
COSMOS
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TEUCAN by
POUL ANDERSON
ALL NEW STORIES
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COSMOS SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

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CONTENTS

FEATURE STORY

NOVELETTES

SHORT STORIES

Publisher J. A. KRAMER *Associate Editor* PHYLLIS FARREN
Editor L. B. COLE *Production* GEORGE PELTZ

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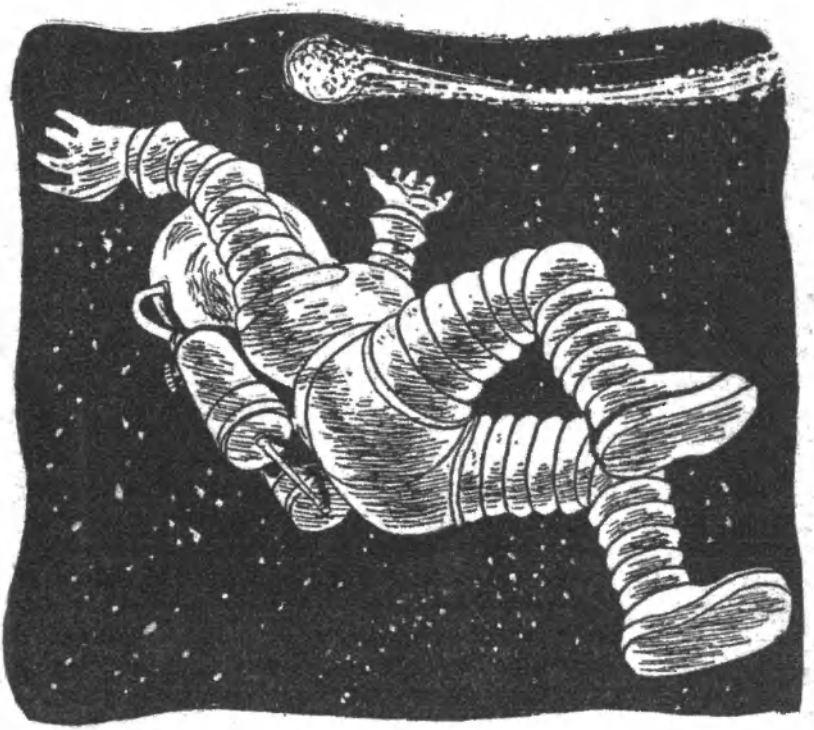


TEUCAN

By POUL ANDERSON

SOMETIMES a nuclear-conversion engine develops an ulcer. The containing fields weaken long enough—a few microseconds, perhaps—for the machine to start devouring itself. It doesn't happen often, but neither is it unheard of, and it will continue to happen until somebody abolishes the Uncertainty Principle. In the event of an ulcer, the only thing to do is

to get out of the neighborhood—fast.

Weber considered himself lucky to be near a planet when his engine broke loose. He had, in fact, been coming in for a landing, and it was a moment's scrambling to get into a spacesuit. He grabbed for the chest where he kept his weapons, and a blue electric bolt sizzled to his hand and limned his insulated suit in ghostly fire. Cursing, he reached again, but the chest was already glowing red-hot and the white-blazing bulkhead aft was slumping into molten ruin. No time—when it went down, he'd get a radiation blast which would finish him. He dove for the airlock, awkward in free fall now that the gravity unit was gone.

Just in time! His impellers whirled him away. The boat was a nova against the bitter stars of space. Alone—weaponless—supplyless save for the suit's little emergency pack — well, that planet had better be habitable!

It was a great cottony ball of cloud below him, blinding in the harsh spatial sunlight. Below him —yes, he was close enough, well within the region of perceptible gravitation. He turned off his impeller and let himself fall. A few hours—

The silence and loneliness oppressed him. As the thunder of his heart and blood eased, he considered the years ahead, a lifetime of separation from humankind and all he had known. The lifetime would be short unless he was lucky. His name would be bandied among the Traders for perhaps a decade, and then his very memory would be dust.

Well—not much he could do about it. At least his instruments had told him the planet was Terra-type: about the same size and mass, pretty similar atmosphere. That meant green plants, which in turn meant animals with high probability, which *might* mean intelligent natives; but of course everything might be poisonous to his metabolism. He didn't think the natives would be very far advanced, technologically; the planet was rather close to its sun, an obscure G6 dwarf, steamy and tropical and perpetually cloudy—so it was unlikely that its dwellers would have much concept of astronomy, the father of the sciences. Still, you never knew.

First there was the problem of getting down. He gave himself a northward velocity—the subarctic regions would be most comfortable for a human. It was necessary to be careful with energy; his powerpack had barely enough to land him and maybe

fly around a bit, without wasting any.

The slow hours passed.

WHEN he came below the high permanent clouds it was raining. He swung into the wind, the strong heavy flow of water sluicing over his helmet and blurring vision, lightning savage above him. By the time he was out of the storm, his energy meter was flickering near zero. He slanted groundward, studying the terrain with wary eyes.

It was a rolling land of hills and broad valleys, green with a sweeping stretch of jungle, snaked through by long rivers. But he was on the fringe of the wilds. Beyond were cultivated fields, stone huts scattered like grain seeds over the mighty planetscape, wide highways of beaten earth converging on the distant walls of a city. Quite a sizeable city, too, there in the middle of its huge domain; it might well have twenty or thirty thousand inhabitants if they were humanoid. Weber's brain began to calculate.

You could never tell in advance how primitives were going to react. There were the unpredictable inherent differences, due to climate and ecology and physiology and the very external appearance; and then within the same species you could get fantastic variations of thought and behavior patterns from culture to culture. But his best chances lay in a sort of polite boldness, at least till he knew his way around a little better.

He landed with a jarring thump as his powerpack finally sputtered to extinction. Not far off, behind a grove of trees, stood a hamlet of some ten buildings. Dismissing thoughts of bacteria, molds, and other forms of slow or sudden death, Weber got to his feet, threw back his helmet and breathed deeply.

It was a warm, moist, pleasant air, pungent with the aroma of earth and forest and life, heady after the staleness of his suit. The clouds made a featureless gray sky overhead, and there were no visible shadows in that diffused light, but vision was clear enough. A brilliantly feathered bird flew squawking above him. He crossed the field in which he'd landed, set his boots on the road, and started walking toward the village.

The natives came out of it, and others ran from the distant farm huts, converging on him with shrill whoops. He stopped, folded his arms, and waited.

Humanoid—yes, very. If he survived, his shipwreck might prove quite tolerable. They were a slightly built folk, several cen-

timeters shorter than the average Terran, six fingers to a hand and six toes to a sandaled foot, pointed ears, pale bluish skins, hair and eyes of deep purple, the males beardless as the females—but with handsome features not unlike the Caucasian, wiry and graceful of body. Both sexes wore little more than a loincloth, but the males had all the color and most of the shell, tooth, and hammered copper ornaments, feathers in their long hair, tattooing on their breasts. They brandished obsidian spears and axes, and some had wicked-looking wooden swords saw-toothed with chips of flint. They stood and stared at him.

Weber, who was a big blond man, lifted one arm with all the solemnity he could muster. The natives slowed their prancing approach, women huddling behind the ranked men, children screaming, a pack of lithe, long-bodied, blue-furred animals yowling. The peasants coming near, hoes and spades still clutched in their grimy hands, were almost as gaudily equipped as the villagers. Since it was unlikely that he had arrived precisely at a festival moment, Weber decided that the natives simply liked color. Well—the plain, burnished metal of his spacesuit stood out among them. He waited, taut as a drawn wire, holding his face impassive with a straining effort.

They converged again, closing warily in on all sides, muttering to each other. Weber caught one repeated word. *"Teucan."* It could mean stranger, god, demon, amazement, metal, or maybe just plain to hell with it—no way of knowing.

An old one finally stood forth—bigger than the rest, his face hard and seamed by ancient wounds. *"Teucan quituhiulat shu?"* he snapped. *"Baldemo azunabariun tzi?"*

"Sorry," said Weber. "No savvy." He read fright and a savage will in the narrowed purple eyes. The other blueskins had fallen silent; they were watching with an enormous anticipation.

Suddenly the native lifted his ax and whirled it down. Weber threw up his metal-clad arm just in time to save his skull. The native screeched and sprang like a wildcat, hacking again, raking the Trader's cheekbone. Weber struck at him, the armored fist glancing off the dodging native's shoulder and sending him spinning.

He stood panting, glaring at the Terran. Another native prodded him with a spear. Before Cosmos—they were egging him on!

He gathered his muscles and leaped again. This time Weber

was prepared. He caught the blow once more on his arm, and his other fist slammed into the attacker's nose. He felt bone crunch and saw the blood spurt —red as his own, that blood. The native staggered, and Weber wrenched the ax from him.

Some of the watchers shouted, lifting their weapons to the gray heaven. The assailant looked around him, eyes wild with despair through the blood that masked his broken face. There was no friendliness in the answering stares. With something like a groan, he drew an obsidian knife from his belt and charged afresh. Weber swung the ax, and the keen blade clove his skull.

The Trader stood panting over the body, looking around and raising the bloody weapon. "All right," he said hoarsely. "All right. Who else wants the same treatment?"

There was a long minute's silence, and then the cheers nearly split his eardrums. He was escorted into the village by a crowd that capered and yelled and brought forth flutes and drums to serenade him in. Only the peasants stayed behind, eagerly carving the body of the fallen into chunks, squabbling over the pieces and finally hastening back with their trophies.

Before Cosmos, thought Weber dazedly, *they* expected *a finish fight!*

He was shown to a good-sized hut well furnished with stools, mats, furs, and the other items of primitive wealth. Four nice-looking women came in with him, smiling somewhat timorously. Apparently he had inherited his enemy's possessions along with his rank—whatever that had been.

It might be duplicity, but he doubted it. The attempt to murder him had been honest enough, and the awe which he now received seemed honest, too. It was not the formal and silent respect of more civilized races—these people were whooping things up as much as they could—but it was there nonetheless. In the long blue twilight of the planet's day—he estimated it at thirty hours—they gave him a feast. Meats, vegetables, fruits, and a potent sort of beer—it was fun, and he staggered back to his new wives in the middle-sized hours of morning.

By Sirius, if he couldn't make a good thing out of this he didn't deserve the name of Trader!

WITHOUT making claims to brilliance or to any outstanding intellectual interests beyond the making and spending of as much money as possible, Weber Franz had a sharp

brain and knew how to use it. The first thing was to learn the language and find out what the devil he'd gotten himself into.

He held the most intelligent-looking of his wives back from work in his fields and drafted her as his instructor. There was little danger of upsetting his godhead, if any, by asking to be taught something—one very general rule about primitives is that they don't worry about consistency and a god who doesn't know the language is not a contradiction. He wasn't much disturbed in the next few days—his wives did the farming and household chores and except for the gaping children the villagers left him pretty much alone—so he could devote his full time to study. His tutor was only too pleased to be free of manual labor, and the primary trouble was the attempt of a couple of the others, jealous of her privilege, to kill her. Weber knocked a few teeth out and had no difficulties thereafter. He was beginning to realize that brutality was an accepted feature of this society. The men swaggered and fought, the villagers browbeat the peasants, the children abused the animals—and still there seemed to be as much laughter here as anywhere else. *They must like it,* he thought.

Traders generally didn't have too much to do with races as backward as this one. The ideal was a people far enough advanced to have something worth buying or bilking them out of. Thus Weber's knowledge of the present level of society was scant, a fact which caused him considerable grief later on. But he had had mind training, and he understood linguistic principles, so he learned fast now. The names of simple objects and actions—more abstract words derived by indirection or from context—and the language was agglutinative, which helped a lot. It wasn't many days before he could understand and make himself understood.

This, it seemed, was the village of Tubarro, part of the domain of Azunica, to which it paid tribute in the form of foodstuffs and slaves. He—Beber, as they rendered it—was now the Teucan of Tubarro, having killed the old one. He didn't dare ask directly what the Teucan was—that might be going too far—and said merely that he had come from the far land of Terra.

Once a levy of soldiers marched down the road toward Azunica, gay with feathers and shields and flowing cloaks, drums and flutes and gongs, leading a hundred miserable-looking captives roped together. And there was a lot of traffic,

runners speeding up and down the highway, porters moving under fantastic loads, nobles borne in litters and commoners trudging with goods bought or to sell. The life of this culture seemed to be in Azunica; Tubarro was only a sleepy fuel station and supply store. Weber decided that he would have to visit the city.

But as it happened, the city came to him.

THEY arrived toward evening, about two weeks after Weber's arrival—though he had lost count of time in the monotonous round of days. There was quite a procession—a squad of soldiers, a company of slaves, even a group of musicians—and they pushed arrogantly down the one street of Tubarro and halted before Weber's dwelling. The Terran, who was becoming aware of the importance of haughtiness, did not look up. He sat in front of his house, wearing the native dress, which showed his size and blondness to spectacular advantage, playing solitaire with the pack of cards he had had in his pocket at the time of the wreck.

"Are you, sir, the Teucan of Tubarro?"

Weber lifted heavy-lidded eyes. A tall old man had gotten from his litter—gaudily painted and ornamented, with a feather cloak swung from his shoulders and an elaborately carved staff in one hand. Weber, whose eyes missed little, noticed that his visitor and everyone in the troop had had the first joint of the little finger removed. He spread his five-fingered hands into plain sight.

"Yes, sir, I am," he replied, with the cold courtesy of formal occasions. Idly, he shuffled the cards and snatched one out of the air. Sleight-of-hand could be useful. "Would you like to come inside and take refreshment?"

"Thank you, sir, I would." The old—priest?—followed him into the house. Was it polite to go in before or after or arm-in-arm with your guest? Weber didn't know. He signaled a wife for food and drink.

"Word of you has come to Azunica, sir," said the visitor after due formalities. "It is said you came from a remote land, and most strangely attired."

"That is true, sir." Weber nodded his head very slightly to the polished spacesuit, standing in a corner. "Weaponless I overcame the old Teucan and gave his body to the earth. I did not choose to use my weapons against a single man."

"I see, sir." The priest made a bridge of his fingers and peered shrewdly at the Terran. "It is plain that you are from far away, and that the *teucans* have

placed the holy sign on your hands themselves."

There was that word again—*teucan!* In this context it seemed to mean god; but as used by the villagers, and in view of Weber's daily life, it seemed to mean little more than battle-ax champion. The ins and outs of the primitive mind—they don't *think* like civilized people—

"What I wondered, sir," went on the native, "is why you chose to come to this little wallow, rather than to Azunica the great and sacred. You could, being plainly marked as holy yourself, have had the *teucanno* for the asking now that the old one has returned to the earth."

"I had my reasons, sir."

"So you did, sir, and I do not question them. But I am the Chief Servant of Azunica, and it is my duty to select the next Teucan of the city and the whole domain. I do not know how they do it in your land, sir, but in Azunica we determine the will of the *teucans* by drawing lots among all qualified young men. However, you yourself are so clearly the designated one that when word of you came I hastened to find you. It is past time for the choosing—the *banyaquil* must be planted soon or not at all. The people grow restless."

Weber reflected that most of the fields were still being cultivated, and that the crops in the planted ones were young. He must have arrived just in the sowing time, and apparently they needed someone to preside over fertility ceremonies and whatnot. If the old Teucan had lately died—

Hmmm—this, my boy, looks like the luck of the Webers. If you play it right—

"I am content here, sir," he said. "I have my house and my fields and my wives. Why should I move?"

"But reflect, sir. You will grow old and weak—or perhaps, even before that time, there will be a lucky challenger. There are many restless young men who seek a *teucanno* to make their fortune. You will have to fight many times a year. And all for this little village!"

"But there would be even more challengers in Azunica, would there not?"

For an instant the old man looked astonished, and then the mask clamped down again and the eyes were shrewd. There was a good brain under that gray-streaked purple hair. By betraying his ignorance, Weber had started the brain thinking. The Terran looked nervously at the door, but none of the soldiers shifted from the post of attention.

"You jest, sir," said the priest.

"Unless it is indeed that they do matters very differently in your homeland. No, who would dare lift a hand against the Teucan of Azunica? He is—he is the *Teucan!* What he would have is his for the asking. Should he tell a man to slay himself, that man would plunge the knife in his own belly on the instant."

Hmmm—yes, apparently the Teucan of Azunica—which, after all, was the capital of a fair-sized theocratic empire—was something different from the Teucan of a village. The latter were—what? Symbols of some kind, no more. The former might well be an incarnate god.

"The homes of Azunica are stuffed with gold and feathers, sir," said the priest persuasively. "The meats are tender, the fruits are sweet, the beer is a singing in the blood. The maidens are young and lovely. The lords of the realm are glad to wait on the Teucan as his slaves." He sighed. "It is clear to me that you are the intended one, and there will be an evil year if the wrong man should be raised to the golden seat. That, sir, is why I am so anxious to give you all this."

"Hmmm—and what must I do myself?"

"What you will, my lord. There are the ceremonies, of course, and appearances to keep up, but it is not arduous. And every creature in the realm is your chattel."

"I will consider it, sir. You shall have my answer tomorrow."

He'd have to make a few discreet inquiries, confirm what had been said. He couldn't inquire too much, of course, without giving himself away to a dangerous extent—but he could at least find out if the Teucan of Azunica had all that power. And if so—*If so, Weber my boy, you'll take another step to success. From Trader to god—not bad!*

AZUNICA was a big and well-built city, the heart of a high-level barbarism. Large houses of stone and rammed earth set well back from broad paved streets; rows of painted, fang-mouthed idols leading toward a great central pyramid; parks where flowers were a riot of color and the nobles sailed their barges on artificial lakes to the soft music of slave attendants; crowded, jostling marketplaces, men and women yelling around the booths where everything from rugs and pottery to slave girls bred through many generations for beauty and meekness were sold; workshops and factories—it was a gay and colorful scene, and, as Weber saw it from the litter that bore him

to the Temple, he was glad he had come. Whatever happened, life on this planet wasn't going to be dull.

The city, like the villages through which he had passed, was clean, and there seemed to be no beggars, slums, or cripples. It was a culture of priests, warriors, artisans, and slaves, but a healthy vigorous one resting on the sturdy foundation of an independent peasantry and nourished from a rich, deep soil. In centuries to come, its nastier features might die out, it could perhaps accomplish great things, but Weber had to live in its present. He was not an altruist and did not intend to make any changes which wouldn't be of direct personal benefit.

Careful questioning of the Chief Servant, the old high priest Zacalli, had already given him some notion of the social structure. The government was in the hands of the priesthood, who in the various ranks fulfilled not only religious but all important civil and military functions; theoretically, at least, everything was the personal property of the Teucan and everyone his personal slave. A rather moderate tax, as such things go at this level of culture, supported the government and the army. The latter was enormous, every man putting in some time of service and a large cadre of professionals raised to arms from birth. Azunica was in a state of perpetual war with all surrounding nations—which all seemed to have a similar society —and the outer provinces, loosely held, were incessantly rebelling. This yielded slaves and tribute. Pretty rough on the borderland peoples, thought Weber, but it enriched the central domain, and the high soil-fertility and birth rate made it economically feasible. Cripples, the senile, and the hopelessly diseased were killed out of hand, brawls and duels were a casually accepted feature of daily life even among the lower classes; only slaves and low-born women were expected to be humble. The whole setup would have revolted an ordinary Galactic, but Weber had spent most of his life on the frontier and accepted it without too many qualms. The thing to do was to adapt; afterward he could see about steering events in what direction he might choose.

Temple headquarters were in a series of gaudily ornamented one-story palaces sprawling around the great pyramid. Weber was escorted past hundreds of prostrated slaves, servants, priests, and soldiers to a suite which was furnished with a barbaric magnificence that took

even his breath away. There were a dozen virgins waiting for him, with the promise of as many more as he desired, and he was left to rest and prepare himself for the inaugural ceremonies.

Those took place that night, an awesome torchlit festival with all the city turned out to watch the dancers and musicians and wildly chanting priests. Weber had little to do but sit under his weight of gold and jewels and furs—until at dawn Zacalli gave him a knife and led him slowly up the stairway to the height of the great pyramid.

There was an interminable line of bound captives coming up the other side, toward the altar and the monstrous idol which loomed in the vague gray light. As Weber stared, four burly priests grabbed the first one and stretched him over the stone. "Now, my lord," said the old priest, "give back to the earth the life that came from it."

"Human sacrifice—no!"

"My lord, the *teucans* stoop low, they are waiting."

Weber looked at the prisoner's tightly drawn face, and back to the knife in his hand, and there was a sickness in his throat. "I can't do it," he whispered. "I can't."

"Hurry, my lord, the light is coming and the earth is hungry."

Weber caught at his sanity with both hands. *If I don't, someone else will—after I'm dead.*

He walked slowly forward. "The liver lies here, my lord," pointed Zacalli.

The knife was sharp, but there were many prisoners. Weber had to stop now and again to vomit. The priests' faces were like carven masks.

It was done—the earth had been fed—and Weber went down again to the orgiastic multitude and slowly back to his dwelling. Even after the blood had been washed off and his concubines had anointed him, he felt it red and wet on his skin, soaking through.

THERE is a certain type of man, energetic, adaptable, and possessed of a hard common sense rather than any great intellect, who goes where the most money is to be gotten and moves the world to get at it. Afterward he becomes a figure of legend and romance, but in his own time he is merely a practical, if adventurous, businessman, not a brute but not especially tender-minded, willing to take risks but not foolhardy. The glamor is added by others. In the so-called First Dark Age it was the viking. In the Second Dark Age it was the Martian war lord. Now,

when man has reached the stars, it is the Trader.

He fulfills little economic purpose—civilization just doesn't need him—but by juggling goods from one planet to another he can often accumulate a tidy fortune for himself. He is, usually, cordially disliked by everyone else, for his practices are sharp at best and piratical at worst. He is apt to break the law and sneak beyond the frontier to find worlds never visited before, and there is little which the Coordination Service can do about it except hope that he doesn't work too much harm. The Galaxy is just too big, and too little of it is known, for control. To the average Sol-bound Terran he is a swashbuckling hero, flitting from planet to wild new planet. To himself, he is merely a hard-working entrepreneur in a business which consists mostly of monotonous waiting, and he dreams only of the big strike and the fortune large enough to retire on—before he can spend it.

Weber was a Trader. He had gone into the uncharted Bucyrus region to find what he could find. If the Service had known where he was bound, they would have stopped him; if any of his fellows had known, they would have tried to get in ahead of him; so he went off in silence, and now there would be none to look for him and he would remain on this planet for the rest of his life. Wherefore it behooved him, first, to adapt his mind, and second, to make something of his situation.

At least, he thought, he'd been lucky in this planet. The food was nourishing to him, the natives were so humanoid that he wouldn't miss his own species, and he seemed immune to the local diseases. It could be worse. Much worse.

Only—well—he'd almost immediately reached the top. Without effort he'd become the adored god and absolute owner of his environment. It didn't take long for his restless nature to demand action. What to *do?*

The fertility rites attending the planting of the staple *banyaquil* had been exhausting, though—he grinned—fun. His officiation in daily ritual wasn't needed, and there wouldn't be another big ceremony till midsummer. Then another in the harvest, another in the mid-rainy season, and then it would be spring again. The planet's year was shorter than Terra's, though not very accurately known in the absence of astronomy, and that swift crop cycle accounted in part for the food surplus which enabled the culture to support its permanent warfare. The prospect

of a lifetime of the same round looked boring.

Well—he'd make changes. He could do it, being a god, *the* Teucan. First, though, he'd better learn a few more details.

He summoned Zacalli, who entered and prostrated himself. The old man lay there in silence for a long time before it occurred to Weber that he wouldn't speak or move without being told. "Rise," said the Terran. "Sit down over there." He lowered his own bulk to a cushioned stool. "I want to talk to you."

"As my lord commands."

"I want to ask some questions. Answer me truthfully, but otherwise as you would answer any other man. For I am a man and you know it, in spite of my being Teucan."

"Yes, my lord. The man is the Teucan and the Teucan is the man. The *teucanno* of the old one has entered you, as it will enter your successor, at the time when your own life returns to the earth."

"But a village Teucan is something different. He is but a man among men, and anyone who kills him may have his post. Why?"

Zacalli's eyes rested on Weber with an indrawn thoughtfulness. "My lord has come from far away indeed."

"I know. I admit to being ignorant of much about Azunica. Though—" Weber tried to look faintly ominous— "I know much of which you here have no inkling."

"Yes, my lord. They saw you come from the heavens. I have seen your clothing of unknown metal. I have seen your own self."

"Very well, then. Answer my question. Why may a village Teucan be challenged and *the* Teucan not?"

"My lord, a Teucan is the life of his people. While he lives, he holds their life and the life of the land within him. Yet he must not sicken or die alone, for then the life of the land would die with him, the crops would fail and the women would grow barren. So he is slain by someone else, someone younger and stronger who can better hold the life. And the man-life of the old Teucan goes back to the earth."

Hmmm—a fertility cult, yes. Sympathetic magic—as the Teucan went, so went the village, and to avoid his wasting away the people had hit on the not unintelligent idea of cutting him off in his prime. And the body, the life of the body, went back to the soil—magic again—yes, that was why those peasants had divided up the corpse . . . In similar manner, the human sacrifices were made for the whole

realm, to give the life of the captives to the land of the empire.

"But what then of me? What is the function of *the* Teucan?

"My lord, you hold the life not of one small village but of the world. Yours is not the chance flux of rain or wind or drouth or heat at one place, it is the great cycle of the seasons all over the lands of man. The little Teucans are chance; you are the great overall harmony of the world and the seasons. Thus no one could challenge you; the power is too great to be poured from one vessel to another without due magical ceremony."

"I see. Yet you speak of the *teucans* sometimes as if they were —well—not men. Beings higher than men."

"Certainly, my lord. Are they not the *teucans?* You yourself are now one of them, the *teucan* of the earth and of growth, rainy Mazotuca."

Weber shook his yellow head and gave up trying to follow a thought-pattern which, by civilized standards, just didn't make sense. It would have been well for him had he known more about primitive peoples; he would have realized that while their logic has a different basis it is quite rigorous, often fantastically so. A civilized man usually compromises with his postulates; a primitive does not, but carries them through to their ultimate logical conclusions.

And because the logic was not his own, he was also led to the assumption that the Azunicans, if not inherently stupid, were at least effectually so. That was another mistake. Zacalli and his cohorts could not have been the real rulers of a large and complex empire for the better part of a lifetime without developing a very practical intelligence.

Their new god was strange, he undoubtedly had remarkable powers and there was no guessing the extent of these. He was ignorant, and one could not tell how he would react to sudden new knowledge—he had certainly been revolted enough by the absolute necessities of the sacrifice. So the thing to do was to keep him in ignorance, and play on him as one plays on a powerful instrument, until—

Previous Teucans had been easy to handle. Sate them with every kind of luxury and it was enough. This one seemed to desire something more. Well, it might be possible to obtain it for him. The law was that the Teucan must have everything he wanted.

WEBER was discovering that a god can be very lonely. His associates could not speak to him except in the most elaborate-

ly unctuous terms of flattery. A few times he summoned others to him, soldiers, artisans, commoners hailed in the streets as he went by, but they were too awed for coherence. With his harem he could relax, they laughed and frolicked with their master, but they were all featherheads who had never seen the real life of the world, born and bred merely to please a man's body. When he complained of this latter fact once to Zacalli, the Chief Servant hurried off and brought him the most intelligent woman in Azunica, wife of a petty noble, and she proved as evasive in her talk as the high priest himself. Coached in advance?

Yes—a conspiracy of some kind. Weber investigated, making surprise visits to all sections of the palaces, snapping questions at underlings who were too frightened to do more than stammer the truth. Such as it was—they weren't aware of a plot, they merely did their jobs, but the fact emerged and when he had it Weber laughed. This, at least, was something he could understand. And it was merely that the Teucan was an elaborate figurehead and the Temple bureaucracy did everything which counted.

Well—he'd see about that!

Easy, though, easy. He'd been thinking of a way to eliminate the human sacrifices, but it would be a long, difficult job. He couldn't merely order them discontinued—most likely the people wouldn't stand for that, and if somehow he did succeed it would be destroying the fertility cult which was the very basis of his power. No, changes would have to be slow, and he'd just have to rid himself of squeamishness.

But he learned there was to be a staff meeting to plan the summer campaign, and insisted on being there. It was an odd conference, the feathered and painted priest-officers discussing strategy and tactics with a cool calculation that would not have been amiss in the Coordination Patrol. He kept himself in the background at first, giving the men a chance to forget their awkwardness in his presence.

There was to be a battle with the neighbor state of Culacanni, and it was thought that a successful raid could be made far into their territory, stealing much treasure and taking many prisoners. Then the army would swing homeward through Azunica's own province of Onegar. "By then, sirs," promised Zacalli, "the revolt will be well under way, but not far enough so that their armies can stand us off."

"The revolt!" exploded Weber. "I never heard of a revolt there."

The impassive blue faces swung around to look at him. "Certainly not, my lord," said Zacalli. "It has not begun yet."

"But how do you know—"

"Why, our agents will start it themselves, of course, my lord. The Onegarans will expect help from Culacanni, but we will already have put those to flight and can crush the uprising without too much trouble."

"But—start a revolt—*why?*"

"My lord jests. We need prisoners for the harvest sacrifice. How could we get them save through war or the suppression of rebels?"

"Hm." Weber relapsed, grunting. The very basis of this culture seemed to be human sacrifice, and everything else followed logically from that. No sacrifices, no crops next year.

