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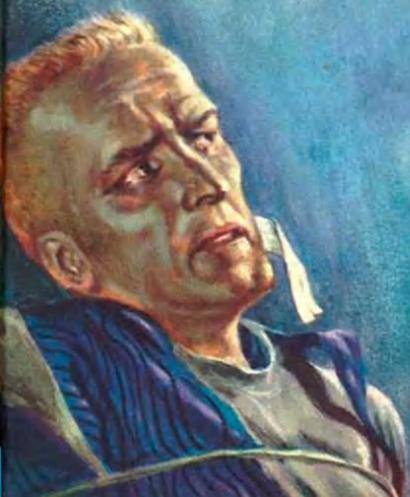
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Not So Great an Enemy (<i>novelet</i>)	JAMES E. GUNN	4
And Then She Found Him	PAUL JANVIER	45
Aces Loaded	THEODORE R. COGSWELL	62
On Hand . . . Offhand: Books	THEODORE STURGEON	77
The Keeper (<i>short novelet</i>)	H. BEAM PIPER	80
The Education of Tigress Macardle	C. M. KORNBLUTH	101
Seat of Judgment	LESTER DEL REY	110
The Harvest	TOM GODWIN	128
Venturings	THE EDITOR	131

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NOT SO GREAT AN ENEMY

by JAMES E. GUNN

Medic Ben Grayle sat in the dark silence and rubbed his head where he'd been slugged. He thought of the dying man in the City who had no right to a doctor . . . of the old man in the Hospital who had paid a quarter of a million dollars for a young man's heart and five years of life . . . of the blind girl whose body might be forfeit. And he thought of death, the enemy.

HE WOKE TO PAIN. IT WAS A sharp, stabbing sensation in the pit of his stomach. It pulled his knees up toward his chest and contorted his gaunt, yellowed face with an involuntary grimace that creased the skin along familiar lines like parchment folded and refolded.

The pain stabbed again. He grunted; his body jerked. Slowly it ebbed, flood waters retreating, leaving its detritus of exacerbated nerve endings like a promise of return. "Coke!" shouted the man.

The word echoed around the big room on the twenty-ninth floor, bounded off tall ceilings and wood-paneled walls. There was no answer. "Coke!" he screamed. "Coke! Coke! Coke!"

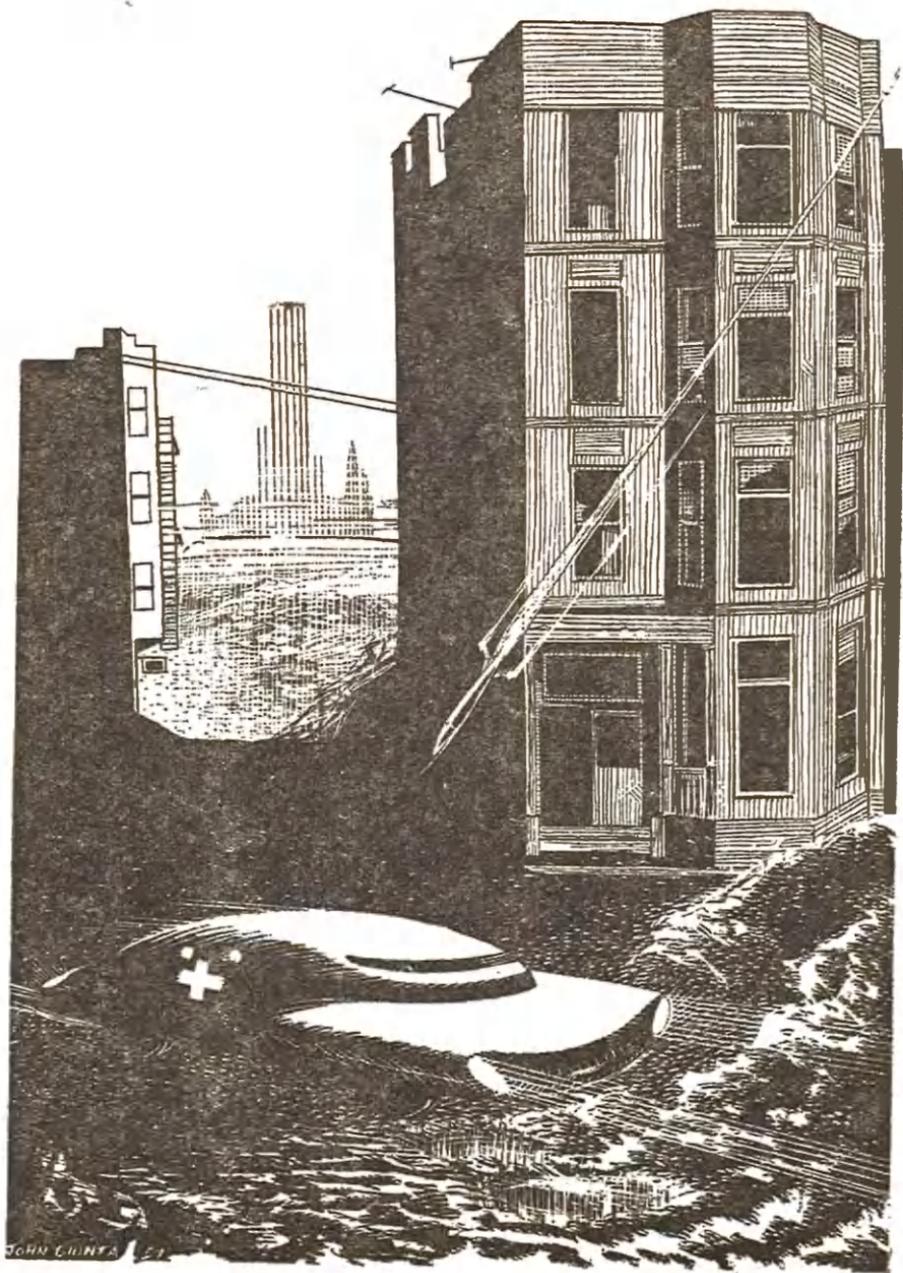
Footsteps pattered distantly, clapped against marble floors, muffled themselves in carpeting. They stopped beside the broad, silken

bed. "Yes, boss?" The voice cringed. The man cringed, too. It made him even shorter. The little eyes wavering in the monkey face refused to focus on anything.

The sick man writhed on the bed. "The medicine!" he gasped.

Coke snatched up the brown bottle from the gray metal nightstand and shook out three pills into a trembling hand. The sick man grabbed them greedily, popped them into his mouth. Into his hand Coke put a glass of water he had poured from a silver pitcher. The sick man drank convulsively.

In a few minutes the sick man was sitting up. He hugged his knees to his chest and breathed in exhausted pantings. "I'm sick, Coke," he moaned. "I've got to have a doctor. I'm going to die, Coke." There was an overwhelming horror in his voice. "Call the doctor!"



"I can't," Coke squeaked. "Don't you remember?"

The sick man frowned as if he were trying to fathom Coke's hesitation, and then his face writhed and his left hand swung out viciously. It caught Coke across the mouth. Coke's head jerked, and he pressed back into the corner and crouched there, watching the sick man with a rodent's wary eyes.

"Be here!" the sick man snarled. "Don't make me call you!" He forgot Coke. His chin dropped, and he hammered futilely against the bed with a knotted fist. "Damn!" he sobbed.

In that position, he sat, graven, for minutes. Coke huddled in the corner, unmoving, watchful. At last the sick man straightened, threw back the heavy comforter, and stood up. He walked painfully to the curtained windows. As he walked he whimpered, "I'm sick. I'm going to die."

He tugged on a thick, velvet cord; the curtains whispered apart. Sunlight flooded into the room, spilled over the sick man; it turned his scarlet pajamas into flame, his face into dough.

"It's a terrible thing," said the sick man, "when a dying man can't get a doctor. I need treatment for this pain, Coke. I can't stand it any longer."

Coke watched; his eyes never left the tall, thin man who stood in the sunlight and stared blindly out over the city.

"Get me a doctor, Coke," the sick man said. "Find one out on call, and bring him here. I don't care how you do it. Just get him."

Coke scuttled out of the room, grayly, like a mouse. The sick man stared out of the window, not hearing him go.

From here the ruins were not so apparent—the city looked almost as it had fifty years ago. But if a man looked closely he could see the holes in the roofs, the places where the porcelain false fronts had fallen and the brick behind had crumbled and toppled into the streets.

Twelfth Street was blocked completely. Mounds of rubble made many others impassable. The hand of Time is not as swift as that of man, but it is inexorable.

The distant, arrowing sweep of Southwest Trafficway drew the eye like movement, bright through the drabness of decay. Medical Center was out of sight behind the rising ground to the south, but the complex, walled entity on Hospital Hill was brilliant in the sunlight.

It was an island rising out of a stinking sea, an enclave of life within the dying city.

Distantly the air conditioner muttered, purifying the air.

The sick man stared out the window at the smog thrusting up the streets from the river, climbing toward the twenty-block-square fortress on Hospital Hill. But the disease-bearing tendrils would never infiltrate those walls.

"Damn them!" the sick man whimpered. "Damn them!"

Ben Grayle, seventh-year medic, peered out the slit-windows of the one-man ambulance into the sooty night. The misting rain was mixed with smog now. It was a live thing, shifting eternally, against which the fog lamp battered helplessly.

Suddenly the purr of the air-conditioner was loud. Grayle frowned worriedly for fear that it would quit and leave him defenseless. It would be almost as bad as stepping out into the night, like breathing that semi-liquid death. He shuddered.

He recognized it for what it was—a trick of the subconscious, the reassurance he needed that the vital purification was going on perfectly.

Ever since he had left the trafficway with its lights and its occasional patrols, he had been lost and uneasy. Even the trafficway wasn't safe any more. A twenty-millimeter shell caroming from the ambulance's armored roof had made a fearful din.

Where had the police been then?

The maps that listed Truman Road as "passable" were out of date. This had to be Truman Road; it was too wide to be anything else. But he had only a vague notion how far east he had come. On either side of the street was darkness; possibly it was a shade denser on the right.

Unless that was a strip razed by wind, fire, or dynamite, it was a

park. He visualized the city map. It was either The Parade or The Grove.

Something exploded under the front wheel. The ambulance leaped, shuddering, into the air. It came down hard. Before the shocks absorbed it, the automatic Chauffeur lost control and the ambulance slewed toward the left.

Grayle grabbed the emergency wheel and overrode the Chauffeur, turning the ambulance in the direction of the skid. The sound of screaming tires came like the muffled wail of a parturient woman.

Lights loomed up unexpectedly, dim-red lanterns in the night, almost invisible in the swirling smog. They were about waist high to a man standing in the street.

Grayle twisted the wheel to the right this time, sharp, clutched his seat with taut legs as the ambulance took the curb, fought the crazy tilt as it lit in mud and skidded again. It was a park, all right. He raced through it, fighting desperately for control, dodging trees and bent telephone poles with their tangles of old webs, until he joggled the ambulance back into the street. He was blocks past the beginning of the madness. He pulled up.

In the ambulance balanced at the side of the road, Grayle sat and sweated. He rubbed the back of a hand across his forehead and fought the twitching of nerves across his shoulders.

Damn the city! he thought sav-

agely. Damn the street department! Damn the sadist Resident who had sent him out on a night like this, emergency call or not.

But it was nobody's fault.

The night traveler went at his own risk. There weren't enough of them to waste scarce taxes on street repairs, and it was no trick to avoid the holes, ruts, and uprooted chunks of concrete by daylight.

One thing they could do, he thought rebelliously. They could code the streets with radioactives for the Chauffeur. The damn thing went crazy every time he hit a hole. The mechanics did their best, but it was shoddy equipment they received.

What's happened, he wondered angrily, to the workman's pride in his product? Even the surgical machines—why a surgeon who used one without watching it rebuilt was wide open for a malpractice suit.

He thought back over the near-accident, blurred then into a kaleidoscope of action but available for more leisurely examination now. That hadn't felt so much like a hole. It had felt more like a landmine. And those lanterns could have been sitting on a barricade which sheltered a band of hijackers.

Grayle shivered and stepped on the accelerator and wished fervently that he were back at the Center, working out his shift in the anti-septic, bulletproof comfort of the emergency ward.

Inside the walls of the hospital, the practice of medicine was a pure and wonderful thing. Even ambulance calls in the country, though distracting, were not altogether unsettling—country people were respectable members of society, and had a proper regard for the miracles of modern medicine. The City was something else again. Cities were the nation's slums, and slums are inhabited largely, Grayle thought cynically, by people without ideals or ambition—scoffers and scum. He didn't like this new duty he'd been put on.

But he'd have to learn to accept it. A doctor's responsibility, he remembered, was to life, wherever it was flickering or failing. But only, of course, when the owner of the life thought enough of it to pay for its preserving.

The Chauffeur seemed to have settled down again. Grayle eased the ambulance back into the middle of the road and relaxed his grip on the wheel. Without meaning to, he let his mind go back to the hospital, to the pure joy of learning to be a great surgeon. Like Dr. Cassner, whom he'd watched the other day in a beautiful three-hour display of microsurgical virtuosity. . . .

It had begun as an ordinary arterial resection and transplant. The overhead, shadowless light was searching and cold on the draped body of the old man. The air conditioners murmured persistently,

but sweat beaded Cassner's broad forehead and trickled down beneath his mask before the nurse could mop it away with sterile cotton.

But Cassner's hands never stopped. Disembodied, alive, his fingers manipulated the delicate controls of the surgical machine with a sureness, a dexterity unmatched in this part of the country, perhaps anywhere. Genius is incomparable.

Grayle had watched with a hypnotic fascination that made time meaningless. The scalpels sliced through the skin with unerring precision, laying bare the swollen, old arteries; deft metal fingers tied them off, snipped them in two, accepted a lyophilized transplant, and grafted the healthy young artery to the stump of the old; the suture machine moved swiftly after, dusting the exposed area with antibiotics, clamping together the edges of the incision. . . .

Cassner's eyes flicked from the patient on the operating table to the physiological monitor on the wall behind it, absorbing at a single glance the composite picture of the patient's condition: blood pressure, heartbeat, respiration. . . .

He saw the danger first. The operation was, comparatively, a speedy thing, but there were disadvantages. The area involved was large, and even the chlorpromazine-promethazine-Dolosal cocktail and the chilling could not avoid shock entirely. And the heart was old.

It was impossible to transfer the instruments to the new area swiftly enough. Cassner took the scalpel in his own fingers and opened up the chest cavity with a long, sure stroke. "Heart machine," he said in his quick, high voice to no one in particular.

It was pumping within thirty seconds, its tubes tied to the aorta and the left atrium. Two minutes later a new heart, still palpitating, was in the old chest; Cassner grafted the arteries and veins to it. Ten minutes after the monitor had signaled the heart stoppage, Cassner pulled out the old heart and held it in his hand, a dead thing of worn-out muscle. He motioned wearily for his first assistant to inject the digitalis.

As the chest cavity was closed, the new heart began squeezing powerfully, forcing the blood through the arteries.

Cassner would have had a good excuse for turning the more routine job over to the assistant, but he completed the arterial transplant before he turned away toward the dressing room.

That, Grayle thought, was what medicine was really all about. . . .

The smog shifted, and he saw a light glimmering far down the street like something lost in the night.

Grayle coasted past the cafe. Inside was a waiter behind a long counter and a single customer. Grayle swung the ambulance

around the corner into a puddle of darkness.

Before he opened the door, he broke open a fresh filter packet and slipped the filters into his nostrils, taking time to see that they were a good fit. He slipped the needle gun out of the holster on the ambulance door.

The smog swirled around him, clutching, trying to insinuate its deadly tendrils down into his lungs. Boyd was right: We swim in a sea of carcinogens. But you had to do your best for those who had to live in the sea.

The rain had almost stopped, but Grayle pulled his coat tight at the collar—even a flash of his white jacket was dangerous here. There was always a chance of running into hijackers or Antivivs or just an ordinary citizen with a grudge.

The street number was long gone from above the door. Grayle pushed his way through the airlock and into the brightness.

He noticed the warmth first. Then he heard the asthmatic gasps of an ancient air conditioner.

Airlock, air conditioner. The proprietor was making a stab at the necessities of life.

The waiter was a thick-necked urban with a battered nose and crumpled ears. He wore a filthy white jacket in obvious imitation of a doctor's uniform.

Grayle tried to control his anger; commercialism always annoyed him.

The customer was thin and weasel-faced. Grayle diagnosed him automatically: *Thyroid. Hypertension*. He gave the man five years.

"What's for you?" asked the waiter eagerly. "Got a new health-food menu. Got a new tonic fresh from the lab: all the known vitamins plus trace minerals, iron, and a new secret ingredient in an oral suspension of medicinal alcohol. You wanta see the lab sheets, analysis, testimonials?"

"No," Grayle began. "What I—"

"Say now," said the waiter, his voice dropping conspiratorially, "I got some stuff under the counter—straight Kentucky bourbon, no vitamins, no minerals, just plain rot-gut."

"All I want to know is the address here," Grayle said impatiently.

