code—Congress would have to legislate. Not only that, but the code and the legislation would have to be worldwide—there would have to be some international agreement and you can imagine how long that might take. Clint agreed to all of this, said he realized it would be necessary. The man is quite obsessed with the idea. As an old friend, I tried to talk him out of it, but he still insists he wants to go ahead. If he is allowed to do it, that is. At first he planned to finance it on his own—but apparently he is beginning to realize the kind of money that would be involved. As I understand it, he is now very quietly trying to put together a consortium to take over the project."

Sandburg frowned. "I would say no on impulse. The potentials would have to be studied closely."

"There could be military applications," said Williams. "I'm not just sure what they would be."

"International agreements, with appropriate safeguards, would have to be set up to keep it from being used militarily," said the President. "And if these agreements should fail at any time in the future, I can't see that it would make much difference who held the license. National needs would always take precedence. No matter how it goes, rapid movement through time seems to be something we're stuck with. It's something we have to face—and make the best of."

"You favor Clint's proposal, Mr. President?" Douglas asked in some surprise. "When I talked with you—"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say I favored it," Henderson said. "But under the conditions we face it seems to me we should consider all possibilities or proposals. We are going to be hard pressed to find the kind of money or credit that is needed to build the tunnels. Not only we, but the world. Perhaps the rest of the world confronts more difficulties than we."

"That brings us to another point," said Williams. "I suppose Chapman and his consortium are proposing to construct only the tunnels in the United States."

"I don't know the extent of his plans," Douglas said. "I would guess that Chapman's consortium might include some foreign money. I can't see a country like the Congo or Portugal or Indonesia turning its back on someone who wants to build its tunnels. Other nations might be hesitant, but if we went along with the plan and a couple of the other major nations joined us—say Germany or France—most of the others would follow. Nobody would want to be left out."

"This is going to cost a lot of money," Secretary of the Treasury Manfred Franklin put in. "Tunnels for the entire world would run into billions."

"There are gamblers in the financial world," observed Ben Cunningham, of Agriculture. "But mostly theirs is what is known as smart money. Chapman must be fairly sure of his bets. Do you imagine he may know something we don't know?"

Douglas shook his head. "I am inclined to think not. His RD people are good, but they're only theorizing that time travel has to be a two-way street. Practical application so far says no. But even that is the first new idea—the first really new idea with genuine technological and engineering potential—that has come along in fifty years or more. Clint and his gang understandably want to get in on the ground floor."

"The question," said Williams, "is whether or not we should let them."

"Much as we may regret to do so," said the President, "we may have to. Or word would be leaked to the public and you can imagine what the taxpayers' reaction would be. Frankly, gentlemen, we may find ourselves in a position where opposing the consortium would be political suicide."

"You don't seem to be too upset about it," Williams said somewhat acidly.

"When you have been in politics as long as I, Thornton, you don't gag too easily at anything that comes up. You learn to be practical. There are times when you simply cannot take potshots at Santa Claus."

"I still don't like it," said Williams.

"Nor do I," said Sandburg.

"Letting Chapman go ahead would be a solution," said Franklin. "Labor is ready to join us in the emergency. If the financial interests of the world would also go along—which is actually what would happen under this consortium setup—our basics would be settled. We still have to feed the refugees, but I understand we can do that longer than we had thought at first. Supplying them with what they'll need to establish themselves in their new start can be done at a fraction of the tunnel costs. Someone will have to do some rather rapid planning to calculate how much of our manufacturing processes and resources will have to be converted for a time to the making of wheelbarrows, hoes, axes, plows and other similar items, but that's simply a matter of computer time. The job may pinch us a bit, but it can be done. The tunnels are the big challenge and Chapman's consortium will do the job there if we let them."

"How about all those banner-carrying kids who say they want to go back in time?" asked Cunningham. "I say let them go. It would clear the streets of them and for a long time a lot of people have been yelling about population pressure. We may have the answer here."

"You're being facetious, of course," said the President, "but—"

"I can assure you, sir, I'm not in the least facetious. I mean it."