Well, he'd heard of stranger basics, here and there throughout the Galaxy. Even Terra's history would supply plenty of odd ones—there had, for instance, been the fantastic statist arrangements previously to the Second Dark Age, where everything was subordinated to the aggrandizement of the nation, which was somehow thought of as having a real and independent existence—

"I'll go along," he said.

"My lord!" gasped an officer. "You cannot — it is unheard of—"

Weber got up and hit the man in the face, hard. As he fell from his seat, Weber kicked him in the belly. "I go," he said.

He thought there was approval in the eyes of the rest. If their own society was brutal, their god, their ideal, ought to be a perfect bastard. Well, he'd give them their wish!

THE campaign lasted through the whole short summer. Weber found himself enjoying most of it, since physical action could veil the fact that he was set apart and lonely. There was little danger to him personally; he could not risk his priceless life in battle and a large cordon of guards was assigned him. The bloodshed didn't worry him any more. His environment was making him calloused.

They marched down the roads of the empire and up into hill country, through rain and heat, quiet fields and tangled colorful jungles and bare windy heights, hunting or stealing for their provisions, chanting as they went. In the long lightless dark there were rings of flickering campfires, wailing songs, harsh barking laughter. When they took an enemy village, they sacked it thoroughly, and Weber could have his pick of loot and captives. There were pitched battles, but no guerrilla harassment—

after all, the war was fought not for possession of the country but of its inhabitants. He'd change that, thought Weber—he'd make something out of this drive to war and turn Azunica into the seat of a real empire. Since there was nothing else for him to do, he'd turn conqueror—next year, maybe, or the year after. It no longer occurred to him to worry about the need or justice of it. Sufficient that he, the Teucan, wanted it so.

They came back through Onegar and scattered the rebels and took prisoners by the hundreds. It was a triumphant return for them.

The harvest ceremonies came, and the grain was stored, and the long rains began.

WEBER sat moodily in his palace, looking out at the endless flow of water from a lowering sky, drinking deep of the bowl which a slave kept filled for him. It wasn't right, he thought self-pityingly, that he should be so cut off from the life of the people, that they should all be obsequious masks. He suspected the hand of Zacalli in the constant frustration of his attempts to learn more. He'd have the Chief Servant killed soon. But right now he needed the old thus-and-so, and Zacalli was the only one who did talk intelligently with him. He realized that he was being drawn out—but what of that? Zacalli couldn't use the knowledge.

It was like trying to grasp a smooth sphere too big for the hand. He slipped away, unable to get a grip, unable to penetrate and understand. Damn! If only he'd known some primitive psychology—but he'd always despised the xenologists, it was their influence in Coordination, their eternal jabber about culture traits and the preservation of autochthonous developments, which had made so much grief for the Traders. Cosmos! Would not it ever stop raining?

He gulped down another mouthful of beer. Wasn't much he could do now. Azunica was huddled into itself, waiting for spring, and the world lay dark and sodden beyond. His energy, baffled by its initial attempts, gave up the fight and turned to the pleasures which were given him in such unceasing abundance and variety. Now and then he thought dimly that it was bad to stop thinking, that there were implications which he should reason out for his own safety, but the very air seemed to cloud his brain. Some other time. There was time enough; he'd be here till he died.

A drum was beating, somewhere far off, it had been going

every day for quite a while now. Zacalli said that it was the first faint rite of spring. When they had three clear days in a row, then it was time for the *banyaquil.*

Weber looked out again. By Cosmos, the rain was slackening. Night swirled slowly out of the streets, up toward the hidden sky, and a thick white mist rose with it. The rain grew thinner. Maybe there wouldn't be any tomorrow.

There wasn't, except for a brief shower which didn't count. Nor the next day. The drums were loud now, thuttering an insistent summons, and the Temple buildings were suddenly alive with softfooted priests hurrying on their errands. From the top of the pyramid, Weber could see that the peasants were already out, scratching up their fields, sowing grain. He'd have to give them a proper plow this year.

This year! Had it been a year? Well, the cycle was shorter on this planet. He wondered if it was springtime on Terra.

There was a feast that night—orgy might better describe it—over which he was expected to preside. Which he did, hilariously. The rains were ending! He slept most of the following day, which was quiet and sultry, and did not see the preparations that were made and the slow gathering of the throngs.

"Tonight, my lord," said Zacalli at dusk, "is yours to do as you will."

"Certainly it is," said Weber. "I'm the Teucan, am I not?" He threw another party.

MORNING came with fresh rain clouds, sweeping low and black over the land on a hot wet wind. But that didn't matter. The rainy season was officially over.

Weber was shaken gently awake. It was Zacalli, robed and feathered and painted as never before, and a train of priests no less gaudy stood behind him. "Go away," mumbled the Terran.

"My lord, you must arise. It is the time of the festival's beginning."

"I said go away!" Weber sat up on his couch, holding one hand to his throbbing head. "It is my order. I am the Teucan."

"Hail the Teucan," murmured the deep voices. Thunder growled in the sky.

"My lord, you must. It is the law of the *teucans.*"

Weber was half lifted to his feet. His mouth tasted vile. Well, if he must, then he must—couldn't be too unconventional at this stage of the game. What ceremony was it? Not the sacri-

fice—he knew it wasn't scheduled for several days yet. Odd that Zacalli hadn't coached him on the details of this performance, as he had of all others. *I suppose I just have to sit and look divine. Maybe I can catch a nap there.*

"Very well, I am coming, I am coming."

Slaves were there, bathing him, anointing him, painting his body and adorning it with the most gorgeous finery in the empire. He was so used to thinking of the attendants as faceless nonentities that he didn't notice anything special in their manner. He ate a large breakfast to the accompaniment of a wild religious chant whose words he only half caught. *"Now the Teucan, rainy Mazotuca, sinks into the earth and gives it his life, to arise gloriously renewed. . . . Hail the Teucan, dead and yet arisen, hail Mazotuca, who makes the earth to flower. . . ."*

Some kind of symbolism, he thought fuzzily. Hadn't that xenologist once said something about the death and resurrection of the fertility god in many primitive cultures throughout the Galaxy? Symbol of the grain, buried and rising anew, of old generations dying and the young springing from their loins, of summer which dies and is buried under winter and rises again in spring. . . . *So I am to be resurrected today, eh? Cosmos, I need it—ouch, my head—*

The priests had waited unmoving for him to finish. As he rose, they bowed to the floor, and Zacalli took his arm and led him into the hall.

There was a sudden curious, almost wistful note in the old priest's voice as he murmured: "My lord, you came from very far away indeed. I would I might have learned more of your country." And with a flicker of malice, "Perhaps you should have learned more of ours."

"Hm?" asked Weber.

They came out on the palace stairs at that moment, and the throng in the streets, surging and roaring behind the lines of guardsmen like a rainbow maelstrom, began to cheer, thunder of noise lifting into the thick dark sky and drowning the whine of wind. Weber shuddered as his head thumped.

Slowly down the avenue between the lines of the army, leading the chanting priests and the skirling music, past the massive stone buildings to the pyramid. It loomed mountainous overhead, gray in the sulfurous storm-light, lightnings flickering about the idol on its summit. Thunder boomed and crashed; the gods were drumming up there.

Slowly they mounted the steps, up and up while the people of Azunica yelled at the base. The wind was strong, whipping cloaks, throwing the first heavy raindrops stingingly into Weber's face. Black overhead, streaked with an incessant fire of lightning, a hazy wall of rain marching down from the north, thunder and darkness and the idol grinning above him. Weber looked back, down the long slope and the barbaric procession winding at his heels, over the human sea and the heavy old buildings and out to the whole vast sweep of land.

His land, by Cosmos, his earth lying rich and open for the rain's divine embrace, his valleys and rivers and sky-storming mountains, brawling, pulsing fury of life—standing here with the air blowing wild and the thunder a steady salute, crowned with lightnings, he *was* the Teucan and a sudden drunkenness of power sang in his blood. To be a god—

The priests formed a half-circle about the great idol, and their chants rose loud against the hooting wind. Zacalli prostrated himself once more in front of Weber. Then he stood up, and the knife gleamed in his hand, and four huge priests grabbed the Terran and threw him across the altar stone.

The god of life is reborn each year—but first, he must die.

OF *Withered* APPLES

PHILIP K. DICK

SOMETHING was tapping on the window. Blowing up against the pane, again and again. Carried by the wind. Tapping faintly, insistently.

Lori, sitting on the couch, pretended not to hear. She gripped her book tightly and turned a page. The tapping came again, louder and more imperative. It could not be ignored.

"Darn!" Lori said, throwing her book down on the coffee table and hurrying to the window. She grasped the heavy brass handles and lifted.

For a moment the window resisted. Then, with a protesting groan, it reluctantly rose. Cold autumn air rushed into the room. The bit of leaf ceased tapping and swirled against the woman's throat, dancing to the floor.

Lori picked the leaf up. It was old and brown. Her heart skipped a beat as she slipped the leaf into the pocket of her jeans. Against her loins the leaf cut and tingled, a little hard point piercing her smooth skin and sending exciting shudders up and down her spine. She stood at the open window a moment, sniffing the air. The air was full of the presence of trees and rocks, of great boulders and remote places. It was time—time to go again. She touched the leaf. She was *wanted.*

Quickly Lori left the big living-room, hurrying through the hall into the dining-room. The dining-room was empty. A few chords of laughter drifted from the kitchen. Lori pushed the kitchen door open. "Steve?"

Her husband and his father were sitting around the kitchen table, smoking their cigars and drinking steaming black coffee. "What is it?" Steve demanded, frowning at his young wife. "Ed and I are in the middle of business."

"I—I want to ask you something."

The two men gazed at her, brown-haired Steven, his dark eyes full of the stubborn dignity of New England men, and his father, silent and withdrawn in *her* presence. Ed Patterson scarcely noticed her. He rustled

through a sheaf of feed bills, his broad back turned toward her.

"What is it?" Steve demanded impatiently. "What do you want? Can't it wait?"

"I have to go," Lori blurted

"Go where?"

"Outside." Anxiety flooded over her. "This is the last time. I promise. I won't go again, after this. Okay?" She tried to smile, but her heart was pounding too hard. "Please let me, Steve."

"Where does she go?" Ed rumbled.

Steve grunted in annoyance. "Up in the hills. Some old abandoned place up there."

Ed's gray eyes flickered. "Abandoned farm?"

"Yes. You know it?"

"The old Rickley farm. Rickley moved away years ago. Couldn't get anything to grow, not up there. Ground's all rocks. Bad soil. A lot of clay and stones. The place is all overgrown, tumbled down."

"What kind of farm was it?"

"Orchard. Fruit orchard. Never yielded a damn thing. Thin old trees. Waste of effort."

Steve looked at his pocket watch. "You'll be back in time to fix dinner?"

"Yes!" Lori moved toward the door. "Then I can go?"

Steve's face twisted as he made up his mind. Lori waited impatiently, scarcely breathing. She had never got used to Vermont men and their slow, deliberate way. Boston people were quite different. And her group had been more the college youths, dances and talk, and late laughter.

"Why do you go up there?" Steve grumbled.

"Don't ask me, Steve. Just let me go. This is the last time." She writhed in agony. She clenched her fists. "Please!"

Steve looked out the window. The cold autumn wind swirled through the trees. "All right. But it's going to snow. I don't see why you want to—"

Lori ran to get her coat from the closet. "I'll be back to fix dinner!" she shouted joyfully. She hurried to the front porch, buttoning her coat, her heart racing. Her cheeks were flushed a deep, excited red as she closed the door behind her, her blood pounding in her veins.

Cold wind whipped against her, rumpling her hair, plucking at her body. She took a deep breath of the wind and started down the steps.

She walked rapidly onto the field, toward the bleak line of hills beyond. Except for the wind there was no sound. She patted her pocket. The dry leaf broke and dug hungrily into her.

"I'm coming . . ." she whis-

pered, a little awed and frightened. "I'm on my way. . . ."

HIGHER and higher the woman climbed. She passed through a deep cleft between two rocky ridges. Huge roots from old stumps spurted out on all sides. She followed a dried-up creek bed, winding and turning.

After a time low mists began to blow about her. At the top of the ridge she halted, breathing deeply, looking back the way she had come.

A few drops of rain stirred the leaves around her. Again the wind moved through the great dead trees along the ridge. Lori turned and started on, her head down, hands in her coat pockets.

She was on a rocky field, overgrown with weeds and dead grass. After a time she came to a ruined fence, broken and rotting. She stepped over it. She passed a tumbled-down well, half filled with stones and earth.

Her heart beat quickly, fluttering with nervous excitement. She was almost there. She passed the remains of a building, sagging timbers and broken glass, a few ruined pieces of furniture strewn nearby. An old automobile tire caked and cracked. Some damp rags heaped over rusty, bent bedsprings.

And there it was—directly ahead.

Along the edge of the field was a grove of ancient trees. Lifeless trees, withered and dead, their thin, blackened stalks rising up leaflessly. Broken sticks stuck in the hard ground. Row after row of dead trees, some bent and leaning, torn loose from the rocky soil by the unending wind.

Lori crossed the field to the trees, her lungs laboring painfully. The wind surged against her without respite, whipping the foul-smelling mists into her nostrils and face. Her smooth skin was damp and shiny with the mist. She coughed and hurried on, stepping over the rocks and clods of earth, trembling with fear and anticipation.

She circled around the grove of trees, almost to the edge of the ridge. Carefully, she stepped among the sliding heaps of rocks. Then—

She stopped, rigid. Her chest rose and fell with the effort of breathing. "I came," she gasped.

For a long time she gazed at the withered old apple tree. She could not take her eyes from it. The sight of the ancient tree fascinated and repelled her. It was the only one alive, the only tree of all the grove still living. All the others were dead, dried-up. They had lost the struggle. But this tree still clung to life.

The tree was hard and barren. Only a few dark leaves hung from it—and some withered apples, dried and seasoned by the wind and mists. They had stayed there, on the branches, forgotten and abandoned. The ground around the tree was cracked and bleak. Stones and decayed heaps of old leaves in ragged clumps.

"I came," Lori said again. She took the leaf from her pocket and held it cautiously out. "This tapped at the window. I knew when I heard it." She smiled mischievously, her red lips curling. "It tapped and tapped, trying to get in. I ignored it. It was so—so impetuous. It annoyed me."

The tree swayed ominously. Its gnarled branches rubbed together. Something in the sound made Lori pull away. Terror rushed through her. She hurried back along the ridge, scrambling frantically out of reach.

"Don't," she whispered. *"Please."*

The wind ceased. The tree became silent. For a long time Lori watched it apprehensively.

Night was coming. The sky was darkening rapidly. A burst of frigid wind struck her, half turning her around. She shuddered, bracing herself against it, pulling her long coat around her. Far below, the floor of the valley was disappearing into shadow, into the vast cloud of night.

In the darkening mists the tree was stern and menacing, more ominous than usual. A few leaves blew from it, drifting and swirling with the wind. A leaf blew past her and she tried to catch it. The leaf escaped, dancing back toward the tree. Lori followed a little way and then stopped, gasping and laughing.

"No," she said firmly, her hands on her hips. "I won't."

There was silence. Suddenly the heaps of decayed leaves blew up in a furious circle around the tree. They quieted down, settling back.

"No," Lori said. "I'm not afraid of you. You can't hurt me." But her heart was hammering with fear. She moved back farther away.

The tree remained silent. Its wiry branches were motionless.

Lori regained her courage. "This is the last time I can come," she said. "Steve says I can't come any more. He doesn't like it."

She waited, but the tree did not respond.

"They're sitting in the kitchen. The two of them. Smoking cigars and drinking coffee. Adding up feed bills." She wrinkled her nose. "That's all they ever do. Add and subtract feed bills. Figure and figure. Profit and loss.

Government taxes. Depreciation on the equipment."

The tree did not stir.

Lori shivered. A little more rain fell, big icy drops that slid down her cheeks, down the back of her neck and inside her heavy coat.

She moved closer to the tree. "I won't be back. I won't see you again. This is the last time. I wanted to tell you. . . ."

The tree moved. Its branches whipped into sudden life. Lori felt something hard and thin cut across her shoulder. Something caught her around the waist, tugging her forward.

She struggled desperately, trying to pull herself free. Suddenly the tree released her. She stumbled back, laughing and trembling with fear. "No!" she gasped. "You can't have me!" She hurried to the edge of the ridge. "You'll never get me again. Understand? And I'm not afraid of you!"

She stood, waiting and watching, trembling with cold and fear. Suddenly she turned and fled, down the side of the ridge, sliding and falling on the loose stones. Blind terror gripped her. She ran on and on, down the steep slope, grabbing at roots and weeds—

Something rolled beside her shoe. Something small and hard. She bent down and picked it up. It was a little dried apple.

Lori gazed back up the slope at the tree. The tree was almost lost in the swirling mists. It stood, jutting up against the black sky, a hard unmoving pillar.

Lori put the apple in her coat pocket and continued down the side of the hill. When she reached the floor of the valley she took the apple out of her pocket.

It was late. A deep hunger began to gnaw inside her. She thought suddenly of dinner, the warm kitchen, the white tablecloth. Steaming stew and biscuits.

As she walked she nibbled on the little apple.

LORI sat up in bed, the covers falling away from her. The house was dark and silent. A few night noises sounded faintly, far off. It was past midnight. Beside her Steven slept quietly, turned over on his side.

What had wakened her? Lori pushed her dark hair back out of her eyes, shaking her head. What—

A spasm of pain burst loose inside her. She gasped and put her hand to her stomach. For a time she wrestled silently, jaws locked, swaying back and forth.

The pain went away. Lori sank back. She cried out, a faint, thin cry. "Steve—"

Steven stirred. He turned over a little, grunting in his sleep.

The pain came again. Harder. She fell forward on her face, writhing in agony. The pain ripped at her, tearing at her belly. She screamed, a shrill wail of fear and pain.

Steve sat up. "For God's sake—" He rubbed his eyes and snapped on the lamp. "What the hell—"

Lori lay on her side, gasping and moaning, her eyes staring, knotted fists pressed into her stomach. The pain twisted and seared, devouring her, eating into her.

"Lori!" Steven grated. "What is it?"

She screamed. Again and again. Until the house rocked with echoes. She slid from the bed, onto the floor, her body writhing and jerking, her face unrecognizable.

Ed came hurrying into the room, pulling his bathrobe around him. "What's going on?"

The two men stared helplessly down at the woman on the floor.

"Good God," Ed said. He closed his eyes.

THE day was cold and dark. Snow fell silently over the streets and houses, over the red brick county hospital building. Doctor Blair walked slowly up the gravel path to his Ford car. He slid inside and turned the ignition key. The motor leaped alive, and he let the brake out.

"I'll call you later," Doctor Blair said. "There are certain particulars."

"I know," Steve muttered. He was still dazed. His face was gray and puffy from lack of sleep.

"I left some sedatives for you. Try to get a little rest."

"You think," Steve asked suddenly, "if we had called you earlier—"

"No." Blair glanced up at him sympathetically. "I don't. In a thing like that, there's not much chance. Not after it's burst."

"Then it *was* appendicitis?"

Blair nodded. "Yes."

"If we hadn't been so damn far out," Steve said bitterly. "Stuck out in the country. No hospital. Nothing. Miles from town. And we didn't realize at first—"

"Well, it's over now." The upright Ford moved forward a little. All at once a thought came to the Doctor. "One more thing."

"What is it?" Steve said dully.

Blair hesitated. "Post mortems —very unfortunate. I don't think there's any reason for one in this case. I'm certain in my own mind. . . . But I wanted to ask—"

"What is it?"

"Is there anything the girl might have swallowed? Did she

put things in her mouth? Needles —while she was sewing? Pins, coins, anything like that? Seeds? Did she ever eat watermelon? Sometimes the appendix—"

"No."

Steve shook his head wearily. "I don't know."

"It was just a thought." Doctor Blair drove slowly off down the narrow tree-lined street, leaving two dark streaks, two soiled lines that marred the pale, glistening snow.

SPRING came, warm and sunny. The ground turned black and rich. Overhead the sun shone, a hot white orb, full of strength.

"Stop here," Steve murmured.

Ed Patterson brought the car to a halt at the side of the street. He turned off the motor. The two men sat in silence, neither of them speaking.

At the end of the street children were playing. A high school boy was mowing a lawn, pushing the machine over the wet grass. The street was dark in the shade of the great trees growing along each side.

"Nice," Ed said.

Steve nodded without answering. Moodily, he watched a young girl walking by, a shopping bag under her arm. The girl climbed the stairs of a porch and disappeared into an old-fashioned yellow house.

Steve pushed the car door open. "Come on. Let's get it over with."

Ed lifted the wreath of flowers from the back seat and put them in his son's lap. "You'll have to carry it. It's your job."

"All right." Steve grabbed the flowers and stepped out onto the pavement.

The two men walked up the street together, silent and thoughtful.

"It's been seven or eight months, now," Steve said abruptly.

"At least." Ed lit the cigar as they walked along, puffing clouds of gray smoke around them. "Maybe a little more."

"I never should have brought her up here. She lived in town all her life. She didn't know anything about the country."

"It would have happened anyhow."

"If we had been closer to a hospital—"

"The doctor said it wouldn't have made any difference. Even if we'd called him right away instead of waiting until morning." They came to the corner and turned. "And as you know—"

"Forget it," Steve said, suddenly tense.

The sounds of the children

had fallen behind them. The houses had thinned out. Their footsteps rang out against the pavement as they walked along.

"We're almost there," Steve said.

They came to a rise. Beyond the rise was a heavy brass fence, running the length of a small field. A green field, neat and even. With carefully placed plaques of white marble criss-crossing it.

"Here we are," Steve said tightly.

"They keep it nice."

"Can we get in from this side?"

"We can try." Ed started along the brass fence, looking for a gate.

Suddenly Steve halted, grunting. He stared across the field, his face white. "*Look.*"

"What is it?" Ed took off his glasses to see. "What you looking at?"

"I was right." Steve's voice was low and indistinct. "I thought there was something. Last time we were here. . . . I saw. . . . You see it?"

"I'm not sure. I see the tree, if that's what you mean."

In the center of the neat green field the little apple tree rose proudly. Its bright leaves sparkled in the warm sunlight. The young tree was strong and very healthy. It swayed confidently with the wind, its supple trunk moist with sweet spring sap.

"They're *red,*" Steve said softly. "They're already red. How the hell can they be red? It's only April. How the hell can they be red so soon?"

"I don't know," Ed said. "I don't know anything about apples." A strange chill moved through him. But graveyards always made him uncomfortable. "Maybe we ought to go."

"Her cheeks were that color," Steve said, his voice low. "When she had been running. Remember?"

The two men gazed uneasily at the little apple tree, its shiny red fruit glistening in the spring sunlight, branches moving gently with the wind.

"I remember, all right," Ed said grimly. "Come on." He took his son's arm insistently, the wreath of flowers forgotten. "Come on, Steve. Let's get out of here."

I'LL SEE YOU TOMORROW

By BEN SMITH

"WAIT," Henry Bitts said. They were in front of a pawnshop and Henry stood there, the new camera slung from his shoulder, his eyes unfocused, peering into some greater distance. Duane Morton paused, outwardly patient. "You said you had it figured out," he prompted.

"Yes," Henry touched his tongue to dry lips, conscious of the rather seedy reflection of a little man that faced him in the pawnshop window. It had been a wonderful thing—the new Speed-Graphic bought from a year's savings, the job with the bunch at the *Globe,* the friendship of Duane Morton.

The two wonderful things in Henry's world, Duane and Dorothy. . . .

Henry was unconscious of Morton's impatience as his mind turned over the hours of the past year as if they had been the pages in a book. The first and greatest scene, of course, was the memory of the day when Dorothy had agreed to marry him. Of all the men she had known . . . Duane . . . Halley . . . Shorty, the entire staff of the *Globe,* she had chosen an inoffensive little man who made a sometimes living in a photography shop. Henry Bitts caught his breath because the recollection was edged with pain.

"You have a knack for photography," Dorothy had said and Henry felt again the urgency in her voice. It had been a warm night so long ago and Dorothy had been sweetly desirable in her short-sleeved linen frock. It had been a night for dreaming and Dorothy had been the foundation for his dream. A knack for photography Henry Bitts might have, but not a knack for making money, and Dorothy's linen dress and all the other beautiful clothes she bought back when she had been working soon became shabby. It was then that Henry had taken what little money they had and bought the camera. After that, Halley gave him a job.

"Halley is a good guy," Mor-

ton's voice brought Henry back to the present. "He'll take you back after he gets over his mad spell."

"No," Henry shook his rather narrow, balding head regretfully, "there's no chance of that." His eyes, squinted from too many hours under a ruby light, passed over the heterogeny of the pawn shop window. "I told you I had it figured out."

Morton took an impatient step, swinging his broad shoulders irritably. "I'll talk to Halley. . . ."

"No," Henry's thin fingers caught at Morton's tweeded sleeve. "No. It's not on account of me that I hate to get fired. It's Dorothy. You know how women are. Even with me working nights, she had the money to have a good time once in a while. And, you've been a good friend to us, taking her. But, it's me . . . I mean about the pictures. There's something about me that makes a camera act the way it does."

"You're crazy!"

Henry Bitts nodded his head wearily. "I guess I am," he replied and again his mind looked into the past . . .

THAT had been a honey of an angle shot he had worked out. From the roof of the tool shed obliquely centering upon the rotund figure of the Mayor, presumably doing something important about the new high school's cornerstone. Henry Bitts could again feel the warm touch of the afternoon breeze; he had been on the day trick then; and from below the voices of the spectators had risen in a pleasant murmur. Across the field, so soon to be covered by an educational plant of imposing brick, tall grass undulated. The Mayor had turned, arm upflung, asking for silence, and Henry Bitts had tripped his Speed-Graphic. A beautiful shot.

"Remember that, Mort?" he asked softly and wondered that his voice could remain calm. "I told you about it. But the plate was a washout and Halley thought I had forgotten to remove the lens cover and he kicked me downstairs to the night trick with Shorty."

"But you got a pic," Morton protested, much as if reasoning with a child. "You simply shot too high, Henry, and missed the ceremony. You got an angle view of the field."

"No." Now that Henry Bitts could see the course of the next few moments, he was calm. As calm as Duane Morton. And the suave, dashing *Globe* reporter

was noted for his own level head.

"I've always envied you, Mort," Henry continued quietly. "I wanted to be like you, as much as I could. You made money, you wore good clothes and if you ever married your wife would have the things she wanted. Dorothy . . . she married me, Mort, but, maybe, she should have married you."

Morton interrupted swiftly, his greenish eyes hooded. "Don't talk like that . . ." his words were torn apart by the thunder of a passing bus, the quick whoop of a boy on a bicycle. "You'll drive yourself nuts. Henry, a camera is a piece of machinery and the picture it takes is what the lens sees. What if they did find a bug in the works, something about a condemned sewer, and change their plans about the high school? They had the ceremony, didn't they? And you took a picture, didn't you?"

Henry Bitts felt the last of his uncertainty vanish. Morton, this brawny, handsome, well-dressed and well-paid *Globe* man about town . . . Mort's voice was shaking.

"A piece of machinery?" Henry Bitts' voice was thoughtful. "No. Not with me, Mort. Look at this," he swung his Speed-Graphic before him and the sunlight winked from the polished chrome. "When I push the release, *something happens!* I took a picture that day at the site of the new high school, Mort. I took other pictures. But, when they were developed . . ." His voice trailed off uncertainly.

"Mort!" Henry's face was white and his throat was dry again. All the fear came flooding back. And the horrible *knowledge.* "I take pictures of things as they will be!"

"Look, Henry. I know a doctor. He'll help you. And Halley . . ."

"Shut up, Mort!"

"Well, O. K." Duane Morton looked through the dingy window of the pawn shop and was suddenly afraid. "Let's go, Henry . . ."

"Not yet." Henry Bitts' voice rose shrilly and a man pushing a street-cleaner's cart looked up, startled. "I take a picture in the morning and when it's developed I wind up with a shot of the same place, *later.* I took a snap of some swans in Richard's Lake, two of them, and when Shorty ran the print through, *there were five.* The young had hatched. Oh, God . . ." There was nothing profane in the tortured word. Henry Bitts' eyes were wet with tears. "Mort, I take pictures of the *future."*

"Easy, Henry," Duane Mor-

ton stepped close, placed an arm across the little man's trembling shoulders. "Easy. It might be a good thing." His lips were stiff with the attempt at jocularity. "Think of the killing you could make at the races. . . ."

"Killing?"

Henry Bitts calmed, suddenly. "Yes." His voice was again almost toneless. "Taking pictures of the future could be very valuable, Mort. It has been to me. I've been working nights for weeks, kind of missed out on what was going on. I can't be blamed, in any way, can I Mort?"

A burly policeman walked by, twirling his night stick. He stopped behind them, his voice thick and Irish. "Your buddy sick, or somethin'?"

"No. No, officer, I'm all right." Henry Bitts waited until the blue uniform was out of sight, his eyes squinted up at Morton, watching the tinge of the big man's exasperation and embarrassment. Henry Bitts even smiled a little. . . .

"I even took a picture of Dorothy yesterday," he said softly. "Mort, a picture of the future is a handy gadget. She had been out to the grocery and had her hair up in those little metal dofunnies. Before I thought I snapped her as she came in the door. Was *she* mad."