The waiter looked at him blankly. Slowly he shook his head. Maybe addresses and street numbers didn't mean anything now, Grayle thought. It wasn't just that, though. Suspicion was something solid between them. What set him apart: his clothing? his speech?

The waiter jerked a thumb back the way Grayle had come. "That way," he said. "That's Benton."

"Thanks," Grayle said coldly. He turned toward the door, danger at the back of his neck, prickling. He went out into the night.

"Pssst!" something hissed behind him.

Grayle glanced back. It was Thyroid, his weasel face screwed up in-

gratiatingly. Grayle stopped. The man sneaked close, glancing behind him. "Where you going? I can maybe tell you."

Grayle hesitated. "Tenth," he said. "Thirty-four hundred block."

"Two blocks east, turn left. It's straight north," the man whispered huskily. Grayle muttered his thanks and turned away. He had just noticed that the man had no filters in his nose; he felt embarrassed and uncomfortable. "Look!" the man said quickly. "Want some penicillin?"

Grayle stood rooted for a moment, too surprised to act. Then his right hand went casually into his pocket to grab the pistol butt while his left hand pressed two studs on his belt buckle. Faintly, listening for it, he heard the ambulance motor rev up. "What's that?" he asked.

"Penicillin," the shover repeated urgently. "Hot stuff. Straight from the lab, and the price is right."

"How much?"

"A buck per hundred thousand. Look!" He stuck out a grimy hand; the yellow restaurant light filtered over it, over the metal-capped ampule that nestled in the palm. "Here's three hundred thousand units all ready to go to work. Suppose you get an infection tonight. It can lay you away for good. With this little ampule here, you catch it yourself. Three bucks, okay? Save a day's work, and you got your money back."

Grayle looked curiously at the 10 cc. ampule. He wondered what was in it. At that price, most likely it was water. A dollar per hundred thousand units was less than wholesale.

The shover laughed uneasily when Grayle remained silent. "Well—" he pulled his hand back as if he were going to thrust it into his pocket and walk away—"it's your life. End up in a hospital."

Grayle listened for the beat of rotors. The night was silent. "There's worse places," he said.

"Name one," the shover challenged, and edged closer. "Tell you what. I'll make it two-fifty. I can't stay here all night."

By then the shover was close. Too close, Grayle thought. He backed away. The shover grabbed at the coat to hold him. The coat fell open.

Grayle damned the fool who had failed to magnetize the closure properly. The shover staggered back from the white jacket and looked wildly around for help that was unavailable.

Grayle pulled out the pistol. "That's far enough," he said firmly.

The shover came back immediately, like a ball on a string. "Look, say. I mean there's no reason we can't do business. I give you the penicillin, you forget we ever met, eh?"

"Where did you get it?"

The man shrugged helplessly.

"You know how it is. Somebody passes it to me, and how do I know where it comes from? Stolen maybe. Diverted at the factory."

"By Bone's men?"

The shover looked startled. He glanced apprehensively into the shadows. "What do you think? Come on, Medic, give me a break."

The light came on like a detergent spray, cleansing the darkness. Grayle heard the rotors overhead and blinked blindly.

"Don't move," said a bull voice. "You're under arrest."

The shover dashed for the darkness. Grayle aimed carefully. The needle caught him in the back of the neck, just below the basi-occipital bone. He took one more step and crumpled, half in darkness.

The police sergeant listened to Grayle's description of events with unconcealed impatience. "You shouldn'ta shot him," he said. "What's the man done, he should get shot?"

"Shoving," Grayle said firmly, counting them off on his fingers with the muzzle of the needle gun. "Bribery. Adulterating, too, if you'll analyze that ampule."

"That's no proof," the sergeant said sourly. "You think we got nothing better to do than answer false alarms?"

"Proof?" Grayle echoed, scowling darkly. "What do you need? There's my testimony. There's this." He pressed the playback button on his belt buckle.

The voice was rich and cultured. "Contraindications are known ilyotycin sensitivity and—"

Grayle hit the stud hastily and reeled off a few feet of tape before he started it again. "Penicillin," said the shover's husky whisper. "Hot stuff. Straight from the lab, and the price is right. . . ."

When it was finished, Grayle added his own affidavit, "I, Benjamin Grayle, seventh-year medic, do hereby swear by Aesculapius and Hippocrates that . . ."

The officer's reluctant confirmation made it legal, and Grayle dropped the bobbin-sized spool into the officer's meaty hand. "That should be plenty. There's your prisoner."

The shover was on his hands and knees, weaving his head back and forth like a sleepy elephant.

The sergeant's voice was heavy. "You don't have to get tough. I'll do my job. Try to understand, though—a man's got to live, and these is hard times. Why that man's probably trying to meet payments on a medical contract!"

"That's your problem, Sergeant. It's rats like that who are slashing the throats of the medical profession. If drugs and antibiotics circulate without supervision, the lifespan will plummet to seventy or lower. We have enough trouble with antibiotic sensitivity and resistant bacteria strains without this."

Grayle looked down again at

the shower. He was sitting up, bewildered. He rubbed the back of his neck and pulled his hand away to stare at it. "I ain't dead," he said.

"My business is saving life, not taking it," Grayle said harshly.

The shower looked up at the voice and snarled. "You! You lousy body snatcher! Quack! You with your noble airs, your self-sacrifice. You ain't gonna get away with this! Hear me? John Bone'll take care of you, butcher!"

"Here, now!" the sergeant broke in sharply, hauling the shower to his feet. "That's enough out of you."

But his hands were surprisingly gentle. Grayle's lips twisted wryly as he turned towards the ambulance. The shower was treated with more respect than the medic.

Over the muffled throb of the helicopter's rotors, the shower shouted at him, "You and your kind—you're responsible for all this!"

The searchlight swept along the front of the porch roof and picked out two numbers hanging rusty and askew. Luckily they were the last two.

The house stood beside a vacant lot crammed with the disintegrating pipe, machinery, and derrick of a gas-drilling outfit. At one time the yard had been paved. Now it was little better than powdery gravel as Grayle drove up to the front steps.

He turned off the lights and sat in the darkness staring up at the place. It was two stories and an attic. An ancient porch reached across the front. The windows stared dark and blind into the night.

Had the Resident made a mistake? It would be typical.

Then he saw a dim flicker behind the west, second-floor window.

The light built into the black bag splashed against the old door. Grayle knocked. There was no answer. The only sound was the comforting vibration of the ambulance motor.

He tried the antique brass handle. The door swung open. He pulled out the needle gun and entered cautiously. To the right an archway had been boarded off with worm-eaten plywood. Ahead was a flight of stairs.

At the head of the stairs was a multitude of doors. Grayle turned right. The door was locked. It rattled under his hand.

He listened uneasily to the noises of the house. It creaked and squeaked and stirred as if it had acquired a life of its own over the centuries. His shoulders twitched.

The door opened.

The light from the black bag spilled over the girl like quicksilver, stared into it, unblinking. Grayle stared back. She was short, not taller than five-five. Her dark hair would have been very long, he thought, if it had been allowed to

fall free, but it was braided and wound around her head like a coronet.

Her face was delicate and slender, the skin very white, the features regular. Her dress was yellow and flowing, belted in to a small waist; it was impractical and completely unlike the straight, narrow fashions women were wearing these days.

But there was something suggestive about the hint of figure beneath the cloth and the bare, white feet. His pulse climbed ten beats per minute.

Only then did he notice that she was blind. Her corneas were cloudy, opaque, darkening the pale blue of her eyes.

"Are you the medic?" Her voice was low and gentle.

"Yes."

"Come in before you arouse our roomers. They might be dangerous."

As the girl bolted the door behind him, Grayle surveyed the room. Once it had been a bedroom and fairly large. Now it was a one-room apartment containing two chairs, a gas burner, an upended crate serving as a table for a smoking kerosene lamp, and a cot made of wood and canvas.

On the cot was a middle-aged man, sixtyish, his eyelids closed, his breathing noisy in the bare room.

"Philip Shoemaker?" Grayle asked.

"Yes," the girl said.

He noticed her eyes again. In the sun they would be the color of wild hyacinth. "Daughter?"

"No relation."

"What are you doing here?"

"He's sick," she said simply.

Grayle studied her face. It held much peace and calmness, but it told him nothing. He adjusted the lamp and turned to Shoemaker. He was in a dangerous condition.

As he sat down on the chair beside the cot, he unlocked his black bag. Quickly, without wasted motions, he brought out a handful of instruments, trailing their wires. One small pickup went over the man's heart; another was fastened to his wrist, a third to the palm. He wrapped a sphygmomanometer band around the bicep and watched it grow taut, slipped a mouthpiece between pale lips, fitted something like a skullcap to the head. . . .

When he was finished, Shoemaker was a fly caught in a web, transmitting feeble impulses to the spider lurking in the bag. This spider, though, was linked to the ambulance below by intangible lines, and together they would pour life back into the fly, not suck it away.

It took one minute and twenty-three seconds. During the next second, Grayle noticed the adhesive tape on the patient's forearm. He frowned and tore it loose. Beneath it was a compress dark with blood and a small, welling slit in the median-basilic vein.

"Who's been with this man?"

"Me," the girl said clearly. One hand was resting gently on the box that held the lamp.

Beneath the head of the cot was a quart jar. In it was a pint of blood, clotting now but still faintly warm. Grayle put it down slowly. "Why did you perform a phlebotomy on this man?"

"There was no other way to save his life," she said gently.

"This isn't the dark ages," Grayle said. "You might have killed him."

"The way I heard it, Medic," she told him softly, "in some cases blood-letting is effective when nothing else will work—cerebral hemorrhage, for instance. It lowers the blood pressure temporarily and gives the blood in the ruptured vessel a chance to clot."

Involuntarily, Grayle glanced into the bag. From the bottom, the diagnosis was shining up fluorescently. It was cerebral hemorrhage, all right, and the prognosis was hopeful. The hemorrhage had stopped.

He took a compress out of a pocket in the bag, pulled the tab, and watched the wrapper disintegrate. He pressed it firmly over the cut. It clung to the skin as he took his hand away.

"There are laws against practicing medicine without a license," he said slowly. "I'll have to report this."

"Should I have let him die?"

"There are doctors to treat him."

"He called one. It took you an

hour and a half to get here. If I had waited, he'd have died."

It wasn't as if the girl were arguing with him, Grayle thought. It was more like explanation, like an attempt to make him understand. "I came as fast as I could. It's no joke to find a place like this at night."

"I'm not criticizing." She put her hand back until she felt the chair behind her and sank down into it, lightly, gracefully, and folded her white hands in her lap. "You asked me why I bled him. I told you."

Grayle was silent. The girl's logic was impeccable, but she was wrong all the same. There weren't any reasonable excuses for breaking the law. The practice of medicine had to be the monopoly of men who were carefully, painfully trained for it and indoctrinated in the ancient ethics. No one else could be permitted to tamper with the most sacred thing in the world.

She rose and walked toward him confidently, put a hand on his shoulder, and leaned past him to touch Shoemaker's forehead. "Yes," she said, and her voice was firm with an unusual certainty. "He'll get well now. He's a good man. We mustn't let him die."

The girl's nearness was a warm fragrance, stirring, provocative. Grayle felt his blood pressure mount. *Why not?* he thought; *she's only an urban.* But he couldn't, and it wasn't just a medic's honor

or even, perhaps, that she was blind.

He didn't move, but she drew away, took back her hand, as if she sensed the emotions fermenting inside him.

"I've got to get him to the hospital," Grayle said. "Besides the hemorrhage, there'll be infection."

"I scrubbed the arm with soap and then with alcohol," she said. "I sterilized the knife in the lamp flame and scorched the bandage over the lamp chimney."

Her fingers looked blistered. "You were lucky," the medic said coldly. "Next time someone will die."

She turned her face toward his voice. Grayle found the movement strangely appealing. "What can you do when they need you?"

It was too much like a physician's response to the world's plea for help. A doctor had a right to respond to the plea; she didn't. He turned brusquely back to Shoemaker and began stripping off the instruments and stowing them away. "I'll have to carry him down to the ambulance. Can you carry the bag for me to light the way?"

"You mustn't take him. He hasn't kept up payments on his contract. You know what they'll do."

Grayle stopped in the act of snapping the bag shut. He was shocked. "If he's a defaulter," he began, his voice trembling on the verge of anger.

"What would you do," she asked quietly, "if you were dying and

alone? Wouldn't you call for help? Any help? Would you stop to weigh legalities? He had a contract once, and the payments ruined him, cost him his home in the country, drove him here to the sustenance life. But when he was sick, he turned to his old faith, as a dying Catholic calls for his priest."

Grayle recoiled from the comparison. "And he deprived several people of vital, lawful attention," he said bitingly. "The chances are that he traded his life for that of someone else. That's why the laws were passed. If Shoemaker can't pay, he ought to be repossessed." He stooped toward the man.

She pulled him back with surprising strength. "Surely you've got enough blood, enough organs. They'll kill him."

"There's never enough," Grayle said. "And there's research, after that." He put an impatient hand on her shoulder to push her aside. Under the dress material, the flesh felt warm and soft. "You must be an Antiviv or you wouldn't call it killing."

"I am, but that's only part of it. I'm asking for him, because he's worth saving. Are you so inflexible, so perfect, that you can't—forget?"

He stopped pushing, looked down at his hand for a moment, and let it drop. It wasn't defeat—not exactly. He merely refused to fight with the girl for the man's body.

"All right," he said.

He picked up the black bag with a snap that locked it shut and started toward the door.

"Wait!" she said.

He looked back at her as she moved toward him blindly, her hand outstretched until her fingers touched the arm of his coat. "I want to thank you," she said gently. "I thought there wasn't any mercy left in the medical profession."

For a moment his viscera felt cold, anesthetized, and then the ice melted in a surge of anger. He didn't want any credit for something he wasn't going to do. "Don't misunderstand me," he said bluntly. "I'm going to turn in his name to the Agency. I'm going to report you, too. That's my duty."

Her hand fell to her side in a gesture of apology, for her own mistake and perhaps also for the nature of humanity. "We do what we must."

She moved forward past him, unbolted the door, and turned toward him, her back against the door. "I don't think you're as hard as you pretend to be."

That stopped him. He wasn't hard, incapable of understanding or sympathy. Those who must live in the midst of sickness and death, upon whose skill and judgment rest health and life, can't afford to be touched by the drama, the human values of every situation. It would be unendurable.

"There's an old man downstairs who needs help," she said hesitantly. "Would you see him?"

"Out of the question," he snapped angrily.

Her head lifted for a moment. That was pride, he thought. But then it nodded resignedly. "I'm sorry," she said softly.

The light was dangerous, she said, and offered to lead him. Her hand was warm and firm and confident. Three-fourths of the way down, the stairs hesitated at a landing, and turned left to reach the hall. A door opened in the darkness to the right of the landing.

Grayle tore his hand loose and stuck it into his coat pocket onto the solid reassurance of the needle gun.

Glimmering whitely in the dark rectangle of the door was a ghost of a face. "Leah?" it said. It was a girl's voice. "I thought it was you. Give me your hand. I thought I would never get through the night. . . ."

"There now," said Leah. She put out a hand toward the face. "You're going to be all right."

With a sudden flash of irritation, Grayle snapped on the light of the black bag. It hit the girl like a blow; she recoiled, her arms over her eyes, moaning.

Grayle flicked off the light. He had seen enough. The girl in her thin, mended nightdress was a bundle of bones wrapped tautly in pale skin. Except for two feverish spots

of color in her cheeks, her face was dead white.

She was dying of tuberculosis.

Tuberculosis. Today! Why do they do it!

"Go up and stay with Phil," Leah said. "He needs you. He's had a stroke, but he's better now."

"All right, Leah," the girl said. She slipped past them silently and climbed the stairs.

"What's the matter with them?" Grayle's voice was strained and puzzled. "Tuberculosis is no problem. We can cure it easily. Why do they let themselves die?"

She stopped in front of the worm-eaten plywood partition and raised her face toward him. "Because it's cheaper. It's all they can afford."

"Cheaper to die?" Grayle exclaimed incredulously. "What kind of economy is that?"

"The only kind of economy they know. The only kind the hospitals will let them practice. You've made good health too expensive. The way she is now, she needs a few months of bedrest, a hundred grams of dihydrostreptomycin, a thousand grams of PAS, perhaps some collapsed lung therapy, some rib resections. That girl has never seen more than fifty dollars all at once. If she lived to be a hundred she couldn't save half the money necessary for the treatment. She's got children to support. She can't stop working for a day, much less months—"

"There are clinical contracts," Grayle said impatiently.

"They don't cover the kind of treatment she needs," Leah said wistfully. A door opened behind her. "Goodnight, Medic." Then she was gone.

That wasn't right, Grayle thought as he turned toward the front door. That wasn't the way it should be. But was it the way it was?

He turned back impetuously, words pouring to his lips like: *If there isn't enough to go around, who are you going to treat—the indigent or the prosperous, the bottomless pits or those who can finance the future, with more medicine, more health for everyone?*

But the words died on his lips. The panel in the partition had come ajar. In the room behind it was a battered, antique aluminum chaise longue—Twentieth Century Modern. An old man was propped upright in it, so straight and still that Grayle thought for a moment that he was dead.