"And I agree with your main position," Henderson said. "My reasons may not be yours, but I do think we should not try to stop anyone who wants to leave us. But before we allow them to go they must have the same ecological sense and convictions the future

people have. We can't send back people who'll use up the resources we already have used. That would make a paradox I don't pretend to understand, but I imagine it might be fatal to our civilization."

"Who would teach them this ecological sense and conviction?"

"The refugees. They don't all need to go back into the past immediately. In fact, they have offered to leave a group of specialists with us who will teach us much of the knowledge of the next five hundred years—as much of it as we can assimilate. I think this offer should be accepted."

"So do I," said Williams. "Some economic and social applecarts will be upset, but in the long run we should be way out in front. In twenty years or less we could jump five hundred years ahead—without making the mistakes our descendants on the old world line made."

"I don't know about that," said Douglas. "There are too many factors involved. I'd have to think about that for a while."

"We are forgetting one thing," Sandburg said. "We can go ahead and plan, of course. And we have to do it fast. We have to be well along to a working solution in a month or so or time will begin running out. But the point I want to make is this—the solution, the planning may do us little good if we aren't able to wipe out, or at least control, the aliens."

44. The kids out in the street might be the ones, Wilson told himself, with the right idea. He could understand their fascination with the concept of starting over once again—the slate wiped clean and the record clear. Only trouble was, he thought, that even starting over, the human race might still repeat many of its past mistakes—perhaps in some different form. Then again, maybe not. It would take some time to make old errors and there would at least be the opportunity, if the will were there, to correct them before they got too big, too entrenched and awkward.

Alice Gale had talked about a wilderness where the White House once had stood and Dr. Osborne, on the ride from Fort Myer to the White House, had expressed his doubt that the trend that had made the White House park a wilderness could be stopped—it had gone too far, he had said. You are too top-heavy, he had said—you are off balance.

Perhaps the trend had gone too far, Wilson admitted to himself—big government was growing bigger; big business was grow-

ing fatter and more arrogant; taxes were steadily rising, never going down; the poor were becoming ever poorer and increasing in numbers despite the best intentions of a welfare-conscious society; the gap between the rich and poor, the government and the public was becoming wider by the year. How could it have been done differently, he wondered. Given the kind of world Earth was, how could circumstances have been better ordered?

He shook his head. He had no idea. There might be men who could go back and chart the political, economic and social growth and show where the errors had been made, putting their fingers on certain actions in a certain year and saying here is where we made this error. But the men who could do this were theorists working on the basis of ideas, many of which could not stand the test of application.

The phone on his desk rang and he picked it up.

"Mr. Wilson?"

"Yes."

"This is the guard at the southwest gate. There is a gentleman here who says that he must see you on a matter of importance. Mr. Thomas Manning. Mr. Bentley Price is with him. Do you know them, sir?"

"Yes. Please send them in."

"I'll send an escort with them, sir. You'll be in your office?"

"Yes. I'll wait here for them."

Wilson dropped the receiver back into its cradle. What could bring Manning here? Why should he have to come in person? A matter of importance, he had said. And Bentley—for the love of God, why Bentley?

Was it, he wondered, something further about the U. N. business?

He looked at his watch. The cabinet meeting was taking longer than he had thought it would. Maybe it was over and the President had become busy with other matters. Although that would be strange—Kim ordinarily would have squeezed Steve in.

Manning and Bentley came into the room. The guard stopped at the door. Wilson nodded at him.

"It's all right. You can wait outside. This is an unexpected pleasure," he said to the two, shaking their hands. "I seldom see you, Tom. And Bentley. I almost never see you."

"I got business elsewhere," Bentley said. "I get my legs run off. I'm running all the time."

"Bentley just got in from West Virginia," Manning said. "That's what this visit is about."

"There was this dog in the road," said Bentley, "and then a

nearby tree came up and hit me."

"Bentley took a picture of a monster standing in the road," said Manning, "just as it disappeared."

"I got her figured now," said Bentley. "It saw the camera pointed at it and it heard it click. Them monsters don't stay around when they see something pointed at them."

"There have been other reports of their disappearing," Wilson said. "A defense mechanism of some sort, perhaps. It's making it tough for the boys out hunting them."