Duane Morton laughed and there was relief in the sound. Henry would be all right, now, he was just kind of a nut, that was all. A kind of a dumb nut. But why was his voice so low, choking out the words?

"I developed the picture, Mort." Henry swung his camera abruptly, rubbing the bright surfaces with his thumb. "You look at it while I go in here. . . ."

And Henry Bitts handed Duane Morton the picture of Dorothy — the picture that, through some unknown alchemy, was of another *time*. The picture that showed a gloriously happy Dorothy clasped in Duane Morton's arms, her full lips to his. . . .

Henry Bitts went into the pawnshop and traded his Speed-Graphic for a gun.

ITCO'S STRONG RIGHT ARM

By GORDON DICKSON

IT WAS sunset in the city of Cinya, on the planet of Margaret IV. Flying worms tittered peacefully on the rooftops. In the buildings, female Reechi were tying their young into cubicles for the night. At the temple of the great god Rashta, a large crowd of male Reechi were munching supper as they watched Reechi priests disemboweling a slave with suitable ceremony. At the temple of the great god Itco, a rather small crowd was hopefully waiting for the handouts that would follow the harangue of the human priest now officiating at what was hopefully called

evening service. Watching this proceeding with a jaundiced eye was the high priest of Itco, one Ron Baron, who, having seen quite enough, removed his attention from the crowd and directed it to a letter he had just taken from his pocket and which he was now rereading for the fifteenth time.

Dear Ron (it began)

I look on the wall of my office and what do I see? I see one word printed there in letters of fire. And that word is "action" —ACTION—ACTION! *In that word the whole policy of the Interstellar Trading Company is stated. Action makes the wheels go around. Action stimulates the native, brings in an increased flow of materials and pumps life-blood into the Company. Action is the duty of every man-jack of us.*

Of course, some of us are more limited than others. Much as we would like to stimulate action, we are held in a position back here on Earth where we can do nothing but cheer on our more fortunate brother out on the Frontier. But we take our second-hand glory in the action he creates. Every report of action he sends in causes us to rejoice. And every report indicating a lack of action saddens us.

I regret to say that you have saddened us, Ron. During our recent drive for a hundred percent increase of trade at all the trading stations, where were you? Down at the bottom of the list. Yes, you have saddened us. You have saddened J. B. Hering, our genial president. You have saddened Tom Memworthy, our friendly Chief of Stations. And you have saddened me, Ron.

Come on, now, Ron, you can make that increased quota. Give it the old fight, boy. When you get up in the morning, tell yourself—"I will have action today," and when you go to bed at night, ask yourself, "Did I have action today?" You can do it, you know you can. Don't let those Rashta priests seduce worshipers from good old Itco. We're all behind you, back here on Earth: J. B. Tom Memworthy, and myself—every man-jack of us. You have carte blanche. Anything you say goes—we'll back you to the hilt. Get rid of that Rashta opposition, root 'em out, burn 'em out. You are Itco's strong right arm on Margaret IV, Ron, and we're all rooting for you.

Yours for more action,
Bug Palet
Assistant Chief of Stations.

P.S.—I want to caution you, Ron. Don't forget the Conventions. No rough stuff, now, with the

natives. Remember, you're not allowed to destroy any native idols, or harm any native's faith in his own natural religion. Itco wants worshipers, but not to the extent of damaging Rashta. Just bear that in mind and go to it. We're all behind you here, even old Kimbers, who is panting for action himself and who has asked for your job. Naturally, we all just gave him the old horse laugh. Heh-heh!

"Heh-heh," said Ron Baron, but without humor. He put the well-creased letter away and looked back at the crowd in the temple.

The service was over, and from his position on a secluded little balcony behind the Itco idol—a horrendous creation having a multitude of arms, horns, weapons and teeth—he looked down and saw a heaving mass of green bodies pressing tightly around the officiating priest to snatch the highly spiced cakes he was handing out. To one side lay the pile of offerings. Not a very large pile, either. The Reechi went on the principle of what a thing was worth to you rather than worth to them. There wasn't one of them that couldn't stroll out, club and skin a dozen *chichas* and be back in time for lunch, in contrast to the most skilled human hunter who would be lucky if he got one in that length of time. But the skin-flint worshipers of Itco had barely brought in a skin apiece as offerings.

Of course, Ron reminded himself, the cakes weren't worth anything to the humans, either—or almost nothing. *Their* value lay in the fact that the Reechi were not advanced enough in cookery to duplicate them. It was the one advantage that Galuga, high priest of Rashta, had not been able to steal away from him.

Nevertheless, he found sufficient resentment to curse the ridiculous taboos of the Reechis that had, by pure chance, reserved *chicha* skins for god-offerings, so that a hard-working trading post official couldn't make ordinary above-board exchanges of cakes for skins, but had to go to this mummery of a fake god and what almost amounted to a religious war.

There was another angle to it, too, he reminded himself as he put the letter away and left the balcony by tunnel for his office in back of the temple. The hell of it was, he was growing to like the Reechi, who, except for a certain childlike bloodthirstiness and a bad tendency to shed odorous flakes of hide all over the place, were not a bad type

of alien at all. And this had the result of tying his hands in certain directions.

There were certain things a man could do and still remain, officially, within the Conventions, those rules set up by Central Human Headquarters for the protection of intelligent natives on the New Worlds. Ron knew it. The Itco office back on earth knew it, and knew Ron knew it. And, reading between the lines of Bug Palet's letter, Ron saw only too clearly that he was expected to do just that.

He reached the office just as Jer Bessen, his assistant, came bursting in from the door that led to the temple floor, loaded down with the day's gift offering of hides. Jer was a roly-poly little man with a red face made redder by his exertions, and would have looked ridiculous in his elaborate priestly robes if it had not been for a pair of very small, shrewd eyes that had already gained a reputation among the Reechi for being able to see the state of a Reechi soul, be the Reechi body ever so swaddled in clothes.

"What's up?" he said, dropping into the office's one easy chair.

Ron passed him the letter and sank into the less comfortable seat at the desk.

"I was going to hold it back until I could figure out something," he said. "But you might as well know it now."

Jer read the letter and swore.

"That's Kimber's work," he said, handing it back.

"Kimber?" echoed Ron, straightening up.

"Sure," said Jer, looking at him closely. "Don't you get it? This is his chance to get rid of you. You know both of you are in line for Assistant Chief of Stations when Tom retires and Palet goes up a notch, don't you?"

Ron shook his head.

"It was office gossip just before I came out," said Jer. "I didn't mention it, because I figured you knew it."

"No, I didn't," said Ron.

"Well, it's so," said Jer. "So you can see what Kimber's after. By acting like he's after your job here, he puts the pressure on. He can't lose. If you crack, you're out of line for the A. C. S. job. If you break the Conventions to get results, he drops an anonymous word to the authorities, away goes your Earth citizenship rights, and it's the labor draft to the Colony Planets for you, my boy."

Ron's face was grim. Jer looked at him closely for a long minute.

"There's things we could do —" he began.

"Nuh-uh!" Ron shook his

head with finality. "The letter of the Conventions may be stupid in certain cases, but the spirit is right, and I'm going to stick with it as long as I can." He changed the subject. "Do we have any materials for fireworks on hand?"

Jer scrubbed a hand thoughtfully on his round jaw.

"We could make some simple stuff," he said. "Rockets, roman candles, fire bombs, auroras. Anything like set pieces would take an awful lot of time."

"Simple stuff is good enough," said Ron. "We'll put on a bit of a show tomorrow night and see if that won't lure a few worshipers from Rashta."

SO IT happened that at noon the next day the long trumpet of the great god Itco bellowed like a bull and Ron Baron, high priest and human went forth to speak to the people of Cinya.

And the burden of speech was this: that the great god Itco, mightly in wrath, had been displeased with the Reechi that they did not, more of them, come and worship at his image and give gifts. Therefore, Itco would speak to the heavens, tonight, concerning his displeasure, and let those who were guilty, beware.

And of those that heard him, there were in the crowd some who had earlier worshiped at the Itco temple and now gave all of their devotion to Rashta. Hearing, they were afraid, and ran to Galuga, high priest of Rashta, and pleaded with him to save them.

The high priest of Rashta listened and went away for a while. Then he came back and said:

"Itco may speak. But he will not be heard."

And from mouth to mouth his words ran through the city, even to the temple of Itco, and the high priest Ron Baron.

"Now, what the devil do you think he's got up his sleeve?" demanded Ron, pacing back and forth in the narrow confines of the office.

"I don't know," answered the little man, honestly. "He can't know what we're planning to do. It may be no more than a bluff."

"It's not like him to bluff where he stands to lose prestige," said Ron. The other shrugged.

"Well," he said, "that's all I can think of. Remember, I've only been out here a couple of months. Anyway, we'll know in a few minutes—" he glanced at his chronometer—"it's almost time to start."

"That's right," said Ron. "Where's Jubiki?" He was referring to the one Reechi they

trusted with the inner workings of the temple. Ron had fixed an ingrown toenail for him once, and he was eternally grateful—an interesting reaction, Ron always thought, when he stopped to consider other Reechi whose lives he had saved by various medical treatments, and who blithely deserted back to the spiritual embrace of Rashta the minute they were able to walk.

"I sent him up to the roof to clear a space for the rockets," said Jer. "Better ring for him."

Ron stepped over and touched a button connecting with a buzzer on the roof. In a moment there was the rattling slap of outsize Reechi feet on the stairs outside the office, and Jubiki burst into the room.

He was a big Reechi, as tall as Ron and a lot heavier. He stood on one leg with joy at being summoned into the inner sanctum, and his wide mouth split in a sharp-toothed smile with an ingratiating desire to please.

"Good God!" said Ron, suddenly leaping toward him. He ran one palm over a rough green shoulder and Jubiki wriggled with pleasure. "You're wet!"

"Rain," Jubiki informed him, happily. You could see him making a mental note to get rained on again at the earliest possible opportunity.

"What!" yelped Ron, and dived for the stairway. Jer followed him, and Jubiki brought up the rear. They burst onto the rooftop of the temple almost together.

In the west, the last gleam of the sunset lit a dark and lowering sky with a weird yellow light. A few fat drops of rain splashed about them, pocketing the summed dust on the rooftop. Thunder muttered.

"I knew it!" and, "So that's it!" exclaimed Ron and Jer at once. The station chief swung on Jubiki.

"Jubiki!" he said. "Did you or any of your people know this storm was coming?"

Jubiki grinned in the face of the increasing wind. It was *so* nice to be able to tell the high priest things he wanted to know.

"No," said Jubiki.

Ron and the little man looked at each other, heedless of the rain that now was beginning to fall in earnest.

"I think I know what he meant, now," said Ron slowly. "Whatever the talking Itco was planning to do, he knew it couldn't compete with this thunder and rain."

"But how would he know?" objected Jer.

"There's probably ways most of the natives don't know about," answered Ron. "Back on Earth

a medicine man used to see a spider rolling up its web, certain birds taking to cover, or notice that the fish were biting unusually well. There must be something like that here."

"Well," said Jer, despondently, "let's get off the roof before we get blown off."

They made their way against the increasing wind to the stairhead, and descended again to the office.

"WELL," said Ron, "that's that, then."

The two men had been sitting up over coffee in the office while the storm rolled with a muted thunder overhead, half-silenced by the thick stone roof. For six hours they had been discussing ways and means to meet this latest setback, and now Ron had come up with one scheme that set the little man's eyes popping with alarm.

"You're crazy!" Jer said. "What's going to happen if you lose? The whole populace is liable to turn on you. Then it's a choice between being torn to pieces or shooting your way out and fracturing the Conventions in sixteen different places."

Ron made an impatient gesture with his hand. "I won't lose," he said. "We'll call it a duel and a test between the two gods, but essentially it'll just be a competition in parlor magic between Galuga and myself. And if I can't outdo a savage in that line, I deserve to be torn to pieces."

The little man shook his head stubbornly.

"The risk isn't worth it," he said. "All that's needed is one good bloody sacrifice with a Reechi as the *piece de resistance.* You know yourself that little things like that cake and the trumpets would bring them in as long as we matched Rashta in the other departments. When we don't have sacrifices we impress them as not being—well—er—serious. I'm not suggesting we actually cut up one of the poor devils; but we should be able to fake it up some way."

"No," said Ron, definitely. "A fake might clear us as far as the written rules of the Conventions were concerned, but it's just the sort of thing the men that wrote them were against. We've got to lift them up to our level, instead of stooping down to theirs."

The other groaned.

"Oh, well," he said. "It's your neck. Want me to issue the challenge?"

"No," answered Ron. "I think it's best that I just wander out in front of the temple and start working miracles. Galuga'll have to compete to save his own face."

"Okay," said the little man, resignedly. "I'll get some equipment together. And you better get some sleep."

It was a refreshed, but somewhat grim-looking Ron Baron who stepped out onto the broad steps of Itco's temple the following morning. The square before the temple was full of the green Reechi, and as he appeared they drifted in to stand clustered around the foot of the steps, their interested, wide-mouthed faces upturned to him. He had been right in telling Jer that it would be better not to announce his intention. The ubiquitous and superhuman tongue of rumor was a better town crier, and the loungers in the square this morning were witness to that fact.

Loftily ignoring the interested gazes of the crowd, Ron pulled a small table from his robes, set it up, and whipped out a cloth to cover it.

Then he went into his act.

IN A SMALL room of the temple, Jer sat before the message unit. He had been busy here ever since finishing Ron's magical paraphernalia early this morning; and now the regular mail from the Itco office back on Earth was about due. So he sat deep in the chair, before the unit, his hands folded together over the dumpy stomach and his eyes half closed.

Only someone who knew the little man intimately would have realized that he was fighting a losing battle against some overpowering anxiety. He had sat still now for a long time, and occasionally his fingers twitched in the fashion of a man who wants a cigarette, but has made up his mind not to light one. And this was surprising, because as far as most people knew, Jer Bessen did not smoke. It was not until his fingers had twitched for the sixteenth time and the buzzer on the message unit had sounded to announce that the advance pulse of a deep-space message had just been received, that his fingers went to an inside pocket and drew out a little flattened cylinder wrapped in heavy metal foil, whose further end smoldered suddenly alight as his darting fingers unwrapped it and put it to his lips.

He inhaled deeply as a cloud of purple, sickly-sweet smoke filled the tiny room; and his face changed subtly, the tension and the amiability fading from his features to leave them hard and subtly altered. And his eyes gleamed.

There were dope-peddlers on the Outer Planets, and men of Central Headquarters Intelligence who would have recog-

nized the drug for what it was. . . . It went by the code name of S. E. 47 and was an almost inhumanly powerful mental stimulant. As it took effect, Jer leaned forward to the message unit, and, adjusting its tuning, brought in the message.

There was the fading deep hum of the pulse that served as a tuning guide, and the machine-gun rattle of dots on the message tape. Then letters began to click out on the tape, slowly and purposefully:

ITCO Office, Earth,
to Ron Baron, Margaret IV.
Dear Ron:

Ignore any earlier letters I may have sent. Itco has just been informed that Central Headquarters is considering raising the official status of Margaret IV from that of a Class twelve to that of a Class eleven planet. As this means the appointment of a human governor and the stationing of government personnel on the planet, Itco is naturally concerned. I am arriving by deep space message boat to take charge of situation. I should be on Margaret IV within ten hours of your reception of this message. Do nothing until I come. Repeat, *do nothing until I come.*

Bug Palet, Asst. Chief
of Stations
ITCO.

Jer tore the letter from the message tape. For a moment he sat there, holding it in his hands, the brain behind his little black eyes spinning at an impossible speed. Then he rolled up the letter and thrust it into the pocket of his tunic.

He went out toward the front steps of the temple.

AS HE passed through the front door of the temple, onto the stone porch, he stepped into a great hush. The square was packed with staring, silent Reechi, except for a short, respectful path through their ranks leading from the foot of the steps on which Ron stood to the center of the square, where in a similar circle of polite space, a tall and muscular Reechi clad in vermilion robes stood facing him. Jer hesitated, then stopped, waiting.

The Reechi spoke, half-chanting the words after the manner of the Reechi language spoken in the temples.

"There is no truth in Itco. There is no truth in Ron Baron, the priest of Itco. The one is a little god. The other is bleached by the sun and lies. He is a bleached player of false magic. In the temple of Rashta, the one great god, I, Galuga, high priest of Rashta, have heard of the things he does and come here to

prove that he lies. Show us the magic eye, false priest!"

And the crowd took up the cry, swelling the noise in the square until it was a tumult of sound.

"Show us the magic eye! Show us the seer-at-distances, again, Ron Baron! Oh, priest of Itco, show us the eye!"

For a moment, Ron stood tall and straight, facing the storm of voices. Then he reached out and whipped a cloth from the table, uncovering an object the size of a small crystal ball that stood there.

"Behold!" he cried.

The voices stilled into one vast gasp of wonder, for in spite of the fact that they had seen it once this morning, the small scanning unit Jer had sunk into ruby plastic was an impressive thing. It burned and sparkled in the sunlight like some gigantic jewel.

"Let us see it work, Ron Baron," said Galuga. "Tell us what is happening on the steps of the temple of Rashta."

Ron peered into the red depths of the plastic, making them wait. Unobtrusively, his hand, on the side of the unit away from the audience, adjusted its controls.

"Three Reechi sit facing each other on the steps of Rashta's temple," he said. "They are talking and one has a blue cloth on his head." Galuga's face darkened, and there was another wondering "Oh!" from the audience. But the priest of Rashta spoke up.

"You are fools!" he shouted to the audience. "This much had I heard of the magic eye, that it could see things that were hidden from others' sight. But how can we know the truth of this, since none of us may check? Let the magic eye tell us something we can check." And Galuga whirled, suddenly, pointing to a toy figure outlined against the sky on a distant rooftop. "What does that one, Ron Baron?"

Again Ron bent over the scanner and his fingers made adjustments.

"That one," he announced, "lays cloths to dry in the sun."

"Ho!" Galuga's shout cut across the rising murmur of the multitude. "Run, some of you, and fetch that one. We will see if the magic eye indeed saw, or whether the false priest lies."

From the far edge of the crowd, several Reechi broke off and went dashing off through the narrow streets. And the crowd settled itself, to wait.

There is nothing as unnerving as a Reechi crowd waiting for something to break. Unlike a human gathering, there is no mutter of conversation, no mov-

ing about, but only the still, stark process of waiting. Watching from the shadow of the pillared porch, Jer felt an irresistible surge of admiration for Ron. For he waited as the Reechi did, straight and still as if turned to stone, through the stretching laden minutes between the departure of the searchers, and their return.

They brought him finally, half-dragging him through the crowd, an old thin Reechi, who shook with fear at the sight of the two priests. They carried him to the empty lane between them and stood him there.

"Speak," said Galuga, "tell the truth and you will not be harmed. What were you doing on your roof? Were you laying out cloths to dry after watching?"

"No, no," quavered the old man, "I am old, I am poor. I have no cloths. Only this—" and he indicated the band of rough fiber around his middle.

"What!—" Ron took one step forward. Too late, he saw through Galuga's scheme. "Old one, come here to me. Look at me—"

"No," wailed the oldster, looking pleadingly at Galuga. "I am afraid. I am poor. I have no cloths. I was just standing in the sun!"

"The eye lied!" shouted Galuga triumphantly to the crowd. "The eye lied. The false priest lied. Itco has lied!" He raised his arms in a frenzy, beginning to move his feet in the shuffling stamping movement with which the Reechi work themselves up to a religious frenzy.

"Don't listen to him!" called Ron, desperately, as the dust boiled up around the other's stamping feet. "Can't you see the old man is terrified of Galuga? Galuga put him on the roof to be seen by me and then deny what he was doing." His words were lost in the gathering voice of the crowd.

"Itco — has — lied," voices chanted, taking up the refrain in time to their stamping feet. "Itco—has—lied." Dust seethed and mounted over the crowd, hiding them from view, obscuring the square, rolling in choking folds up the steps. Jer rushed from the porch, grabbing Ron by the arm.

"Come back inside!" he yelled over the noise, grabbing Ron by the sleeve. "They're working up to murder!" Ron shook him off.

"They won't touch me," he yelled back. "I'm a priest."

"Some of Rashta's priests will, though," shouted Jer. And, appearing like phantoms out of the yellow dust, five Reechi in vermilion robes, headed by Galuga, came leaping up the steps.

Ron stood rooted. But Jer, whipping a tear gas grenade from his robes, pulled the pin and sent it rolling down the steps toward the charging priests. It burst, and Jer dragged Ron back from the searing fumes and through the temple door. He was swinging it shut behind them when a stone, thrown by a priestly hand, came flying through to catch Ron on the temple.

And as the big door of the temple slammed shut, Ron dropped into darkness.

HE AWOKE to the silence and peace of his own room in the temple. For awhile he lay still, letting the memories creep back to him, remembering what had happened the day before.

It was all very hazy and confused. He remembered the stone flying at him. The next thing had been Jer bathing his forehead in the temple office. He had been sick and Jer had given him a drink. It had tasted good. He had had another. Jer had had one with him. He remembered reading the letter announcing Palet's coming. After that there was nothing left to do but get drunk. They had sat in the little office, and the hours had stretched out into a montage sequence in which Jer's black eyes stared piercingly at him across the rims of constantly refilled glasses.

He had been telling the little man, over and over again, that he did not blame the Reechi. He did not blame Galuga. It was just as fair for Galuga to run in a ringer like the old Reechi as it was for he, Ron, to bamboozle the crowd with science of the thirty-first century. He had raved about dirty office politics and said that he didn't want to be Assistant Chief of Sections, anyway. He wanted to stay here with the Reechi and if the office hadn't been on his neck for more skins all the time he would have gotten along all right with the green aliens. He had sworn he was quitting the minute Palet arrived.

Now, on the morning after, the shame of these recollections made him shudder. He dragged up the forlorn hope that Jer had been equally drunk and would not remember; and tried to make himself believe it. He sat up dizzily, and made his way to the medicine chest in the infirmary, where he washed down a hangover pill with about a quart of water. Then, feeling somewhat bloated, but better, he made his way to the office.

JER was seated at the desk, making out grading slips on the last pile of hides they had

received as offerings. Ron flopped down in the chair and watched him.

"Had breakfast?" asked Jer, without looking up. Ron grimaced.

"I don't feel like it yet," he said. "Wait'll the pepper pill takes effect." A short silence fell between them. Breakfast was not the important topic and both of them knew it. Finally Ron spoke out.

"Well," he said, bitterness creeping into his voice in spite of himself, "what's going on after my little debacle of yesterday?" Jer shoved the slips away from him and turned.

"Nothing," he said.

"Nothing?" echoed Ron.

"Nothing," repeated Jer, flatly. "Evening service last night was a bust. The only one who showed up was Kibuki, and I sent him on home. Nobody here this morning." Ron smiled a little in self-derision.

"And Palet?" he said.

"The ship's circling the planet," answered Jer. "They flashed they'd be down in about an hour."

"That's that, then," said Ron, with a sigh. "Hope I wasn't too much bother last night, Jer."

The little man grinned.

"No," he said, and added, "but you were wild. It was all I could do to stop you from writing out your resignation right then and there."

"Too bad you did," answered Ron. "I'll just have to do it this morning." Jer stared.

"You're crazy!" he said. "Where'll you find another job? They're tight as hell back on Earth right now, and you can't keep your citizenship there without one. Not with every Tom, Dick, and Harry trying to buy his way back home from the Frontier Planets. The Reechi aren't that bad, Ron."

"The Reechi aren't that bad," said Ron, soberly, "but the business of exploiting them is. I didn't see what Itco was really like while I was back in the office on Earth. It made sense, then, all this conniving and bamboozling. All this taking advantage of a people too childish to understand. But there's no point in talking, Jer. I'll be out anyway, when Palet gets here."

Jer looked away.

"Don't get sour," he said.

"I'm not sour," said Ron. "Just disappointed. I wanted to fill the quota, and I can't. I wanted the Reechi to like me, and they don't. I want to stay here, and I can't. Maybe if I had the next ten years and no Itco office breathing down my neck—" He broke off suddenly. "Where's Jubiki? I wanted him to help me pack my stuff."

"Jubiki?" repeated Jer, looking a little startled. "I haven't seen him since I sent him home last night."

"Well, he must be here," said Ron, annoyance edging his voice in spite of his efforts to keep it away. "He comes in first thing every morning. He must be around the temple somewhere."

He got up and strode out into the corridor. Jer followed him.

"Jubiki!" Ron called. The word went bounding away down the corridor to die in the little side passages and rooms. "Jubiki!"

The whirr of a buzzer sounded in the distance. Jer had stepped back into the room and pressed the button that sounded on the roof. The sound of his footsteps came back up to Ron in the silence that answered them both.

"This is ridiculous," said Ron. He looked at Jer and added wryly, "Unless Jubiki's given me up as a lost cause, too."

Jer shook his head, his eyes alert.

"He's never missed before," he answered. "Let's check up and see if he's at home." He led the way back into the office and the large scanner set in the wall there. He spun dials and the interior of the cubicled building in which Jubiki slept came into view. Quickly the scanner's view swept up and down its halls. They were deserted.

"Not there," said Jer.

"Wait a minute," Ron shouldered the little man aside, stepping up to the scanner. "Even if he isn't there, the whole building shouldn't be empty like that." The dials flicked under his fingers and a view of the street outside took shape on the screen. It was completely empty of life.

"By the Lord!" said Ron, between his teeth, "there's only one place that could drag them out like that!" and the scene on the scanner spun dizzily as its view jumped wildly through the deserted streets to the Rashta Temple.

The square was packed.

Crowded, jammed, stifled between the buildings that hemmed it in, the green-bodied mass shifted and boiled as each individual fought his neighbor for a better view. On the steps of the temple, on the sacrificial slab of tilted stone were spreadeagled not one, but two green bodies, awaiting the knives held up by a chanting Galuga to the idol's face, in his prayer for their blessing by the lust and love of Rashta.

"No wonder they're all there," said Jer. "No wonder Jubiki deserted. *Two* hunks of meat for the carver!"

"It isn't like Jubiki," Ron

could not quite hide the touch of disappointment in his voice. "There was something a little gentle about him. He wasn't quite as bloodthirsty as the rest. I thought that maybe—Holy Hell!"

With one sudden savage movement he jumped the screen closer to the sacrificial slab; and the faces of the two men tied there filled the screen.

"Jubiki!" ejaculated Jer. "And the old one that lied about you yesterday, Ron."

The big man had already whirled from the screen. With one yank he swung open the arms cabinet and unhooked a gunbelt, its holster jammed with the heavy shape of a twin-charge Gaussier. He slapped the belt around his waist and hooked it.

"Get out of my way," he said to the little man, who stood barring the door.

"Listen, Ron," pleaded Jer. "I know you're fond of Jubiki. But don't you see—the Conventions—if you use that gun—"

"Get out of my way!"

"Listen, Ron. Wait a second. I'll tell you—"

Ron's fist moved in a blurring arc. It smashed against Jer's head, throwing him back against the wall. He slumped to the floor, the whites of his eyes half-showing through closing lids. A little trickle of blood welled from the lower corner of his mouth.

Ron stepped over him and was gone.

IN THE silent office, Jer lay still for several minutes. Then he groaned and opened his eyes woozily. Pushing against the wall with one hand, he struggled to a sitting position. He wiped at the blood on his mouth, and tenderly felt his jaw. For a second he sat there, nursing it. Then he took his hand away and, throwing back his head, went off in a burst of silent laughter, which lasted for several seconds.

Finally he sobered and got to his feet. He walked out of the office and down to the infirmary, where he washed the blood from his face and treated his jaw.

He had just finished injecting a local anesthetic in the injured area when the message unit rang its alarm bell. He laid down the syringe and went down the hall to answer it.

An excited voice babbled at him as he opened the receiver.

"This is Palet. That you, Ron? Jer?"

"It's me," replied Jer, shortly, and flicked on the visio. The plump, worried features of the Assistant Chief of Stations seemed to jump at him from the screen.

"The ship's down," said Bug

Palet. "I'm coming in by flitter to the temple roof in about two minutes."

"I'll be there," said Jer, and flicked off.

THE flitter came down like a snowflake from the clouds. It rocked to a halt on the rooftop and the transparent cover slid back. Bug Palet stepped out.

He was bigger and more rotund than Jer. His face was baby-round with smooth flesh, but it showed the first signs of a fat man going to pieces with worry and a bad digestion. There were crow's-feet thick around the humorless eyes, and the skin was dark beneath them. He moved in an undignified hurry.

"C'mon, c'mon," he said, grabbing Jer by the elbow and hurrying him through the roof door, and down the stairs toward the office. "Where's Ron? Better get him. We've got to get briefed on the situation here. C'mon."

Jer let himself be chivvied down to the office. But, once there, he shut the door behind them and literally shoved the other man into a chair.

"What's this?" the words came popping from Palet's mouth as he bounced on the cushions. "What're you doing? Where's Ron?"

"I'll find him for you in a minute," said Jer, without turning his head from where he was bent over the dials of the wall scanner. "He should be shooting up the temple of Rashta by this time."

"What?" the fat man bounced clear back to his feet on that one. "Shooting—but the Conventions! Central Headquarters on its way here! The fool! Let me see!" And he shoved Jer away from the instrument.

But Jer had already found the square in front of Rashta's temple and the scanner showed it empty. Dust hung thinly over it in a dispersing haze. But there was no sign of life, Reechi or human, and the sacrificial slabs were empty.

"What happened? What happened?" demanded Palet excitedly.

Jer told him.