He was a very old man—Grayle thought that he had never seen a man as old, although geriatrics was one of Medical Center's leading specialties. His hair was pure white and thick; his face was seamed like old leather, sagging away from strong facial bones as if it were eager to be gone.

Beside the chair Leah had sunk to her knees. She had one of his bony hands in hers, pressed to her

cheek; her eyelids closed over their clouded corneas.

There was something familiar about that old face, something Grayle couldn't isolate, pin down. He noticed with a shock that the old man's eyes were open now.

"Come in, Medic," the old man whispered.

Leah's face came up, her sightless eyes open; she turned toward him. She smiled, too. It was a warming thing, like sunlight.

"You came back to help," Leah said.

Grayle shook his head slowly and then remembered that she couldn't see. "There's nothing I can do."

"There's nothing anyone can do," the old man whispered. "Even without your gadgets, Medic, you know what's wrong with me. I'm one hundred and twenty-five years old. You could give me a new heart from some unfortunate defaulter, but my arteries would still be thickened with arteriosclerosis. And if you replaced those without killing me, I would still have a fibrotic liver, scarred lungs, senile ductless glands, probably a few carcinomas. And even if you gave me a new body, you still couldn't help me, because down deep, where your knives can't reach and your instruments can't measure, is the me that is old beyond repair."

"I can't stand it, Russ," Leah moaned, pressing her forehead against the old man's hand.

When Leah turned her face back

toward Grayle, he was shocked to see tears trickling from the blind eyes. "Can't you do *something?*" she demanded fiercely.

"Medicine can't give anyone the will to live."

Leah stood up angrily. "There must be something you can do—with all your magnificent knowledge, all the expensive gadgets we bought you!"

"There's the elixir," he said thoughtlessly.

Russ smiled again, reminiscently, perhaps. "Ah, yes—the elixir. I had almost forgotten. *Elixir vitae.*"

"Would it help?" Leah demanded.

"Probably not," Grayle said firmly. He had said too much already. Laymen weren't equipped for medical information; it blurred the medical picture.

Besides, the elixir was still only a research phenomenon. The stuff was a synthesis of a rare blood protein which had been discovered in the bloodstreams of no more than a handful of persons in the whole world. This protein, this immunity factor, seemed to pass on its immunity as if death itself were a disease. But as yet it could not be duplicated in the laboratory, and the supply was hardly enough for research purposes.

"A tremendously complicated process," he said. "And not available to the public." He turned accusingly toward Russ. "I can't understand why you didn't have new

corneas grafted onto her eyes."

"I couldn't take the sight of anyone else," Leah said softly.

"There's accidental deaths," Grayle pointed out.

"How are you going to differentiate? No, if it's wrong, it's wrong for every case."

"Don't you want her to see?" Grayle demanded of Russ.

"If wanting were enough," the old man whispered, "she would have had my eyes many years ago. But there's the expense, my boy. It all comes back to that."

"Stupidity!" Grayle snorted and turned to leave.

"Wait, boy," Russ whispered. "Come here a moment."

Grayle turned and walked to the old man's chair, looked down at Leah and back to Russ. The old man held out his hand, palm up. Automatically, Grayle put out his hand to meet it, let his hand rest upon it. As the hands met, Grayle felt a curious sensation, almost electrical, as if something had stimulated a nerve into sending a message up his arm to his brain and carrying an answer back.

Russ's hand dropped back limply. He lowered his head wearily against the back of the chaise longue, his eyes closed. "A good man, Leah, troubled but sincere. We might do worse."

"No," Leah said firmly, "he must not come here again."

"Don't worry about that," Grayle said.

"Some empty time," Russ said distantly, "you might think of this, boy—a conclusion I reached many years ago: *There are too many doctors and not enough healers.*"

Leah rose gracefully from the floor. "I'll see you to the door."

Her unconscious use of the phrase brought a lump of pity into Grayle's throat. It was tragedy because she was beautiful—and peacefully beautiful inside. Reporting her was going to be painful.

He wondered how his hand had felt to her; how had she known him: hot, sweaty, nervous?

He paused at the outside door. "I'm sorry I couldn't help your grandfather."

"He's my father. I was born the year he was one hundred. He wasn't old. He was middle-aged, everyone thought. It's only these last few months he's grown old. I think it's a surrender we make when we grow very tired."

"How do you live—with him sick and . . . ?"

"And me blind?" she supplied. "People are generous."

"Why?"

"They're grateful, I suppose. For the times when we can help them. I collect old remedies from grandmothers and make them up; I brew ptisans; I'm a midwife when I'm needed; I sit up with the sick, help those I can and bury those I can't. You can report this, too, if you wish."

"I see," Grayle said, turning

away and swinging back, irresolute. "Your father—I've seen him somewhere. What's his name?"

"He lost it more than fifty years ago. Here in the city, people call him *Healer*." She held out her hand toward him. Grayle took it reluctantly, thinking that this was the end of it. The hand was warm; his hand remembered the warmth. It would be a good hand to hold if you were sick, he thought.

"Good-by, Medic," she said soberly. "I like you. You're human. So few of them are. But don't come back. It wouldn't be good for any of us."

Grayle cleared his throat noisily. "I said I wouldn't," he said; even to him it sounded petulant and childish. "Good-by."

She stood in the doorway, as he turned, shifted the bag into his right hand, and picked his way down the porch steps.

A man was lying almost under the front wheel of the ambulance. Beside him, on the broken pavement, was a crowbar. Grayle rolled the man over. His eyes were closed, but he was breathing easily. He had got too close and the supersonics shield had knocked him out.

Grayle knew he should call the police about this, too, but he felt too tired for another battle. They would only turn the man loose.

He pulled the body out of the path of the wheels and opened the ambulance door. There was a whisper of movement behind him.

"Medic!" Leah screamed. Her voice was distant and frightened.

Grayle started to turn, but it was too late. The night came down and covered him.

He opened his eyes to darkness, and the thought was instantaneous: *This is what it is to be blind. This is what Leah knows always.*

And he wondered if he were blind.

His head throbbed excruciatingly. There was an eggsized lump on the back of it, where someone had hit him. The hair was matted with dried blood. He winced as his fingers explored the depth of the cut, but it wasn't too bad. He decided that there wasn't any concussion.

He didn't feel blind. It was likely that he was in a lightless room.

He had a faded, uncertain memory—as of something lost in childhood mists—of a wild ride through city streets, of being carried—up steps, down dark halls.

Someone had said something. "He's coming around. Shall I tap him again?"

"Never mind. Just roll him out until we need him."

Thump! Blackness again.

There was concrete under him, cold and hard. He got to his feet, feeling shaky, aching all over, not just his head. He took a cautious step forward and another, holding one hand straight out in front, fingers extended, the other arm curled protectively over his face.

At the fifth step, his fingers touched. It was a vertical surface. Concrete again. A wall.

He turned and moved along the wall to a corner and along a second wall that was shorter and had a door in it. The door was solid metal; it had a handle, but the handle wouldn't turn. The other walls were unbroken. When he had finished the circuit, he had a mental picture of a windowless room about fifteen feet long by nine feet wide.

He sat down and rested.

Somebody had boobytrapped him, knocked him out, brought him to this concrete box, locked him in. Leah?

Her face floated up in front of his eyes, almost effortlessly because there were no distractions. He saw her face, gentle, peaceful, blind. No, it hadn't been Leah. Not even to save herself or Shoemaker. Not even though she was an Antiviv.

There was only one person it could have been—the man he had pulled from under the wheels. He must have crept in close to the ambulance, so slowly that the detectors hadn't reacted, and faked unconsciousness. When Grayle had come, the shield had clicked off, and the man had been released to club him. A crowbar might make a wound like that.

Who was he? Hijacker?

Maybe, but why had he bothered to bring along the medic if it was the drugs and the instruments he wanted. The only reason Grayle

could think of was illegal treatment. Somebody wanted treatment he wasn't entitled to. He or she was in for a disappointment.

Grayle went through his pockets. Futilely. There was nothing in the coat or the jacket underneath. They had taken the needle gun.

He had fists. He was big enough; maybe he was strong enough, too. He would hide behind the door, he decided. When it opened—it opened inward—he would be behind it. He would have a good chance of taking the hijackers by surprise.

Meanwhile, he sat in the dark silence, remembering the dream he had wakened from. It had seemed to him that he was a little boy again, and his father was talking to him in the grown-up fashion he affected with his son.

"Ben," his father said, "there may be more important things than medicine, but you can't be sure of any of them." He put his hand on Ben's shoulder. It was heavy and Ben wanted to shrug it off, but he didn't dare.

"It's different with medicine. You deal with life, and life is always important. You'll feel it every day, because every day you have a personal fight with death, you beat him back a foot, surrender a few inches, and come back to the battle. Because life is sacred, Ben. No matter how mean it is or crippled, it's sacred. That's what we bow down to, Ben."

"I know, Dad," Grayle said, his voice high and a little frantic. "I want to be a doctor. I want to—"

"Then bow down, boy. Bow down!"

But why should he think of Leah's father? Why was the old man so familiar?

Was it what the dying man had said: *Too many doctors and not enough healers!*

Absurd. It was like so many meaningless phrases which seem portentous because of their vagueness. It reminded him of arguments with the other medics.

He remembered standing by the dormitory's bulletproof window, staring out at the block of houses being razed to make room for the two new wings—geriatrics and the premature section of obstetrics. It seemed to him that the twin processes of destruction and construction never stopped. How many square blocks did the Center's walls enclose? Forty? Forty-five?

He must have said it aloud, because Charley Brand answered from his desk. "Sixty and three-fourths." Brand was a strange person, an accretion of miscellaneous information waiting to be mined, a memory bank asking only the proper question. But he lacked something; he was cold and mechanical; he couldn't synthesize.

"Why?" asked Hal Mock.

"No reason," Grayle said, vaguely irritated. "I went on a call a few days ago—into the city."

"Got back safe, I see," Mock said. "Sometimes I wish something would happen to a few medics in our class. Like getting sick—not seriously, you understand—or breaking a leg. The school can only graduate so many, you know. But we're all so healthy, so careful. It's disgusting." He brooded over it.

Brand shifted uneasily and changed the subject. "What are you going to specialize in, Ben? After you graduate."

"I don't know," Grayle said. "I haven't thought about it."

"How about geriatrics?" Mock asked slyly. "The incidence of senescence is one hundred percent. That's the well that never runs dry."

"Until they bring out the elixir in quantity!"

"They'll never do that," Mock said shrewdly. "They know which side of the bread the jam is on. . . ."

"There's more to medicine than money," he said to Mock.

"Sure," Mock said, "but economic facts are basic. Ignore them and you can't do an acceptable job at your profession. Look at the income tax rate: it starts at fifty percent. On ten thousand a year, it's eighty percent. How are you going to pay for your bag, your instruments, your library? You can't practice medicine without them. How are you going to pay your dues in the county medical society, in the A.M.A., special assessments . . . ?"

"But why?" Grayle demanded. "Why are income taxes so high? Why are instruments so expensive? Why are a hundred million people without adequate medical facilities, condemned to a lingering death in a sea of carcinogens, unable or unwilling to pay for what the orators call 'the finest flower of medicine?'"

"It's the cost of living," Mock said, curling his lip. "Whatever you want, you have to pay for. Haven't you figured it out?"

"No," Grayle said savagely. "What do you mean?"

Mock glanced cautiously behind him. "I'm not that foolish," he said slyly. "You never know who might be listening. Some medic might have left his recorder on in his desk on the off chance of catching somebody with his ethics down. I'll say this, though: *We can be too healthy!*"

Nuts! Grayle muttered in the darkness of the concrete cell. He let himself sink down the wall until he reached the floor.

They were all wrong, Mock and Russ and Leah and the rest of them who hinted at dark things. He had seen Dr. Cassner refute them brilliantly in that heart operation the other day.

That's what the scoffers forgot, Grayle had told Mock—what a man got for his money: the skill, the drugs, the instruments. Without modern medicine the man on the operating table would have died

twenty years earlier. Now he was good for five to ten years more.

"That's nothing," Mock said. "I saw Smith-Johnson save a five-month fetus. It made me wonder: why?"

Grayle looked scornful. He knew why: it was because life was sacred, any life, all life.

"Sometimes in the night," Mock said distantly, "I can hear their voices wailing, muffled by the incubators, all the preemies that were too weak to live, that nature wanted to be rid of, and we saved—for blindness and disease and perpetual care. Oh, Cassner's good, but I wonder: how much did the operation cost?"

"How should I know?"

"Why don't you find out . . . ?"

Grayle moved restlessly in the darkness. His hand touched his belt buckle.

He started and wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. He pushed the alarm button hastily.

It was a chance, and no chance was worth throwing away. He supposed that the hijackers had turned off the ambulance motor when they parked it.

Grayle sank back against the wall, remembering how he had gone to the business office and looked up the old man's statement. He had put down a \$200,000 deposit when he'd entered the hospital. The business office had figured it pretty shrewdly. The final bill was only a few hundred less.

He glanced down the "Debit" column with its four and five digit numbers:

Operating Room \$40,000

Well, why not? The heart machine alone had cost \$5,000,000. Someone had to pay for it.

After that was the room fee, anesthesia, laboratory fees, X-ray, tissue exam, EKG—EEG—BMR fees, drugs and dressings, and most prominently the prices for new organs and arteries:

New Arteries (1 set) \$30,000
New Heart (1) \$50,000

Some poor devil of a defaulter had paid up his bill.

Grayle sat in the concrete cell and told himself that a medic shouldn't have to weigh questions of relative value. So the operation had cost the old man thirty to forty thousand dollars for each year of life it promised him. It was worth it—from the old man's viewpoint. Was there another viewpoint? Was someone else footing the bill?

Society, maybe. Was it worth it to society? Maybe not. The old man was a consumer now, eating up and using up what he had been smart enough or strong enough or ruthless enough to have produced when he was younger.

So it wasn't worth it to society!

That was a brutal, inhuman viewpoint. That was the reason nobody wanted society to be the judge of what was worthwhile. Medicine

had been fighting that possibility for centuries; on that point the A.M.A. was immovable. A man had an inalienable right to the doctor of his choice and the medical treatment he could afford.

But what did Mock mean: we can be too healthy?

"Charley," Grayle had asked Brand, "what percentage of the national income went into medicine last year?"

"Therapy, education, research, production, or construction?"

"Everything."

"Let's see—fifteen point six, ten point one, twelve point nine, five point two, eight point seven—that's—what does that add up to?"

"Fifty-two point five," said Grayle.

In the darkness of the concrete room, he repeated the figure to himself. *Nonsense*, he muttered. . . .

It was a relief from thought to discover that the recorder was running. He had only to press the play-back stud to identify his captors.

He pressed the stud and listened, engrossed, to the voices of Leah and Russ and himself. . . . But before the tape reached Leah's frightened cry, the door swung open and a blinding light dazzled his eyes.

He stabbed the recorder into silence and cursed silently. He had lost his chance.

"Police officers," said a rough voice.

"Get that light out of my eyes," Grayle said suspiciously. "Let me see you."

"Sure."

The light, turned away, glittered on badges, exposed faces, caps.

One of the two men looked familiar. Surely that was the sergeant to whom he had turned over the shover?

"Well, Medic," the sergeant said, "so we meet again, eh? Come on, we'd better get out of here."

"Certainly, but where's the ambulance? Did you find it? Did you catch the hijackers? Did you—?"

"Hold it." The sergeant chuckled. "We ain't got time for everything now. The hijackers might come back, eh, Dan?"

"You bet," said Dan.

They went down long, marble corridors, echoing with their footsteps, opening before them as the flashlight moved forward into the darkness. They reached a wide hall. On each side were three sets of heavy brass elevator doors, one set standing open. Grayle followed the officers into the car. The sergeant pushed a button. They started up with a jerk.

The elevator creaked and rattled and wheezed until Grayle wondered whether it would ever make it. He leaned back wearily against the ornate brasswork of the wall and thought, *I'm lucky.*

In his moment of safety he found time to wonder about Leah. Was the blind girl all right? Surely, she

hadn't been hurt. And her father. What was familiar about his face?

It reminded him of a picture, of the time he had wandered through the gallery of grim-faced past presidents in the Court House headquarters of the county medical society. One of them had worn a ghost of a smile.

He had bent over, curiously, to read the name on the tarnished brass plate fastened to the bottom of the frame. He bent again, in imagination, trying to read the memory engraved on his brain.

DR. RUSSELL PEARCE

President, 1972-1983

Russell Pearce—of course, how could he forget? Discoverer of *elixir vitae*, developer of the synthesis which bore his name, dying now of senescence in a rotting house in the middle of the city. . . . Dr. Russell Pearce—Russ—Leah's father.

The door opened in front of them. Hesitantly Grayle stepped out into the hall. It was almost identical with the one below. He asked impatiently, "What is this place?"

"City Hall," said the sergeant. "Come on."

"What am I doing in City Hall? I'm not going anywhere until you answer my questions."