"I don't think so," said Manning. "Forcing them to disappear may be as good as hunting them."

He unzipped a thin briefcase he was carrying and took out a sheaf of photos. "Look at this," he said.

He slid the top photo across the desk to Wilson.

Wilson took a quick look, then fixed his gaze on Bentley. "What kind of trick photography is this?" he asked.

"There ain't no tricks," said Bentley. "A camera never lies. It always tells the truth. It shows you what is there. That's what really happens when a monster disappears. I was using a fast film—"

"But dinosaurs!" yelled Wilson.

Bentley's hand dipped into his pocket and brought out an object. He handed it to Wilson. "A glass," he said. "Take a look with it. There are herds of them off in the distance. You can't do tricks of that sort."

The monster was hazed, a sort of shadow monster, but substantial enough for there to be no doubt it was an alien. Behind it the dinosaurs, three of them, were in sharp focus.

"Duckbills," said Manning. "If you showed that photograph to a paleontologist, I have every expectation he could give you an exact identification."

The trees were strange. Some looked like palms, others like gigantic ferns.

Wilson unfolded the magnifier, bent his head close above the photo, shifted the glass about. Bentley had been right. There were other strange creatures spread across the landscape, herds of them, singles, pairs. A small mammal of some sort cowered under a shrub.

"We have some blowups," Manning said, "of the background. Want to look at them?"

Wilson shook his head. "No. I'm satisfied."

"We looked it up in a geology book, said Bentley. "That there is a Cretaceous landscape."

"Yes, I know," said Wilson.

He reached for the phone. "Kim," he said, "is Mr. Gale in his room? Thank you. Please ask him to step down."

Manning laid the rest of the photos on the desk. "They are yours," he said. "We'll be putting them on the wire. We wanted you to know first. You thinking the same thing that I am?"

Wilson nodded. "I suppose I am," he said, "but no quotation, please."

"We don't need quotes," said Manning. "The picture tells the story. The monster, the mother monster, I would suppose you'd call it, was exposed to the time travel principle when it came through the tunnel. The principle was imprinted on its mind, its instinct, whatever you may call it. It transmitted knowledge of the principle to the young—a hereditary instinct."

"But it took time tunnels, mechanical contraptions, for the humans to do it," Wilson objected. "It took technology and engineering—"

Manning shrugged. "Hell, Steve, I don't know. I don't pretend to know. But the photo says the monsters are escaping to another time. Maybe they'll all escape to another time, probably to the same time. The escape time bracket may be implanted on their instinct. Maybe the Cretaceous is a better place for them. Maybe they have found this era too tough for them to crack, the odds too great."

"I just thought of something," said Wilson. "The dinosaurs died out—"

"Yeah, I know," said Manning. He zipped the briefcase shut. "We better go," he said. "We have work to do. Thanks for seeing us."

"No, Tom," said Wilson. "The thanks are to you and Bentley. Thanks for coming over. It might have taken days to get this puzzled out. If we ever did—"

He stood and watched them go, then sat down again.

It was incredible, he thought. Yet it did make a lopsided sort of sense. Humans were too prone to think in human grooves. Aliens would be different. Again and again the refugees from the future had emphasized the creatures must not be regarded as simple monsters, but rather as highly intelligent beings. And that intelligence, no doubt, would be as alien as their bodies. Their intelligence and ability would not duplicate human intelligence and ability. Hard as it might be to understand, they might be able to do by instinct what humans would need a machine to accomplish.

Maynard Gale and Alice came

into the room so quietly that he did not know they were there until he looked up and saw them standing beside the desk.

"You asked for us," said Gale.

"I wanted you to look at these," said Wilson. "The top one first. The others are detail blowups. Tell me what you think."

He waited while they studied the photos. Finally Gale said, "This is the Cretaceous, Mr. Wilson. How was the photo taken? And what has the monster to do with it?"

"The photographer was taking a picture of the monster. As he took it—at the moment he took it—the monster disappeared."

"The monster disappeared?"

"This is the second—or third or fourth—report of one disappearing. The second that I know of. There may have been others. I don't know."