The fat man turned livid with anger. He became so angry he forgot to jitter, and his voice slowed down to a thick, malevolent crawl.

"The stupid hick!" he said. "That's what comes of taking on a colonial. You didn't know he was born on the Outer Planets, did you, Jer?"

"Yes," said Jer.

"Huh?" said Palet. "I thought he was too ashamed to tell anybody. Well, it doesn't matter. He mucked up old Itco, and Itco'll muck him. I'll see he loses

his Earth papers for this! I'll see he's deported! Where the hell is he now? Find him!"

Jer spun the scanner dials and gave a low whistle of surprise.

"He's coming back to the temple here," he said. "There's a crowd behind him."

"C'mon!" said Palet, leaping for the door. "Show me the way to the front of this shack!"

Jer led him forward through the building and out to the wide stone steps.

"Here he comes," said Jer.

A MOB of shouting Reechi boiled into the square, following the old one, Jubiki and Ron. The tall Earthman led the procession, and he walked like a conqueror across the square, to the foot of the steps, and up to stand facing the two men there. And for a minute the two of them found themselves at a loss for speech.

Ron was a wild and wonderful sight. His priestly robes had been ripped to tatters, one eye was black, his lip was cut and an assortment of other cuts and bruises were scattered over his face. But his smile was jaunty.

"You look like *hell!*" said Jer, his voice cutting through Palet's babble of astonishment.

"That's nothing," answered Ron. "You ought to see Galuga."

"Galuga!" exploded Palet. "Then you didn't shoot him? You fought with—with—"

"Four falls, catch-as-catch-can," grinned Ron. "For the first ten minutes it was all I could do to hold my own. Then I got in a lucky kick at his head. He came right back at me, but after that science began to tell. The third time I knocked him out they couldn't bring him to again. Want a blow-by-blow description?"

"But the crowd—" stammered Palet, waving an incredulous hand at the gaping green faces that pressed to the foot of the stairs.

"All for Itco now," said Ron. "I should have done it long ago. The trouble was, we were being too subtle for these Reechi. The simple thing was to fight it out. If I won, naturally, my god was stronger. If he won, his was. Why complicate the matter? All Itco needed was a display of the effectiveness of his strong right arm—yes, you fat skunk—" said Ron, turning suddenly on Palet and waving a brawny fist under the fat man's nose. The startled Assistant Chief took an abrupt step backward. "There's the strong right arm you were talking about all the time in your letters. Take a good look at it. I suppose you want to fire me now?"

"Why—" blurted Palet. "Beating up a defenseless native —the Conventions—"

"Cut it out," said Jer, speaking up. "Galuga may have been smaller, but he outweighed Ron by a good forty pounds. And these Reechi are made of spring steel."

"Well," the words came reluctantly from Palet's lips, and he darted a poisonous side-glance at Jer. "I suppose—if the Conventions haven't been broken—maybe we could keep you on, Ron. Of course, there'd be a reduction in salary and a few minor changes, but—"

"I'm glad you said that," answered Ron, his voice rising. "I'm very glad you offered that. Because now I can tell you I don't want your stinking job. And I don't want my Earth citizenship any more, either, because as soon as I get home, I'm applying for a settler's permit and coming back here. So, when the Commission arrives, I'm going to testify to just what a trading outfit like Itco does to get its skins on a planet like this, and you can kiss your trading rights good-bye!" He was shouting by the time he finished, and Palet's face was crimson.

"Why, you muddy-faced swamp-baby!" screamed the Assistant Chief. "You think you'll come back here, do you? You think you'll testify against Itco? Why, we'll bring so many charges of mismanagement and cruelty to the Reechi against you that you'll never outlive your forced labor term on the Colony Planets. Why, we've already got those letters you sent back to the office faked up so that—" he stopped, suddenly, aware that he was saying more than he had intended.

"Go on," said Jer, smoothly, "so that what?" Palet turned on him like a wounded bear.

"What're you sticking your oar in for?" he roared.

JER grinned and took off his nose.

Palet and Ron gasped together. Jer ignored them. Calmly, as if he was an actor removing makeup in his dressing room, he continued to strip off portions of his features. The lashes came away and parts of cheeks and chin. The plump lower lip was peeled away to reveal a thinner one underneath.

"If you want to be uncomfortable," he said, conversationally, turning to Ron, "try wearing skin plastic night and day for a couple of months straight." His shrewd eyes, that were all that remained familiar about his features, bored into the big man.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said. "Cay Retver, ad-

vance agent for the Commission on Margaret IV."

"But you—" stammered Palet, "you've been with Itco for years."

"The real Jer Bessen has, of course," answered the little man. Even his voice, Ron noticed fascinatedly, had changed. It was crisper now, charged with the tones of authority. "He stopped off on his way out here at Government request. He's vacationing on Arcturus III at the moment."

"You," the fat man choked. "You were sent here to spy on us, on Itco. We'll file protest. We'll claim bias, we'll—"

"No," said the other, coolly, "not at all. My job here was only to survey the native situation and check on the qualities of Ron." His eyes swiveled to the young human. "Being planetary governor on a Class Eleven planet is a big responsibility. Think you'd care for it, Ron?"

"Huh?" said Ron, his face showing the dazed expression of an improperly poleaxed steer.

"I said," repeated Cay, speaking slowly and clearly, "would you care to accept the position of Governor of Margaret IV? I have the power to make the appointment provisionally, and of course the Commission will confirm it, since there's no competing candidate."

"I think I'm probably dreaming," said Ron dizzily, "but I'll say yes, anyway."

"Good," Cay smiled and took him by the elbow, turning him toward the Temple. "You and I had better get busy, then. There is a lot to be done before the Commission arrives." Ron followed him dazedly.

Palet, coming to himself with a start, dashed after them, clutching Cay just as they reached the temple door.

"But what about us?" he demanded squeakily. "What about Itco?"

Palet was feeling weak.

"I'm afraid I can't help you," said the little man, pausing. "The matter's entirely out of my hands. After all, whether Itco retains its trading permit here, and what's done about its practices in the past, is up to only one man—the new governor. I suggest you—" he stopped suddenly.

"Ron," he said, pulling the other around.

"What?" said Ron, still half-dazed, but turning obediently to face him.

"Look down," said the little man. "I'm afraid that strong right arm of Itco is going to be needed again. Palet's fainted."

IT'S *MAGIC*

By LARRY M. HARRIS

"AND now," said the thin man, "I would like to present a show of wizardry which, I am sure, none of you has ever seen before."

Gravel was bored. He sat in his back-row seat and watched Robert Feuermann go into his act on stage. *The next time I get tricked into going to one of these conventions,* he thought, glaring at Colonel Kroll sitting Napoleonically next to him, *I'll know it. Never again.*

He looked at his watch. *Twenty-three eleven. And I have to be home early, damn it. Up and on the job early tomorrow, inspecting grave sites.*

Oh, well. It's a steady job. And I'm the foremost probability scientist in the world. Human, gnome, or other. I'm even getting to like my insane superior, he mused, staring at the blank countenance of Colonel Kroll, head of Gnome Intelligence.

"With this cantrap," Feuermann said, beaming at the audience and rustling a paper nervously in his hand, "I will make the auditorium disappear. Not, you understand, to our eyes—but, to the outside onlooker, we will be removed from the known universe. The fourth dimension. . . ."

Oh, fine, Gravel thought wearily. *Reading it forwards, then backwards, sending some of us outside to see—though I suppose you could get the same effect by looking out the windows—now we'll never get home. Another half-hour at least. Fine. Great.*

His eyes roamed wearily around the audience as his mouth opened in a gigantic yawn. *I shouldn't be up this late,* he thought. *Not on a working day. I ought to be home in bed by this ti . . .*

He sat up in his chair and began to take notice. About eight rows in front of him sat a Vision. Colonel Kroll swung around in his chair and hissed. "The performance, it interests you, *mon vieux?*"

"Well," said Gravel, "not the performance on stage, exactly. Look there." He indicated with

a nod of his bulbous, gnomic head.

"Ah!" said Colonel Kroll. "It has been a long time since I have seen anyone who with Josephine matches. But she is here."

"Josephine?"

"My—my former wife. In my other —ah — existence, *mon petit.*"

Oh, yes, Gravel thought. *Former existence. Our little transmigrated Napoleon.* "Well, she matches up to anything I've seen," he said. "After the show, we must get to talk to her."

"Mais oui!" Kroll enthused. "She seems most interested in the tricks of magical, No?"

"A little too interested. Maybe she's Feuermann's wife or something. That would be the last straw."

"What is this with straws?"

"Well, if I have to sit and listen to that idiot making an idiot out of himself on stage, I can at least get a little profit out of the evening without him butting in."

"Ah," said Colonel Kroll.

Feuermann was still talking. ". . . but first, for those of you who remember any of your advanced Calculus courses, there are certain mathematical expressions of a four-dimensional space which are of interest here. Some expressions of the type . . ." and he was off into the wilds of mathematics. Gravel followed him grimly for a few minutes, and then gave up with a snort.

"D'you understand what he's talking about?" he hissed.

"Most assuredly not. Is it that you think that he does?"

Gravel choked back a laugh. "Maybe he doesn't, at that. He doesn't seem to know much else, though, and everybody has to know something."

"It is not of necessity. If you remember the beautiful Irma. . ."

Gravel remembered. Irma was beautiful, certainly, but behind the facade of face and figure she had a blank. Her brain was nonexistent.

Gravel pointed again with his head. "But she's even more so that Irma."

"Certainement." Which might mean that she has even less so, *mon vieux."*

"I hope not," said Gravel, leaning back.

Feuermann went on and on.

A FEW long-haired wizards in the first few rows applauded. Gravel peered at his watch and saw that the time was twenty-three fifty. *Oh, fine,* he thought. *I can get home in about another half-hour. Now we'll get to the magic proper.*

Feuermann, looking like an

undertaker, bowed and grinned to the audience. "Now, for those of you who would like to leave before—ah—before the hall does —" He waited for the laugh and got it. Gravel obliged with two grunts and sat grimly. "—if you will exit quickly now, so that you will not hold up proceedings too much. Thank you."

No smoking in the orchestra, Gravel thought. *This is ridiculous.*

Feuermann waited until the last straggler had gone out through the open door into the forest beyond. Then he said, "If the rest of you will move towards the windows, and the telepaths attach your minds to someone inside the building—as I have already explained, the warp will prevent your keeping contact with the outside." Again he waited.

Damned fool, Gravel thought. *He's losing his audience, what there is left of it.* He sidled to a nearby window and hopped up on the sill. He peered out for a minute, then looked around to see the Vision standing next to him.

Whee! he thought. *Here we go!*

"Enjoying the show?" he said.

"Why, yes, I am," she answered. *A voice, too,* Gravel thought. *Whee! It was couched in an educated tone which betrayed at least some college training. Maybe,* he thought, *some of it sank in. Though after seeing Irma, I shouldn't be too hopeful.*

"I just came out of curiosity. My boss—that tall gnome over there—dragged me down."

"Oh," she said. "What kind of work do you do?"

"Probability Scientist," he said, making it sound important. "And the name is Gravel."

"Oh. Mine's Elsie. Elsie Janeway. I'm a salesgirl—that is, that's my job. I qualify for the convention by being a were-butterfly. You must do fascinating work."

"I—yes. But—you know, I've never met a were-butterfly before."

"Well—"

"Ladies and gentlemen," Feuermann bellowed. "If you will all be quiet for a minute while I set up the continuum. . . ." He waited, and rattled off a string of gibberish.

"Ordinary stuff," Gravel hissed. "Demonikae. I'd have thought he'd use something special, at least."

"You must know a great deal about magic, Gravel," she said.

"Well, I—" he said, blushing under his coppery complexion.

"Hey!" somebody screamed. "Look!"

"Well," said Gravel, "he's done it. In spite of his obvious

incompetence. In spite of his amateur tendencies. In spite of the fact that he couldn't materialize a demon in Hell."

"Is he really that bad?" Elsie said.

"I think so. Not that I'm an expert, but I can usually tell a good act from a bad one."

"Really? Because he's my cousin."

"Oh," said Gravel. *I knew it,* he thought sadly. *Too good to be true.* "Look out there."

They peered out the window at the blackness where there had been trees and forest a minute before.

OUTSIDE the windows and the open door, there was nothing. Not even the black of night, or the strange blackness of soot-filled air—not even black at all. Just a complete emptiness, a space of no-space, of no air and no breathing, of no movement and no living, of vacuum without anything to relieve its blank majesty forever to the limitless ends of it. It pressed at the air and space inside, trying to get in . . . it was invisible, impossible, and horribly real.

Gravel cleared his throat. "Quite a view," he said.

"Is it not, *mon vieux?*" said Colonel Kroll. Gravel spun around and stared.

"I have been standing here, my little one, but you have not observed me. Which is natural when you are with such an evidence of envelopment talking to such a sweet young lady."

Gravel shrugged his shoulders. Intelligence Service! Oh, well. "Colonel Kroll — Elsie Janeway. She's Feuermann's cousin."

"How happy I am to meet you."

The Colonel executed a little bow. "You remind me of Josephine."

"Josephine?" Elsie said, turning to Gravel.

"Napoleon's wife," he whispered. "Kroll thinks he was Napoleon in some previous transmigration. Batty as a bedbug."

"But—why couldn't he have been?"

Oh, great, Gravel thought. "No reason. Except that he acts too French to be French, if you see what I mean."

"But he still might be, mightn't be?" Elsie persisted.

Feuermann interrupted them. He walked over, said, "Hello, Elsie," and peered out into the nothing.

"Hello, Robert," she said. "You know, this is quite a bit of magic—even though my friend here doesn't seem to agree with me."

"I didn't—" Gravel said helplessly.

"Ah," Feuermann said, stooping low and opening the window with a grandiose gesture. "Perhaps you think I am tricking you? Well, go on. Take a better look. Go ahead."

"But I—" Gravel said.

"Go ahead. Don't be frightened. Take a better look." Feuermann gestured outside with the hand that was holding the cantrap—the hand that had been holding the cantrap. Gravel made a dive for it and missed, nearly losing his balance. Colonel Kroll whipped out one Gallic stream of profanity and was silent. Feuermann stared at the window for a second and whispered, "It's—gone. I—I let it drop."

Gravel said, "You mean to say you don't remember it? Any of it?"

"I—I never thought—"

"Of course. That's obvious. You never do, I imagine." Gravel, enraged and a little scared, was taking it out on the nearest participant. "They shouldn't allow incompetents like you to play around with dangerous stuff! Why couldn't you stick to rabbits out of a hat or simple demons?"

"Don't mind him, Robert," Elsie said. "He's just childish. We can get out."

"Childish!" Gravel exploded. "Do you know what we've got ourselves into? We can't get back unless your cousin here decides to remember the cantrap—which isn't too likely. If we stay here, we'll die—probably from mob rioting when this crowd realizes what's happened to it. And if not that, then some of you have to breathe—most of you, as a matter of fact. And this air is liable to run out in a very short time. We're in a sealed bubble and the air is limited as Hell. Childish! Okay—but all us little kids are going to go on a nice long trip in a little while unless we can get out of here—and I don't see how we're going to manage that. I don't feel much like transmigrating at present, and there are those present—you two among them—who don't even have that to look forward to."

Elsie gulped and turned pale. "Robert—is he right?"

Feuermann nodded his head slowly. "And it's all my fault."

For a minute, there was silence. Then Elsie turned flaming eyes on Gravel. "Can't you see he's bad enough off! Can't you leave him alone! What good will it do, kicking him now he's down?"

Gravel blushed again. "I guess—I'm sorry, Mr. Feuermann," he said.

"Call me Robert," said the tall wizard grandly. "We're all in the

same fix. But if that crowd realizes—"

Colonel Kroll spat, *"Betes!"* into the silence. Elsie turned mollified eyes towards Gravel. "You said you were a scientist. Can't you get us out of this?"

"Without equipment, I can't see how. If I had my crystal ball—" he shrugged.

"But assuredly he will get us out," Colonel Kroll chipped in. "He has me pulled out of a greater than this. The case of one M. Riw. . . ."

"Huh?" Feuermann said.

"Never mind. This is no time to bring up the case of one little gnome I had to help transmigrate. He and Irma don't concern us now. And there is more than one to consider."

"All of us," Elsie breathed. She shivered. Gravel restrained himself from putting an arm about her. "All of us," he said savagely. "What do we do now?"

"Wait," said Colonel Kroll.

They waited. Feuermann and Gravel sat and stared into the crowd and thought—or tried to think. *So little time,* Gravel realized. *So little time.*

TWENTY-FOUR five. *Maybe fifteen minutes left,* Gravel thought. *Maybe half an hour.*

Elsie was standing next to him, wiping his wrinkled brow. He thought: *I can't fail now. I've got to get us out. Elsie thinks I can do it; I can't disappoint Elsie.*

Suppose I sent somebody outside? Maybe he could find the paper, bring it back—it couldn't have gone far. But that's impossible. Nobody'd take the risk. Even though nothing could happen to them, of course—I think. They're not part of the continuum, so the continuum couldn't have any effect on them.

But who? Sounds sensible, but who would do it for me? Even Colonel Kroll wouldn't risk it; Feuermann might, but I wouldn't trust the damned fool out of my sight. Even if he is Elsie's cousin. And Elsie stays here. My inspiration.

"Mmmm," he said, closing his eyes.

"What?" Elsie said. "Have you—"

"Not yet. But if only one more thing falls into place—" He was stalling, and he knew it, but . . . "I'll tell you what you can do. It'll conserve the air some. Wait a minute—" He struggled to his feet.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" The crowd was a little uneasy; they knew by now, they must know, but thank God they were still calm. "Many of you here are were-things or are in other ways capable of change. If those of

you who can will do so now—I have hopes of conserving the limited air-supply—we are in no danger, of course, but it is always best to be safe. Thank you."

Elsie stood up, straight and tall, and then began to melt into a dot in mid-air—a dot which sprouted many-colored wings and began to flutter about his head, fanning it with her wings.

"Magnifique!" said Colonel Kroll, walking over. "Even changed, she makes my mind to be baptized."

"Huh?"

"Baptized. When you look into someone's eyes and everything it goes black and you do what he says. Always you do what he says, think what he says to think. . . ."

Oh, my God! "You mean hypnotized?"

"Oui," said Colonel Kroll, inspecting the butterfly with pursed lips.

"I'll bet. She makes me a little dizzy, too." Gravel started to walk away; the butterfly followed him. Suddenly he whirled. "Colonel Kroll!"

"Oui?"

"Are you a good hypnotic subject?"

"Not of the best, *mon petit.* But why do you ask?"

"It doesn't matter. For the glory of Gravel—and to save some of these people—you will be hyptoized."

"But—I do not understand—"

"Good. Now just sit down there and stare at the light. Just relax. Stare at the light. There is nothing else in the room but the light. Nothing else in the room but the sound of my voice. Just stare at the light. . . ."

TWENTY-FOUR thirty.

". . . in the room but the light—you are asleep. Completely and deeply asleep. You will do whatever I say. Whatever I say—stand up."

Slowly, with a strange swaying, Colonel Kroll stood up. Gravel beamed.

"You will walk to the door of the auditorium. You will walk to the door of the auditorium. Walk."

The gait was shuffling and uncertain, but there was no question about it; Colonel Kroll was walking. He stopped at the entrance to nothing.

"You will go outside," Gravel said.

One slow foot went over the threshold. Colonel Kroll stopped.

The butterfly flitted up to him and began to inspect his still frame. A wingtip brushed the edge of the nothing outside the door. . . .

The butterfly hung suspended in mid-air. Kroll, Gravel saw, was absolutely still, not even blinking.

"Feuermann!"

"What is it?"

"My God! Look, man! They don't move! The Colonel and—and Elsie. Miss Janeway. They don't move!"

"Well? I could have told you that. The continuum has no effect on them—you know that, as I have explained."

"Yes—but I thought—"

"You didn't think." Feuermann almost smiled. "If the continuum has no effect on them, how can they have an effect on it? How can they move through it? How can they do anything in it?"

Gravel stared. "But you—you stuck your hand out the window. So did I. And nothing happened."

"Of course. The cantrap protected us. When it fell—well, we can't move out of here. That's all there is to it. You've got to do something, you and your hypnosis—"

He hesitated for a moment.

"Look. Don't get mad at me. I didn't do it on purpose. For the sake of God, who started this whole mess, anyway? You with your amateur clumsiness. . . ."

"Okay. Just find a way."

GRAVEL cupped his chin in his hands and thought. Colonel Kroll's voice was running through his head; *poor Kroll, stuck out there and not even knowing, not blinking, waiting for me to get somewhere with this . . . poor trusting Colonel Kroll. His voice came back: ". . . she makes my mind to be baptized." Baptized. Poor Colonel Kroll. A tear rolled down Gravel's cheek and he wished Elsie were there to brush it away. But she's waiting, too. I have to do something. And fast.*

But it was no use. Relentlessly, the voice circled in his mind. ". . . when you look into someone's eyes and do what he says. Always you do what he says to do and think what he says to think. . . ."

It took a second to register. Then, suddenly, he had it! "Feuermann!" he yelled.

"What?" the tall man said, coming over.

"Now look. I want you to stare at that light. Just relax and stare at the light. The light is the only object in the room. Just keep staring at the . . ."

"Sorry," Feuermann said. "That won't do. The cantrap doesn't protect me any more, and . . ."

"Nothing like that. Believe me, I'm the only one who can get you out of the unholy mess

you've got all of us into." ("All of us," Elsie's voice said, but he could ignore it now. He had what he needed.)

"Well . . ." said Feuermann.

"Good. Now sit there and relax. Good. Stare at the light. The only object in the room is the light. There is nothing in the room but the light. The only object. . . ."

ELSIE stared out the window at the dark leaves of the forest. "But—I don't understand. You did it, somehow—but how?"

Gravel put his arm around her. She didn't seem to mind. "Come on, then—I'll walk you home. I've got to get up early tomorrow." They started out the door, Colonel Kroll silently dogging their footsteps.

"Well," Gravel said, "It was simple. You see, under hypnosis you can remember anything you've ever seen. And Robert had seen the cantrap. So I made him see it again and read it backwards, and—here we are. See?"

"It's wonderful. How did you ever think of it?"

Gravel beamed, then tried to look modest.

"Well, you can do anything when you have to."

"I think it's wonderful."

"Magnifique," said Colonel Kroll, under his breath.

Gravel turned around, glared, and then winked meaningfully at the Colonel.

"Aha!" said Kroll. "I must take another path here. I will leave you." He disappeared into the forest.

Elsie came closer. "You know," she said . . . "I'm sure he must have been Napoleon."

"Uh-huh," Gravel said. "Maybe."

WE ARE HERE

By ALGIS BUDRYS

. . . The world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help from pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain . . .

—*Matthew Arnold,*
Dover Beach

I

THE car came up Eighteenth Street from the West Side Highway, crossing Tenth Avenue, and, because of the trailer truck standing in front of the diner, had to be parked in the darkness that lay up the street.

Kelly Marquis noticed the car and stopped. He watched a man slide out from behind the wheel and stand with his keys in his hand, obviously debating locking the door. He shrugged, left the door unlocked, and went into the diner.

Marquis matched the gesture. Still, the unlocked door would save him thirty seconds' trouble.

It was not the car, as a car, that so much interested him as did its sleek newness and the unusual flavor of its styling. The engine's preternatural quietness, too, had been another of the faintly-felt cues that had decided him. For the past month, he had been paying attention to such details with all the concentration of which he was capable.

There was something about the design of that car. . . . It was a new Cummings '58. He had never seen one before, but the national magazines had carried enough advertising to make him completely familiar with the whippet grace of its body. Marquis had a flair for design, and the first painting of that dully gleaming machined-aluminum cowl had sent his hand into his pocket for a comparative examination of the tool which he now held in his artist's fingers.

That tool, too, had been nationally advertised as an all-purpose household item, and bore a

familiar name—and the one he had was capable of things which, had they been included in the advertised list of applications, would have sent the company's production facilities into overload frenzy in an attempt to keep up with the demand.

For instance, this: He had walked around softly to the driver's side, opened the door gently, and slipped in. Now he touched a small push-pull switch on the tool's tapering barrel, and a slim plastic blade licked out. He pushed the blade into the ignition lock, felt a momentary quiver as the blade remolded itself, and then the lock turned.

Marquis shook his head slightly in wonder that familiarity had not lessened, and reached out to touch the starting button.

There was a fumbling at the door beside him. He looked up, his face white, his neck muscles vibrating at the frantic snap of his head, and saw the car's owner.

An alarm! he thought. *This isn't a normal car. It had some kind of a supersonic or radio alarm. . . .*

"What are you *doing?*" the man exclaimed, his voice almost as surprised as if it were he who had been trapped.

"I—" Marquis gestured hopelessly, feeling the gray beginning of helplessness sapping at reflexes that, a moment before, had been humming with confident efficiency.

The man's eyes followed his gesture. The tense face relaxed, and the surprised and—Marquis realized with a start—desperately worried voice now became relieved. "Oh. I thought. . . ." The man's smile was embarrassed. "You'll admit, the probability *is* low, with so few of us here," he said in the typical reaction of a man who has almost made a fool of himself.

Human, Marquis thought. *Human all the way through.* It was that which had thrown him off. He had not expected the man to be anything like it, and, as a corollary, had not expected a human being to react in guilty fear. Nor had he expected this final twist, but his trained reflexes seized on it even before he had time to formulate the situation logically. His own startled glance had followed the man's to the tool in his hand. He realized that its possession was some kind of passport. And, with that realization, he knew what his course of action would be.

"My fault," he said, wondering what he was actually apologizing for. "I should have told you, but there wasn't time."

"Of course." The man was now displaying his understanding. "Then, there's an emer-

gency." May-I-help-in-this-glamorous-undertaking?

Marquis' thoughts raced through his mind like a silent avalanche. "We've got to get uptown immediately." Urgent-enterprise-necessitating-immediate-and-drastic-action. Casual-assumption-of-cooperation-instantly-forthcoming. Slight-air-of-privilege-granted.

Whatever the car's owner may have been engaged in, he was no less human than any of the other people who had furthered Marquis' enterprises in the past.

The man nodded enthusiastically. "Certainly. Would you like me to drive?"

Marquis nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I think that might be best. Take the Highway again."

He pushed himself into the right-hand seat as the man climbed in, reached out to put his key in the lock, smiled, with a special grin for Marquis, dropped his keys back into his pocket, and pulled the car away from the curb. He tramped down heavy-footedly on the accelerator, and took the corner of Eighth Avenue with a screech of his tires.

Marquis added another item to his information file. Whatever the man had been up to, he was as susceptible to the example set by crime dramas as anyone else.

Already, the problem of having been discovered in the act of automobile theft had lost its crash priority in the methodical organization of his thinking. He had been handling this man for the past five minutes. He could probably continue to do so indefinitely. Now, the question of greatest importance was that which, in a generalized way, had drawn him to the car in the first place.

What was the man, where had he gotten the car, and, since man, car, and Marquis' tool all apparently came from the same place, and the tool was itself remarkable, what was the car capable of? And, of course, once that was learned, how could he best benefit by the information?

"By the way, my name is Erm Martin," the man volunteered as he lurched the car out of the Twenty-third Street ramp onto the highway.

Erm? Ermmanuel? Ermsworth? Ermintrude? Marquis kept himself from frowning. Coupled to a perfectly acceptable surname, it might be indicative of no more than a spark of individualism on the part of his parents. On the other hand, it might be a code, a title, almost anything equally dangerous not to recognize.

"I'm Kelly Marquis," he said finally in a significance-laden voice.

Martin once more bore out the years through which Marquis had taught himself applied psychology. He nodded wisely. We-both-know-better-but-if-you-say-so. . . .

And a correlative section of Marquis' mind supplied the key to Martin's actions. Marquis leaned back and turned his head slightly to look at the never-surfeiting spectacle of night-lit New York as the car passed along its flank.

During the war—almost four years, now—there had been other people who might have been brothers to Martin. They, too, had been perfectly ordinary people catapulted into situations for which they had been somewhat prepared, but in whose potential reality they had not truly believed except in their innermost wish-dreams. The fifth columnists—or, rather, the quasi-columnists who had run the errands while their more prosaic and infinitely more effective professional counterparts did the damage. Marquis remembered one such. Under the impression that he had actually been entrusted with the transmission of vital information, he had decoyed the counterespionage away from the true channel, and had eventually stood up to be shot, imperturbable in his calm knowledge that he was a martyr to his cause.

And the logical extension was. . . . If Martin was the subordinate, then, obviously, Marquis was his superior.

And so, with the advantage of his supposed authority to fall back on, Marquis felt confident enough to probe further.

"I hope I'm not interrupting some important mission of your own?"

"Mission? Oh—I see what you mean." Martin had looked puzzled for a moment, and Marquis had felt the first rivulet of the familiar wash of failure, but now his features cleared, and Marquis could feel the luxury of annoyance at his own lack of confidence.

"Oh, no, nothing important," Martin went on. "I was just coming in to check our local outlets. I'm Distribution Manager, you know."

Ah. A distribution manager. But what did the man distribute?

The car passed Seventy-second Street, and there was the park to Marquis' right, and the shimmering river below and to the left. The car ghosted over the smooth highway, and Marquis slid down until his neck fitted itself to the curve of the seat's top. He sighed. There was something about the silent motion, the shadowy landscaped slopes, and the overhang of lighted buildings in the night. This was the work of Man the Improver,

Man the Designer. Or, why be vague? This was the finest of Man, and Marquis could never experience it without feeling that it was in things like this that the peculiar creature came closest to his destiny.