"Hear that, Dan? He ain't going anywhere. Ain't that the truth? Go tell Coke we're here."

The other officer, big and sullen-faced, slipped through a pair of glass doors at the other end of the

hall. The sergeant grinned and ostentatiously adjusted a pistol in the holster at his side.

That one, Grayle thought with a shudder, wouldn't be loaded with anesthetic slivers. "You've got no right to keep me here against my will," he said defiantly.

"Who's keeping you here against your will?" the sergeant asked, surprised. "You want to leave? Go ahead. Of course, you've gotta be careful about little accidents on the way, like tripping on the stairs. It's a long way down."

There was something awful about it—this degradation of the police power of the city. Its criminality paralyzed Grayle's will.

The wizened little man who came back with Dan peered at Grayle speculatively. "He's just a medic," he said petulantly, his mouth curving down in disappointment.

"You expect us to be choosy?" the sergeant complained.

"Well," Coke said timidly, "I hope it's all right. Follow me." He motioned casually to Grayle.

The medic compressed his lips defiantly. "No!"

The sergeant's hand moved in a blur of speed. It hit Grayle's face, palm open, with a solid, meaty sound. The room reeled; Grayle's knees buckled. Anger burst over him redly, and he straightened, his arms ready for battle.

Dan stepped forward, grinning, and kicked him in the groin.

The pain blurred everything as Grayle lay curled on the floor, sobbing. Gradually it ebbed, and his muscles relaxed enough to let his legs fall away from his belly. Grayle forced himself to his knees on the cold, marble floor and struggled up. He found the sergeant's arm around him, helping him stand.

"There now," the officer said casually, "we're going to be sensible, aren't we?"

Grayle gritted his teeth and did not groan. He let himself be led through swinging glass doors into a large room bisected by a long, darkly polished counter. Against the right wall was a bench. On the bench was a thin, weasel-faced man.

The weasel face smirked at Grayle. *Thyroid*, Grayle thought dazedly. The shaver. Free. Laughing. While he was held by the police, in agony.

By the time they reached the heavy walnut door in the right wall, Grayle could walk without crippling pain. "Where are we going?" he got out between clenched teeth.

"The Boss needs a doctor," Coke said, trotting past him to open the door. Beyond was darkness. "It's about time he should wake up."

"Who's the Boss?"

The gray little man stared at him incredulously. "John Bone, of course."

"Coke!" screamed a voice thinned with pain. "Coke! Where are you?"

"Here, boss!" Coke said in a

frightened voice. "Here with a medic!"

He scurried across the room to draw curtains away from tall windows. The light crept in grayly across the floor, onto the wide bed with its tumbled covers. A man was sitting upright among them. He was cadaverously thin, his face a blade, his arms and legs mere sticks.

"A medic!" he screamed. "Who wants a medic? I'm dying. I need a doctor!"

"This is all we could get," Coke squeaked, trembling.

"Oh, all right," Bone said. "He'll have to do." He swung his feet over the edge of the bed and fitted them into baby-blue mules. "Come, Medic. Treat me!"

"Where's your contract?" Grayle demanded.

"Contract!" Bone screamed wildly. "Who's got a contract? If I had a contract do you think I'd be hi-jacking medics?"

"No contract, no treatment."

The hand hit him on the back of the neck like a club. Grayle sagged and almost fell. Distantly he heard his own voice saying, "That won't do any good."

When the blackness went away, he was sitting in a chair near the bed. He turned his head painfully. The policemen were standing behind him, one on each side. In the doorway, the shover was lurking, watching eagerly. Coke was in front of him. Pacing back and forth between the chair and the window

was Bone, his mules clacking against the marble floor and then clumping on the thick carpeting.

"If this is because of the shover —" Grayle began hazily.

"Crumm?" Bone laughed scornfully. "That's right, you turned him in. Why should I be sore about that? He's out, ain't he? What I want, Medic, is treatment. Can't you see I'm dying?"

"We're all dying," Grayle said.

Bone stopped and stared fiercely at Grayle. "Sure. But some of us can put it off longer if we're smart, I'm smart. I want treatment. I can pay—why shouldn't I have treatment? Why should I be discriminated against? You think nobody ever got treatment who wasn't entitled to it?"

"The only thing I know is that there are ethical standards and I'm bound to them. What difference does it make?" he said defiantly. "You don't need a doctor; you need a psychiatrist. The only disease you've got is hypochondria. Everybody knows that."

Bone turned to stare at Grayle with dark, unreadable eyes. "So," he said softly. "A hypochondriac, am I? I am not dying, eh? Who is to say? These pains in my belly, they are imaginary? My head is sick? Well, maybe. Come here. I want to show you something."

Grayle didn't move quickly enough. A rough hand shoved him out of the chair, propelled him across the room. Sullenly, he stood

beside Bone in front of one of the tall windows. The dawn had come, and the city lay beneath them, gilded, the signs of decay hidden.

"Look!" Bone said grandiloquently, encompassing the city within the sweep of his arm. "My city! I am the last of a dying breed, the political boss. After me, the deluge. There will be no more city. It will fall apart. Is that not a sad thing?"

Grayle looked at the city, knowing its ruins, and thought it would be a very good thing if it were all destroyed by fire or flood, wiped off the Earth just as medicine had wiped out smallpox, diphtheria, malaria, and a hundred other infectious diseases—only in a different way, of course.

"The City," Bone mused. "It is a strange thing. It has a life of its own, a personality, emotions. I woo her, I rage at her, I beat her. But underneath it all there is love. She is dying, and there is no medicine to save her." There were real tears in Bone's eyes.

"I can't help her," Bone said softly, beating his fist gently against the paneled wall beside the window. "I can only weep. What has killed her? That cancer there upon the hill! The doctors have killed her. Medicine has killed her."

Grayle looked where the skeletal finger pointed, toward the hill rising like an island of sunlight out of a sea of night. The reddish, slanting rays gleamed on the stout walls and towers of Hospital Hill.

"You killed it," Bone went on, his eyes burning, "killed it with your talk of carcinogens and urban perils. 'Get out of the city!' you said, and wealth left, moved into the country, built its automatic factories, and left us bloodless, leukemia eating at our veins. And inside, the hospitals grew, gobbling block after block, taking one-quarter of the city off the tax rolls and then a third. Medicine killed her."

"All medicine did was present the facts and let the public act upon them," Grayle said stiffly.

Bone beat at his own forehead with the side of a fist. "You're right, you're right. We did it ourselves. I wanted you to see that. We gave ourselves into the hands of the physicians, saying, 'Save us! Make us live!' And you did not ask, 'How live? Why?'"

"Take these pills, you said, and we swallowed them. You need X-rays, you said, and radioactive iodine and antibiotics and specifics for this and that, and we took them with our tonics and our one-a-day vitamins." His voice dropped into a chant. "Give us this day our daily vitamins. . . . With microsurgery we can give you another year of life, you said, with blood banks another six months, with organ and artery banks a month, a week. We forced them on you because we were afraid to die. What do you call this morbid fear of disease and death? Give it a name: hypochondria!"

"Look at it! Look at the city, dying. Look at the wild growth of the hospitals. The city has hypochondria; the society has hypochondria—and for once it will be fatal."

He made surprising sense, Grayle thought, in his own neurotic way.

"Call me a hypochondriac," Bone said, "and you are only saying that I am a product of my environment. More intimately than you, than anyone, I am connected to my city. We are dying together, the society and I, and we will die crying out to you, 'Save us! Save us or we die!'"

"I can't do anything," Grayle insisted heavily. "Can't you understand that?"

Bone took it with surprising calm as he turned his dark eyes toward Grayle. "Oh, you'll treat me," he said, offhand. "You think now that you won't, but there will come a time when the flesh conquers, when it screams that it can endure no more, when the nerves will grow weary of pain and the will is agonized with waiting, and you will treat me."

He studied Grayle casually, from head slowly toward the feet, reached cursorily toward the belt buckle. Before Grayle's tension could achieve action, his arms were caught from behind, pinned back.

"A spool," Bone said, "and something on it." With an experienced finger, he punched the button for rewind and then playback. As the voices came disembodied into the

room, he leaned back against the paneled wall, listening with a thin, speculative smile on his pale lips. When it ended, his smile broadened lazily. "Pick up the girl and the old man. I think they might be useful."

Grayle understood him instantly. "Don't be foolish," he snapped. "They mean nothing to me. I don't care what happens to them."

"Then why protest?" Bone asked blandly. He turned his eyes toward the police officers. "Keep him close. In the broken elevator, there's an idea."

A minute later, the big, brass doors clanged behind Grayle, and he was in the darkness again.

But this was darkness with a difference. This was night gingerly supported above a pit of nothingness. It gave him a prickling, swelling feeling of terror. . . .

He found himself later in front of the doors, hammering against them with futile, aching fists, his voice hoarse from too much screaming.

He forced himself to sit down in a corner of the car. He forced himself to forget that it was a car, hanging broken over a void. There was no escape.

He remembered punching the old buttons of the control panel. In his frenzy he had torn off a fingernail trying to pry the door open.

He found the black bag and flipped on the light. He rummaged

for a bandage, pressed it across the finger where the nail had been.

Then he sat in the dark. It was uncomfortable; he didn't like it. But it was better to sit in darkness with the knowledge of light available if it is needed than to be without any chance of light at all. . . .

Two hours later the doors swung open, and Leah was thrust between them. His watch told him the time, otherwise he would not have believed that it had not been at least a day.

The girl staggered blindly, and Grayle was as blind as she. He sprang to his feet, though, caught her before she fell, and held her tightly. She fought against him, twisting in his arms, lashing out wildly with her arms and feet.

"It's me," Grayle said repeatedly, "the medic." When she stopped struggling, Grayle started to release her, but she clutched at his arm, and held herself, trembling, against him.

It was a curious sensation for Grayle. It was a comforting thing, not professional, skillful, or impersonal like his medical skill. This was clumsy; it offered part of himself.

"Where are we?" she whispered.

"A broken elevator car in City Hall," he said huskily. "John Bone."

"What does Bone want?" she asked. Her voice was almost steady; it made him feel stronger, abler, listening to it.

"Treatment."

"And you won't." It was a statement. "You're consistent, anyway. I reported your kidnaping to Medical Center. Maybe they'll help."

It kindled a hopeful flame, but reality put it out. Medical Center would have no way of locating him, and they wouldn't tear apart the city for one minor medic. He was on his own. "Did Bone get your father, too?"

"No," Leah said evenly. "The Agency got him. They saw Russ when they came about the kidnaping. One of them recognized him. They took him in."

"That's fantastic!" Grayle exclaimed incredulously. "Where did they take him?"

"The Experimental Ward."

"Not Dr. Pearce!"

"You remember now who he was. So did they. They used his old, reciprocal contract as an excuse because the terminating date was set arbitrarily at one hundred. Doctors didn't use to live that long. I guess they still don't."

"But he's famous!"

"That's why they want him; he knows too much, and too many people remember him. They're afraid the Antivivisection Party will get hold of him and use him against the Profession in some way. They've been looking for him sixty years now—ever since he walked out of the hospital and disappeared into the city."

"I remember now," Grayle said

quickly. "It was like Ambrose Bierce, they said. He was lecturing to a class—on hematology, I think—and he stopped in the middle of a sentence, and he said, 'Gentlemen, we have gone too far; it is time to retrace our steps and discover where we went astray.' Then he walked out of the classroom and out of the hospital and no one ever saw him again. No one ever knew what he meant."

"Those days are forgotten. He never talks—talked about them. I thought the hiding was over. I thought they had finally given him up. . . . Why does John Bone want me?"

"He hopes he can force me to treat him—by—"

"Torturing me? Did you laugh at him?"

"No. No, I didn't do that."

"Why not?"

"Maybe I didn't think fast enough."

Slowly Leah pulled her hand away, and they sat silently in the darkness. Grayle's thoughts were charged; he could scarcely bear to consider them.

"I'm going to look at your eyes," he said suddenly.

He got out his ophthalmoscope and leaned toward the girl, focusing the spot of light on the clouded cornea. She sat still, let him pull up her eyelids, pull down the soft skin of her cheek. He nodded slowly to himself and put the instrument away.

"Is there any hope, doctor?" she asked drily.

He lied. "No," he said. . . .

It was unethical; it gave him a queer, dizzy feeling as if he had thrown mud at the hospital wall but it was mixed with a strange feeling of elation. It was mercy. Sure she could see—if she had an operation costing several thousand dollars more than she would ever have. It was mercy to kill that hope quickly and finally.

Maybe it wasn't ethical, but he'd just begun to realize there were times when a doctor must treat the patient and not the disease. In spite of what the professors said. Each patient was an individual with his own problems and his own treatment, and only part of both were medical.

"I don't understand," he said abruptly, "why the people let John Bone continue here with his corruption and his graft and his violence."

"That is only one side and one few people see. To most of them he is the patron—or, in longer translation, the one who does things for us. What are you going to do about him?"

"Treat him," Grayle said quietly. "There's no point in being quixotic about this."

"But, Medic—!" she began.

"Ben," he said. "Ben Grayle. I don't want to talk about it. Someone might be listening."

After that there was more silence than talking, but it was a warm sort

of silence, warmer perhaps than speech, and her hand came creeping back into his.

When the policemen opened the door, it was night again. Grayle had only a glimpse of the hall before they were hustled in to see Bone in the dark-paneled room. The political boss had a warm, red robe wrapped around his body, and he looked chilled.

"So this is the girl. Blind. I should have known that. Well, Medic, what is it to be?"

Grayle shrugged. "I'll treat you, of course."

Bone rubbed his thin hands together with a dry, sandpaper sound. "Good, good." Suddenly he stopped and smiled. "But how can I be sure that you will treat me properly? Maybe we should show the medic what my lack of treatment will mean to the girl?"

"That isn't necessary," Grayle said hastily. "I'm not a fool. You're filming this. After I treat you, you'll use it as blackmail to get future treatment. If you aren't satisfied, you can turn it over to the county society. Besides—" his voice deepened suddenly, surprisingly—"touch the girl, and I won't lift a finger to save your life!"

The light in Bone's eyes might have been admiration. "I like you, Medic," he said. "Throw in with me. We'd make a pair."

"No, thanks," Grayle said scornfully.

"Think it over. Let me know if you change your mind," Bone said. "But let's get down to business." His voice was eager.

"Have the ambulance motor started."

Bone nodded at the sergeant. "Do it!"

They waited, the four of them, stiff with a watchful uncertainty. When the depths of the bag glowed dimly, Grayle began fastening the instruments to Bone's emaciated body.

Where's Coke? he wondered.

He read the diagnosis, removed the instruments, and slowly stowed them away. Thoughtfully, he explored the pockets of the bag.

"What is it?" Bone asked anxiously. "Tell me what's wrong!"

Grayle's face was sober. "It's nothing to be concerned about," he said. "You need a tonic. You're taking vitamins already, I'm sure. Double the dose." He pulled out a bottle of pink pills. "Here's some barbiturate-emphetamine pills to put you to sleep at night and wake you up in the morning. And here's some extra ones." He handed Bone a second bottle; in it the pills were round, flat, and green. "These are important—take one every four hours."

Bone frowned cautiously. "What's in them?"

"Nothing to hurt you." Grayle shook out a couple into his hand, tossed them into his mouth, swallowed. "See?"

Bone nodded, satisfied. He swiveled to the policeman. "Okay. Take them back."

"Wait a minute," Grayle objected. "Aren't you going to turn us loose?"

"Where'd you get that idea?" Bone chuckled. "I like having a medic around. Gives me a feeling of security."

Grayle sighed, accepting it. "Well, I guess there's nothing I can do." He bent to pick up the bag and noticed the expression of disappointment that flickered across Leah's face. His hand strayed past Bone's neck. "Here," Grayle said to the officer watching them suspiciously. "I suppose you'll want to keep this."

The policeman stepped forward to accept the bag and moved back into place with it in his hand. With the hand that held the gun, he reached down to scratch the back of his other hand.

Slowly Bone collapsed behind Grayle. It made a rustling sound. The policeman tried to lift his gun, but it was too heavy. It pulled him down. He fell.

"What's happened?" Leah asked, startled.

Grayle caught up her hand and scooped up the black bag in one swift motion. "I knocked out Bone with supersonics and the cop with a hypodermic of neo-curare. Come on."

As they went through the glass doors into the hall, he wondered

again: *Where's Coke?* He thumbed the elevator call button and waited in a frenzy of impatience. Leah held his hand firmly, confidently.

"Don't worry. You'll get us out."

Cool certainty flooded over him. His shoulders straightened.

When the elevator doors opened, the sergeant stood there facing them. He stared, surprised, and his hand dropped to his gun.

Grayle stepped forward confidently. "Bone said to let us loose."

"That don't sound like Bone," the sergeant growled. He tugged his gun loose. "Let's go check."

Grayle shrugged, released Leah's hand so that he could shift the bag into that one, and swung around so that the bag bumped the sergeant's leg. The sergeant brushed the spot casually, took two steps, and fell, heavily. . . .

As Grayle and Leah stepped out of the elevator into the basement hall, the lights went out. *Coke!* Grayle thought, and groaned.