"Yes," said Gale, "I suppose that it is possible. They're not like us, you know. The one that came through the tunnel experienced time travel—an experience that would have lasted for only a fraction of a second. But that may have been enough." He shuddered. "If that is true—if after such an exposure they are able to travel independently in time, if their progeny is able to travel independently in time, if they can sense and learn and master such a complex thing so well, so quickly, it's a wonder that we were able to stand up against them for these twenty years. They must have been playing with us, keeping us, protecting us for their sport. A game preserve. That is what we must have been. A game preserve."

"You can't be sure of that," said Wilson.

"No, I suppose not. Dr. Wolfe is the man you should consult about this. He would know. At least he could make an educated guess."

"But you have no doubt?"

"None," said Gale. "This could be a hoax?"

Wilson shook his head. "Not Tom Manning. We know one another well. We worked on the *Post*, right here, together. We were drinking companions. We were brothers until this damn job came between us. Not that he has no sense of humor. But he wouldn't use it in a thing like this. And Bentley? The camera is his god. He wouldn't use it for an unworthy purpose. He lives and breathes his cameras. He bows down before them each night before he goes to bed."

"So we have evidence the aliens flee into the past—even as we fled."

"I think so," said Wilson. "I wanted your opinion. You know

these creatures and we do not."

"You'll still talk with Wolfe?"

"Yes, we'll do that."

"There is another matter, Mr. Wilson, that we have wanted to talk with you about. My daughter and I have talked it over and we are agreed."

"What is that?" asked Wilson.

"An invitation," said Gale. "We're not sure you will accept. Perhaps you won't. We may even offend you with it. But many other people, I think, would accept the invitation. To many it would have a great attraction. I find it rather awkward to phrase it, but it is this: When we go back into the Miocene—if you wished to do so you would be welcome to go along with us. With our particular group. We should be glad to have you."

Wilson did not move. He tried to find words and could not.

Alice said, "You were our first friend, perhaps our only real friend. You arranged the matter of the diamonds. You have done so many things."

She stepped quickly around the desk, bent to kiss him on the cheek.

"We do not need an answer now," said Gale. "You will want to think about it. If you decide not to go with us we'll not speak of this again. The invitation, I think, is issued with the knowledge that in all probability, your people will be using the time tunnels to go back into an era some millions of years in the past. I have the feeling you will not be able to escape the crisis that overtook our ancestors (I refer to you, of course) on the original time track."

"I don't know," said Wilson. "I honestly do not know. You will let me think about it."

"Certainly," said Gale.

Alice bent close, her words a whispers. "I do so hope you'll decide to come with us," she said.

Then they were gone as silently and unobtrustively as they had come.

Dusk was creeping into the room. In the press lounge a typewriter clicked hesitantly as the writer sought words. Against the wall the teletypes muttered querulously. One button on Judy's phone console kept flashing—not Judy's console any more, he thought. Judy was gone. The plane that was taking her to Ohio was already heading westward.

Judy, he said to himself. For the love of God, what got into you? Why did you have to do it?

He would be lonely without her, he knew. He had not known until now, he realized, how much she had kept him from feeling alone.

She had not needed to be with him—the mere thought that she was somewhere nearby had been quite enough to bring gladness to his heart.

She still would be near, he thought. Ohio was not far—in this day no place on Earth was distant. Phones still worked and letters went by mail, but there was a difference now. He thought of how he might phrase a letter if he wrote to her, but he knew he would never write.

The phone rang. Kim said, "The meeting's over. He can see you now."

45. "Thank you, Kim," said Wilson. That he had asked to see the President had slipped his mind. So much had happened since.

When he entered the office the President said, "I'm sorry you were kept waiting, Steve. There was so much that had to be talked over. What do you have?"

Wilson grinned. "Nothing quite as grim as what I had when I tried to reach you earlier. I think the situation is better now. There was a rumor out of the U. N."

"This Russian business?"

"Yes, the Russian business. Tom Manning phoned. His U. N. man—Max Hale, you know him?"

"I don't think I've ever met him. I read him. He is sound."