"I've never met a Security man before," Martin suddenly said, blotting out Marquis' heedless mood. Enough of it remained so that a curious lethargy overlay his mental reaction.

So, he was supposed to be a Security man. Security of what?

"Um."

The noncommital answer brought a quick reply from Martin. "I'm sorry—I didn't realize you were concentrating. I didn't mean to interrupt."

Marquis waved a negative hand. He smiled. "As a matter of fact, I was simply enjoying the scenery. Don't get much of a chance to look at it, ordinarily."

Martin shrugged. "It's nice enough, I suppose. But it's nothing like Helm."

"No, no, of course not," Marquis said. The car shot onward.

"Where should I turn off?" Martin asked.

Once more, Marquis had to be annoyed at himself. The fact that he was in complete control of Martin had filled him with the satisfaction that such things always brought. To take the highest animal in the world and trap him in the very weaknesses that were his human heritage; to snare a man in his own psychological twists—*that* was hunting. But, in the heat of the chase, the hunter must not forget that he is himself human.

Control Martin though he did, he did *not* control the situation—he did not, except within limits so general as to be tenuous, even know what the situation was. And now, the very vagueness of that hastily thrown-forth word, 'uptown,' had doubled back to disconcert him at a time when the answer should have been immediate, crisp, and specific.

"George Washington Bridge cutoff," he said. "Up Broadway. We'll turn off into Inwood. I'll tell you when," and only then realized that the answer *had* been immediate, crisp, specific—and implicit in that supposedly random 'uptown,' for he *did* have a definite destination in mind. The almost sensual warmth of his confidence beat through his body.

"Only human," eh? It was a phrase that entered his thinking very often. *Only* human. *If the mealy-mouthed philosophers and apologists could see me now—if they could sit in a circle around me, invisible and impalpable, while I'm in the middle of taking off a score!*

Watch me, you doddering fools! he exulted. *The character-*

istic that distinguishes man from every other beast is his mind. This is his weapon—the weapon that flung him up to the top of the heap. But so few of you are as clever as I—clever enough to use that weapon against other men, clever enough to study its strength and weaknesses and to use both to my advantage.

Against animals, men used their minds. But, against each other, they fought like animals. And all the animals were helpless against the man who used his mind to its fullest potential.

Even so strange an animal as Martin.

He noticed the pressure of metal against his side and shifted his position slightly. "Handy things, these tools," he said, apparently making conversation, and, as usual, operating on two other levels at the same time. Aside from the probe for information, there was the genuine love for efficient gadgetry—and always, as there had been for so many years, the deep feeling of admiring self-appraisal at the dexterity with which his mind wove its patterns.

Martin nodded, his expression falling into the I've-got-something - to - do - with - that pattern which was as old as human vanity.

"Yes," he said. "We began distribution on the prototype this year, as you know. By next year, we'll be ready to release the real thing. Give these people a little time to adjust to that, and we'll try them with something else along those lines." He chuckled. "As a matter of fact, our sociologists are already alerted, and champing at the bit. I've got to admit, I'm rather curious myself as to what happens to an interdependent technology when its small-tools industries collapse."

And that, Marquis thought, fitted the pattern too. He had no why's or how's as yet, but the what of the situation was becoming less and less obscure. Somewhere, gadgets were being manufactured, and smuggled into the world's technology. Hence Distribution, and hence, to guard against exposure, Security.

That gave him the lead into his next remark.

He nodded. "That's what the trouble is tonight," he said. "A few months back, one of the real models was stolen. I've just located the man who has it."

And Martin brightened. "Oh, *that* case! Well, you've certainly taken a load off my mind. I've been told about it, of course—warned to act in accordance, as a matter of fact. One of your men, wasn't it? Had his pocket picked on a bus, as I recall."

Marquis nodded carefully. "That's the one," while his mind

jumped. For that *was,* precisely, how he had acquired the tool. It looked like any of the mass-produced ones that were on sale in the specialty and hardware stores—except that all the others were simply cleverly nested screwdrivers, wrenches, and pliers.

"I never could understand that thief's motive," Martin went on. "Unless, of course, he simply reached in and grabbed. Why should anyone steal something if he thought he could buy it for two and a half dollars?"

Well, he might be attracted to gadgets, and might feel that as few things should be paid for as possible, Marquis thought, but said "That's one of the quirks of the criminal mind."

"I suppose so. But I'm glad that Fix-All's coming back where it belongs, for the time being. Particularly since it's been in a criminal's hands. Every time I thought of what might happen if their police apprehended him with it. . . . Brr!" He turned the car into the bridge cutoff with a twitch of his fingers.

Marquis shook his head in the darkness of the car's interior. So it had been one of their Security men. He pictured the undercover search that must even now be going on for him. He had no idea of how efficient Security was, of course, but, apparently, the automatic safeguards by which he kept the usual police forces from finding him had also served to throw Security off his track.

The car would be another matter. A small wave of relief swept over him as he thought of what would have happened if he had succeeded in stealing it. With the alarms it carried, Security would have been on his neck almost immediately.

Now, he could devote perhaps twenty minutes to a swift examination, no more. But then, if the car was not the source of information he had expected it to be, the driver certainly was. And what he had learned was enough to lead him still further.

Which brought him back to the problem of Martin. The man could be told the tale indefinitely, it seemed. Here was the epitome of the mark who could be taken for every cent in his pocket and then sent home with full confidence that he would return with more before the ink was completely dry on his mortgages. He sighed. Well, if nothing else, he had a tip on how the hand-tool industry was going to go.

But that was a sideline—a minor sideline, he catalogued. The tool was only a small representation of a technology, hidden away somewhere, which, if penetrated and properly exploited. . . .

Admit it, no matter how much

he rationalized, it was not the profit involved that was primarily tempting him. It was the old fascination of the chase, and something else, too—something there had never been before—the promise that, directing this enterprise, was an opponent worthy of him.

But Martin definitely had to be kept from turning the chase too uncomfortably near his trail. Marquis sighed again. It was against his emotional grain, even if his intellect could find no equally efficient course.

"Take a left," he said. Martin touched the wheel, and the car swung into a street that topped a small park covering the slope between that street and the one below. The street was dark, with thick trees fencing in the street-lamps. The park fell away to the left; and there were no buildings on that side, of course. The houses across the way, farther up the slope of the hill, had their windows blocked off by foliage.

"All right, you can pull up here," Marquis said. Martin stopped in the street, and, after looking around for himself, and deciding that nobody could see them, touched a lever on the steering column. The car rolled sideward until its tires touched the curb.

Um. Marquis thought. Martin, again with that special, abashed grin, put his key in the ignition and turned the motor off.

"Come with me, will you?" Marquis said, doing what his intellect told him was inevitable even while his emotions tried to block his tongue. Martin, excited, got out as Marquis reluctantly walked around to his side.

"Where does he live?" Martin asked. His eyes were shining. Here, at last, in his humdrum distribution job, were romance, glamor, and excitement.

Marquis, oppressed, shook his head. "He doesn't live here." Martin frowned in puzzlement. "Doesn't live here?"

Marquis grimaced at the gape of the man's expression. The revulsion he had felt was suddenly intensified, and re-directed. Lord, how many slow-witted fools *did* you make?

"As a matter of fact," Marquis explained condescendingly, "He lives on Nineteenth Street, a block away from the diner where I took over your car. He has an occasional meal in that very diner. Coincidence, eh?"

"B—but, I don't understand. If he doesn't live around here, what did you want to come for? Is he near here now?"

Marquis' sense of the melodramatic was highly developed. "Very near," he said, and struck Martin down with the hard edge of his palm, snapping the man's

neck and sending him flopping down into the gutter under his car.

Marquis' calm eyes surveyed the park, the street, and the buildings. Nothing stirred. The tree-gauntleted street was dark, and at the foot of the hill was the end of the Eighth Avenue subway line, from which a man might reach any part of the city and be lost, untraceable, from even such a search as an alarmed and angry Security might institute.

He had allowed himself twenty minutes. Even though there was no sign of life or discovery at the end of that time, he did not dare exceed the limit. He broke off his attempts to disconnect the car's radio, slid out, and closed the door gently, stepping over Martin's body.

He stood still for a moment.

His pockets were as full as he dared to make them—too much bulge in the faultlessly tailored suit might be remembered by someone sharpeyed. He glanced around once more. A car was coming down the street from the top of the hill—someone had brought a girl home, probably—but the danger was as real as though it were a police car. He stepped hastily back behind a tree until the car was past, and something tumbled out of his pocket, unnoticed, to lie under the tree until it was found in the morning.

II

TUCKER McBRIDE let the chair take all his weight and bulk, feeling the foam rubber mold itself so that it held him firmly and comfortably. He looked across the desktop at Inspector Morris, watching the deepening lines of tension begin at the corners of the man's nostrils and grow out to bracket his mouth as he read McBride's report.

"And that's all, is it?" Morris asked, looking up.

McBride nodded. As always, Morris' violent approach to every problem struck him with a slight but definite impact. He was not a nervous man, but he consistently acted as though forty-eight hours' work had to be done in every twenty-four. Which, McBride decided with a quiet grunt, was probably true.

"What about that counterfeit registration?"

McBride shook his head in frustration. "It's good. It's perfect. Paper, watermark, printing—even the MVB stamp. The number isn't duplicated on any genuine registration. But Albany doesn't have a file copy."

"Clerical error?"

McBride nodded. "I'd say so—but it's the same story on the

driver's license and the plates. They're perfectly genuine, but Albany's got no record of any of them."

"Still a possibility."

McBride felt the first trace of subliminal bewilderment. Morris sounded like a man who was chasing rainbows in an attempt to ignore the cloudburst. Then he caught himself with a thrust of guilt. Morris' attention to the apparently trivial possibility was one of the things that had made him a top man. But McBride had to point out that the address on the license and registration was an empty lot.

Morris acknowledged the fact with a nod. "All right. But check with the Cummings people to see who sold him the car. Where is the car, anyway?"

"Labs," McBride answered. "Fresh prints all over it. Two sets. One's Martin's, the other's strictly unidentified. We haven't got 'em, and neither do FBI or OCD. Telefaxed 'em into Defense, in Washington. No word, yet."

"What about this lighter?" Morris asked, dropping the report with an exasperated gesture.

McBride took the dull-finished metal block out of his pocket and handed it to Morris, grunting as he stretched. "Found ten feet away from the body. Same prints as the car. Lab's all through with it."

Morris turned it over in his fingers. "Butane?" he asked.

McBride grunted audibly. "Uh-uh," he was forced to contradict. "One of those flameless jobs. It's a block of metal. One bright face. Touch a cigarette to it, and inhale."

Morris looked at it thoughtfully. A faint air of abstraction hovered around his eyes, as though the lighter was only a convenient object for concentration while his thoughts were occupied with something else.

"How did you know it was a lighter?"

"Trademark."

Morris turned the lighter over again, then nodded. "Etched in the finish. Good make."

McBride frowned. Morris had begun the session characteristically enough, but now he seemed so preoccupied with something else that he was paying hardly any attention at all.

"Looks like it, first glance," McBride half-agreed. "But it's not Welington. It's Wolingten."

Morris did not seem to look closer, but he said "So it is. Cheap imitation, do you think?"

"Don't know," McBride said. "Remember the story of the time the Japs re-named an island so they could stamp their stuff 'Made in USA'? But that's quite a

lighter. No place to refuel it. No lid, no push-button. Just a block of metal. What's it an imitation of? Had twenty or thirty lighters in my life, I guess—can't resist a new model—never heard of one like this."

"It works all right," then?"

"Oh, yeah, it works. One of the lab boys tested it. Saw the trademark, figured it for a steal, looked like a flameless, so he tried it. Says he'd like to have it back, if he can. Kind of excited about it. First flameless lighter he's ever seen without an air intake."

Morris smiled and shook his head. "He'd better go find himself another one. But I can understand why he wants it. We're a culture of gadget addicts, Tuck." He looked fondly at the block of machined aluminum in his hand.

McBride, at a loss, coughed uncomfortably.

Morris looked up, then smiled with a twist of his lips. "Sorry, Tuck. Not very much on the ball this morning, am I?"

McBride could only shrug.

Morris snapped back to business. "All right, I'll hang on to this—it might be a lead, and it might not. I'll see if it correlates with the lab reports on that car." He swung the lambent fire of his eyes directly on McBride. "I want those reports coming in to me directly, Tuck." He held up a hand. "I know, Tuck, I know. Don't tell me you can handle them. I know you could, but you won't be here to do it. I want you out with the rest of the boys, and I don't want you back until this killer's been caught. I want you to hit hard, and hit with everything we've got. One thing—I want this boy alive. But I want him. I want him badly. Okay?"

McBride grinned, relieved. "Okay!" he said, taking fire from Morris' drive. "I'll be checking in once in a while."

Morris nodded. He was already buried deeply in a re-reading of McBride's report.

McBride's grin widened. Morris was back up to form, and everything was going to be all right.

MORRIS put the report down as soon as the door closed behind McBride. He rubbed at his eyes and sighed. He had been up all night, waiting for Martin to check in safely. And then the routine report had come in from a prowl car, and, as the supplementary reports had been filed, each inexorably pointing to a conclusion that McBride's comprehensive report confirmed beyond a doubt, the cloying despair had reached out and tangled him

until he could only sit where he was and hope his face did not betray as much as he thought it did.

What had Martin been doing in Inwood? He shook his head in tired incomprehension, and pushed his chair back. He stood at the window and looked out.

There it was. Manhattan. New York City. Not Helm, no. Not low houses, set in spring-soft lawns, not thick-leaved trees that held swings and hammocks. But this was the source. This bustling factory, this proving ground. This was where the swings and the hammocks came from.

Martin's murderer had to be found. There was no guessing what had lured the man into Inwood, but the killer's subsequent actions had been too purposeful and systematic to be those of a casual thief. The car had not been ransacked, it had been stripped. Heaven only knew what the unknown adversary had taken. The lab reports might show it, but, without the technicians knowing what should be there, the chances were low.

But that was not the greatest difficulty. There would be trouble enough in altering the reports, but, at least, he'd kept them out of McBride's hands.

But how was McBride going to catch the killer without finding out as much as the man himself knew?

Martin's wallet, with all its cash intact, had been left behind. But his watch and fountain pen were gone—as well as any other gadgets he might have been carrying.

The adversary had to know quite a bit. He almost had to be the same man who had stolen the Fix-All. Otherwise, there was no pattern at all, and there had to be a pattern, somewhere.

He thought of what would happen if the man, whoever he was, broke through the careful barrier that had been set up between New York and Helm. He thought of low houses and green lawns. Up to now, they had been safe. How much longer would that safety endure?

He turned back to the desk, picked up the outside phone, and dialed a number.

"Pan-Europa Imports?" he said when the call was answered. "This is Mr. Helm. H-E-L-M. I'd like to speak to Mr. Courcy." He waited for the manager's, "Courcy, Mr. Helm."

"Security," Morris said bluntly. "Authorization follows. The Wolington lighters are to be marketed immediately."

"Without Welington's releasing the model they're supposed to imitate?" Courcy was incredulous.

"Order. Get your advertising section cracking on a revised campaign. This is emergency. I want those lighters in the drugstores within two days."

"Well, all right, but—"

"Would you want to be lynched?"

There was a choked whistle at the other end of the line. "That bad?"

"Yes."

Morris answered impatiently, and cradled the phone.

Well, there it was. The first panic move since the beginning. With knowledge of the lighter so diffused that it could not possibly be suppressed, there was only one way to keep word of its uniqueness from spreading—and that was to make it no longer unique.

He half-turned and fed a sheet of paper into his typewriter. Heaven only knew what the repercussions would be in Planning when this report came in. But, damn it, Earth was his responsibility, and the move had to be made, plan or no plan! He had to do something about it.

As he typed, he drew small comfort from the thought that the killer was groping as blindly toward Helm as he and Tuck were searching after him. *Like two ignorant armies,* he thought. *But how much brains or firmness of purpose did it take to set off the bombs last time?*

III

KELLY MARQUIS looked at the pairs of objects on the kitchen table, and at the smaller group of single items.

Two Fix-All hand tools. Two fountain pens, two wristwatches. And three single items: a key 'ring,' a fingernail clipper, and a comb.

One of the Fix-Alls was the one he had acquired on the bus. The other was the standard item, bought an hour ago on the way back from the jeweler's where he had 'matched' Martin's watch and pen, but no one could sell him an alnico key 'ring' or a fingernail clipper that bore vague resemblances to a pocket pencil sharpener. No one sold a comb that exuded a light trace of tonic as it was passed through the hair.

He frowned at the 'ring.' It was almost as hard to separate the keys from each other as it was to pull them off the coin-shaped magnet that held them. The pencil-sharpener-clipper seemed like an impractical idea. The hair tonic comb? It was perhaps the best of the lot, and a potentially cumbersome thing even then. It reacted to resistance against the teeth. He could visualize what would happen if it were put in a hip pocket.

Failures? Experimental models? If Martin had been in charge

of distributing foreign gadgets, it was perfectly logical that he might have been indulging in some personal testing. Or, Marquis decided on further thought, he might simply have been transporting original models into New York for duplication at factories located in the city. What better way to camouflage them?

Foreign? Was that the word? Marquis ran the tip of his tongue over his grimacing upper lip. Martin had been a peculiar duck —peculiar in his absolute contrast to the subtly alien flavor of the items he distributed. There had been *nothing*, absolutely nothing out of the ordinary about the man. And yet, he had been driving a car that, Marquis was convinced, had never seen the inside of the Cummings plant.

The design, though. Cummings *was* coming out with that body design. They'd gotten it somewhere — and it stemmed from none of their previous models. Marquis knew, beyond a doubt, that when he discovered the source of Martin's gadgets, he would know where Cummings had gotten their design, as well. And that design *was* radical. No one had ever curled a fender into that slashing curve before. No windscreen had ever quite flared as that one did. Not on a Cummings, not in Detroit, not in Italy—not anywhere on Earth.

But that problem had to be temporarily dropped as insoluble on the basis of present data. He picked up the two Fix-All's.

Holding them this way, he could see no difference in them. The one he'd had all this time was no more worn than the other. The brand names were the same. Both were machine-turned aluminum alloy—a harder alloy than any of which he knew. They were the same in size—but one had half again as many working heads retracted into the barrel. Those extra heads provided all the reason for a Security man's carrying one. Marquis smiled. The same reasons insured that he would devote all his strength and ingenuity to avoid losing it.

But the Fix-All was a familiar miracle. The watch and pen were not. He put the tools down and picked up Martin's watch. It was a *Chronometre*—a 'Swiss' brand that, up to now, had restricted itself to the $7.95 drugstore trade. The 'duplicate' from the jewelry shop had cost fifteen dollars. Apparently, *Chronometre* was moving up. But, if they ever marketed the model that Martin had worn, they could command almost any price they asked. Martin's watch had a dummy stem, nor was there any way of opening the back. The case was an apparently solid block of machined aluminum alloy. There

was no way to either wind or service the works—but, in the twenty-four hours that Marquis had had the watch, periodic checks had confirmed that there was something within the case-humming quietly, relentlessly, as though it would never stop.

The pen had a tapering barrel that ended in a rounded-off point. The model from the jeweler's ended in a ball. Martin's did not. It was a solid length of dyed aluminum, and, where the twist-top of the standard model simply retracted the ball, it was a color selector on the pen Martin had carried.

Marquis cracked his knuckles. There was a pattern here. A standard model was made up, marketed, and allowed to be generally accepted. And, meanwhile, vastly improved versions which, on the surface, were identical with their prototypes, were already in existence, waiting to be released. What was it Martin had said, in relation to the Fix-All? "We began distribution on the prototype this year. By next year, we'll be ready to release the real thing. Give them a little time to adjust, and we'll hit them with something else."

But where was the purpose? *Were* they deliberately trying to wreck Earth's industries—or was it only New York's industries, or wasn't that it at all? And why this rigamarole? Who were they?

There was another facet to the problem—and an interesting one. All the brand-names on the gadgets were old and familiar ones. No one could have pirated them in extensive use and not drawn a howl of protest from the legitimate owners.

He had a glimpse of factory after factory, its ownership usurped by something alien, and the chill wind laid its icy hand on the back of his neck.

He pounded his fist into his palm. If he could have removed that car's radio. . . . But he hadn't had time to find the proper head on his Fix-All. If he hadn't lost that lighter somewhere, the loss wouldn't have been so great. He was almost positive there had been something strange about that hastily-read brand-name. Something that should have been a clue, if he only hadn't been such a careless fool.

But he had lost his chance. He didn't have that wafer-thin radio, and he didn't have the lighter. He had no lead, to opening through which to infiltrate this complex undertaking that was creeping into the structure of his society. He had missed. Someone else would find out, and someone else would reap the reward. Someone else would engage that marvelous adversary—and lose,

as anyone but he was doomed to lose.

Marquis' mouth twisted in robbed bitterness.

TUCKER McBRIDE stared down at the drugstore display case. There was a cheaply printed card at the head of the case. In red letters, it advertised "Your Choice—98¢." The case was full of lighters exactly like the kind he had found near the unknown man's body. He cursed, turned to his assistant, and pointed at the case. "There it goes, Fred. Higher than a balloon. There's a million of those things."

The assistant grinned sourly. "Well, what'd you expect? The guy was a walking blind alley."

"He wasn't walking when we found him," McBride said.

"Yeah," the assistant answered. "Now, suppose you tell me why he was killed. What was there about him that made somebody break his neck?"

"I don't know," McBride said. "But if he was to walk out of the morgue and come up to me now, I'd break it again."

Morris crumpled the laboratory reports in his hand. They were worse than he'd expected. One of the technicians—the same one who'd been so enthusiastic about the lighter, obviously—had apparently gone over the car from stem to stern, taking it to pieces as far as he could, improvising tools and dismantling even some assemblies that no Earthly wrench or screwdriver could have opened.

Morris looked at the list of findings again.

The car was assembled out of die-stamped and machined aluminum alloys. (See list attached below, together with sublist of tentative classifications for alloys unknown to this laboratory.) The tires were plastic, as were all other non-metallic components. (A parallel footnote was indicated.) Wherever a casual inspection was liable to be made, the assembly techniques had been similar to standard procedures, but this was far from true in the less accessible components. No tool had been able to remove the cylinder head. Apparently the engine was a solid aluminum block. This, of course, was impossible. The radiator was not a radiator in the sense that automotive engineering had come to understand. It was some type of recirculation mechanism. The fan was a dummy, as were the spark plugs. There was an electrical system, of course, but it avoided the 'battery' entirely, and, while the flow of current did originate

in the generator, or what resembled a generator, there was no means of confirming this conjecture, for neither the generator nor the 'battery' could be disassembled for inspection. What looked like power-assisted steering, was, loosely speaking, just that. The steering wheel, as it was turned, brushed a contact across a circular array of switches, and the turret on which the engine was mounted and from which the front wheels were suspended was shifted the corresponding number of degrees. A similar arrangement at the rear axle made it possible to drive the car sideward. In fact, there was a master switch which performed this action instantaneously, once the car's forward motion had been stopped.

Controls were standard. Some of the indicators, of course, were dummies. The car radio, in place, looked perfectly normal—but did not extend through the dashboard. Apparently, it was as thick as its projection from the dash—¾ in.

And the gas tank was a dummy.

No identification had been made on either set of fingerprints. No additional sets had been found.

Morris threw the report into his wastebasket. He opened a drawer and took out a laboratory report form. Reaching under the body of his typewriter, he switched the typeface to one that approximated the lab typewriter's, and, stopping frequently to search for the proper technical words, began to fake a perfectly normal report.

He could only be grateful that the only people who knew about the car were the lab technicians. Even the squad that had responded to the prowl car's original report had, naturally, not performed any examination of its own. That was the police lab's job, and it always did a good one.

Morris nodded in the solitude of his office. The lab technicians were top grade. Give an Earthman something to tinker with—a problem, an idea, a piece of machinery—and he did not rest until he had taken it down to the smallest components he could.

He sighed—as he was sighing so often, these days. Martin's death had been like a cobblestone dropped into the delicate symmetry of a beautiful and crystalline structure. The loss of the Fix-All had been nothing compared to it. Now, the structure was in mortal danger of collapse, and he, the man entrusted with its maintenance, was forced to buttress here and mend there, replace this, alter that, and with each desperate move he made to

preserve the whole, some part was flawed.

He had authorized the premature release of the Wolingten lighter. Now Welington had cancelled their plans to issue their own model—the model the Wolingten was intended to 'copy,' and he knew their engineers were working day and night to improve their product to a point beyond that which the Helm attained.

And they would do it. The entire purpose of the Wolingtens was lost—and Welington's legal department was quietly scouting Pan-Europa. If the import company had to be abandoned, a year's work was lost.

All because Martin's killer had dropped the lighter. That much had been done by sheer accident alone. Now, Martin's deliberate killing, and his abandoned car, meant that the lab personnel would have to be scattered, each technician on an apparently logical excuse, but with the entire move ready to be bared as a deliberate suppression at the first serious investigation. And so flawed was the structure of Helm's organization that the first suspicious touch would send it shattered into agonizing ruin, and all Helm with it.

Morris ran his hand over his eyes. It couldn't go on. Martin's killer—no, he was more than that, he was far more dangerous than that—the Adversary had to be found.

KELLY MARQUIS looked at the display on the drugstore counter and almost laughed aloud. For the past two days, he had been dogged by the sluggishness of his thinking. His walk had been heavy-footed, and his face had been set in the stiff mask of a peculiar withdrawn expression that epitomized all his emotions. But now, all this was magically gone as the sudden tidal wave of returned confidence smashed through his body and left him dazzlingly alive.

It was a victory. A *victory!* A sacrifice to save a queen in check, at least. He must have dropped that lighter at the very scene of Martin's death. The police must have found it, and his Adversary, whoever he was, had been forced to hide that vital clue.

Clever, he thought. Hide the tree in the forest. Probably, the police now thought that Martin had picked the lighter up at a store that had received its supply somewhat early. They might try checking that. Well, let them.

He had forced the Adversary's hand. Forced it to move so that, in protecting itself, it also protected Marquis. The police were farther away from him than ever.

It was one thing to pursue a case with what looked like a valuable lead. When the lead was destroyed, so was some of the drive—and the chances of something significant actually turning up.

And the Adversary had also marked his own trail with his desperate action. Marquis rummaged idly through the lighters until at last he found one whose color matched his suit. He picked it out, and laid a dollar on the counter.

"Clever things, these," he said to the clerk who took his money. He smiled confidentially. "I was wondering who supplies you with them." Another dollar appeared in his extended fingers. The clerk look at him suspiciously.

"Purchasing department buys 'em. I dunno. Why?"

Marquis' smile became even more secretive. The dollar lay on the counter. He reached into his pocket, and there was another dollar. "As a matter of fact—" he chuckled "I own part of a concern that handles a line of similar items. I'm rather curious as to how these people manage to make a profit at so low a price." Now, there were three dollars on the counter in front of the clerk.

Marquis could almost have repeated the man's thought word for word. His expression was as readable as that.

Feeling it in the pocketbook, huh, moneybags? Somebody's undercutting you. Okay, I'll tell you —why not? And I hope you eat your heart out.

"Says 'Pan-Europa Import Company' on the boxes," he grunted, and gathered up the money.

Marquis smiled broadly. It was amazing to what chords the mind of a man would resonate. "Thank you very much," he said. The clerk turned to wait on another customer. Marquis put five more of the lighters in his pockets. "Ah, yes, thank you very much," he repeated under his breath, and walked out of the drugstore, humming. Under the circumstances, it would have been impractical to stay and look up 'Pan-Europa' in the drugstore phonebook.

IV

MORE and more, as he tried to make sense out of the Inwood murder, Tucker McBride found himself wondering just what he had gotten into. The whole thing should have been just a routine case—but the first urgent reply from the motor vehicle bureau in Albany had taken it completely out of that class, and with each new development, the case had become more and more of a groping attempt to en-

compass something infinitely involved.

It had begun with the car—a new model. One that couldn't have been sold more than a week or two before. But the serial number that Morris had read off to him from the lab report had led to a baffled man in Detroit who took him out to his garage and showed him the identical number on the engine of a new, powder-blue, not cream and rust, Cummings Javelin.

Martin himself had never been registered at birth anywhere in the United States, Canada, Mexico, or Cuba. He had never signed his name to any official document except that spurious license and registration. He had never married, had never been arrested, and had never, anywhere, been fingerprinted. He had not earned a salary, had filed neither Federal nor State income tax returns, had never been classified for Selective Service, had never volunteered for or been a member of the armed services, held no Maritime Union card, had never attracted the attention of the FBI, the Secret Service, any of the military intelligence services, or any congressional committee. In short, the man had never officially existed—except that the Department's handwriting experts insisted that 'Erm Martin' was *not* an alias, or that, if it was, it was so habitual as to have as much validity and long standing as any true name. There had been no deliberation, no suppressed nervousness in those two signatures. They had been no deliberation, no suppressed nervousness in those two signatures. They had been smooth, confident—as though Martin had been signing that name all his life.

To what? McBride thought. *What was he signing his name to? If I knew that. . . .* He shrugged. It would be an accident if he ever did.

There had been the lighter. For a day and a half, it had seemed like the one thing that distinguished Martin from any other dead man in the world. And the lighter had turned out to be a dud. Fred was checking the distribution on that, trying to find out where Martin had picked one up. But that was almost a desperation gesture.