"What's the matter?" Leah asked, alarmed.

"The lights went out."

"I can help if I knew what you were trying to do."

"Find the ambulance. It should be somewhere in the basement."

"They must have brought me in that way," Leah said thoughtfully. "There was a door that clanged, some steps, a door, some more steps, and then a straight stretch to the elevator. Come on."

Grayle held back for a moment

and then let her pull him into the darkness. "There's steps," she said. They walked down carefully. Grayle found the handle of the door and held it open. A moment later they were descending more steps.

"This way," Leah said confidently.

Within seconds they were beside the ambulance, climbing in, switching on the lights. Grayle swung it around with a feeling of elation approaching giddiness. Even the sight of the closed, garage door didn't bother him. He eased the ambulance as close as possible, stepped out, touched the door gingerly, and tugged at the handle. It rose with well-oiled ease.

After that it was nothing. Grayle headed north for Sixth Street Trafficway, to avoid ambush and shake off pursuers. On the road, he could outdistance anything. After a few minutes they hit Southwest Trafficway. Grayle turned the driving over to the Chauffeur, and swung around to look at Leah. She was sitting on the cot.

"Look!" he began, "I—" And he stopped.

"Don't you know what to do with me?" she asked, smiling gently.

"Well, I—I guess that's right. I can't leave you alone out here, and if I take you to your home, Bone might pick you up again. There's rules against taking anyone into the Center—" He took a deep breath. "The hell with the rules. Listen! You're a patient. For—an eye oper-

ation, replacement of opaque cornea. You've been transferred from the Neosho County Hospital—that's just outside Chanute, Kansas, in case they ask questions—and you don't know why your records haven't got here yet. Understand?"

"Won't that mean trouble for you?" she asked.

"Nothing I can't get out of. If anyone sees us together—why, I was fooled, too, that's all. No argument now. It'll give us an extra day to decide what to do with you."

"Will I be able to see my father?"

"Of course not," Grayle snapped. "Not if he's in Experimental, anyway. The only ones allowed in are doctors and attendants on duty."

"I understand. All right, I'll leave it up to you."

Again Grayle felt that quick, irrational flood of happiness. It was inappropriate. He shoved it down, deep, as the walls of Medical Center opened and took them in.

They were lucky. There was no one around as Grayle parked the ambulance in the vast, underground garage and led Leah cautiously to the subway. They waited in the shadows until an empty car swung into view.

"Move quickly," he said. "Trust me."

He led her onto the moving belt, holding her forearm in a sure grip. Even so, she swayed and almost fell. He pulled her up and led her swiftly after the car moving on the

belt beside them. Just as they reached the end of the approachway, Grayle helped her into the car and swung after her.

He was sweating. The subway wasn't built for the blind.

Getting off was much less difficult. The sign above the archway said: EENT. They walked into an elevator and let it lift them to the fifth floor. Grayle watched from the concealment of a cross-corridor while Leah felt her way to the glass enclosure of the duty office.

"Is there anyone here?" she asked out of her darkness. "There was a medic, but he had to leave. I'm from the Neosho County Hospital. . . ."

As Grayle faded down the hall, he saw the nurse come out of the office with a look of concern. He sighed. Leah was safe temporarily.

He walked through the dark halls wondering where everybody was. It was only eight o'clock in the evening.

The floor under his feet was yielding and resilient. He breathed in the hospital smells of ether and alcohol, the old odors, omnipresent, eternal. They were his first memory of his father. It was a good smell. He filled his lungs with it, held it in tightly, as if he could hold on to everything he valued if only he could keep this from escaping.

This was his place, his home. This was his job. This was his life. He *had* to hang on to that belief. Otherwise everything was worthless,

seven years of study and labor were wasted, and a lifetime of dreams was turned into nightmare.

Charley Brand looked up from his desk, surprised. "My God, man! Where've you been?"

"A long story," Grayle said wearily. "First I've got to have some food and some rest."

"They'll have to wait. There's a royal request on your desk."

There was a message glowing on the plate set into the top of his desk. He read it with a cold, shrinking viscera.

Your presence is requested at the meeting of the Wyandotte County Medical Society this evening and at the meeting of the Political Action Committee to follow.

J. B. Hardy, M.D.
Secretary

Grayle looked around the dormitory with frantic eyes. "Where's Hal?"

"Do you think he'd miss a meeting?" Brand asked sardonically and added a good imitation of Mock's knowing voice. "These things look good on your record.' Better run along. If you hurry you can still make the convoy."

It was more of a tradition than anything else—this convoy detail with the helicopters hovering above. No one was foolish enough to attack anything stronger than a lone ambulance.

They drove north on Seventh Street Trafficway over the Armourdale Industrial District that flamed below them in the night. Grayle looked out, unseeing, his fatigue and hunger conquered by anxiety.

Why did the PAC want to see him?

Few medics and fewer doctors got summons to appear before the committee. It was not an enviable thing. It was followed, frequently, by the person involved quietly collecting his personal belongings from the hospital and disappearing from the sight of medicine.

When the convoy pulled up in front of the Court House, Grayle was still tormenting himself with possibilities.

As usual, the meeting was a bore. When the anxiety ebbed, Grayle dozed in his chair, jerking himself up occasionally to hear a few words.

There was a moving speech by the A.M.A. field representative on the danger to ethical standards in new legislation pending before Congress. Its inevitable result was socialized medicine.

Funny, Grayle mused, how that Hydra was never scotched. Cut off one head and two more grew in its place. Doctors should know enough to cauterize the stump.

By unanimous voice vote, \$325,000 was turned over to the Washington lobby for legislative action.

The chairman of the Political Action Committee stood up. According to him, the political situa-

tion was under control at state and county levels. The Antivivisection Party had closed alliances with a number of quasi-religious groups during the last months, but this was expected to amount to no more than usual. Everyone had been given a mimeographed slate of the state and county candidates. They had all received PAC approval.

The slate was accepted without dissent. A sum of \$553,000 was voted for campaign expenses.

There was more.

When the general meeting had been adjourned, Grayle wandered slowly toward the door of the room announced for the PAC meeting.

"Grayle?"

It was the chairman of the committee. Grayle followed him numbly into the big room. There were five of them, the chairman taking his place in the middle. They sat solemn-faced behind a long, heavy desk made of dark old wood.

"You're in trouble, boy," the chairman began. "There's quite an indictment against you."

The doctor on the chairman's right leaned forward, a small memoreader in his hand. "Last night, while on an emergency call into the City, you turned over to the police an alleged shover named Crumm. You offered the police some alleged evidence."

"There wasn't anything alleged about it, sir. It was an open-and-shut case."

"Unfortunately, that isn't true."

As a consequence you have put Medical Center, the society, and the Profession in an uncomfortable position. We have received a complaint about you from the Chief of Police."

Grayle stared at them.

"Crumm was dismissed at 9 a.m. There was no foundation to the charges."

"But I gave them the ampule he offered me," Grayle said in bewilderment, "the recording of his offer, my affidavit—"

"Worthless. You misunderstood him. He had a license. And the penicillin in the ampule tested a full three hundred thousand units."

"A typical Bone trick! He took out a license and backdated it."

"Obviously. Nevertheless, you laid yourself and us open to a false arrest suit. You should have better judgment, Medic."

"They're lying about the penicillin," Grayle said hopefully. "They couldn't sell it at that price; it was less than wholesale."

"If you had been listening to the reports tonight, you would have learned that we have decided in recent weeks to abandon the use of penicillin—which makes it worthless. When it was first introduced, immune bacterial strains averaged five percent. Now they are ninety-five percent and still climbing. The same thing is true of aureomycin, streptomycin, neomycin, terramycin, and a dozen others. Naturally John Bone can get them at less

than cost. There are mountains of the stuff lying around useless."

The doctor put down his memorandum. "The important point, Grayle, is that those who buy from John Bone aren't in the market for honest medicine anyway. We can't help matters by penalizing agents, even if we had the power. You don't cure diseases by treating symptoms. You don't treat coronaries by amputating a finger."

"What do we do?" Grayle demanded. "Give up?"

The doctor smiled. "That's what the PAC is for. We refused to renew John Bone's contract. We knew that would bring him to his senses." His face hardened. "At least, we thought it would."

"What do you mean?" Grayle felt vaguely frightened.

"Until Bone released you . . ."

Grayle stared at the five immobile faces. "He didn't release me. I escaped!"

"Now, Grayle, don't waste our time with stuff like that," the chairman said impatiently. "Men don't escape from John Bone. And we have evidence—a film of the examination and treatment you gave him!"

"But I did," Grayle broke in. "I used the supersonic anesthetizer and a hypodermic of neo-curare and I escaped—"

"Fantastic!"

"I gave him sugar pills—"

"Just as bad. They're as effective as anything else."

"What did you expect of me?" Grayle protested. "Should I have got myself killed? Don't you see why Bone sent you the films? It was for revenge. If I'd really treated him, he'd have held these films over my head as a blackmail threat."

The committee members exchanged glances. "We might be able to accept that," the chairman said, "except that we have other evidence to prove that you hold the Profession and its ethics rather lightly."

He switched on a recorder. Incredulously, Grayle listened to his voice mouthing questions about medicine and fees and social problems. It was skillfully edited. It was damning.

Hal, he thought, Hal, why did you do it?

But he knew why. Hal Mock was worried that he might not graduate. One less in the class was one more chance for Hal.

The chairman was speaking to him. "You will submit your resignation in the morning. As soon after that as possible, you will collect your personal effects and leave the Center. If you are ever discovered practicing medicine . . ."

When it was finished, Grayle asked quietly, "What are you going to do with Dr. Russell Pearce?"

The chairman's eyes narrowed and then he turned to the doctor on his right. "Dr. Pearce?" he said suavely. "Why he disappeared sixty years ago, didn't he? He must have died long ago. A pity . . ."

Grayle stopped listening. Something had finally snapped, like a carbon-steel scalpel, and he didn't have to listen any more. A man spends his life searching for the truth. If he's lucky he learns before he dies that no one has it all. We each have little pieces.

The danger was in assuming our fragment was the whole.

Medicine could not be both political and irresponsible.

Dr. Pearce could not be both hero and villain.

Grayle had finally found his way to the back of the statue and learned—in time—that half an ideal is worse than none at all.

He turned and walked out of the room. While the Chauffeur guided the ambulance back toward Medical Center, he fished around in the black bag for a couple of amphetamine pills and ate them like candy.

But his feeling of exhilaration and purpose began minutes before the stimulant hit him. He wasn't even disturbed to discover that he was being followed. He shook off the white jacket in the subway.

"Look," he said to the pharmacist on duty, "it must get pretty boring here at night. Don't you get an overwhelming yen for a cup of coffee?"

"I sure do."

"Go ahead," Grayle said. "I'll watch the pharmacy."

The pharmacist hesitated, torn between duty and desire, but the decision came from a reluctance to

appear timid before the medic.

As soon as he was gone, Grayle went straight through the pharmacy to the vault. The heavy door was ajar. In the farthest corner was a modest cardboard carton. Its contents had been estimated, conservatively, as worth \$10,000,000. Grayle pocketed an ampule, hesitated, and removed the eleven others from their cotton nests—he was suddenly doubtful that the hospital should be trusted with them . . .

"Thanks for the break," said the pharmacist gratefully.

Grayle waved carelessly as he left. "Any time."

At the barred door of Experimental Ward, the guard stopped him. "I don't see your name here anywhere," he growled, his finger moving down the duty list.

"No wonder," Grayle said, pointing his finger. "They misspelled it. Quayle instead of Grayle."

It worked. Inside, he walked quickly past the blood bank with its rows of living factories, the organ bank with its surgery and automatic heart . . . The experimental rooms devoted to geriatrics were at the very end.

Dr. Pearce made scarcely a dent in the firm hospital mattress. Grayle shook him, but the smudged eyelids wouldn't open. He filled a hypodermic from the ampule in his jacket pocket and injected it into a vein.

Grayle waited anxiously in the near darkness. Finally Dr. Pearce's

eyelids flickered. "Dr. Pearce," he whispered. "This is the medic. Remember?" Pearce nodded, barely perceptibly. "I'm going to try to get you out of here, you and Leah. She's here, too. Will you help?"

Pearce nodded again, stronger this time. Grayle brought the long cart beside the bed and lifted Pearce's bone-light body onto it. He pulled a sheet up over the face. "Here we go."

He engaged the clutch and guided the cart back the way he had come, past the rooms with their burdens of human tragedy, through the door, past the startled guard. The guard acted as if he were going to say something, but he waited too long.

When they were entering the elevator, Pearce whispered in a dust-dry voice, "What was the shot, medic?"

"*Elixir vitae*. Isn't that justice?"

"So seldom do we get it."

"When did you have your last shot?"

"Sixty years ago."

Which cleared up that point. "You said you'd give Leah your eyes. Did you mean it?"

"Yes. Can you do it?"

The years had dessicated the body, but they hadn't dimmed the mind, Grayle thought. Pearce had realized instantly what Grayle meant. "I don't know," he admitted. "It's a chance. I'll have to do it all alone, hastily. I could give her some from the bank, but she would

hate it. With yours it would be different."

"A gift of love," Pearce whispered. "It can never be refused. That is how it should be done always, with love. Don't tell her. Afterwards she'll understand, how it made me happy to give her what I could not give her as a father—the world of light. . . ."

The duty office was vacant. Grayle ran his finger down the room list until he found Leah's name. He found another cart, ran it silently into the room, and stopped beside the bed. "Leah?"

"Ben?" she said instantly.

For a moment it blunted the cold edge of his determination. It had been a long time since anyone had called him "Ben" like that. "Onto the cart. I've got your father. We're going to make a break for it."

"You'll be ruined."

"It was done for me," he said. "Funny. You have an ideal—maybe it looks like your father—and you think it exists outside you. But it doesn't; it's inside. And one day you look and it isn't there any more. There was no basis for it; it was a dream. And you're free."

The cart was rolling toward the elevator. On the floor below, he guided the cart into the EENT operating room. As it bumped gently against the cart on which Pearce was lying, Leah put out a hand, touched her father's arm, and said, "Russ!"

"Leah!"

For a moment it stabbed Grayle with jealousy; he felt left out, alone. "You were right," Leah said, and she put out another hand to catch hold of Grayle and pull him close. "He is the man. Better even than we thought."

"Find a great deal of happiness, children," Pearce said.

Grayle chuckled happily. "I think you two planned the whole thing."

Leah blushed slowly. *She's really beautiful*, Grayle thought in sudden surprise. "No, we only hoped it," she said.

Grayle injected the anesthetic, felt her fingers relax, droop away. Motionless, he stared at her face and then held up his hands in front of his eyes. They were trembling. He looked around at the gleaming whiteness of the walls, the delicate microsurgical tools, the suturing machine, the bandages, and he knew how easy it would be to slip, to make the fatal mistake.

"Courage, Medic," said Pearce. "You've studied for seven years. You can do this simple thing."

He took a deep breath. Yes, he could do it. And he went at it as it should be done—with love.

"Medic Grayle," said the hidden speaker in the ceiling, "report to the dormitory. Medic Grayle. . . ."

They had discovered that Pearce was missing. The old man talked to him while his hands were busy and helped take his mind off the terrifying consequences. He told

Grayle why he had walked out on his class sixty years before.

"It suddenly came to me—the similarity between medicine and religion. We fostered it with our tradition-building, our indecipherable prescriptions, our ritual. They called the new medicines wonder drugs because they didn't know how they worked. Religion and medicine—both owed their great periods to a pathological fear of death. He is not so great an enemy."

Grayle made depth readings of the cloudy corneas and set them into the microsurgical machine.

"Oh, the doctors weren't to blame. We were a product of our society just as John Bone is a product of his. But we forgot an ancient wisdom which might have given us the strength to resist. *A sound mind in a sound body*, the Greeks said. And even more important, *Nothing in excess*."

Grayle positioned the shining scalpel over Leah's right eye. The blade slipped into the eye without resistance, slicing away the cornea.

"Anything in excess will ruin this society or any other. Even the best of things. The lifespan can be extended to a reasonable length without overburdening the society. Then we run into the law of diminishing returns, and it takes just as much again to push it a year farther, and then six months, a week, a day. There is no end, and our fear is such that we can't say, 'Stop! We're healthy enough!'"

The scalpel retracted and moved to the left eye.

"The extra lives we were saving were peripheral: the very young, the very old, and the constitutional inadequate. We repealed natural selection, saved the weak to reproduce themselves, and told ourselves that we were healthier."

Both corneas were gone. Grayle looked at his watch. It was taking too long. He turned to Pearce.

"No anesthetic," Pearce said. As the microsurgical machine descended into position, Grayle was rock-steady.

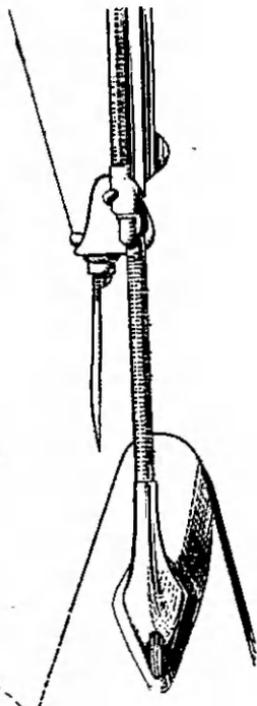
The empty sockets were bandaged.