"Hale heard that the Russians would push for the international dropping of nuclear weapons on the areas where the monsters might be."

"I had expected something of that sort," said the President. "They'd never be able to pull it off."

"I think the question is academic now anyhow," said Wilson. "These just came in." He laid the photos on the desk. "Bentley Price took the shot."

"Price," said the President. "Is he the one—"

"He's the one all the stories are about. Drunk a good part of the time, but a topnotch photographer. The best there is."

The President studied the first photo, frowning. "Steve, I'm not sure I understand this."

"There's a story that goes with it sir. It goes something like this—"

The President listened closely, not interrupting. When Wilson finished he asked, "You really think that's the explanation, Steve?"

"I'm inclined to think so, sir. So does Gale. He said we should talk with Wolfe. But there was no question in Gale's mind. All we have to do is keep pushing them. Push enough of them into the past and the rest will go. If there were more of them—if we had as few weapons as the people of five hundred years from now had when they first reached Earth—they probably would try to stay on here. We'd offer plenty of fighting, be worthy antagonists. But I think they may know when they are licked. And back in the Cretaceous, they'll still have worthy opponents. Formidable ones. Tyrannosaurus rex and all his relatives. The triceratops. The coelurosaurs. The hunting dinosaurs. Hand-to-hand combat, face-to-face. They might like that better than what humans have to offer. More glory in it for them."

The President sat thoughtfully silent. Then he said, "As I recollect, the scientists have never figured out what killed off the dinosaurs. Maybe now we know."

"That could be," said Wilson.

Henderson reached for the call box, then pulled back his hand.

"No," he said. "Fyodor Morozov is a decent sort of man. What he did this morning was in the line of duty—he had to carry out orders. No use phoning him. He'll find out when the picture hits the street. So will the people at the U.N. I'd like to see their faces. I'd say it spikes their guns."

"I would say so, sir," said Wilson. "I'll take no more of your time—"

"Stay for a minute, Steve. There's something you should know. A sort of precautionary knowledge. The question may come up and you should know how to field it. No more than a half-dozen of our people—all scientists—know this and they won't talk. Neither will the future people. There is no record. State doesn't know. Defense doesn't know."

"I wonder, sir, if I should—"

"I want you to know," said the President. "Once you hear it you are bound by the same secrecy as the others. You've heard of the Clinton Chapman proposal?"

"I have heard of it. I don't like it. The question came up this morning and I refused comment.

Said it was only rumor and I had no knowledge of it."

"Neither do I like it," said the President. "But as far as I am concerned he's going to be encouraged to go ahead. He thinks he can buy time travel—thinks he has it in his hand. He can fairly taste it. I have never seen a more obvious case of naked greed. I'm not too sure his great good friend, Reilly Douglas, may not have a touch of that same greed."

"But if it's greed—"

"It's greed, all right," said the President. "But I know something he doesn't know and if I can manage it, he won't know it until it's too late to do him any good. And that is this: What the future people used was not time travel as we think of it—it is something else. It serves the same purpose, but it's not time travel as traditionally conceived. I don't know if I can explain this too well, but it seems there is another universe, coexistent with ours. The people of the future know it's there, but there is only one thing they really know about it. That is that the direction of time's flow in the second universe is exactly the opposite of ours. Its future flows toward our past. The people of the future traveled into their past by hooking onto the future flow of this other universe—"

"But that means you can travel in only one direction."

"Exactly," said the President. "It means that you can go into the past, but you can't come back."

"If Chapman knew this the deal would be off."

"I suppose it would be. He's not proposing to build the tunnels from patriotic motives. He's been told, of course, that the tunnels work only one way, but he doesn't know why. Do you think badly of me, Steve, for my deception—my calculated dishonesty?"

"I'd think badly of you, sir, if there really were a chance for Chapman to do what he means to do and you did not stop him. This way, however the world gets help and the only ones who are hurt are men who, for once, will have overreached themselves. No one will feel sorry for them."

"Some day," Henderson said, "it will be known. Some day my dishonesty will catch up with me."

"When it does," said Wilson, "a great guffaw will go around the world. You'll be famous, sir. They'll build statues of you."