The other set of prints had been as useless as Martin's. They could be checked against those of all criminals as they were arrested on other charges. But that was as bad as Fred's checking the lighters. It was a routine move, and enough routine moves eventually produced a result through pure chances, but that result could never be counted on. Besides, whoever had killed Martin had followed a peculiar behavior

pattern. It had not been a revenge killing. It had been neither brutal nor violent enough. Instead, it had been precise, dispassionate—a means to an end.

To a chance to search the car? Maybe. But, in that case, what had Martin been carrying? The lab reports, again, indicated no traces of anything unusual in the car or in Martin's clothes. Papers, then? Information? Some small item, like the lighter? Martin's wallet had been left behind. One key was in the car's ignition. But there had been no other keys, no comb, no watch.

McBride frowned. No watch? Martin had been dressed like a business man. No pen, either.

That was a false note. He played it over in his mind. Nothing taken, except, perhaps, small pocket accessories. What was it Morris had said? "We're a culture of gadget-lovers?"

Gadgets. The lighter. Dropped accidentally, or simply discarded as unsuitable? Incapable, say, of concealing a roll of microfilm.

McBride's sleepy eyes began to glitter. *There* was the key to the killing. It had been a move of convenience—a means of removing opposition to the attainment of a purpose, or an item of importance. A soldier's killing. Or an undercover agent's. A move of war. McBride thought of all the factors in the case which he had previously reviewed, and now they fell into a logical order.

Martin had been an agent for something. A man with no past, no present — only a purpose, whatever it might have been. And someone, as anonymous as he, had intercepted him. It had been the convergence of two opposing clandestine purposes.

And now McBride thought of what the world had suffered in the war only four years past, and felt his hackles rise. It was on again. The game was begun anew, and the rockets would ravish the shrieking air again, the cities would burst and burn, and there would be refuge for the human race nowhere on the face of the agonized globe that had given it birth.

The lighter. He'd said it himself. "Remember the time the Japs. . . ." It wouldn't be they, this time. The natural alliance that locked the Pacific from Alaska, down the Kuriles and the Japanese home islands, that expanded to include the Phillipine Republic and swung back to cover the Pacific Islands Territory and the Hawaiian Commonwealth was too secure, too mutually advantageous.

No, that lighter had come out of Europe, somewhere. And now McBride decided to check that distributor again, and this time not for the purpose of finding

out where and when the lighters had been sent, but where they had been obtained.

KELLY MARQUIS knew that he had almost no time to spare. He himself was not in personal danger of discovery—the only possible lead to himself were his fingerprints, and he was perfectly sure that they were not on file anywhere. If he were somehow caught, they would be a confirmation of his guilt, certainly—but, if he were caught, no such confirmation, or lack of it would make any difference.

Security? Security—the legendary Security, which hasn't made a significant move yet, he parenthesized—had no more than the police, and lacked the official arm's ability to use the resources of the Federal agencies.

No, it was not apprehension for himself that put the power of desperation behind the swing of his arm. It was the knowledge that Martin's car was at the police laboratories—had to be—and that Helm, whatever Martin had meant, was in danger of discovery. And this was something that Marquis did not want to happen. If it did, it would destroy his monopoly of knowledge about its abilities and techniques. And if that happened, all the possibilities that Marquis had envisioned from his first awareness of the Fix-All's unheard-of properties would be lost, and he would have to go back to life as it had been—a succession of skirmishes with the idiots who thought that life gave up its good things without a struggle, until the day came when a mark more stupid than the rest gave up all hope of his own dignity for the sake of seeing Marquis sent to prison.

That Martin, for example. Just intelligent enough to understand that if he became alarmed, toward the end, it would be an admission that he had been made a fool of. So his dignity had not permitted alarm, and he had tried to salvage something of self-respect by following a line of thought based on something that had never been a fact. If he had been too dull-witted to make the subconscious computation, he would have panicked — turned and run, perhaps, and lost his sense of his own intelligence, and lived. As it was—how dignified is it, to lie in the gutter like a felled animal?

Marquis swung his arm again, and once more the lighter was flung out of his hand and against the wall. It struck, putting a fresh chip in the stucco, and clattered to the floor. Once again, he picked it up and touched the cigarette's end to its bright face. He

inhaled, and the acrid taste of the re-lighted cigarette filled his mouth.

He spat the smoke out of his throat, and stubbed the cigarette out. He threw the lighter again. And this time, at last, its case abraded and the finish battered, it failed to light.

Marquis rammed it into his pocket impatiently, and put on his coat. It was time—time to move, time to reach his objective before the police blundered on it. He had thought the lighter would never break.

His feet beat impatiently on the stairs—not nervously, impatiently, he told himself, and his steps were hurried as he walked out into the street. He reached the corner of Twenty-Third Street before he found a cab on Ninth Avenue, and, by the time he gave the driver Pan-Europa Imports' address, his voice had the faintest sign of an edge on it that should not have been there in the voice of a man who had already defeated the Adversary once and knew exactly what he was doing so that he could win again.

THE telephone rang on Morris' desk, and he picked it up as he picked up telephones thirty times a day.

"Inspector Morris," he said.

"Inspector, this is Mr. Helm," the slightly unclear voice spoke at the other end. Morris reached down and touched the switch on the telephone terminal box, and a recording began to feed a dummy conversation into the line while he gave a half-turn to the ear and mouth pieces of the handset.

"All right now," he said.

"Revisions of plan and instructions as follows," the unclear voice told him.

Morris dragged a pad over to where he could make notes on it. "Shoot."

There was a short chuckle. "Okay, *let's* skip the formalities. How's things, Stel?"

Morris snorted. "You were about to tell me. How's it going on your end, Dac?"

The voice was rueful. "Like you said, I'm about to tell you. Data follows.

"Might as well give up the lighters as a bad job. If Welington presses too close, throw 'em a bone and pull the things off the market. I suppose we can always use them here." Dac sighed. "I never did thing that was the hottest idea on record. We ought to stick to working directly through our own dummies. Apparently Plan thinks so too, because you're instructed not to work too hard to save Pan-Europa, if it comes to that."

"Check," Morris said, his

voice not as matter-of-fact as it could have been. Pan-Europa had been a difficult and expensive outlet to establish. Plan might now have decided it was expendable, but last year Plan had been firm in its contention that such a dummy was necessary for variation from what might, otherwise, have been too clear a pattern. This move was too akin to that of a general who finds a salient outflanked. He has not, as yet, lost it, but he suspects he will, and so begins to convince himself that it was not really so important as he had thought it to be.

Desperate, he thought. One item falls into the wrong hands, one man dies, and it is like a chain reaction. This must be sacrificed to safeguard this—but what will they do if the sacrifice leaves the board clear of players?

What then? Find another world, and begin all over again?

"Now," Dac continued, while Morris' pen drew aimless circles on the pad. "What's going to happen to Martin's car?"

"Go up for sale at the Police Auction. SOP. I'll get it, send it back. Nobody really examines those things. I think that's pretty blocked off, now."

"Good! Plan instructed me to tell you to get it, somehow, but couldn't suggest a method. I'll report back to them. Nice thinking, Stel."

Oh, I know my police routine pretty well, Morris thought. *I've been an honest cop for twenty years.*

"Routine," he said.

Dac chuckled. "Yar. The bright moves are routine, the bum ones are stupidity. Plan still doesn't know whether to kiss you or kill you about those lighters."

"Let me know when they make up their minds," Morris said dryly.

Dac laughed again. "Anyway. The Cummings deal is out the window. Plan's going to try again, with another make. They're got dummies negotiating for two or three manufacturing outfits. Whichever one comes cheapest, they'll re-stamp the body shells and drop them on the same chassis."

The pen slipped across the pad, blazing a heavy trail of frantic blue across the paper as Morris jerked his hand.

"You're joking!"

Dac's voice was puzzled. "No. Should I be?"

Morris sighed. "No, no, I guess not. Plan doesn't want to take a chance on those lab technicians getting suspicious, eh?"

"Guess so."

Fourteen of them, Morris thought. Fourteen men might

have learned about the Helm model of the Cummings, and because of that, Plan was going to abandon its most ambitious prep campaign. Well, he could see their point. If more of those cars suddenly came on the market, some one of the now dispersed—and only slightly mystified—technicians might remember where they had seen the first one, and might say so to someone who would press a genuine investigation. But, fourteen men frustrating three and a half million people—an entire civilization!

And then he sighed again. It was not ever fourteen. It was the fifteenth; the Adversary. Everything stemmed from him. His weary hand pressed across his eyes and nose as it went down his face.

A cobblestone. A cobblestone dropped on a crystalline structure, a stone cast into a pool. The ripples were spreading, seeking out the farthest edges of the shore, and lapping at it with slow, seemingly gentle waves that were ruthlessly undercutting the banks.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"Nope. Nothing that you won't learn through the usual channels as more models are ready. Plan's got a prep campaign starting in on watches that's a real honey. Ties in with that *Chronometre* deal. Just before that outfit gets ready to spring the Helm models, they're going to feed the information to one of the class manufacturers—you know, the ones with stores on Park and Fifth Avenue. At the same time that *Chronometre* brings out the working man's model, you'll see the identical watch in a gold-dyed case selling for two hundred more. With a genuine alligator strap, of course. Boy, what a war *that's* going to be. And we'll be cashing in on both sides."

"Hardly," Morris said wearily. He'd argued time and again for someone with a genuine familiarity with Earth to be included in Plan. "They won't be competing. They'll each monopolize their own markets, but the overlap's insignificant."

"Mass Psych says different. They claim enough people'll want to show up their neighbors, who've only got the *cheap* model."

"Maybe. But practical psych says a two hundred dollars differential will lead to ingenious rationalizations about not spending extra money for the same thing with a fancy label. Besides, what're they trying to do—drain the mass market so that it can't afford to buy anything else?"

"All right," Dac admitted. "You're probably right, But Plan

had to move fast. We lost a lot of potential revenue when those lighters went sour."

"So that's an emergency measure, too," Morris said.

"Well, yes. But it was the only fast buck they could see."

"We're not working for the fast buck," Morris reminded him.

"We are now," Dac said.

"Yes, I guess we are," Morris admitted. Something like a clammy hand seemed to have touched his brain.

Panic. A man is drowning, and he threshes out.

"Anything else?" he said again. If Dac had any more such unofficial information, he didn't want it. Not now. Already, the components were assembling into too clear a picture.

"One other thing. Administrative. Courcy's Distribution Manager now. You might as well pass the word along."

"All right. Tell Plan I've got it all. And I'll call in the minute I get a lead on Martin's killer."

"Check. Any messages?"

Morris thought for a moment. "No, I guess not." Who did he have, in Helm, to send a greeting to? Dac and he had built up a friendship over the years, but who else? Nobody. Not for the first time, he wondered if his successor—if there ever *was* a successor—would be on the same basis with Dac as he had been. Probably not, he thought. An endless series of friendships would be too boring. If he had judged Dac's psychology at all correctly, he'd probably pick a fight with the next man, just for variety. *A forty-year spat,* he thought. And then what? If my successor is succeeded, how will Dac act with him?

But the sixty years until that time was too long a span over which to speculate. Sixty years was as long as his life—and, by then, he would be forty years dead.

"All right, then," Dac said. "I'll be talking to you."

"Right." There was a click at the other end of the wire. Morris re-set his phone, cut in on the dummy conversation, and terminated it. Then he cradled the receiver and went back to the window.

It was a retreat. A retreat all along the front. The lighters would have to be pulled back, he knew. Welington sensed that it might be fighting for its life, and Pan-Europa was the visible assailant. The Cummings project was being abandoned, and the general plan to branch out into heavier projects would have to wait until another manufacturer could begin producing the cars. That meant a hold-back on the refrigerators, the washing ma-

chines, the TV sets—on all the heavy goods.

The entire plan was being rescheduled. There might be brave talk in Helm, but that was the grim reality. And the spur-of-the-moment machination with the watches was as unconvincing a brave front as he had ever seen.

Fifty years without a hitch—and then the Adversary.

Morris' breath gusted out of his open throat in a sad and exhausted exhalation. *They thought they were safe, hidden in Helm. Who would possibly think that a technological culture might conceal another such, complementing it in its own way? Why should the Earthmen possibly suspect that they were not the only ingenious people in the Universe?*

So, the apparently inconsiderable chance had been taken. And now the true weakness of the interdependent structure-within-the-interdependent-structure was becoming apparent. *A breach anywhere is a breach everywhere, and the discovery of one is bound to become the discovery of all.*

He turned back to the desk to telephone Courcy and let him know about his promotion.

Pan-Europa Imports' manager took the news in about the way that Morris had expected. He had anticipated it, of course, but the elation of having his hopes confirmed showed strongly through his attempt to remain businesslike. He was thankful to Morris, for one thing, when calm logic would have shown him that the Security head had nothing to do with advancements in Distribution, and that, judging from Morris' past attitude toward him, the Security man would probably have opposed the move if consulted.

"By the way," Courcy said as Morris was about to hang up, "This might interest you. I've got a man here with a broken lighter."

Morris felt the skin stretch over his suddenly tensed jaw.

"A *broken* lighter?"

"That's right. Claims he dropped it. Frankly, it looks as though it went over the edge of the Empire State, but it's possible, I suppose, though I don't see how. I've explained to him that he can't expect a guarantee on a ninety-eight cent retail item, but he doesn't seem to understand that. Should I give him another one?"

"Yes, you jackass!" Morris surprised himself with his own shout. "*After* you've stalled him for twenty minutes. Don't bother to ask for explanations, because I'm not giving any. I don't want that man out of your office within twenty minutes—I don't care if you have to order your secre-

tary to throw herself at him. Do anything, but keep him there that long. Then let him go."

"All right, sir." Courcy's tone was one of innocence taken aback and slightly indignant.

Morris slammed his palm down on the cutoff bar, then lifted as his hand flashed to the dial.

The numbers spun out in a staccatto that hardly seemed to pause.

Morris began to talk as soon as the receiver on the other end was picked up.

"This is Stel. Take a man and get over to Pan-Europa. Do it *now!* There'll be a man coming out of Courcy's office in just nineteen minutes. I want him followed. Don't lose him, even if you have to sink your teeth into his ankle. I don't know what he looks like, but he'll be somebody with no connection to the company—and he'll have a new Wolingten lighter. Don't let anybody separate you from him. If a safe drops on him, push him out of the way and take it yourself, but leave him alive for the other man to follow. Understand?"

Only another Security man could have followed that tumbling series of words. Only another Security man had the reflexes required to analyze the sounds of Morris' vocal cords vibrating, his tongue moving, at a speed no human vocal mechanism could have attained.

"Right."

And Morris knew that the Adversary would not long remain a phantom.

V

"I'M AFRAID I don't understand this delay," Marquis said to a strangely tense Courcy. "Either you are going to replace this lighter, or you are not. If you are, I wish you'd do it. If you're not, just tell me so. I'll admit that I was not attempting to bluff you when I stated that I'd take my grievance to the Better Business Bureau, but if you're willing to take that possibility, why, then, I see no sense in either of us wasting time."

His face bore the properly stubborn and not-too-bright expression, but, behind the mask, he was laughing as he watched Courcy's face become even more strained, and the clumsy device of looking at his watch to avoid meeting Marquis' glance was the added spice to the amusement.

They all have their little tricks, Marquis thought. All of the human race, as represented by its individuals, seemed to fence itself in with these little avoidances. One, when embarrassed, hid the blush on his face by raising his hand to cover a cough,

or a yawn, that never quite seemed to be genuine. Another warded off the blow by raising his hand to pull at his earlobe. Still another braced himself for the shock by palming the back of his neck. A fourth rubbed away the sting of the slap by running his hand through the hair over his temple.

Mannerisms. They called them mannerisms. And, true, they were the heritage of Man. Men were weaklings. The things they built were sometimes strong, but the builder himself. . . .? Defenceless before a man who understood that he was an animal frightened of his own kind, that, because of the fear, he was vain, and credulous of anyone who played on that vanity or that fear, and made the lost, fearful being seem for a while to be purposeful and direct, to have somehow become a thing greater than its fellows. The standard con game technique. Find the mark. Make him do you a favor—already, he feels that he is somehow a finer man. Offer him, in return for the favor, an opportunity at riches and power. And, when it developed that the only riches involved were his own, and that he had been somehow stripped of them, why, then the timid and shattered animal crawled back into the den of its silence, and, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, would never speak its shame out so that its kindred could know it for the kind of thing it was—a tree-dweller barely accustomed to the ground, and terrified of the stars. In short, afraid that other men would learn it, too, was human.

"Well—uh—well, Mr. Boretz, you see, as I said. . . ."

Marquis raised a hand. "Please. Guarantee or no guarantee, don't tell me I haven't got a right to expect your product to work after it's done no more than fall off a table." *Fall off a table!* He could barely restrain his laughter as he looked at the lighter on Courcy's desk. It looked as though it had been hammered repeatedly. Which it had. But Courcy had not, at any time during their discussion, summoned up the courage needed to look a man in the eye and call him a liar.

Courcy looked at his watch again, and, apparently, the avoidance-device-fetish had become so ingrained that repeated recourse to it did bring a measure of relief, for the man's face cleared.

"All right, Mr. Boretz," he said, his words, too, uttered in a tone of strain vanishing. "Will a new lighter be satisfactory?"

"I've said so repeatedly."

"Well, then," Courcy's voice was tuned to the proper heartiness of a business deal concluded, "If you'll wait just a few mo-

ments more, I'll have the stock boy bring one up. Will the same color be satisfactory?"

"It's the one I chose."

"Yes. Well, you just wait right there. . . ." Courcy pressed a button on his desk interphone and gave the necessary instructions.

Marquis sat watching him, the expected expression of patience and persistence rewarded carefully on his face. Courcy picked the broken lighter up and put it in his desk drawer. *Careful,* you idiot, Marquis thought, *You'll smudge the fingerprints!*

TUCKER McBRIDE slumped lower in the seat of his car. The sun burned down through the windscreen and touched his face with heat, but his eyes, behind their dark-green sunglasses, did not even squint as he kept them on the entrance to the building where Pan-Europa Imports had its offices. In a short while, he would call in to Headquarters and ask for a relief, but, first, he wanted to be sure of his half-afraid thoughts.

The flow of traffic into the building was *not* quite normal. McBride knew all the types of concerns housed in it—none of them could quite account for the types of people he had seen going in and out. People were McBride's business. He could not have said just what it was that struck him as wrong. But he knew, beyond all doubt, now, that there was something wrong, and, though Pan-Europa was only one of many companies in the building, he was morally sure it was the focal point of that abnormality.

Somewhere in that building was a secret. The expressions on the faces of some of the people who emerged so that he could see them, for instance. They were masks, some of them. Secretive masks. Blandly innocent masks. Determined masks. Vacuous masks. None of them spoke of what was hidden. But they all spoke of hiding.

The well-dressed man coming out now, for instance, stopping to light a cigarette with a Wolingten lighter. McBride photographed the face in his mind. There was a sure one. As the man bent to touch his cigarette to the dully gleaming case, his eyebrows arched with subtle satisfaction. He straightened up, pocketed the lighter, and began to stroll casually away.

McBride followed him with his eyes. The man did not, outwardly, seem to be aware of the two other men who unobtrusively stopped being part of the steady flow of passersby and began to keep a shifting pace with him,

sometimes falling behind, sometimes going ahead or across the street.

But he knows, the policeman in McBride's trained mind said to him as he watched the three men walk down the street like a fluid but cohesive unit. *A man knows he has his bodyguard with him.* And the image of Marquis that was already photographed was now underscored in red. *Near the top,* McBride classified. *A big fish,* for he did not consider the fact that Pan-Europa might have other adversaries besides himself and Martin's killer, who would certainly never have emerged from that building.

He reached to pick up his radiophone and call Morris. And saw, out of the corner of his eye, that Morris had just driven up in his own car, was slamming the door behind him, and half-running up the steps that led to Pan-Europa.

KELLY MARQUIS felt the sun warming his body through the fabric of his suit, and the inner warmth that rose out of his flesh and radiated throughout every fiber of his awareness of himself was even more comforting.

Another victory—an incidental one, a patrol skirmish that allowed the deeper penetration, but another victory still. He drew in the smoke from his cigarette and felt it slip into his lungs with a pleasant tingle.

He had walked *in* to the Adversary's salient, he had accomplished his purpose, and he had walked *out.* He had left behind him a thoroughly deceived man. When the Adversary discovered that the fingerprints on the lighter belonged to the same hand that had killed Martin, the knowledge that Courcy had been hoodwinked would, at first, be a slap in the face. That was good. That would throw him off balance. Only after the first few moments would the Adversary stop to consider that Marquis'—or, rather, Mr. Boretz's—action had been more purposeful than that.

Marquis had no doubt the lighter would be examined for fingerprints. If the Adversary had known of the lighter's discovery at the scene of Martin's death, then he also had access to the fingerprint files. And Courcy, of course, would report Mr. Boretz's 'broken' lighter immediately. The man might not have been equipped with the moral courage to say so, but it was obvious that the lighter had been deliberately mistreated. Courcy would report it, even if he did not understand the reasons for Marquis' action.

And the Adversary would not understand, either, but the fran-

tic search would begin again, this time with some hope of success. But before that success came too near, Marquis' advertisement would appear in the newspapers.

Marquis hailed a cab at a reasonable distance away from Pan-Europa's windows and leaned back in the cushions with the lithe grace of which he was capable when his brain and body were at the peak of their smooth, confident, cooperative precision.

The ad was a beauty.

> "ACCUSTOMED TO BEING AT HELM of large organizations, mature, intelligent man wishes to discuss terms with interested parties. Write Box —, The Times."

Marquis smiled to himself. He was quite sure his mail would be interesting. Then would come the bargaining, and, after that? Well, there *was* an opening as Distribution Manager, wasn't there?

He thought of Courcy again. The man was probably filling the position at the present, but that could hardly be considered competition. He'd had the job for perhaps three days, and his nerves were so strained already that he didn't even know how to handle an inconvenient telephone call in the middle of an only slightly dangerous situation. He had mumbled his way out of the room like a schoolboy, to take it on an extension, when all he had to do was firmly tell his caller to either hold on or call back.

Poor, befuddled man. Reach for the stars, but keep all four feet firmly on the ground.

The taxi stopped and Marquis waved away the change of the dollar he gave the cab driver. He walked up the stairs with effortless strides, his face completely serene, and into his apartment with the same all-pervading confidence.

Confidence, eh? he thought. *Well, that wasn't how we got our name, but it should have been. It isn't the mark's believing in* you *that counts—it's your belief in yourself. Have that, and you can have the world.*

Worlds, he corrected himself. He took off his coat and hung it up carefully. He opened the top drawer of his bureau and looked at the Fix-All, the watch, the pen, the other gadgets that were tucked into one corner. They were all like the Fix-All, actually. Tools of many uses. For him, they had been keys which, one by one, had clicked back the tumblers and unlocked the door into Helm. And what, and where, and why, was Helm? What did it matter? There'd be plenty of time in which to find out.

Time, and leisure. He could

abandon this tenement hideaway to which no policeman would trace a well-dressed gentleman. He could stop worrying about the police altogether, once he had—he smiled at the irony—security to protect him.

There was a knock on the door. He went to it casually. The superintendent had been promising to come up and repair a leaky faucet for some time.

Two men stood in the doorway. One of them looked past him into the open drawer. Somehow, he was past Marquis and standing beside the bureau. Marquis, open-mouthed, frowned. He'd seen that face before. Not very recently, and only for a few minutes, but he'd seen it.

The man reached into the drawer and took out the Fix-All. "I'll take this back now, thank you, Mr. Boretz," he said.

And the gray seemed to laugh with familiar savagery and wash over Marquis' superb mind.

VI

SOMETHING held McBride back in his car. Perhaps it was the urgency in Morris' entrance into the building—urgency that would have been normal at the head of a raiding squad, but which a lone man about to make an arrest would never have shown.

McBride had been exposed to an atmosphere of his own suspicion for all of that day, and his mind could not shake itself loose at a second's notice.

And the policeman in his brain was always as logical as the years of training could make it.

So, while his fingers crushed their flesh against the steering wheel, while his feet jammed themselves against the floorboards, he sat and waited for Morris to come out, and the bitter lines deepened at the corners of his eyes.

If Morris had followed a parallel lead into Pan-Europa, why hadn't he called for help? This was FBI business. But McBride should have been told about it—would have been told about it, before the notification was made. McBride's stomach muscles knotted, but the policeman continued to function, even though another part of McBride told it to stop.

When Morris and Courcy came hurrying out of the building into Morris' car, it was a sick but unhesitating McBride who waited only long enough to be sure no one was escorting them before he swung into traffic behind them.

Morris drove by instinct, glorying in the ease with which his suddenly relaxed body could

perform such tasks automatically. It had been too many days since every breath had been measured, every motion counted, while the overtired body had to be willed into even the most trivial action.

Even Courcy, still explaining and expostulating, was bearable. Anything was bearable. The Adversary was caught, and Helm was safe. The trust had been fulfilled.

"Please," he broke into the train of Courcy's chatter. "Be quiet." He took the flat little intercommunicator out of his breast pocket, pressed the stud that shot the hairline aerial out the open window, and resumed contact with St. John.

"This is Stel. Has he revived yet?"

"No, sir," the Security man answered from Marquis' apartment. "But he's beginning to show some signs of it."

"Good! Is he manageable enough to be put in the car?"

"Definitely, sir," the Security man's purposeful voice replied. "Lel and I can carry him easily."

"Even better! I'm on my way now. I'll be in front of the building in about five minutes."

"Right, sir."

Morris reeled the aerial back in and turned his head to smile at Courcy. "Well, we had us a rough time there, for a while, but it's over, now."

Courcy finally realized that no blame for anything was going to be attached to him. He smiled back. "It's a wonderful feeling," he said.

Morris grinned wryly. "Not that it's a bed of roses. That boy left us quite a mess to clean up. We'll be years before we're over the effects. But, it's not as bad as it might have been." *Actually,* he was thinking, *Maybe* this *will convince Plan that Earthmen aren't as naive as they were fifty years ago. We're living in a suspicious and wary age, now.* Perhaps he thought, they'd listen to him now, and revive the Terrestrial organization.

And if that happened, it would have been worth it. The fear and the agonized worrying would have been a small price. Somehow, he felt he could do it. And that would be something. That would be a mark for someone like him to leave on their history.

He swung the car into Nineteenth Street, and stopped in front of the building just as Gid St. John and Lel Forrester brought Marquis out between them, his limp, extended arms over their shoulders.

Morris looked at the gray-faced, shrunken man as he was pushed upright in the back seat between the two Security men. He looked more like a manne-

quin than like a man. His eyelids were partially up, but there was only white visible beneath them. His head dropped back on his neck, and his mouth was open. Short breaths whimpered through his nostrils.

So this was the Adversary, Morris thought. *This is Martin's killer and the man who almost tore down the greatest civilization he would ever encounter.*

He looked at Marquis with curious pity. *What could have shocked him so?*

But that was over, now. Over, over, and there was all the time in the world to question the man after he regained control of himself.

All the time in a peaceful world. The small war was over.

And McBride's car followed him doggedly as he drove away.

THE scar-like, bitter lines were deep at the corners of McBride's eyes and the sides of his mouth. His motions as he drove were spasmodic and angry.

He had seen the two bodyguards bring the big fish down from that tenement. He had seen Morris' concerned expression through the back window of the Inspector's car. And it added up. Even if you wanted five, two and two made four. Morris was in it, somewhere.

It added up. The policeman in his mind gave him the stored data, bit by bit, and forced him to accept it.

That first morning, Morris had been worried sick, but there had been nothing at the time to attract attention to the fact. He had tried to stall the investigation in detail while apparently pushing it in general. He had kept the lighter. He had ordered McBride into the field, and rerouted the lab reports to himself. The too-clean lab reports, and the serial number which wasn't the serial number at all. This was a perplexing matter.

And his concern to have the killer alive. His far too emphatic concern for a co-worker.

An angry fog settled over McBride's vision. The lighters—the lighters that had suddenly flooded the market. That was clear now, too. Morris had passed the word along to Pan-Europa.

Something had happened to the big fish. Morris had either been told of it by Pan-Europa's manager or had brought the news himself. It did not particularly matter in which direction the flow of information had gone. The contact was there. And now Morris was helping his superior. Superior? It was too hasty an assumption. The chances were better that it was actually the man who had killed Martin, though

there was no reason why he could not be both.

McBride bucked the car around a truck with a snap of his wrists, realizing there was only one logical place, now, for the Inspector's car to be going, and that was his office. Bitterly, McBride followed.

A SMALL part of the world grudgingly re-admitted Marquis. He focussed his eyes, and saw that he was no longer in his room, but in an office of some kind.

He turned his head slowly. A gray-haired man with patient eyes was watching him. Courcy stood beside him.

The grayness fought to take him again, but, this time, it did not strike unexpectedly. He pushed it back into the secret crevice in his mind while his natural curiosity bravely took its place.

He looked at the gray-haired man, and a thin, twisted smile came out in his lips. "So, you must be the Adversary," he said, and wondered why the man looked so surprised, but then the man began to chuckle in the same way that he himself had. The two of them laughed while the uncomprehending Courcy looked on, and neither was very sure of what the other thought was funny. but each had his reasons.

"I think you should know," Morris finally said. "That was my nickname for you, too."