"We destroyed the cities with our doom-sayings," Pearce went on, "and we amassed a disproportionate amount of capital with our tax-exemptions. Like religion again, in Medieval Europe, when piety accumulated wealth free from levies."

The corneas were in place.

"It couldn't last in Europe, and it can't last here. Henry VIII found an excuse to break with the Pope and appropriate the Church lands. In France it helped bring the Revolution. And thus this noble experiment will end. In ice or fire—by the degeneration of technology below the level necessary to sustain it, or by rebellion. And that's why I went into the city."

The suturing machine drove its tiny needles into the edges of the cornea, stitching it to the eye in a neat graft.



"That's where the future will be made, where the people are surviving because they are strong. There we are learning new things—the paranormal methods of health that are not so new after all, but the age-old methods of healers. When the end comes, the fine spacious life in the country will end like the May fly. The City will survive and grow again. Outside they will die of diseases their bodies have forgotten, of cancer they cannot resist, of a hundred different ailments for which the medicine has been lost."

As the bandages were fastened over Leah's eyes, the speaker in the

ceiling spoke again. "Emergency squads report to stations. Heavily armed forces attacking St. Luke's."

The time for caution was past. Grayle taped together the cart legs and guided them across the hall into the elevator. They dropped to the subway level. Clumsily, Grayle maneuvered the two carts across the approachway into one of the cars and swung himself aboard after them.

In short moments the garage would be swarming with the emergency squads.

Another speaker boomed: "Snipers on buildings along Main Street

are shelling St. Luke's with five-inch mortars. No casualties reported. Emergency squads, on the double."

"Has it started already?" Pearce asked softly.

As they reached the garage, men were racing past them. No one paid any attention to the medic guiding the two carts. Grayle stopped at the first unoccupied ambulance, opened the back, and lifted Leah's unconscious body onto one of the stretchers. He lifted Pearce onto the other one. He slammed the door shut and raced around to the front.

Just as the engine caught, a startled medic raced up and pounded futilely against the door. Grayle pulled away in a burst of speed.

The ambulance was only one vehicle among many; they streamed from the Center: ambulances, half-tracks, tanks. At Southwest Trafficway, Grayle edged out of the stream and turned north. North—into the City.

John Bone was waiting beside the garage door under City Hall. "Okay," he told Coke, "you can call off the diversion now." He gave Grayle a twisted grin. "I had a feeling you'd turn up here sooner or later. Come on in."

"Said the spider to the fly," Grayle said, smiling. "No, thanks. You'll get healed and better than I can do it. But not now."

Bone's face wrinkled angrily. "By whom?"

"These," Grayle said, waving his hand toward the back of the ambulance.

"An old man? A blind girl?"

"A blind old man, and a girl who might see. Yes. They can do more for you than I can. We'll get along, Bone."

Bone grimaced. "Yes. Yes, I suppose we will."

Leah was stirring. Grayle reached back and put a hand on her forehead. She grew quiet. He turned back to Bone and stripped off his white jacket and tossed it to the political boss of the city. "Here, maybe this will do you some good. You can have the ambulance, too, when it's taken us home."

Home. He smiled. He had thrown in his lot with the City. He had even forgotten his filters. There was brutality in the City, but you can tame it, put its misdirected vitality to use.

But the only thing to do with an ideal that has outworn its necessity is to turn your back on it, to leave it behind.

There is no division between men; there aren't men and men in white jackets. A doctor is only a man with special skills. But a healer is something more than a man.

They would make the beginning, the old man, and the blind girl who might see, and the medic who had found a new ideal. "I spent seven years learning to be a doctor," Grayle said. "I guess I can spend seven years more learning to heal."

AND THEN SHE FOUND HIM . . .

by Paul Janvier

*You could smell the panic in
the town. Pale clerks and
tense detectives waited in
all the stores for the thief
that no one ever saw.*

*One merchant said the thefts
seemed humanly impossible—
and he was almost right*

THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE Merchants' Protective Association was held on the second floor of the Caspar Building, above Teller's Emporium on Broad Street. Around seven o'clock, before anybody'd had a chance to more than half settle his supper, members began coming up the narrow stairs beside Teller's display window. Unsmiling, they sat down on folding chairs that lost their straight-rowed orderliness as small groups bunched together to talk in low, upset voices. In a short time the air was thick with cigar smoke, and the splintered old board floor was black with scuffed ashes. There was more than a touch of panic in the atmosphere.

Todd Deerbush sat alone and unnoticed in the back row, his bony



JOHN GUNTHER '37

ankles hooked over the crossbar of the seat in front of him. He looked tiredly out from under the brim of his khaki rainhat, and from time to time, he pinched the bridge of his narrow nose. He and Stannard had rolled over four hundred miles today, and more than fourteen hundred in the past three days, to be in time for this meeting. Deerbush had driven all the way, while Stannard analyzed and re-analyzed the slim sheaf of newspaper clippings that had brought them here. Now Stannard was in a hotel room, sleeping. Tomorrow they'd rendezvous, Deerbush would give his report on this meeting and the executive half of the team would begin work.

Deerbush was dog-tired. Because he could leave it to second nature, his mind worked on alertly, but his face fell into weary, unguarded lines. He was somewhere near forty, with features that could look either younger or much older. Most important were his eyes. They were set among radiating folds in his gray skin. Shadowed by pinched eyebrows, his eyes gave him the look of long-accustomed solitude—of a loneliness walled off and carefully, methodically sealed away.

In the front of the room, the chairman was calling the meeting to order. The minutes were approved as read and Old Business was tabled by acclamation. There was a dignified clinging to orderliness in the way the chairman ran

faithfully through the parliamentary procedures. There was impatience in the nervous creak of the folding chairs. Men hunched forward, shuffled their feet, caught themselves and sat still, and then crouched again. Only Deerbush sat motionless, by himself in the back of the room.

"New Business?" the chairman asked, and immediately recognized a short, spare, balding man who'd gotten his hand in the air first. The man stood up quickly.

"I guess—" he began. "I suppose," he substituted self-consciously, "we all know why we're here. So there's no use talking about that. What we're here for tonight is to try and do something about it."

"If we can," another man broke in.

The first man waved a hand in sharp impatience. "If we can. O.K. But—what I was saying— We all know each other. I guess we've all checked with each other. It looks like my store's been hit the worst. Our inventory's short about a hundred dollars a week for the last two months."

Other men broke in now. The short man snapped: "Well, maybe my place isn't the worst. But, by golly, what's the difference in the end? Somebody's walkin' out with stuff from every one of our places, he's been doin' it for months, we're goin' crazy, and we can't even say how he's been doin' it. And what's more, I guess there ain't a merchant

here can stand that kind of stuff very long. 'Bout the only thing this feller ain't done yet is rob the bank—and maybe he's gettin' set to do that, too. The police ain't findin' anything out, the insurance detectives ain't no better, and neither's my store cop. If we don't do somethin' soon, this town—yessir, this *whole* town—is gonna be flat on its back and bankrupt! Now, what're we gonna do about it?"

Deerbush grunted to himself. He reached three fingers into the open package in his shirt pocket, took out a pinch of loose tobacco, and began chewing it thoughtfully.

Other men were standing up now. "All right, Henry. I'm going crazy over at my place, too. You say we ought to do something. But what? Things just disappear. In broad daylight. No one comes near them. Stock can't just float out the door—but one minute it's there and the next it isn't. I can't think of anything to do about that."

"An', by the way," another man put in, "I figure we'd be six weeks closer t'an answer if all you didn't keep shut t'each other about it that long. What's the good of this 'Sociation if we got t'read about these things in t'paper?"

"I didn't notice you standin' up and sayin' anythin', Sam Frazer," the spare man answered testily. "I don't mind admittin' I wasn't in a hurry to look foolish. Then I found out it wasn't just my place. But I guess after that I didn't try to make

out I'm so smart, callin' down my fellow merchants in this community. You just sit down, Sam, and let the rest of us work this out. Before it gets to be more'n we can handle."

"We can't handle it now." The man who spoke hadn't said anything up to now. Deerbush had noticed him earlier hunched forward in the first row, a scorching cigarette held gingerly between his fingertips. He went on doggedly, in spite of his obvious embarrassment. "This isn't shoplifting as anyone has ever heard of it before. I've checked this with the men from my insurance company, and I've talked to Chief Christensen. I'm—I'm almost inclined to believe it's humanly impossible to be robbed in this particular way."

Deerbush fingered his nose again, and sat up straight. But nothing was made of that half-idea, and the man who'd brought it up had nothing more to say.

It ended with the Association's deciding on offering a reward. It was a patently useless move, but it was something to put on the record. The meeting broke up lingeringly, with men snapping at each other and at nothing.

By then, Deerbush had a fair picture of things. More and more it became obvious that he'd been right in calling the newspaper stories to Stannard's attention.

The last man to leave the hall put the lights out and locked the

door behind him. Deerbush stood up and shucked out of his trenchcoat. Rolling it into a pillow, he took off his hat, stretched out on the floor, and went to sleep.

It was almost noon when he woke up. He got to his feet, ran his fingers through the thin, gray-brown hair left on his shiny scalp, and brushed off his suit with a few swipes of his palms. He looked out through the windows.

Outside, he saw Broad Street in the light of a brightly sunny day, with cars moving up and down the street and shoppers going into stores. But there were policemen on duty at every corner, and they neglected the traffic in favor of stealthily watching the people on the sidewalks. People-like, the shoppers evidently had not yet let a few stories in the weekly paper really sink in. But Deerbush could see one or two pedestrians looking at the police with sudden realization. It was a small town. Once started, it wouldn't be many days, or hours, before the panic he'd seen in this hall last night would osmose out from behind the store counters, puddle up, and begin to choke the whole town.

He settled his hat on his long, narrow skull, folded the trenchcoat over his arm and left the hall. He was thinking Stannard had better clean this up today if he could.

Stannard was waiting for him on the corner of Broad and Fauquier streets. They walked slowly along together, hugging the edge of

the sidewalk, while Deerbush gave his report. Occasionally people bumped into them, and always moved on without apologizing. Whenever it happened, Stannard would grimace. Deerbush paid it no attention.

Stannard nodded slowly when the report was finished. "I think that confirms it," he said in his patient voice. "You agree, don't you, Todd?"

"We never had one of us turn out to be a criminal up to now," Deerbush answered, intending it to be no more than a comment.

Stannard turned to him patiently. "I'm surprised it hasn't happened before, Todd. You must remember the pressures and strains that arise in us from being as we are. Bear in mind that it's incredible that any of us, let alone most of us, grow up to be mature personalities."

"Sure, Frank. I didn't mean to say anything special by it. It's just that this kind of thing hasn't happened up to now."

"Of course, Todd. And I appreciate your getting help from someone else, instead of trying to handle it by yourself."

Deerbush shrugged uncomfortably. He knew very well that Stannard and the other people of his kind, back in Chicago, were all of them brainier than he was. The people at the top of the organization, like Stannard, were almost as much different from Deerbush as he was from most people. Maybe

more. They seemed to live a different kind of life, inside—restless, tense; like people trying to climb out of a cage. Deerbush had thought about it for a long time, and decided it was because they could always spare a part of their brains for remembering the spot they were in.

He and Stannard walked along, and toward one o'clock they stopped at a diner next to the city hall. They finally got seats at the crowded counter after, missing their turn twice, and then they waited a long time for the waitress to get their order. Stannard toyed with his fork. Deerbush was accustomed to this kind of thing, being among other people much more often: he called out their order as the waitress passed by, trusting to her training to leave it stuck in her mind. In time she came back along the counter, carrying two plates and looking up and down the row of customers.

"Hot roast beef and a ham on white?"

"Right here, Miss," Deerbush said in a deliberately loud, firm voice. She set the plates down in front of them automatically, without looking at them. She was an attractive woman, near Deerbush's own age, with laughter lines at the corners of her mouth. Deerbush looked at her with almost naked hope in his eyes. But there was no disappointment in him when she turned away without ever having looked at the man behind this one of a row of faces.

Stannard looked at him, shaking his head. "Isn't your own kind good enough for you?" he said with gentle pointedness.

Deerbush shrugged uncomfortably. He ate quickly, left an oversized tip, went out, and waited for Stannard on the sidewalk.

They set a rendezvous, divided the town between them, and separated. Deerbush began walking along the streets south of Fauquier, turning casually into each store for a minute or two. Each time, he could smell the mute panic, thick as sour honey, clogging the air. Every place was the same; full of pale clerks who forced smiles at their customers and jerked their heads every time the door opened. But no one ever noticed him—no one stopped him to ask what he was doing. He moved along, stepping out of everyone's way, gathering urgency from the look of the people he saw.

Two o'clock found him walking quickly. By now he knew which stores had been hardest hit, and he thought he saw the pattern in the shoplifter's work. He wondered if Stannard mightn't have seen it some time ago, and possibly finished their job already. . . .

He walked into *The Maryland Company*—"The Complete Department Store"—and began moving back and forth along the aisles.

It was worse here than anywhere else in his half of town. The clerks were worked up to an edge of des-

peration that made them dig their pencil-points into their sales receipts and fumble at change-making until the customers caught the infection too. No one talked in a normal tone of voice.

He saw how many people there were who stood motionless and went over everybody with their eyes, and that told him how frightened the insurance companies were. And there was a stock-taking crew, moving hurriedly from counter to counter, making spot-checks—not quite at random.

They'd seen the pattern, too. Deerbush nodded to himself at the efficiency of the system, even though it couldn't ever catch this special thief.

He went to the Misses' Dress Department. There were more tensely idle people concentrated around it than anywhere else in the store. Deerbush stopped, leaned against a pillar, and waited, ignored. And eventually, almost at closing time, he saw her.

She walked into the department with a number of packages already under her arm; a tall, pale, thinish girl. Her brown eyes were large, her nose was short and upturned. Her lips were pursed in a cupid's bow. Her hair was short and black, carefully dressed, with just the faintest dusting of silver at the tips. She moved lightly—not gracefully, as grace is taught, but with quick, unsettled movements that reminded Deerbush of a small

young bird. Her gown was pale pink and summery, with bows at the shoulders and a ruffle of thick petticoats at the hem. Except for the deep creases in her forehead and the sharp definition of her lips, it might have been easy to mistake her age.

Her glance swept the dress racks and adjoining accessory counters. She looked at handbags, her lower lip caught between her teeth, and shook her head. She pivoted on one heel. The detectives all looked past her, preoccupied.

Deerbush was sure.

He watched her approach the dress racks and begin lifting things out. After a moment, she went over to the saleswoman, who was picking nervously at a floss of lint on her skirt.

"Hello," she said softly.

The saleswoman came to life. Her face lit in a warm smile that was all the more strange for the abstracted look in her eyes. Deerbush grunted explosively.

"Why, hello there, miss!" she beamed fondly. "My, that's a pretty frock!" And still, there was something vague in her expression.

The girl dimpled. "Why, thank you!" she smiled. And the detectives continued to ignore her, just as they ignored Deerbush.

Now the girl twined her fingers behind her back and bowed her head, blushing. "But you have so many other pretty ones here," she whispered shyly.

"Why, bless you, dear, do you

mean you'd like to have some of them?" The saleswoman looked contrite for not having thought of it sooner. But Deerbush could see something trapped in the saleswoman's eyes. Something that knew there was a wrong thing going on, but couldn't get its knowledge through.

"Oh! Could I?" the girl in the summery dress exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "They're so beautiful!"

"Of course, dear," the saleswoman soothed. "Here—come with me—here's where the really nice ones are. You just pick out the ones you like."

Deerbush watched wonderingly. The girl lifted dress after dress off the racks, holding each against herself and turning in front of the big floor-length mirrors. She never looked directly at her own face—only at the dresses. Deerbush had the feeling she was too self-conscious to be caught admiring herself.

Finally, she and the saleswoman had chosen a group of dresses.

"Thank you *very* much!" the girl breathed.

"I'm glad you like them, my dear," the saleswoman said, smiling warmly. "Please come back again." And still there was something lost and trapped in her expression, but it was very faint.

The detectives stayed watchful, but all of them seemed to have found something—a curled edge in

the carpeting, or a turning overhead fan—that kept attracting their attention.

"I'll come back," the girl said. "I promise." She turned to go, holding the dresses. "Goodbye!"

"Goodbye, dear," the salesgirl said. She smiled fondly, if vaguely, and drifted back behind her counter. She looked down at her skirt, began scraping harshly at the fabric.

The girl in the summery dress moved slowly toward the doors, browsing as she went, stopping at an occasional counter to look over the merchandise. Once she waited while a floorwalker stepped abstractedly out of her way.

Deerbush moved after her. He heard a sound behind him and felt it raise the hackles of his neck. He spun his head around. The stock-taking crew was in the Misses' Dress Department and the saleswoman was doubled over her counter, sobbing hysterically. "No—no," she was saying, "there wasn't anybody here."