The President smiled. "I hope so, Steve. I feel a little sneaky."

"One thing, sir," said Wilson. "Just how tight is this secret of yours?"

"I feel it's solid," said the Presi-

dent. "The people you brought up from Myer told our National Academy people—only three of them. The future scientists and the men who talked with them reported back to me. To me alone. By this time, I had gotten wind of Chapman's deal and I asked them to say nothing. Only a few of the refugee scientists worked on the project that sent the people back—only a handful of them know what is actually involved. And, as it happens, they all are here in the United States. Something like the diamonds. They all are here because they felt we were the one nation they could trust. The word has been passed along at Myer. The future scientists won't talk. Neither will our men."

Wilson nodded. "It sounds all right. You mentioned the diamonds. What became of them?"

"We have accepted temporary custody. They are locked away. Later, after all of this is over, we'll see what can be done with them. Probably discreet sales will dispose of them, with a suitable cover story provided. The money will be put in escrow for later distribution to other nations."

Wilson rose and moved toward the door. Halfway there, he stopped and turned. "I'd say, Mr. President, that things are going very well."

"Yes," said the President. "After a bad start events are moving well. There's still a lot to do, but we are on the way."

Someone was at Judy's desk when Wilson returned. The room was dark. There were only the flashing lights on the console and they were not being answered.

"Judy?" Wilson asked hesitantly. "Judy, is that you?" Knowing that it couldn't be, for by now she was probably landing in Ohio.

"I came back," said Judy. "I got on the plane and then got off again. I sat at the airport for hours, wondering what to do. You are a son of a bitch, Steve Wilson, and you know you are. I don't know why I got off the plane. Getting off, I don't know why I came here."

He strode across the room and stood beside her.

"But, Judy—"

Judy pouted. "You never asked me to stay. You never really asked me."

"But I did. I asked you."

"You were noble about it. That's the trouble with you. Noble. You never got down on your knees and begged me. And now my baggage is headed for Ohio and I—"

He reached down and lifted her from the chair, held her close.

"It's been a rough two days," he said. "It's time for the two of us to be going home." ●

(Continued from page 5)

azines. Now, lo, he appeareth in color no longer. (Take a look at May '73 Galaxy*—Ed.)*

Another point: I am afraid that I cannot find words for the story in Galaxy *(March '73) titled* The Girl And The Dolphin. *Those animals are really that smart, hunh? Still, I must say the story was out of the ordinary—and I must congratulate Frank Herbert on his novel,* Project Forty. *I read it in one evening and found it amazing.*

Re The Wizard of Anharitte*—I didn't place this novel as Kapp's* Patterns of Chaos *on my favorite story list.* The Wizard *lacked the color of* Patters*—it was an interesting yarn all the same.*

Keep up the good work. I'm about to read Doomship *now—and I know you won't let me down.*

Will you?
R. E. Grehan
Memphis, Tenn.

With a Fred Pohl/Jack Williamson collaboration? And you're asking?

Dear Mr. Jakobbson:

The cover illustration of the April Worlds of If *was the best I've seen in a long time—it was better than any of Brian Boyle's three* Project 40 *covers for* Galaxy Magazine *or most of his paintings up to now. Very, very good—have Mr. Boyle keep it up.*

The best feature in this issue was Doomship, *another Pohl/Williamson masterwork, extensively flavored by Jack Williamson's wholesome and identifiable human characterizations—his most attractive trademark, I think.*

The Wizard of Anharitte, *which received such heavy praise from Tony Lewis in* Locus, *was equal to the previous parts published in* If.

Next Time *and* Call Me Proteus *were also enjoyable.*

I'd like to suggest, though, that instead of running serial installments every month you forget about serials entirely and try to include a novella, a couple of novelettes and as many short stories as you can in each issue.

In view of the competition you still have to try harder! And I'll be boosting you all the way.
Lester Boutillier
New Orleans, La.

Good science fiction, the best we can find at any length in wordage, is what we've wanted and will continue to want for Galaxy/If—I can say most emphatically and with total sincerity that I have never turned down for purely mechanical reasons a work of fiction that I've liked.