A final laugh trickled through Marquis' throat. The twisted smile returned. "Great minds, thinking alike," he said. Morris chuckled again.

Keep laughing, Marquis *thought. Keep laughing—while I'm thinking.* His life had been spent in training himself to do the unexpected where the expected would have been disastrous. Once again, his subconscious had moved to seize the advantage. A man in his position was expected to be frightened, or angry—sullen, in any case. But he had laughed.

I can still beat him, Marquis thought. He had beaten him twice. He could do it again. He had bluffed Martin, he had maneuvered Courcy—or had he? *That's immaterial!* he told himself savagely—he had picked a Security man's pocket.

From some hidden well, the confidence began to hum through his system again, and the terrible shock the two Security men had brought with them was forgotten, as all the gray times were forgotten while he felt the glow shaping his mind and body into the most deadly fighting machine in the world—an intelligent man who knows his fellows are as human as he.

"Let's get down to business," Courcy said testily.

Marquis could have asked for nothing better. He threw Courcy a wry sidelong glance, then turned back to the Adversary and smiled his sympathy at the fact that the man had to work with assistants of that caliber.

The Adversary nodded imperceptibly, ruefully, and the glow in Marquis burned brighter.

"Might as well get the labels straight, Marquis. My name's Stel Morris," the Adversary said.

"Glad to know you," Marquis said instantly. He got up and held out his hand. To Courcy's surprise, but not to his, Morris shook it firmly. "The first name's Kelly, as you know." Better and better. Marquis could sense the hidden advantages—the real, psychological, ones—accruing to his side almost as if they were solid stones which, piled on one another and bound together with the mortar of his superb confidence, could build a structure that all Security could not break down. If Morris had expected him to show surprise at the fact that they had found out his real name; if he had played it as an ace in this game, then Marquis had trumped it beautifully. After all, he did have a mailbox in his building—but how many other people would have thought of this as the obvious source of Morris' apparently incredible knowledge?

Whew! Morris thought, *if he'd ever really gotten room to step back and start swinging, he'd have been unbeatable!*

The Adversary's transformation from a sucked-out husk into a high-headed, fire-eyed man whose personality was almost a physical force had been like nothing he had ever seen.

They've never seen anything like it in Helm, either, he knew.

If he could have showed them this man—this product of a race they'd thought they could fool indefinitely. They would have revised their opinion if they could have seen this superbly cold-blooded murderer.

Courcy fidgeted nervously. "I don't enjoy being here, you know," he said.

Morris grinned. "Neither does Kelly, here," he pointed out. "But, we *don't* have all day. All right, Kelly, let's have the story. How'd it all happen?"

And he listened while Marquis told him, his heartbeat accelerating steadily as he realized how close a thing it had been, how near the low houses and green lawns had been to the poison mushrooms.

McBRIDE parked his car beside Morris' and walked slowly into Headquarters. He walked down the long corridor, looking at the blue-triangled white helmets that nobody felt sure enough to take down from the walls. And the ironic part of it was that the helmets had been put up there *after* the war, for the building had been erected in an area that had been hit. But Man had learned to fear himself, and to tremble at tomorrow.

The labs were down in the basement of this wing. There was some equipment he would need. Wire taps. Acoustic pick-ups. A recorder—a notarized recorder, with a time clock and an automatic beacon that would get a permanent fix of its location on record at the police receiver. When such a recorder was unlocked in court, the words on its tape were unshakable evidence.

We've gotten very good at that, McBride—not the policeman in his mind—thought. Men had learned to trap the words of men, and thereby trap the men. Men had learned to spy on each other, learned out of the depths of distrust that the hot and cold wars had brought. That was McBride, but the policeman in his mind did not hesitate at the lab door, but requisitioned the necessary equipment, and it was only then that McBride noticed that there was not a single technician that he recognized.

"What happened," he asked the nearest one. "Where's George, and Pierce, and the rest of the crew?"

The technician looked blank. Then he realized what the glowering, shaggy-haired Deputy Inspector with the snow-shovel hands meant. "Oh. I guess they were transferred out, because all of us have only been here a couple of days."

"Morris!"

McBride hurled the word out like a curse.

The technician frowned. "Yeah, that's who would have done it," he said.

McBride's heavy glance shot around the laboratory. "You've got file copies of all reports around here somewhere. Where?"

The technician pointed at a row of filing cabinets. "Which ones would you like to see?"

"Couple of days ago. And I don't want to just see them. I want them, period." His head was thrust forward, so that his jaw overhung his broad chest, and there was a burning light lurking redly in his eyes.

"Sorry, but file copies don't go out of the lab except in special cases. Besides, that cabinet's locked, for some reason, and nobody seems to have a key. We

called a locksmith, but he isn't here yet."

"Meet your new locksmith," McBride said, and strode past the technician, elbowing him out of the way.

"Hey?"

McBride shot a look back over his shoulder at the technician. "How would you like to be detached for special duty with a sewage-geiging squad?"

The technician closed his mouth. McBride stopped in front of the filing cabinets, his eyes darting from label to label. He found the right one, and tugged at the drawers. He braced his hand against the top of the cabinet, got a firm grip on a handle, and threw his shoulder back. The front of the drawer bulged out around the handle, but the lock held. McBride spat and whirled around. He grabbed a bunsen burner, held it by the still-hot nozzle, and smashed its base against the projecting lock. The base bent under the impact. The lock held. He swung again, and a crack appeared in the cast-metal of the lock, which had never been intended as more than a moderately tough discouragement.

The base had broken off the burner, and he seized another one. The technicians were clustering around him, some of them looking as though they might try to stop him in another moment. He turned on them and roared out curses until they fell back. As he swung on the lock again, he realized how dangerously close he was to snapping under the strain, as the lock's metal was rapidly fragmenting. But McBride the policeman had no time to concern himself with McBride. Those file copies had to be gotten at.

The lock broke off. McBride dropped the burner and shook the drawers until the locking pins fell back, and then he pawed through the reports until he found the ones he wanted. One glance was enough to tell him that they were radically different from the ones Morris had showed him, and he cursed again and stuffed them into a pocket as he charged across the floor to the table where his equipment was laid out. He picked it up, even his legs bending a little under the recorder's weight, and shouldered out through the lab doors. He made an express elevator out of a local by the sheer weight of his voice, forgetting that the operator had known him for seven years, and flung himself into his own office, next to Morris'. He listened just long enough to check that there were men talking in there, and began to connect his apparatus. The acoustic pick-ups were jammed against the wall, and their leads run into

the recorder. He snapped the switch to RECORD, and within the sealed case, the ten-hour tapes began to turn. He jabbed the wire-taps into the telephone cord that ran parallel to the corridor wall. He put the phones over his head, and only then did McBride the policeman acknowledge that all that could be done to preserve the human law was being done, and McBride the man was free to remember who had taught him the law and the techniques.

". . . and that's it," Marquis finished. "And here I am."

Courcy shuddered. "You almost got away with it," he said, his voice shaky. "If Stel hadn't called me when he did, you couldn't have missed. They would have had to give you anything you wanted."

Morris nodded slowly. "Not if they'd thought it over for a while," he said. "But they were not thinking. They would have moved first, and thought afterwards."

Marquis smiled. "I had no idea I was that frightening," he said disarmingly. He looked at Morris and waited.

Morris shook his head. "Not you. Sorry, Kelly. No, what would have scared them would have been what you represent."

Marquis raised his eyebrows. "And what do I represent?"

Morris sighed—the sad and weary sound came to him easily, now. "The human race. They've always been afraid of you. For fifty years, they've trembled at the thought of what would happen if the human race discovered them."

"They. Always 'they.' Who are they, then, and *where* are they—and, since you want to keep it in the third person, why are 'they' so frightened of people who are indistinguishable from them?" Marquis asked with some impatience. He smiled and broke the darkening mood. "I'm taking it for granted that they don't live on Earth. Am I right?"

Morris nodded, looking past Marquis with something terribly lonely beginning to edge into his face. "No, they never came from Earth, and they never came to Earth. They came to Helm from across the darkest deeps of space, threading their way between the dying stars and the young stars, drifting from world to world, lost and alone, alone in the stars until they came to Helm." He spoke as though he were repeating a formal history that had been taught to him in childhood.

"Space—" Morris fumbled in the air with his cupped palms. "Space is curved, but—but *not*

like a sphere — not really — like. . . ." He stopped. "They told me to think of it as spheres within spheres, except that the innermost sphere is also the outermost, and all the spheres are adjacent. If you have the right fields you can—it's hard to explain—there are *doorways*. . . ."

Marquis was frowning. "I'm afraid I can't—" He broke off. "But that's unimportant. Doorways. Helm is on one side of one of these doorways, and Earth is on the other. Correct?"

Morris nodded. "This is close enough."

"And you came through the doorway."

The sadness was strong in Morris' eyes. "Yes," he said, "*We* came through. They can't."

Marquis jerked his head up. "What?"

There was a tremor in Morris' voice. "We're—not robots, exactly. We're human beings—but we were born in Helm. We come through the doorway, and we are their—tools is the word, I suppose. We do it because we love Helm, because we know that it cannot go on without us—but they have to do something to us, at the doorway, because otherwise we could not live on Earth after having lived in Helm. And we can never go back."

Morris was looking into nothing. The muscles of his face, no longer mirroring the drive of a man who faithfully lived a double life for twenty years, were relaxed, and Marquis could see how old and sad he was.

Morris looked into nothing. And saw Spring-green grass, thick-leaved trees, and low houses. His skin sang to the remembered touch of a breeze forever gone, and the lost scents of that other planet drifted about in his memory and stung at the corners of his eyes.

Empathy was the greatest part of Marquis' abilities. He felt only a small, borrowed measure of what Morris bore, and the weight of that portion was enough to bow his shoulders, too. "Conditioning," he finally said. "They conditioned you. It's not a genuine love—how could it be, after all these years?"

Morris and Courcy both swung on him like furious eagles. "Man, can't you leave me *something?*" Morris cried. "Do you have to dirty *everything* you touch?"

THE cry reached through the wall of McBride's office. He raised his face and pulled the wiretap phones off. He'd hear the phone if it rang in Morris' office. He disconnected the lead to one of the acoustic pickups, and put his ear to the cup that clung to the wall. And gradually, as he

listened, his knotted body slowly relaxed, while his fists beat a slow time on his thighs.

In the corridor, St. John turned to his partner. "Hear something in that office next to Stel's?"

Forrester shook his head. "Nobody's in there. Checked when we got up here, and nobody could have gotten by me, since," he said, forgetting that St. John had left for a minute, and that he himself had walked to the end of a corridor for a drink of water.

"But *why* can't they come through the doorway? And *why* are they so afraid of us?" Marquis asked.

"Because you die," Morris said. "As we must die, because we have come to Earth." Marquis could no longer look at his face.

"There are only a few planets capable of sustaining immortality," Morris went on, his husky, aging voice low. "Helm is one of them. Earth—" he smiled faintly, the movement of his lips wrinking the skin of his cheeks, "is not."

He crossed to the window and looked out, as he had done so often. "There are so many of you. It is possible to stand at the doorway and—" His voice caught. "see Helm. It is also possible—physically possible to pass through the doorway without immediate ill effect."

He swung on Marquis suddenly. "Four years ago, you fought a war for the sake of a dozen barren islands and a strip of desert —or so you said. Eighteen years ago, you fought a war for one-fifth of a planet's land area. Four years after that ended, you fought through three and a half years for half a peninsula. Forty-four years ago, you fought because one man—*one man!*—was killed by a maniac. Or so you said. *What would your excuse be for Helm?*"

Marquis could only look back at him silently.

"You are born to die, and that is not enough for you! You must bring death with you, in your hands, like personal baggage, wherever you go! Some of you talk of the stars. Well, *go!* Find new deaths—and bring them to those few places where my fathers may live." Morris turned his back on Marquis and stood looking out at the planet of death.

"We built the mechanisms," he said, his voice harder to hear, but still clear. "They, in Helm, are designers. Designers such as your race never saw, except so rarely that you venerated each of them for hundreds of years afterwards." He was speaking out of his bitterness now, but most of that was partly true.

"The doorway was opened shortly after the beginning of your Twentieth Century. Do you remember the novelty catalogues, Marquis? Descended from gimcracks and patent can openers, born of tinkerers and quasi-inventors, the 'novelties' jammed the catalogues. Player mouth organs with paper rolls that were cranked past the reeds. The ancestors of the injector razor. Look in the catalogues sometime, Marquis. You—and we, because we are like you—are a race of gadget lovers. The handy tool, the improvement, the redesign. Buttonhooks and bottlecaps. Cars and coffeemakers. Ashtrays and fountain pens. A million variations on the same basic idea. Why? Because everything must always be done easier, or differently. Because an idiot must be able to open a can better, light a cigarette more efficiently, than his genius ancestor.'

McBRIDE reached into his pocket for the lab reports. Cigarette lighters. Cars. Hunched over, his ear not daring to move from the acoustic pickup, he began to read the report.

Out in the corridor, Lel Forrester remembered that few moments' interval when the door to McBride's office had been unobserved, and frowned.

Morris caught himself, and turned back toward Marquis, his face apologetic. "I'm sorry, Kelly. I'm maligning our kind. I was angry."

Marquis shook his head. "Point of view," he said.

"No. There is always the truth, which is not dependent on any point of view. When the doorway was opened, and the first of us came through, we discovered a technological civilization, built by a race with a strong mechanical flair. One that already had a host of gadgets of its own.

"But Helm had to support itself, somehow. You see, there are practically no minerals on the planet—and the people of Helm had a long history of ships and mechanical aids-to-living. They, too, were a race of designers and builders. The answer was import, and the problem of trade goods was solved fairly simply. One thing Helm has—dirt. Aluminum silicate, for the most part. The people of Helm knew how to reduce it.

"But aluminum, even though not worthless, is too low in return per unit of bulk to be a practical commodity. Moreover, there was the problem of maintaining secrecy. It would be extremely difficult to ship large quantities of anything through the single doorway—which happens to lie adjacent to so popu-

lous an area as New York City.

"The problem was not as difficult as it might seem. Your own Switzerland imports a ton of Swedish steel—and converts it into a ton of watch movements worth hundreds of times the price. So, Helm began to manufacture gadgets.

"The first items were ordinary handicrafted aluminum, at a time when such articles were still rare."

McBRIDE finished the report. Something ran along his back on a thousand feet, and he stared at the wall as though, by looking hard enough, he could see through it.

Forrester was becoming restless.

"So, of course," Morris was finishing, "Once there was something equivalent to an even balance of trade, it was no longer necessary to maintain extensive production facilities in Helm. Only pilot plants were kept in operation. These produced prototypes of various gadgets, some of which, not being too revolutionary, were issued to us for field testing. Others were sent along when it was felt they might be directly useful to us—such was the case with the Fix-Alls, which were issued to all Security men.

"Meanwhile, some of us had infiltrated Terrestrial industry. We designed copies of the Helm prototypes—but always in an inferior model, so that when, in a few years, our agents begin to sell the producers the formulae and specifications for the truly revolutionary model, the impact will not be so great, and no comment will be aroused about all the wonderful new scientific advances. It will merely seem that progress has somewhat accelerated."

FORRESTER decided that, for his own peace of mind, McBride's office should be rechecked. But he stood irresolutely for a few minutes, wondering what his partner would say to such a move after his previous assurance.

I can still beat him, Marquis thought. *If I can talk to Courcy alone for a few minutes, I can promise him Earth and High Heaven, and as long as Helm doesn't suffer—too much—he'll go along with me.* He knew his man. He thought of all the wealth locked behind the doorway into Helm, and he knew that for such a prize, he could

persuade the Devil himself to play a harp.

Morris spread his hands. "That's the set-up, with variations. We own Cummings, and Pan-Europa was set up to handle 'imitations' of gadgets our planted designers had worked up for outside producers.

"Eventually, we'll simply take over the design and experimental work for all of Earth's technology. You'll have technological unemployment with a vengeance, but our sociologists have already worked out several tentative solutions. Meanwhile, your technology won't degenerate—it'll leap forward tremendously. A few years of local hardship are worth it at the price.

"Helm will benefit by it, of course, but who would object, even if they knew? There would be value received a thousandfold. And meanwhile—" The voice grew nostalgic again. "The people of Helm will have an even finer place in which to live out their immortality."

McBRIDE bit his lips, but McBride the policeman made him stand up. It was at this point that Forrester, not really expecting to find anything, opened the door.

McBride the policeman did not hesitate. He knew that Forrester was one of Morris' people, and he saw Forrester, already conquering the shock of seeing McBride crouched in front of him, begin to move. He saw one of Forrester's hands literally blur as it went toward his hip.

McBride's hand was on his gun. That and Forrester's shock were what gave him the advantage, for all he had to do was pivot, forcing his hand down on the gun butt, twisting the short black holster upward, and firing through the leather.

In his office, Morris heard the shot. He turned toward the sound, his mouth open. St. John, in the hall, was scrambling for cover. Courcy moaned, and Marquis' face turned pale.

McBride the policeman fired from between the door and the jamb, and St. John was dead.

McBride stood in Morris' doorway, his gun out in his hand, but pointed at the floor. He forced words past McBride the policeman's unwilling throat.

"Sorry, Stu," he said to Morris. "It's all off. I've got it down on court tape." His face twisted. "I wanted to stop you before you said it. But you trained me too well, so I waited until you had, and then I came in here to arrest you."

Courcy sank into a chair, his face in his hands. Morris looked back at McBride. "The name isn't

Stu any more, Tuck. Not ever again. It's Stel. Just Stel. Not even Stel Morris."

McBride went on as though he had not heard him. His chest was heaving. "Just the technology, eh? But the sociologists had a solution. Don't you see, Stu, what it would have been? Bit by bit, you would have had to remold the entire human race. And the human race isn't like that, Stu. We do things our way. We're a proud animal."

"He's right," Marquis said, speaking because as long as he spoke, the gray defeat was locked away. It was lost. It was all lost, and his limbs were heavy, his head was bowed, and the gray defeat was waiting.

"My name is Stel!" Morris cried.

"You couldn't have threatened us with a worse thing," McBride said.

"People don't like being made fools of," Marquis whispered to himself. "People don't like defeat."

Courcy had taken his face out of his hands. He stood up, his face set, and began to walk toward McBride's gun. Sweat was pouring down his face.

Insanely, the telephone rang beside Marquis. Courcy stopped. He looked at it, whatever had driven him breaking almost visible, then collapsed in a heap on the floor. Marquis picked up the telephone.

"Hello?"

"Stel? Listen, what's happened? I've been trying to get in touch with you all over the place. Pan-Europa said you'd been there and gone. Why haven't you reported in—"

The gray defeat swaddled Marquis in its clammy wrappings, and he let the almost hysterical voice run on until it stopped.

"Stel?"

"He isn't here," Marquis said heavily, fighting for the words through the gray morass. "He'll never be here again."

"What? Listen — when he comes in, tell him Mr. Helm was calling, and for him to call back. Mr. Helm. H-E—"

"I know," Marquis interrupted. "But he won't be back." He looked around the room, at Courcy getting to his hands and knees on the floor, at Morris standing stiffly erect, with the look of lost green lawns and low houses in his eyes, and at McBride, the Earthman, in whose eyes there was nothing but helplessnesss and inevitability as he looked at Morris.

"I don't think you'd better be back, either," Marquis said. "We don't want you. We don't want your technology." Something reared up inside him and bellow-

ed. "*I* don't want your technology!"

The voice on the other end was unclear, but it was almost certainly as hopeless as his had been. "I see." Mr. Helm put his receiver down.

Marquis hung up and turned to McBride. "That was someone from Helm," he said.

McBride nodded. Courcy began to sob, but Morris walked to the window, ignoring McBride's gun.

"They'll be closing the doorway." He turned around and looked at McBride. "I don't know what they'll *do,* now."

"Find some other place and build more robots," Courcy sobbed.

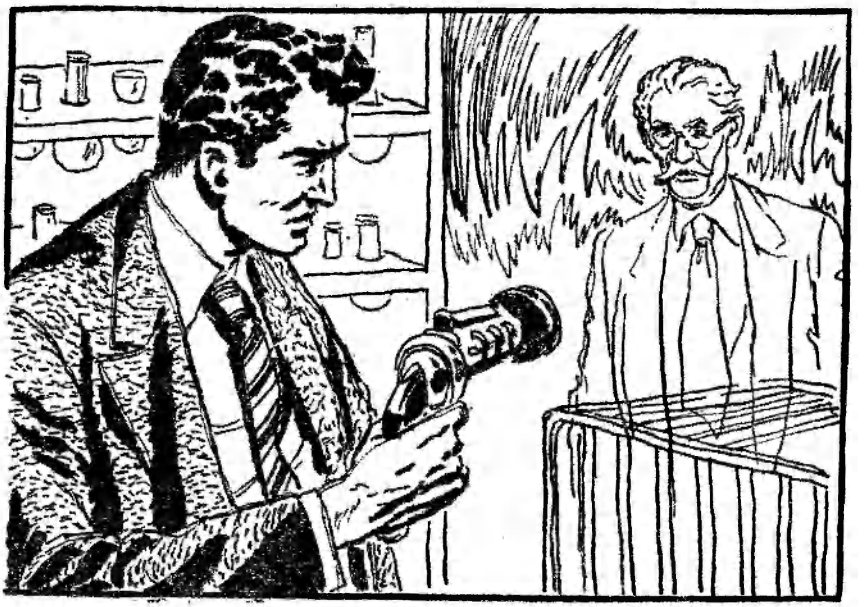
"There are so few planets for them," Morris said.

And there was an aurora over the Hudson. It rippled into the air, a towering curtain of translucent fire, and then there was a thunderclap that beat against the city like the fire of a thousand guns.

Courcy sobbed in his chair while the three of them stood looking at where the aurora had been; the thief and murderer and Earthman, the policeman and Earthman and bitter friend; and the step-child, bereft of heritage and machined into love, and they knew that their three different sets of actions and responses, founded in fear and conditioning, in pride and love, in courage and in cowardice, had combined to somehow save a world, and to condemn another; and none of them understood where the fault lay, but none of them was glad of what he had done.

SEE NO EVIL

By CHARLES E. FRITCH



THE rabbit cage seemed empty, but there was a telltale flurry of activity as sawdust flew beneath invisible feet. The man who called himself Jason Achilles watched, fascinated, as a carrot lifted itself into the air and slowly disappeared amid sounds of gnawing.

Jason glanced swiftly about the laboratory. Satisfied he was alone, he raised his wrist and spoke softly into what appeared to be a watch, using a language not of Earth. "Achilles."

From the other side of the moon, a voice crackled in response. "Base HQ. Is the formula ready?"

"In a while," Jason Achilles promised, riveting his gaze on the laboratory door. "The experiments are quite successful. All animals eating the chemicals

are invisible. Preliminary tests indicate invisibility good for approximately four months. No ill effects noted."

The watch-radio crackled impatiently: "And on humanoids?"

"Should be the same. I'll check on Dr. Schoener, when I take the formula." He cut off and silence returned, broken only by the gnawing, scampering sounds coming from the seemingly empty cages lining the wall.

Jason peered once more into the rabbit's cage and thought of his comrades-in-arms on the other side of Earth's moon. They had been waiting four months to strike, and morale was dangerously low; they would be glad to welcome the first chance to take off in their spaceships—but they needed the formula first. Little wonder they were impatient. A thousand soldiers, ready to invade, crowded together for months on a dusty satellite—and the ripe paradise of Earth only a step away.

Well, soon it would be over, Jason consoled himself, and the bloodless invasion would be complete; bloodless, of course, to them, not the Earth people. They would get the formula, compound it from synthesized ingredients; and then a thousand invisible soldiers would be dispersed across Earth, taking it over with swift, unopposed precision. Invisible, they could with impunity reduce the native population with their more advanced weapons, without harm to either themselves or Earth industries—and then send for the rest of their race on a dying sun many light years away.

"Fascinating, isn't it?"

Jason Achilles started at the voice. He looked into the kindly gray eyes of Dr. Herman Schoener.

"Incredibly," he agreed.

He didn't like to look into the doctor's eyes. They were intense, piercing, intelligent. Often, during the four months he had been Dr. Schoener's laboratory assistant, Jason had felt qualms of annoyance when he couldn't help but wonder if the scientist could somehow pierce his disguise, see him as someone not of Earth. The feeling came now, and he shook it off.

"Even though I know it's only the refraction of light around a body," the doctor said, "it still seems magical."

Jason nodded. He said, slowly, "The experiments, then, are complete."

"Except for a test on a human," the doctor agreed. "It should work as well, though."

"And then what?" Jason's eyes narrowed.

"And then—I don't know for

certain. The government's interested, of course—vitally so. That's why we're here, at an army base surrounded by soldiers, instead of at a private laboratory. They sponsored our undertaking, and they'll certainly want to share in its benefits. I'd hate to have any other government take it over, though. Maybe now we can have a little peace."

"An invisible army would really be invincible," Jason mused.

"Invincible indeed," the doctor agreed. "A mere handful could take over the entire Earth, striking anywhere they wished, with no fear of retaliation. Can you conceive of the possibilities?"

Jason smiled inwardly. "Very easily," he said. "Are you going to test it on yourself?"

"I imagine so. It's a harmless chemical. It's only purpose is to cast an invisible aura about the body surface, which refracts light around that body, clothes and all, so that a person appears to be invisible."

"Try it now," Jason suggested.

"It can wait," Dr. Schoener said. "I'd like to do it before some officials, so—"

"Try it now," Jason Achilles said. A strange tubular pistol was in his grasp.

Schoener frowned. He looked into the other man's face. "I see."

"The capsules," Jason insisted, with a wave of his gun. "Get them." He went to the door, bolted it silently. "And the formula," he added.

"You'll get caught, Jason," the doctor warned. "The place is heavily guarded. A fly couldn't get through."

Jason laughed. "An invisible fly could. The capsules!"

Dr. Schoener unlocked a drawer. He held the small metal box uncertainly in his hand, together with a paper.

"Take one," Jason commanded. "And then toss the box to me, with the paper in it."

Helplessly, the scientist did as he was told.

"That's it," Jason Achilles said, pleased. He held the gun pointing at Schoener's chest, while he spoke into the watch-radio. "Achilles."

"Base HQ," the set crackled. "The formula?"

"Stand by." Jason read the formula into the set.

"Are you certain it's correct?" the radio said.

"I've seen it before, and the factors check. It'll work, all right. Schoener's beginning to fade."

"Good," the voice said; for the first time, it seemed genuine-

ly pleased. "The synthesizer will give us enough in an hour. Meanwhile, we'll be airborne!"

Jason smiled and cut off. A few yards away, Dr. Schoener was rapidly becoming transparent. The portion of laboratory bench directly behind him was visible, becoming clearer.

"You'll never get away with this," Schoener said, but his voice was uncertain.

"No reason I shouldn't. In a few short hours, your planet will be under our control," Jason boasted. "Already our fleet is aloft." He grinned and raised his pistol. "But of course you won't be able to see the conquest."

Schoener sprang quickly. His body was little more than an outline now, as though he were made of glass, and seeing him was difficult. In sudden panic, Jason fired. A blast of light crackled from the pistol, missed.

The scientist plowed into him, knocking him down. At close quarters Jason used the weapon as a club, striking out furiously. In the scuffle his radio was smashed against the floor, but Jason paid it no attention. With a desperate thrust of his feet, he pushed Schoener upright and fired swiftly into the near-invisible figure.

Schoener staggered back into the laboratory bench, stood swaying uncertainly, and then crumpled to the floor.

Puffing, Jason got to his feet. He reached out gingerly, prodded the invisible figure. From behind the closed door came the sounds of hurrying feet and excited voices.

Jason started to speak into his radio, and only then discovered it was broken. Well, it didn't matter; they had the formula, were even now mass-producing the capsules. He tore the formula to shreds, slipped a capsule into his mouth and the box into his pocket—and waited.

Voices were shouting beyond the door, giving commands. Jason ignored them. He waited, confidently.

He examined his hands. They seemed to be slowly changing, becoming slightly transparent. But suddenly the lights in the room seemed to be getting dimmer. Jason frowned. In darkness, they would be as invisible as he. Was that their trick, he wondered? He laughed nervously.

Fervently, he wished the process were faster. He held his hand to the dimming light. He could see the neon tube through it. No, that was not right. He could see the tube *around* the hand, for light waves were being cut off from the hand itself. Just as they were being cut off

from other parts of his body—from his arms, his legs, his head, his—

The lights seemed to dim even more, and a terrifying thought came to Jason Achilles.

The light from the neon tubes was not dimming! *It was being refracted around him!*

"But—I won't be able to see!" he exclaimed aloud.

"That's right, Jason," a voice said nearby.

"Wha—What? Schoener! But I killed you . . ."

The voice was smiling. "Not quite. Your—your ray, or whatever it was, hit me, all right; but thanks to the invisibility, it wasn't direct. I'll get better."

"But—how—"

"I don't know where you're from, Jason, but you must be pretty vain to think you could pose as an Earthman and get away with it. You tripped yourself up a dozen different times."

Jason snorted. "Then why the pretense?"

"We resolved to find out your mission here by letting you learn the process. It was safe—because under the circumstances it's as much a weapon against the user as anyone. You yourself just discovered the difficulty. A person made invisible by this process is like an ostrich with its head in the ground."

Jason waited, stunned, still not believing. Around him, the laboratory was drifting into darkness.

"In time," Schoener continued, "we may utilize infrared or other equipment to see, but now— Tell me, Jason, can you also conceive of how helpless an army is that's blind?"