A man held the front doors open for the girl in the summery dress. Deerbush was on the street only yards behind her, brushing by the store detective who unobtrusively blocked the exit. He followed her as she turned off the main street away from the shopping areas, and he couldn't make sense out of what he'd seen.

But that didn't matter so much—the important thing was that he'd found her.

He could tell she'd never had anyone follow her before in her life. She never looked about her. When she turned off into a tree-lined side street, Deerbush stepped up beside her.

He walked there for perhaps twenty steps before she turned her head and looked at him, frowning a little. She peered at him with puzzled eyes. "You're different," she said.

"It's all right," Deerbush said, trying not to frighten her. "My name's Todd Deerbush and I'm not going to hurt you. I'd like to walk along with you for a while."

She stopped still. "You're different," she repeated. "You're like me."

Maybe, Deerbush thought. "I don't know," he said.

She began walking again, finally, the dresses forgotten in her arms, puzzling over it. "You noticed me," she said after a while, her mind made up. "All by yourself. Nobody else ever did. You must be real too."

"I don't know what you mean by that," Deerbush said gently. "But people don't notice me, either."

She nodded firmly. "Unless you make them. You're real . . . I never thought anybody else but me was real."

"I guess there's quite a few," Deerbush answered, thinking that there was none exactly like her. "But it's hard to tell. Might be some in every town. Far's I know, I'm with the only bunch that's gotten together."

"Are there that many of us?"

"Well," he said, "there's more than fifty in this bunch I'm in."

They walked a little farther. They were in a very good neighborhood now, with big houses and wide lawns. She turned toward him again, and looking at her he realized she'd been preoccupied all the while. "What makes us real, Todd?"

He still didn't know what she might mean by that. He tried to answer her as best he could. "Stannard—that's one of our real smart people; you better ask him for the answers—Stannard says we broadcast—like a TV station, he says—something like that; it's out of my league—that makes us not be noticed. It works inside people's heads." He felt he was making himself sound confused and stupid. He couldn't help it, and he was used to it.

"That's not what I asked you, Todd. That's what happens first. But after a while you can make people notice you and be nice to you. But they can't do it to you. That proves you're real and they're just . . . something else. But what *does* it?"

"The same kind of thing, I guess," he answered lamely. He was trying to find out more from her than she could from him, and he didn't know what to do about it. Stannard might—but for some reason Deerbush found himself not wanting Stannard in this right now. "Stannard says it's protection.

He says Mother Nature's working out a new kind of creature in us, and doesn't want us to get hurt. But she kind of overdid it."

His voice was gentle. He thought of her growing up in this town, with the broadcast growing stronger and stronger as she grew; wondering why the boys didn't have any interest in her, wondering why everyone acted so strange. He could see the puzzled little child with the tear-streaked face, and the hurt teen-ager who came later, having to separate from her family if she was to live at all . . . and then the woman, blooming somehow in spite of everything, and beginning to fade. . . . Only she'd found something.

A warm and exciting thing was happening to Deerbush. He felt he was really coming to understand her. He'd been no different, before he had the idea of setting himself up in this kind of work. Twenty years of living a settled life had let him strike a balance with himself and get along with what he was. But when he looked at the girl; thin, pale, worn and terribly lonesome, he could understand how it would be for her.

Except that it wasn't the same, he reminded himself. She had something else.

But, looking at her, he couldn't see it. He could only see, under her eyes, the hollows that makeup couldn't quite take out.

"Where're you from, Todd?"

"Chicago, now."

"I've always wanted to see places like that. I suppose I could." She touched her upper teeth to her lower lip. "But I *knew* I was real as long as I stayed here."

They reached a trimmed hedge with a white picket gate set in the middle of it, and a walk going up to a white house with window boxes and ruffled white curtains in the windows.

"My name is Viola Andrews," she said. "I live here. Would you like to come inside and visit with me?"

She showed him through the house. The living room was full of beautifully carved, heavy walnut furniture, with overstuffed divans and easy chairs. There were standing lamps with beautifully decorated shades, and delicate end-tables with china figurines on them. The kitchen had an electric mixer, a toaster, a rotisserie, an electric frying pan, a dishwasher, big refrigerator, and freezer.

As she showed him from room to room, she held his arm. Her grip grew tighter, and her voice more excited. "I can't get over it, Todd. Someone else like me! Aren't these chairs pretty? I had some others, but then I saw these, and I had them sent over right away. I've done that with most of my furnishings—there are so *many* nice things in the stores. But tell me some more about yourself, Todd, please. I'm dying to know all about you. How

were you when you were a little boy? Was it as terrible for you as it was for me?"

"I don't know, Vi." He felt more and more awkward as she clung to his arm and led him from room to room. Her bedroom had gilded antique furniture, with delicate French dolls propped up on satin pillows over the pink bedspread. The dining room had cupboards full of fragile china and sculptured silver cutlery.

"Isn't it all beautiful? Oh, Todd, I'm getting more and more excited by the minute! I can't get *over* you!"

Suddenly she stopped. Her fingers dug into his arm. "It was awful, Todd," she said intently. "After I left my parents, I still tried so hard to be like other girls. I had to . . . not pay . . . for my food all of the time, but I tried in everything else. And then, one day not long ago, I was twenty-five." She touched an embroidered handkerchief to the corners of her eyes. "I suddenly realized I was going to be alone forever, for as long as I lived. Other girls were married, they had families, they had all the things a girl needs—and I was never, never going to have them. It was like a deep black closet with myself crouched in the very far corner, and no way out.

"I—I didn't know what to do. I had to make *somebody* notice me. I was ready to die if somebody didn't. And—and—" her voice sud-

denly rose, "and one day, I *could!* I didn't know how, but I just *could!* I didn't have to be a thief any longer. I didn't just have to get along on as little as I could. I could make people like me, and pay attention to me, and give me presents."

Just as suddenly, she bowed her head. "But they're just pretending, and I know it," she whispered. "They're not real. They don't really see me or like me. They forget me just as soon as I go away."

She straightened and took her hand from his arm. She touched an embroidered handkerchief to the corners of her eyes. "I'm so glad you came to help me that I can't even put it into words; but I am glad, Todd."

Deerbush shook his head. He'd been pretty badly worried when he first read the newspaper stories. But it wasn't that one of his own kind of people had turned out bad, which was what he'd been afraid of at first. It was just this girl, scared, trying to fill in what she'd been missing. He put his arm around her shoulders.

"Listen, Vi," he said, "best thing to do's get you out of here as quick as we can, and get you with your own kind of people."

"Thank you, Todd," she said in her breathless voice. "You're very nice to me." She hugged him impulsively.

"Listen—" he said, trying to think of how to tell her what he

wanted to. "Vi—see, what I am, is a marriage broker."

"A marriage broker?"

"Uh—yes—see, what it says I am in the Chicago Classified is a private investigator. People never see me. They just call up the AA Agency on the phone, and I mail 'em reports on the people they want to find out about. That's how I make my living. But what I really do, for this bunch of our people, is go around the country looking for more. And when I find one, I try and fit them to somebody else that hasn't got a husband or wife. It's a thing I figured out to do, so I could be somebody useful."

That had been the easy part. Now he was stopped again.

He wished he was smarter, so he could know what was wrong with Vi. He knew there was something wrong, something that somebody like Stannard could put his finger on in a minute. But he knew too that it didn't matter. Underneath it, she wasn't bad, or vicious. She didn't do these things because she was mean. She was gentle, and hurt, and lost. If a man had time, he could bring out the good things in her. A man who understood her, and took care of her, and was patient with her, could do it.

"Vi—what I mean, is, I've found plenty of women for other men. I liked a lot of them—I'm not trying to fool you about that—but I never . . . What I mean, is, these women all had a lot on the ball. And the

other men in this bunch're a lot more deserving. They sort of belonged together, and I knew it." He stopped to listen to what he'd said, and went red. "I don't mean," he blurted, "you don't stack up to 'em. I don't mean that at all, Vi. You're a lot smarter than me, and I know it. I'm not much. But what I mean, is, I've always taken these women back to Chicago with a man in mind for them. But—" He reached out for her hands. "Not this time." He didn't sound like himself.

"Vi—I'm not much, and I don't have much. I do work that's bound to keep me away from home a lot, and with people like us that's going to be extra hard on you, but—"

"Oh, Todd," she said, coloring, "I'm the happiest girl in the world!"

He couldn't believe it. He stood looking at her, holding her hands, and for a long moment he couldn't get it through his head. Then he felt warmth all through him, and he had to close his eyes for a minute because he was smiling as hard as she was.

"We better get going as soon as we can," he said, "try and get a start while it's still daylight. We've still got to pick up Stannard, and my car. So I'll ask you to pack fast. Better just take one suitcase."

She pulled sharply away from him. "One suitcase? You mean—leave all my nice things?"

He'd known it couldn't last. "Well—sure, Vi. They don't belong to you . . ."

She stamped her foot in anger. "Leave all my *presents*? I won't! I won't do it!"

"Vi," he said patiently, "you've got to."

"No!"

"Look, Vi, feeling that way doesn't make sense. You took that stuff. Somebody's stuck for the money somewhere. But it's not just that. You've got this town scared; you've got it scared so bad these people're going to stampe and hurt themselves. They're ready for it—it's plain as day, all over town. You want something like that on your conscience?"

"If you leave the stuff here, that'll take care of it. They'll find it after a while, and they'll decide it was a smart crook. It'll be a puzzle for them, but it won't be building up anymore. They'll have their stuff back and after a while they'll forget about it—if it never happens anywhere again.

"And even if you don't think they're real anyhow—the stuff still doesn't belong to you. You didn't earn it."

"You're awful!" she shouted at him. "You're mean and awful. I don't like you at all. You hate me. Get out of here!"

"Vi—"

"I hate you! I hate you!" She pulled her hands back awkwardly and bit him with the heels of her fists. "I won't give you up my nice presents! I won't! I like getting presents—I want lots of nice things

to have! I want lots of nice things—I want a lot more than I have! And I don't *like* you! Get away from me! Go away! Go away!"

Deerbush sighed. "All right, Vi."

"I'm going to go downtown and get more nice things—lots more. And don't you try and stop me!"

"I'm sorry, Vi," he said in a voice that had no life in it, "but it looks like I better come back in a hurry."

Walking quickly toward his rendezvous with Stannard, he saw police cars cruising the streets. The men inside them drove slowly, their heads turning as they looked at every pedestrian except Deerbush. He noticed they were paying special attention to the women, and he wasn't too surprised. But they'd never find her. They might come and knock on her door, and maybe even talk to her, but they'd never find her. It would just get worse and worse.

He wondered how bad it could get. After the first stores had to close—or if Vi began going into people's houses—what would these people living here in this town do? Would they be wearing guns here in this town, looking back over their shoulders all the time, locking everything up? And still losing things? And if it came to the militia and martial law, or the state police or F.B.I., and they still lost things—what then?

A car up the street jammed on its brakes. The doors flew open,

and the detectives inside jumped out on the sidewalk. They ran up to a startled plump woman and surrounded her. One of them flashed a badge for an instant. The others had already grabbed the packages out of her arms and were tearing them open. The woman looked from one to another of them, her face white, her mouth twisted by shock.

There was nothing Deerbush could do to help her. He stood watching it, cursing in a voice so low he didn't hear it. But he couldn't help feeling a little jolt of relief as he thought nothing like that could ever happen to Viola.

"I wish I'd found her," Stannard sighed as they drove toward Viola's house.

"I shouldn't have said I wanted her to come to Chicago," Deerbush said. What hadn't worked out between him and Vi was a personal thing, and a private hurt, but what he'd done was make trouble for everybody.

"You couldn't know that, Todd," Stannard was telling him. "You had no way of guessing. She was something brand new to you—brand new to anyone, for that matter, in this variation. You're quite right—they'd never find her. Between the curiosity-damping field, and this new ability that seems to spring directly from her arrested emotional development, it's—well, it's more than fortunate that I came here with you." He stared out at the

dark street for a moment. "It's a horrible shame she's so completely crippled, has so little moral stamina in her makeup. But what an ability! Intelligently, maturely used—you realize, don't you, Todd, that this could easily be the answer to the problem of the damping field? I'm afraid she's past hope, but if we could learn it from her . . . Well, that makes no difference. We can always raise her children apart from her, so they'll have her heredity but not her hysteria."

"I guess we could," Deerbush said.

"She didn't tell you what it is she does?"

Deerbush shook his head. "Sounded like she doesn't know, herself. She just does it. People—people give her presents."

"She simply wishes people would obey her, and that's all? She walked up to this saleswoman, you say, and caused the woman to give her the dresses."

"I know. But the woman *wanted* to."

"And had hysterics afterward, claiming she knew nothing about it. Well, that part's the damping field, taking hold again after whatever else it was had done its work. Would you describe to me, again, this expression you say you saw on the clerk's face? It sounds to me as though there might be something valuable in that . . ."

They were in front of Viola's house. "No lights," Deerbush said,

feeling almost glad. "She's gone. We'll have to look for her." Now Stannard would have to keep quiet, and leave him alone.

Stannard was peering at the dark house. "Do you think she'll come back here? We have to find her quickly. I want her in Chicago as fast as we can bring her, and I want her isolated from human beings before she has half the world giving her things and the other half howling for her blood."

"We'll find her. We just have to go down along the shopping street." *I wish I was the richest man in the world*, he thought.

They drove back toward the main street, both of them quiet. They passed a police car, its spotlight fingering the sidewalks.

"The stores aren't open late tonight," Stannard said.

"I don't think that's going to make any difference." They turned onto the main street. It lay empty but guarded, most of the storefronts lit by night lights, the parking spaces bare along the curbs except for places where occasional men—insurance detectives, Deerbush guessed—sat in plain cars reading newspapers. Foot patrolmen walked silently from door to door, each with only one block for his beat, trying locks. A radio car rolled up the street to the intersection that marked the end of the double row of stores, made a U turn, came down to the intersection of Broad Street and Riverside Avenue, made

another U turn, and rolled up the street again.

At the corner of Broad and Fauquier, where The Milady Shop was located, Viola stood waiting while a middle-aged man fumbled at the shop door with his keys.

"Is that she?" Stannard asked.

Deerbush nodded. "That's her." He eased the car to a stop at the curb.

"I'll talk to her," Stannard whispered.

Viola was intent on the man opening the shop door, but she turned her head as Deerbush and Stannard hurriedly crossed the sidewalk toward her.

The shopkeeper was paying neither of them any attention. He had the door open now, and he spoke to Viola. "There you are, little honey. Now, I told you it wouldn't take but a minute or two, didn't I?"

Viola took an indecisive step toward the door. Her face was clouded up angrily, and when they were close, she said in a low, angry voice, "You get away from me, you!"

Stannard whispered to Deerbush: "My God, she's acting like a five-year-old!"

Deerbush thought of how sensitive and delicate she was, and how helpless she'd be without this extra something she could do.

"Something wrong, little honey?" the shopkeeper asked Viola, his voice full of concern.

"Make them go away!" Viola cried, stamping her foot.

"Make who go away, little honey?"

"Can't you see them? You see them. See them and make them go away!"

"Miss Andrews—" Stannard began.

Deerbush was looking at the shopkeeper. He had never seen anyone try so hard to do something that ought to be so easy. He and Stannard weren't invisible. But the shopkeeper advanced uncertainly, brushing his hands in front of him like a man going into a long hall full of cobwebs. Then his fingertips touched Stannard. For just a second, he almost did the impossible because Viola had asked him to. His eyes looked into Stannard's face and Deerbush could see them almost begin to focus. But then the shopkeeper's head lolled forward on his chest and he stumbled back against his window. He leaned on the glass, his lips slack, looking at nothing. His breathing became shallow and monotonous.

"I hate you!" Viola spat at him. "You don't like me!"

"Miss Andrews—" Stannard said again. He was pale as he looked at the shopkeeper.

Viola pointed at Deerbush. "You help me," she said to Stannard. "Make him leave me alone!"

A foot patrolman passed by them, turned to the door of the next shop, tested the lock, and went on.

Stannard was motionless, staring at her.

Then Stannard said to her: "Don't worry, dear—everything's fine. Everything's all right. I'll take care of you. You don't have to worry." His voice was soothing, and only someone who knew Stannard as well as Deerbush did could have noticed the peculiar note it struck, as if somewhere, too deep in his throat to win the fight, something was trying to choke off the words.

He turned suddenly and tried to hit Deerbush.

"Oh, thank you!" Viola exclaimed. "You're nice. You'll get rid of the nasty man for me."

Deerbush felt the blow on his shoulder. He tried to get a hand on Vi's arm before she could run away, but he couldn't with Stannard between them. He elbowed Stannard back, but he had to drop his shoulder to do it. Stannard swung again, and this time he split Deerbush's cheek.

Deerbush shook his head sharply. "Get away from her," Stannard panted. "Stop bothering her!" Viola took two quick steps forward and pushed her hands against Deerbush's chest.

"You stay away from my presents," she mumbled angrily.