You may see—if you look through back issues—that we often compress type to get in all that we want. And sometimes departmental material or art work is squeezed.

Both *If* and *Galaxy* are, first of all, *science fiction* magazines.

Competition is a lovely game and good fun and every criticism hurts and is noted. But every publication in the field should serve the field, hopefully add to it. Perfection is beyond most of us—but the unforgivable lapse would be to be of disservice to the field, as mindless competition for its own sake would make us.

We're going to try harder—we always do. But both *If* and *Galaxy* remain open to all lengths of good, pre-

viously unpublished fiction—within reason—available to them.

Besides, the magazine graveyards are haunted by ghosts—many of them once vital and lovely—who went to their ends as mechanical marvels, their services finished.

All boosts, of course, are gratefully received—as are all helpful suggestions as to how we can best serve.

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

I have been trying to locate a short story I read some years ago (ten to fifteen years—or more), but have been hampered by the fact that I don't remember the name of the author or of the magazine in which the story appeared.

The title of the story was Native Problem *and the plot ran as follows:*

A man named Danton claims a planet. This comes about because at the time of the story it is possible to reach any point in the galaxy in a short period of time through a faster-than-light drive—and the galaxy is filled (relatively) with uninhabited, Earthlike planets.

He is transported to his planet and left to fend for himself.

Shortly afterward another spaceship arrives, carrying a group of religious pilgrims. The ship is of ancient design, has no FTL drive and has been in transit for centuries. No one on the ship has even set foot on a planetary surface, but the group's prophets have designated Danton's world as their promised land.

In the ensuing encounter with Danton the pilgrims refuse to listen to his explanations for his presence, but insist on considering him merely one of the natives to be subdued and/or converted.

How Danton ends up as "the last of the natives" with the pilgrims established on the planet is a hilarious comment on the peculiar blindness we know as bigotry.

If you or anyone on your staff is familiar with this story, could you please jot down the name of the author or of the magazine in which the story appeared and send it to me in the enclosed envelope?

Thank you.
D.A. Kirkpatrick
775 California Avenue
Klamath Falls, Ore. 97601

Everyone at the office drew a blank on this one, so I'm taking the liberty of running your address here.

Whatever else—*If* has the best informed readers, save perhaps *Galaxy's.*

—JAKOBSSON

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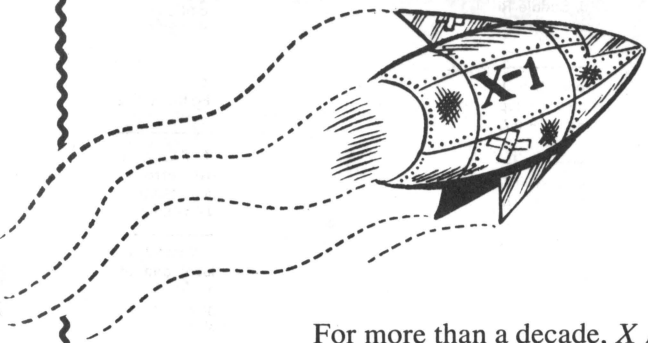

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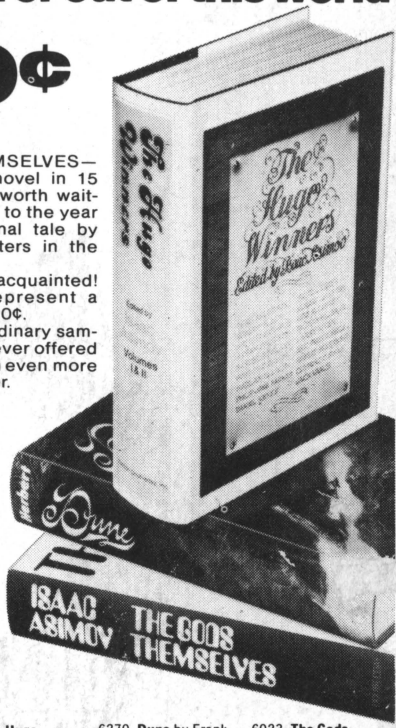

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