With an angry, frustrated curse, Jason Achilles threw the gun hard in the direction of the voice, but only its harmless crash against the wall and Schoener's triumphant laugh answered him.

Somewhere, a door was being smashed in, but Jason paid it no heed. He would be safe, as would be Schoener, for four months, until sight—and visibility—returned. But the army—the invaders—his comrades-in-arms—would be out in space when the darkness came.

The door gave way with a crash. Jason, enveloped by his own private darkness, waited, sobbing quietly.

GEOFF THE DJINN

By STEVE FRAZEE

MRS. BARTHOLOMEW POTTS dawdled uncustomarily over her mid-morning coffee, weighing pros and weighing cons. In the end she made two decisions: to wash the percolator and to call in Geoff the Djinn.

Not that Arabella wanted to get tough with her husband. Not too tough, that is. Tolly was a good sort and Arabella was quite fond of him. He made a good living; he still had most of his chest and a good deal of his hair, at least right above his ears; he took pride in the yard and he could repair things around the house with a minimum of profanity; and everybody said Arabella and Tolly were still the most graceful couple on the floor—the one or two times a year Mr. and Mrs. Potts got there.

Yes, Tolly was a pretty good,

plump, considerate sort of a man, but—Arabella decided to have another cup of coffee and let the housework slide for awhile—Bartholomew Potts was getting a bit out of hand with his table talk of outrageous dishes he was forever reading about in adventure stories and historical novels.

He could comfortably overlook a hundred unfamiliar words describing a ship, such things as *tumble home* and *ratlins* or *ratlines* or whatever they wanted to call them; he never bothered to frown over Chinese, Abenaki, Arabic or French expressions or most of the other items authors use to show their own knowledge; but just let any writer try to get past Bartholomew Potts with mention of a strange food. Then the encyclopedia took a beating and the librarian downtown got that harried look again.

Mr. Potts' philosophy was that information, like happiness, was not much good unless shared.

"You know," he'd say while cutting the best steak Arabella ever prepared, "I can understand how whale blubber properly seasoned would be quite tasty under certain circumstances." Or while helping himself to another substantial slab of rolled roast cooked just right, he'd say, "You know, there's no reason to believe that one's moccasins wouldn't be nourishing if boiled soft. Of course you'd have to have a little salt. Now, in this story I'm reading . . ."

Lobscouse (Mrs. Potts hated the very sound), *poi,* snails, a fat white dog roasted by Arapaho squaws, *baluks,* select parts of caribou offal, Rocky Mountain oysters, shark flippers, haggis without the oatmeal, beaver-tail soup and glumper eyes were just a few of the wonderful tasty dishes Tolly knew all about—from his reading.

Yes, it was about time for Geoff the Djinn.

Geoff was strictly Arabella's own creation. When she was seven, resting in the shade of a lilac bush on her stomach, she had brought Geoff from a nebulous outer world because all the children in the neighborhood had gone on vacations or were whiney from heat that afternoon, and she needed someone to talk to.

He was just the way she wanted him when he appeared and plumped down on the grass beside her.

"Warm today, isn't it?" he said politely.

"Uh-huh," Arabella said, and looked him over. Right then she decided it would be best not to tell the others about Geoff, because he might be startling if you hadn't worked him out per-

fectly in your imagination beforehand.

Geoff was a happy green, except for his jug-like lavender ears, big blue eyes and clothes-brush crop of inch-high red hair. Of course, his teeth were pearly white. His hands and feet were just like anyone's, but his body was composed of spheres, big ones and little ones. He wore a short blue ballet skirt, which wasn't odd at all. In fact, Geoff was quite pleasing to Arabella, mainly because he was just exactly the way she'd thought him up.

"Why did you call me, Arabella?" he asked.

"To talk to."

He chewed on a blade of grass. "What shall we talk about?"

"Things," Arabella said.

They got on famously from the very start.

Geoff said he would do anything Arabella needed done, if she couldn't do it herself and as long as it was not harmful to anyone.

As she grew older Arabella realized more and more what a fine working agreement they had made. At first she had tried two or three times to have Geoff give some of the larger, meaner boys in the neighborhood a good beating, but Geoff reminded her gently that lumps on the head were definitely harmful, even to large, mean boys. But several times Geoff did small jobs for her, tasks she couldn't do herself and which were not harmful to anyone. Once he helped her out with a backyard magic show. Every now and then she met old acquaintances who remembered her best by that show.

Then there were years when she hadn't called for Geoff at all, what with going to Brownie Scout camp, going with boys, school, college, getting married, and raising two sons and a daughter who came around now on holidays or when they had to add to or detract from the various trunks, boxes and bales they'd stored in the basement.

Come to think of it, just talking to Geoff the Djinn after all these years would be rather nice; of course she mustn't forget the real reason for calling on him.

She was pleased with how easily she remembered the proper way to chant the magic words.

Geoff popped right in.

He didn't look a day older. Of course, he'd grown to keep pace with Mrs. Potts. For a moment she thought he was going to say, "Hmm, put on a little weight, haven't you?" But he didn't.

"Warm today, isn't it?" Geoff said politely.

"Uh-huh," Arabella said.

Geoff sat down and chewed on a broomstraw. "What would you like to talk about today, Arabella?"

"My husband, Bartholomew Potts. He's giving me a little trouble." She told Geoff the Djinn all about it.

He thought carefully. "Well, I see you can't make him stop talking about those things without help, and I guess we won't do anything harmful." He plucked at the front of his neck sphere, a habit of his when trying to remember something. "Bartholomew Potts . . . Little Tolly . . . Isn't he the mean boy you especially wanted me to beat up once?"

Arabella blushed. "That was a long time ago, Geoff. Would you care for a cup of coffee?"

"You know anything I eat in this world always shows right through my stomach, even if no one else but you can see the rest of me. You remember the time I ate all that striped candy, and your father said a new kind of beetle was invading his garden, and chased me all over with a spray gun?"

Arabella laughed. "I remember. He watched for three days for that swarm of beetles to come back."

"He ruined my skirt with the first blast out of that spray gun, before I knew what it was all about." Geoff cleared his throat. "It *is* a warm day. Do you happen to have a bit of gin about?"

"Gin!"

Geoff blushed a dark green. "Well, once I investigated a bottle that I thought had my name on it. You know how spelling always confuses me. Well, I sort of developed a liking for gin, even after I found out that wasn't the way to spell my name. Just a little now and then, of course." He sighed, and all his spheres heaved out and in. "It is a *very* warm day, you'll have to admit."

He blinked his big blue eyes so appealingly and looked so helpless and wistful that Arabella could not deny him.

"Tolly does have a bottle or so of that stuff around. Now let me think. . . ."

"Don't bother," Geoff said hastily. "I know where it is."

He did, too.

For awhile Mrs. Potts had some trouble getting used to seeing five large drinks of gin sloshing from side to side in Geoff's stomach when he moved; but after a time she thought it natural enough, considering that some people might have thought Geoff the Djinn rather odd just by himself—even without the visible gin.

He was thoughtful for a long

time, his face glowing just a bit greener than the rest of him.

"I have a plan or two," he said at last. "Nothing harmful, of course. Now if we could seal our pact with, say, just one more small one . . .?"

The small one was as large as the five previous ones.

"You realize that's habit-forming, Geoff," Arabella warned.

"Not if one knows how to control it. And who should know better how to control gin than a Djinn?" Geoff laughed and laughed, until suddenly he hiccupped.

"Pardon me," he said quickly. For a moment he looked worried. "You know that I've always been invisible to anyone but you, and that any sounds I make are inaudible to anyone but you?"

Arabella nodded, looking thoughtfully at the almost empty gin bottle.

"Well—that is—I've discovered that any sounds I make as a result of gin drinking are quite audible to anyone. I nearly scared old Mrs. Pilsudski to death the other evening while strolling through her garden. Purely unintentional, too. I just thought I'd better warn you."

"I don't drink gin," Mrs. Potts said. "When others are present you'll simply have to restrain those sounds."

"Sometimes I can't."

"Then you'll simply have to skip the drinking."

"Sometimes I can't help—" Geoff looked ashamed of himself. "That is, sometimes I have pains in some of my spheres. They ache from dampness and —" He had trouble meeting Arabella's steady look. "Well, we'll work it out. I'll be around when Tolly eats his dinner tonight." He hiccupped more loudly than before and disappeared.

Arabella washed the percolator. Then she hid the gin. She knew it wouldn't do any good, but she hid it anyway. "Maybe his spheres do ache at times," she thought. "Or perhaps the severe strain of the war. . . ."

She began to plan a stew for dinner. If anyone knew about stews, Mrs. Potts was the one.

Bartholomew was in fine fettle when he came home. He almost kissed Arabella before telling her about the big sale that walked right into the office. "It's not every day that anyone sells twenty thousand feet of CMP's!"

Arabella had long known that CMP meant circular metal pipe instead of Civilian Military Police. She had never entirely forgiven Tolly for telling and retelling about that perfectly natural mistake all these years. If she had been teetering just a little over the thoughts of what

might happen to Tolly when Geoff went to work, mention of those CMP's tipped the balance.

Tolly rubbed his hands briskly. "How now, what's for dinner, wenchie?" he asked.

For once Arabella wasn't irritated by the noun. She smiled. "A surprise."

Tolly whooped and yelled in the shower when he turned it on cold just before getting out. A little cold water never hurt anyone, Tolly always said. Think of wading the St. Francis River with Major Roberts and his men. Did they complain about a little cold water?

He was dressing and singing what he thought was a marching song of the Foreign Legion, the tune at least, when Geoff came into the kitchen. Though there was no use in being quiet, Geoff pointed to where Arabella had hidden the gin in the vegetable compartment of the refrigerator and held up one finger questioningly.

"Just one!" Arabella said.

"What's that, dear?" Tolly called.

She didn't answer. "Just one more chance . . ." she began to sing.

"We'll have to go to another dance sometime," Tolly yelled.

Arabella was happy to see that Geoff took only one small drink. He sat down in the corner and folded his hands over his stomach, but the drink showed just the same.

Mr. Potts was on his third helping of stew when Arabella saw it coming. He always mentioned those terrible foods just about the time he was full.

"You know," he said, pushing carrots aside with the spoon and selecting potatoes and meat, "pemmican is most sustaining and tasty. You could call it the K ration of the Indian. I think I would have been quite fond of pem—pem—"

His stew was gone and there on his plate was a dark buckskin pouch that appeared to have been carried under the armpit of a Cree Indian during a thousand-mile trip in hot summer.

"Wh—wh—what's—?" Mr. Potts said.

"Pem-Pem," Arabella explained. "Most sustaining and tasty. You could call it the K ration—"

"I know," Tolly said absently. Gingerly he explored the contents of the sack. They bore a remarkable resemblance to dark-brown, dried paste. "How do you know this is pemmican?"

"You can tell by the rancid smell of the fat, the dried leaves from the berries, the squaw hair mixed in—" Arabella leaned closer. "Hmm! It looks like a mouse—"

Tolly closed the bag hastily.

He laughed loudly, so heartily that Geoff, who had been dozing a little with an angelic smile on his plump face, jumped and caused his gin to sluice around wildly for a moment.

"I hear a slight swishing sound," Mr. Potts said. He grinned at Arabella. "You always were quite good with those sleight-of-hand tricks, dear. But don't you think—" He blinked as the pemmican disappeared. "You've been practicing again with that magic set the kids left in the basement!"

Mrs. Potts smiled. She seemed concerned when Tolly decided he'd eat his dessert later.

Bartholomew Potts went into the yard and studied his petunias thoughtfully.

That evening Mr. Potts was in charge of a battery of forty-pounders on a man-o'-war of the East India Trading Company, busily bombarding the Walled City of Manila. When darkness came he led a small party ashore in the long boat to determine exactly what damage had been done. He determined, had many adventures and also had his life saved by an exotic Filipino girl who introduced him to wonderful native foods in an airy bamboo shack on the Pasig River. He left regretfully to join his men, and led them back to the ship just before dawn.

He was fully restored when he put the book aside. So restored that he went to the kitchen and ate the dessert he hadn't wanted at dinner. Then he had a sandwich or two and wondered a little about that girl on the Pasig.

Geoff was in the kitchen when Arabella came in to start breakfast. He charmed her by telling her how nice she looked and what a fine thing it was for women to take a little trouble to make themselves look presentable during breakfast.

She wasn't nearly so charmed to see the mixture he was making in a skillet on the stove. He had gin, mustard, tomato juice and peanut butter bubbling, and was just dropping in some sweet chocolate. He explained it as a little drink that Yusef the Yerk, a Swedish Djinn, had told him about during a convention in Minsk, not far from Pinsk.

"One of my spheres, the second one above the left knee, has been giving me trouble," Geoff said. "Yusef said this little mixture—"

"Just one!" Arabella said.

"Yes, that's right, the second one above my right—left knee. You can see where it is sort of dimpled in—"

"You used to make any of your spheres dimple just to make me laugh," Arabella said.

"Well, it isn't a laughing

matter any more. One or two of them took a set from that kind of exercise."

"To whom are you talking—or are you singing that song again?" Tolly called.

"I was reading a recipe for fried eggs out loud," Arabella called in return.

Silence indicated that Tolly was thinking, but she wasn't worried. He didn't think too well before breakfast.

Geoff drank his mixture from the skillet. The mustard and tomato sauce made beautiful streaks through the peanut butter and chocolate. Arabella could scarcely see the gin at all.

"What's that rainbow thing splashed in the corner?" Tolly asked when he came in for breakfast.

Geoff the Djinn doubled the large sphere that formed his chest clear over the smaller one that formed his stomach, but the streaks showed just the same.

"Just some bright strips of cloth I'm going to use to make a rag rug one of these days," Arabella said. Something had to be done about Geoff's drinking, dimpled spheres and Yusef the Yerk to the contrary.

Mr. Potts polished his glasses carefully on a clean handkerchief before sitting down. From his chair he couldn't see the corner, and soon his momentary twinge was washed away by the immediate sight of food and bright thoughts of the tasty dishes he had eaten on the Pasig the night before.

He ate two fried eggs, several strips of bacon, four muffins with jam and drank a cup of coffee. He was getting ready to tackle another egg and have some more toast when he got that absent look.

"You knew," he said, "one of the most tasty dishes they have in the Philippines is *baluks.* Now, an egg—a fried egg for example—is nothing but a chicken before it's formed completely. We enjoy that. Why should we balk at—" He stared at his plate. "Arabella, you're getting very clever with those tricks!"

In the middle of his plate was a poached egg cup complete with egg. "Very clever indeed," Mr. Potts muttered.

"You were speaking of *baluks,* Tolly."

"Ah, yes . . . yes . . ." Somewhat fearfully Mr. Potts broke the top of the shell. Inside was a thick brownish mixture and an infant chicken.

He watched it in terrible fascination.

"That's a *baluk,* dear," Arabella said, putting her knife and fork down carefully.

Suddenly Mr. Potts started for

the bathroom, making a sound that was distinctly *baluk! baluk!* The effort wracked his whole body.

In the corner Geoff hiccupped loudly. He got up and felt one lavender ear. "I believe it's a little numb," he said. He hiccupped again. "Yusef knew what he was talking about, but I believe he was a little heavy on the peanut butter." He started for the door. "My sphere feels better, however."

"Which one?" Arabella asked suspiciously.

"The third one down from my right elbow," Geoff said with dignity. "I will be here again at dinner time."

Mr. Potts had a strained look on his face when he began to get ready to go to work. "I don't believe I'll have time for breakfast this morning," he said.

"You already had it."

Mr. Potts looked pained. "I'm a little late," he said.

"You're early."

"Don't argue. This will be a very busy day at the office."

Mr. Potts started to get through the screen door without unhooking it. He backed up quickly and dabbed at the marks the mesh had left on his nose. "A very busy day at the office," he murmured.

He left to catch the bus.

Mrs. Potts was not surprised when Tolly called early that afternoon and asked if she could meet him for dinner in town.

"The Purple Pheasant?" she asked. They always ate there.

"Let's try another place this time."

Arabella smiled at the scratch pad. Tolly was not giving her a chance to arrange props in advance. The breakfast incident *had* been a bit severe. But just as soon as he quit talking about impossible things to eat. . . .

She chanted the magic words and informed Geoff of the change of plans.

After they were seated that evening Tolly beamed around him. His spirits seemed entirely restored. That was one good thing about Bartholomew: he always bounced.

He ordered expertly, a lobster for himself, the vegetable dinner Arabella had said she wanted.

"We should eat out more often," Tolly said. "If things go right, perhaps next summer we can travel a bit. There's a restaurant in Cairo where they serve—" He got a crafty look. "By the way, dear, do you have any matches?"

Arabella smiled to herself as she made her purse quite open to inspection while fumbling for a folder of matches. There were many things in her purse, but not

whatever it was they served at the restaurant in Cairo.

Tolly stowed the matches in his pocket. "Perhaps I'd better not smoke right now. Might deaden my taste buds."

Geoff was just entering, his little blue ballet skirt aflutter from the fan-like action of the revolving door. Of course he'd come through on someone else's push. He smiled at Arabella, nodded toward the bar in the next room.

She compressed her lips and shook her head quickly.

Tolly jerked his head around. "What did that elderly couple do?"

"Nothing, nothing. It's just that my neck sometimes gets a little crick in it." Arabella raised her brows in polite attention. "The restaurant in Cairo, dear?"

Tolly gave the elderly couple another suspicious look. "I forgot," he said. He stared in abstraction at the table.

He was feeling better when the lobster arrived. He lectured on common mistakes ordinary diners make in taking a lobster apart, using his fork as a pointer. He really knew his lobster.

"That's wonderful," Arabella said. "I'm afraid I'm just a small-town girl. Vegetables, salads, unromantic things like beef and lamb—"

"Nonsense! It's the way you look at things. A lobster is a most natural food. So are many things that inexperienced people might think strange. For example, there's nothing so tasty as a boiled moose's nose—"

Before his eyes the unconsumed lobster resumed its position in the shell and crawled off his plate. It was replaced by a large mass of dark meat that needed a shave around the edges. Two great nostrils stared up at Bartholomew Potts on either side of a dark triangle. The tasy dish was as large as a portabe typewriter and the color of a steamed rubber boot.

"Holy!—holy!—" Tolly went speechless for a moment. Then he found his voice and it was a loud one. "The mess is quivering one nostril at me!" he yelled.

Arabella tried to speak calmly. "So it is."

She scowled at Geoff, who shrugged innocently and motioned with his thumb toward the bar.

"No! Not even one!" Mrs. Potts cried.

"Yes, they are!" Tolly yelled. "Both of them are quivering at me!"

People were showing interest.

Geoff just smiled and worked his thumb.

"Just one, you—you—blackmailer!" Arabella said.

Tolly was still held by the

great lump of flesh. "I said both of them! And don't call me a blackmailer!"

A waiter was coming briskly. "What's the trouble there?" he called out.

"This moose's nose!" Tolly cried. "It's—it's—"

The nose went back to New Brunswick; the lobster crawled back on the plate and unshelled itself neatly. One claw clacked when it caught on the rim of the plate, but the lobster shook loose and had settled down to be eaten without protest just before the waiter arrived.

"What's this moose nose stuff?" The waiter was the large, harried, unfriendly type. He looked with sharp suspicion at Mr. Potts and frowned at diners who were examining their food critically.

"Why—ah—" Mr. Potts couldn't take his gaze off the lobster. "It moved," he said weakly.

Arabella was looking with fierce intensity at the back of Geoff. His little blue skirt bounced daintily as he ducked into the bar.

The waiter followed her frown and opened his mouth wide to say, "Ah-ha!" He observed that Arabella was rather pretty, and he liked the plump type better than any. He bent his blackest scowl on Tolly. "For shame!" he hissed. "Getting that drunk before dinner!"

Just before they left, which was soon, Arabella saw Geoff follow a man through the revolving doors. Geoff patted his lips and smiled. Then he looked alarmed as his second largest sphere jumped a little. His gin was bouncing up and down like a puddle pelted by rain.

The next day was Sunday. Mr. Potts was preoccupied at breakfast, though he ate well. He seemed to go about his business in the yard competently, Arabella thought as she did the dishes. But once Tolly held the nozzle of a hose attached to one hydrant and turned a valve on a hydrant that had nothing attached to it. Water ran all over his feet while he looked for kinks in the hose.

Luke Ascutney came over for a snack in the afternoon. Unmarried and selfishly happy, Luke was in charge of bell and spigot pipe sales at Barstow, Brislte & Belcher's. When he wasn't telling Tolly how much more durable bell and spigot water pipe was than CMP's, he was talking about foods he'd eaten on camping trips before he grew too old and busy to go camping. Tolly didn't mind the pipe slander, because anybody knew that CMP's were the best things ever devised to carry

water under highways and railroads; but he did resent Luke's complacent harping on hunter's stew and such-like.

Luke never let Tolly really get started. He was as impolite as any old friend can be.

"Did you ever eat haggis without the oatmeal—or even *with* the oatmeal, Tolly?" Luke would say, or slum or rattlesnake meat or elephant feet or whatever Tolly was talking about at the time.

Of course Tolly had to say, "No-o-o, but I read—"

"Well, I *ate* what I'm talking about. That makes a difference, you know."

Luke and Tolly were sitting in lawn chairs, having several large, cool drinks in the space where Tolly was going to put in flagstones, an arbor and a barbecue pit one of these days. The madder Tolly got because Luke was such a boor about foods simply because he'd happen to eat them, the more Tolly drank. Luke drank so he could remember more camping trips, Arabella supposed.

Tolly's fermented *taro* root paste had just lost a decision to huckleberry jam on biscuits made in a Dutch oven when Geoff showed up.

He came rather sheepishly into the kitchen, where Arabella was getting ready to carry plates of pickles, cold meats, salads and other items to the table outside. Geoff chewed thoughtfully on a potato chip.

"What do you want to talk to me about, Arabella?"

"You!" Arabella whispered fiercely. "You did fine last night —between your blackmail and that nose quivering business!"

Geoff shifted uneasily and glanced toward the oven where Arabella had hidden the last bottle of gin.

"If you think his nostrils quivered on that plate, you should have heard him snort when I checked up to see if he'd got his nose back all right." Geoff sighed with his larger spheres. "It was most unnerving." He glanced significantly at the oven.

"Not even one!" Arabella said.

Geoff the Djinn blinked his big blue eyes and looked sad. He sighed so heavily that every one of his spheres went in and out, even the small ones right above his feet and hands. "I don't work well when I've been unnerved. It was damp in that swamp where I had to go see the moose, and now my left shoulder sphere is paining."

He was silent, listening to the talk outside. Luke Ascutney was inexorably pinning Tolly down to the admission that, though

Tolly had seen the bird's nest soup on the table next to his in a Chinese restaurant, he hadn't actually eaten any himself.

"Well, I *ate* this mud-baked bass," Luke said. "That makes a difference, you know."

"I might be able to work the visitor into my plans," Geoff suggested, glancing again at the oven.

"Just one!" Arabella said, observing that Geoff had read her mind and was striding toward the oven.

"Just one," Geoff promised. "Have you a few teaspoonfuls of garlic salt, a small jar of horseradish and some bitter chocolate? I am going to make a little pain killer of my own that will confound Yusef the Yerk when I see him at the convention in Durban this year."

Arabella was a little disgusted with Luke Ascutney and Tolly. They regarded the lunch as something to nibble at between drinks. She ate a little herself and went back to check on Geoff.

Geoff was using a sauce pan to heat his pain killer. All the gin was gone. The odor from the pan, where chocolate-covered shards of horseradish bubbled under a coat of garlic salt, was enough to stagger a dog raised near a salmon cannery.

"I found some red peppers in a jar and a little chili powder," Geoff said. "To play safe I added some peanut butter from Yusef's recipe, but not as much as he always insisted on." He sniffed ecstatically. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Arabella didn't have to sniff. "No," she said. "But I do believe it's helping my sinus."

"For sinus trouble Yusef has an entirely different recipe. You mix turnip juice—"

"One thing at a time," Arabella said.

From the yard Tolly's voice came loudly. "Luke, I wish you'd take that Dutch oven and beans boiled in a covered pit and—and—" He paused to have a large swallow. "Now if you really want something good, the hump of a bull buffalo roasted over a slow fire made of chips from the same animal—"

There came an awful silence from the yard. Geoff stirred his mixture and smiled. "Do you happen to have a slightly old avocado—you know, something to give my mixture a little more body?"

Arabella groped for the refrigerator door handle, still listening to that awful silence outside.

Luke recovered first. "Is that cross-grained, black-looking hunk of stuff really a bull buffalo hump?"

Arabella gave Geoff an avo-

cado and went to the door. Luke and Tolly were staring like owls at a charred object in the middle of the table.

Luke hiccupped. "I think you got the chips by mistake. Wheresh . . . where'd it come from, Tolly?"

"My wife is a remarkable woman," Tolly said proudly. "I will eat some of this and save the rest to beat you over the head if you ever, ever make cracks about me not eating haggis without the bull buffalo chips—or buffalo hump wishout—without the oatmeal—or anything at all!"

"It looks tough," Luke cautioned.

"Tough, huh! You should see the meat we made lobscouse with aboard the brigantine—"

"Whash . . . whash . . . what's—!" Luke stared.

The buffalo hump was gone. In its place was a tin bowl containing something that Luke and Tolly both blinked at.

"Lobscouse," Tolly said.

He spoke with remarkable control, Arabella thought, considering that he had gone a little green.

Tolly explored with a spoon. "I don't quite unner—understand what this stuff floating on top might be."

"They use ship's biscuits in louse—lobscouse," Luke said. He poured two more drinks. "Ships' bish—bish—cuits are always weevily."

Tolly skimmed the stew and fertilized the grass with the skimmings. "Theresh second layer."

"Weevils," Luke said sagely.

"Third layer," Tolly announced a little later.

"Weevils."

Tolly explored some more. "Weasels—weevils all the way to solid stuff. Whash few weasels?"

Behind her Arabella heard a gurgling sound. Geoff had tipped the pan and was drinking. He kept drinking until all the contents were gone. Then he opened his eyes and grinned.

"Much better than Yusef the Yerk's recipe," he said. "Invigorates every sphere." He wiped a bit of horseradish from his lips and suddenly got a strange and startled look.

His ears and body swapped colors and his clothes-brush crop of red hair formed into tight whorls like cattle bunching up to repel wolves. "Too much peanut butter again," he muttered, and lurched toward the door.

"Weasely lousescouse—loblouse is all right for sailors," Tolly said. "Frankly, I prefer nice wedge of locust pie. You take Walad Sidi Abdalla tribe—'Course they don't know beans 'bout making pie crust, but—"

"You take 'em," Luke Ascutney said.

He was gazing in horror at a nice piece of pie. From one corner the segments of a lucious locust protruded deliciously.

Luke got to his feet. His face was nearly the color of Geoff's ears at the moment. Luke made a *baluk! baluk!* sound, knocked over his lawn chair and made for the house. He didn't even see the beautiful streaks in Geoff's stomach as he reached the porch.

Geoff was gasping for air and wiping his eyes.

Arabella held the screen door open for Luke. "Put the seat up!" she warned as Luke went by.

"Sidiwalla Ladbulla tribe . . ." Tolly mused, unable to take his eyes from the lucious locust.

Suddenly he rose, face piteous. He took two steps in the wrong direction before following Luke's route. He blinked a little as he went past Geoff, who was breathing visible vapors from his nose and mouth.

"Got chocolate on nice trips —strips for rag rug, A'bella," Tolly muttered. "Never let Luke mention bull buffalo louse—lobscouse pie to me. In thish house henchforth food will be sumshing—something to eat, not dish—discourse about!" He waved one hand. "Furthermore—"

A succession of terrible *baluk!* sounds trailed back as he fled to join Luke Ascutney in the bathroom.

"Just a dash too much peanut butter, I think," Geoff muttered. He staggered off the porch and went toward the back fence.

Early that evening, with Luke and Tolly resting crosswise on the bed in the boys' old room, Arabella had time to go see what had happened to Geoff the Djinn.

He had gone where the woodbine twineth and lay in damp grass at the foot of the trellis. His ears were lavender again and his body had almost resumed its happy green color. Nothing showed in his stomach sphere except a few steamy vapors.

Arabella nudged him with one foot against his left elbow sphere.

Geoff sat up briskly. He chewed thoughtfully on a leaf from the woodbine.

"What do you want to talk about, Arabella?"

He fell back with a groan before she could answer. For a moment she thought his ears and body were going to swap colors again. "Peanut butter," he muttered.

Arabella prodded him with one foot again. "Get up. If you

get pains in your spheres from being just a second in a swamp to give the moose his nose, or check on it, think what lying an hour or so in damp grass will do to you. You'll have to follow Yusef's recipe—"

Geoff groaned. "Don't ever mention that Yerk to me!"

His spheres seemed awfully loose on their couplings but he made it to his feet.

"I believe you have done the job all right," Arabella said.

"Any time, as long as you can't do it yourself and it isn't harmful to anyone—not *very* harmful, that is—"

As he went unsteadily past the place where the flagstones, arbor and barbecue pit were going to be one of these days, Geoff stopped to look at an unusual object on a white plate in the grass.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Locust pie. I couldn't do a thing with it. Make it disappear, will you please?"

"Gladly!"

After plate and pie disappeared Geoff the Djinn stood a few moments looking at the place where they had been.

Then he made an unusually loud *baluk!* sound and disappeared himself.

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