"I'm sorry, Frank," Deerbush said. He stepped back, holding one of Vi's wrists now, and with the other hand he hit Stannard hard on the jaw. As Stannard fell down, Vi began to scream.

Deerbush held her wrists for a long moment while she kicked and

kicked at his legs. He looked at Stannard, lying on the sidewalk, and saw the man's eyes start to flutter open.

He let go of Vi's wrists and reached with his hands, drawing up his shoulders and lowering his face to protect it from her fingernails. "I'm sorry, Vi."

Deerbush waited until the police car had rolled by. Then he pulled his old sedan away from the curb, and pointed the car toward the edge of town, driving with both hands on the wheel and only vaguely feeling the hurt places in the skin of his face.

Stannard was sitting hunched in the seat beside him. He rubbed his jaw. "It was incredible," he mumbled. "I never for a moment considered that she might be able to use her ability on one of us."

"All right," Deerbush said.

"I'll never forget it. I knew what she was. I didn't change my judgment of her by one iota before she spoke to me. And then, suddenly, she was the most wonderful person in the world. She deserved everything anyone could offer her. It was right that she be made happy. It was *unthinkable* that anything should be permitted to interfere with her wishes. I would have laid down my life for her."

"All right, Stannard," Deerbush said. He was blinking, and searching the sides of the road with his eyes. He wished Stannard would be still.

"No—no, it's not all right." Stannard shook his head. "Can you imagine what would have happened? If she could make me obey her, she could make any of us obey her. God! Suppose we'd succeeded in getting her to Chicago! Fifty of us, all her slaves. You never could have stopped it. We'd all have been against you." Stannard twisted around to stare fascinated into the back seat, where Deerbush had gently laid Vi down. "You were right to do that, Todd. You were never more right in anything in your life."

Deerbush was more tired than he had ever been. He felt haunted, and he knew that that was something he would never lose.

He saw the church beside the road, its spire and walls a flat bulking shape in the darkness, solid only where the edge of his headlight beam touched the weathered brown shingles. He stopped the car and got out. He opened the trunk and then walked over to the rusted pipe railing that ran around the churchyard. He stood there for a little while, and then he went back to the opened trunk of the car. He came around to Stannard carrying a hubcap he'd pried loose with the big screwdriver from the tool box, and the flat steel top of the box itself.

"Here," he said. "We can use these to dig with."

Stannard got unsteadily out of the car. "She was like a petulant child," he said. "It was love she

demanded. Absolute, complete love."

Deerbush thrust the hubcap into his hands. "Here," he said. "We'd better get this done. And quit harping on it."

"Yes," Stannard said vaguely. "Of course. Deerbush—what could stave off a demand like that? Why couldn't she get to you?"

"The love she got from you and

the others," Deerbush said, "was a reflection of her love for herself."

He leaned over into the back seat and lifted Vi out, holding her with all the gentleness he had. He cradled her in his arms.

"All her life she looked for it—" he said, giving Stannard the answer—"for just one person who could really love her. . . . And then she found him."

NOTE . . .

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Aces Loaded

by THEODORE R. COGSWELL

Bull stepped forward and put out his hand. "Come on, honey . . ."

The redhead's eyes narrowed, and she fired—a needle beam

burned a neat three-inch hole in the bulkhead behind Bull.

Bull's hand and jaw dropped—he had thought the redhead was on his side.

BULL WHISTLED HAPPILY AS HE sauntered down the Diagonal, the wide thoroughfare that slashed through the sprawling cluster of bars and dance halls ringing the spaceport of Engstrum IV. In his throat was the rasping dryness that comes to a man after months in deep space, and in his billfold a thick sheaf of inter-Galactic credit notes. Tomorrow would be time enough to start shopping around for a used ship and some prospecting tools. Tonight . . . tonight was for catching up on all the things he had missed during fifteen months of piloting a Consolidated Metals scow.

An oversized sign blinked from a large building backed up against the spaceport fence and he crossed the street and went in. The bar was roaring and a whirring clatter came from the complex gambling devices that lined three sides of the large room. In an alcove at the rear were crowded dice and card tables. He

felt the old temptation stirring inside him but he fought it off. This time things were going to be different. This time he had it all figured out. The next time he headed out for the Belt he'd be working for himself.

He found an empty table and signaled for a drink. When the waitress came up he took one startled look at her and then let out a soft whistle. Heart-shaped face, jade-green eyes that seemed to slant, close-cropped curly red-gold hair—all attached to other noticeable attributes.

"Evening, spacer," she said. Her voice was husky. "What would you like?"

Bull was a believer in direct action, so he told her. She yawned.

"You couldn't afford it," she said. "Someday I wish one of you characters would come up with a variation on that theme. Any variation at all."

"Bring me a Double Sun and I'll

see what I can figure out," he said.

"You do that." She flipped off to the bar.

Every time Bull tried a fresh approach, he tried a fresh drink. At last he gave up temporarily, and somewhat unsteadily wandered to the rear to watch the crap game. Before long he was back at his table, staring with great sadness down into the dregs of his last drink. He stifled a sullen hiccup, and then someone said, "Evening, son. Mind if I sit down?"

Before he could answer, somebody did, a gnarled man wearing a faded and patched pair of spaceman's coveralls. A battered chief engineer's hat a couple of sizes too small perched on steel-grey hair. Beneath deep-set, faded blue eyes jutted a beak of a nose and the points of a lovingly tended handlebar mustache.

Bull hiccuped again.

"Best thing for the hiccups is another drink," said the old man with sympathy. "And since it's agin nature for a man to sit drinking alone, I'll join you. Beer for me though, my tubes ain't what they once was." He waved a practiced hand in the air.

When the redhead appeared with the drinks, he looked calmly across the table until Bull grinned, reached in his pocket, and poured a small handful of change out between them. The old man eyed it happily and then stretched out a shaky, blue-veined hand.

"Johnston's the name," he said. "Chief Engineer William Johnston of the *Pelican*. People who buy me drinks call me Windy."

Bull stared at the hand through out-of-focus eyes and then shook it. "Brakney. Bull Brakney."

Windy raised his glass in a silent salute and drained half of it off at a single gulp. He said benevolently, "Got troubles, haven't you, son?"

Bull nodded morosely.

"I knew it, knew it the minute I set eyes on you. Wouldn't be surprised if it was that redhead got you triggered off." He snorted ferociously. He waved two fingers at the little waitress. His eyes followed her as she went to fill their order. "Always have been partial to redheads," he said and whinnied like an aged stallion. "Remember once out on Altair—that's when I was serving a hitch with the Exploration Service. I was down by the hydroponics shed one day when Major Kane's three redheaded daughters came by. What made it interesting was that they was triplets, identical triplets, and I took it as sort of a personal challenge. Well, sir, there I was . . ."

The rush of words began to dissolve the alcoholic haze in which Bull had been trying to hide himself. He broke off the old man's monologue with an impatient gesture.

"Women I can handle. Dice I can't." He gestured bitterly at the busy gambling tables at the rear of

the Rotunda. "I seveded when I should have sixed and down the drain went fifteen months of sweat as relief pilot on a Consolidated Metal scow, fifteen months of pinching every penny to get enough of a stake together for a try on my own. I know a rock out in the Belt that's lousy with high-grade tungsten pockets, but it takes a good ship to get in to it and good equipment to dig it out."

With a sweep of his hand he sent the little pile of coins spinning across the table. "That's all that's left."

The old man made a clucking noise. "Hate to tell you this; but, son, you got took. Nobody gets hot in this place unless Big Head McCall wants them to."

Bull's face hardened. "You level-ing with me?"

Windy nodded.

The big spaceman slammed his glass down on the table and then lurched to his feet, one hand sliding down to grip the butt of the blaster that hung at his right hip.

As Bull started purposefully toward the dice tables at the rear of the room the old man jumped up and grabbed him by the arm.

"Easy does it, boy. You haven't got a chance. You'll just get yourself chopped down for nothing." The urgency in the other's voice made Bull pause.

"What do you expect me to do," he said sullenly, "take this sitting down?"

"Of course not. But there's no sense dealing yourself into a strange game unless you know what's behind it. You already tried that and you see where it got you." Unwillingly Bull let himself be shoved down into the chair.

"You got a better idea?"

Windy nodded. He reached over and tapped Bull's tarnished pilot's wings. "You got papers to back those up, haven't you?"

"Sure," said Bull impatiently. "Why?"

"Because I haven't. Mine got canceled a couple of years ago when some quack on the fitness board decided I was too old to handle my own ship." His voice quivered indignantly. "Me, too old!" With an effort he caught himself. "Anyway I've been stranded here ever since. I can't afford to hire a pilot, and every time I try to talk one into a partnership deal, he takes one good look at me and another at my ship and then busts out laughing."

He looked hopefully across the table at Bull. "Neither me or the *Pelican* is fresh off the production line, but we both got a lot of parsecs left before we're ready for the scrap heap. You need a ship, I need a pilot. Why don't we take a flyer at the high grade you mentioned and split the profits?"

Bull looked at him dubiously. "What about equipment? You can't strip an asteroid with hand steel and a four-pound hammer. Minimum gear would run us at least

five thousand. You got that much stashed away?"

Windy responded with a wicked grin. "No, but I know how we can raise it in a hurry. And what's more it would sort of make up for the lumps you took back there tonight."

Bull began to look interested. "Go ahead."

"Big Head McCall, the guy who owns this place, pulled in here five years ago one jump ahead of the Patrol. He'd been mixed up in a hijacking deal in which a Patrolman got killed. They got his partner, Cash Shirey—he's serving life on one of the penal planets right now—but Big Head got away with enough loot to buy off the local officials once he got here. As a result the Patrol has never been able to extradite him. He's safe as long as he stays planetside—the Patrol's jurisdiction ends at the thousand-mile-limit—so he just sits down here and lets the suckers come to him. Which they do."

Bull reddened. "What's all this got to do with us?" he demanded impatiently.

"The Patrol doesn't like cop-killers. There's ten thousand on his head, payable on delivery across the thousand-mile-limit. And no questions asked. Interested?"

Bull thought for a moment and then gestured toward the well-armed bouncers who were spotted at strategic spots throughout the gambling room. "And what are his

guns going to be doing while we're trying to talk the boss into taking a little trip?"

Windy chuckled. "I got it all worked out. And it's foolproof. You get down to the *Pelican* tomorrow morning, help me get her tidied up for blast off, and I'll fill you in on the details."

Bull wandered around the salvage lot at the far edge of the spaceport for half an hour before he finally found the *Pelican*. She was a small rusty ship with a bulging belly that gave her the appearance of an adolescent but very pregnant whale. He sighed and climbed in through her open port. Inside she was even worse. Unshielded wire festooned from her bulkheads, half the instruments were gone from her control panels, and padding from the pilot's seat hung down in long streamers like spanish moss.

Bull found the old man in the engine room tinkering with the bank of equipment that amplified the images picked up by the fore and aft scanners and then piped them into the big vision plate in the control room.

"Be with you in a second," he said as he plugged in the two scanner input leads and then ran a quick check on the test panel. "Wanted to be sure I didn't have those mixed up." He gave a grunt of satisfaction as he surveyed his work. "Looked for a while as if we were going to have to fly blind. The

screen magnification control up forward is burned out but I jury-rigged up a widget so that it can be operated from down here. What do you think of her?" He made an expansive gesture that took in the whole ship.

"Why don't you sell her to a museum? This is a collector's item."

"She's not as bad as she looks," Windy said complacently. "A mite of tinkering here and there and she'll be fit as a fiddle and ready for work. Why don't you go forward and check out the main controls? I'll come up as soon as I finish grinding the main drive tube injectors. . . ."

Half an hour later Windy came up to the control room and slumped contentedly into the copilot's seat.

"Everything all right at your end?" he asked.

"As right as she'll ever be," said Bull unhappily. "You keep the main drive going and I'll fly her somehow. What's next on the list?"

"Getting you briefed." Windy pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and quickly sketched a rough map. "The back of the Rotunda butts right up against the spaceport fence. Between eleven and eleven-forty both moons are down and it's pitch black. While you're busy inside, I'll drift the *Pelican* over on her anti-gravs and steering jets and set her right down on the roof." He turned the piece of paper over and began to sketch again.

"Here's the inside layout. Big

Head's office opens off the back of the main gambling room. There's another door to it that leads into a small corridor that runs along here." His finger moved across the paper. "At the far end is a narrow stairway leading up to the roof. There's a third party involved who will see all the doors are unlocked. He hesitated, "The reward money's going to have to be split three ways. You don't mind, do you? We couldn't swing this without help from inside."

"Seems fair enough," said Bull. "What have you got up your sleeve for me?"

"A pair of aces." Windy gave a wicked grin and pulled a battered metal box out from under the copilot's seat. When he poured its contents out on the navigator's table Bull saw a jumbled pile of odd bits of junk: a few strange coins, a fused pebble, a tarnished medal, an obsolete Arnett wrist radiation detector . . .

"Isn't much to show for fifty years of shipping out," said the old man, "but to me it all means something. It's the closest thing I've got to a diary." While he spoke his fingers wandered from bit to bit and finally pulled out a small chamois bag. "Knew I had them here someplace," he said, and shook out a pair of dice. "These come from Big Head's own private stock. Here, give 'em a try."

Bull rolled them out across the table several times and then looked

up questioningly. "They look all right to me."

"They are . . . now. But watch." Windy scooped up the cubes, placed the sides containing single dots carefully together, and then slowly so Bull could see what he was doing, squeezed rhythmically three times.

"Now try them," he said.

Bull did. Seven. He rolled once more. Again seven.

"Get the idea?" said Windy. "That's how you got taken."

Bull nodded and then looked down at the dice dubiously. "I get it, but if Big Head is the operator you say he is, I can't see him sitting still while an outsider rings in a pair of loaded dice on him." He picked up the dice and prepared to roll them again. Windy grabbed his hand.

"Easy does it, son. I did a little microengineering on those—sort of gimmicked the gimmick. Once they're turned on they're only good for seven passes."

"And then?"

When Windy finished his explanation Bull didn't seem overly enthusiastic. "The whole deal seems pretty 'iffy' to me," he said. "What if they don't work the way they're supposed to?"

Windy made a cheerful hands-out gesture and gave Bull a fatherly smile. "If I hadn't stopped you from trying to shoot up the Rotunda last night you'd have got killed anyway."

Bull felt more nervous than he liked to admit when he stopped in a little bar a half a block from the Rotunda, ordered a quick drink, and carefully spilled half of it down the front of his space jumper. When he went into the Rotunda there was a slight roll to his walk. Ignoring the complicated gambling machines that lined the front of the place, he went straight back to one of the dice tables and tossed a bill of sale for the *Pelican* out on the green felt.

"How much on this?" He slurred his words slightly.

The house man picked up the title, looked at it disdainfully, and then tossed it back.

"This is a cash game. We ain't running no antique shop."

Bull jutted his chin aggressively. "That's as good as cash. What kind of a piker joint is this?" He let his voice rise to an angry bellow. "You take my roll and then you won't give me a chance to get even."

Three rugged-looking characters swinging paralyzers materialized from nowhere. The house man jerked his thumb toward the door.

"On your way, spacer!"

As the bouncers closed in, Bull vaulted up on top of the dice table and jerked out his blaster.

"Action stations!" he shouted.

The spaceman's trouble cry brought every off-worlder in the place to his feet. The bouncers started to come after him, hesitated as Bull's blaster swung toward

them, and then looked to the house man for instructions.

"I got cleaned in here last night," Bull's voice boomed out across the suddenly quiet room. "Now that I ask for a chance to get it back, they're trying to toss me out. What kind of a clip joint is this? I ain't crying about what I lost. All that I want is a fighting chance to get even."

The crowd began to growl. Most of them were spacemen and their sympathies were obviously with Bull. Several of the rougher and drunker of them began to edge toward the table as they scented a free-for-all. Bull pulled himself down into a fighting crouch, his gun trained on the bouncers.

The house man made a restraining gesture to the crowd and whispered softly into a tiny microphone concealed in his lapel. Head cocked he listened to an inaudible reply.

"Easy does it," he said to Bull. "Let's see that title again."

Bull kept his gun pointing toward the bouncers and tossed it down. The house man smoothed it out and examined it again, then whispered in his mike again, and waited.

"The Boss says a thousand is as high as he'll go on a junk heap this old. Take it or leave it."

Bull hesitated for a moment and then holstered his weapon and jumped down from the table.

"O.K.," he growled, "I'll take it."

The house man picked up his

dice from the table. "Want fast action? I'll roll you double or nothing."

"Suits me. My roll though."

The other silently handed him the dice. Bull tossed them back.

"This time I brought my own."

"Don't you trust ours?" There was an edge in the house man's voice.

"Last time they didn't work so well for me. Don't you trust mine?"

The gambler took a quick look at the circle of hard-faced spacemen who had closed in around the table and then shrugged.

"Sure . . . once I've given them a fast check."

"Check away," said Bull with an indifference he didn't feel. The other rolled them out several times, noted that a random pattern came up, and then took them to a cabinet at the far corner of the room where he subjected the cubes to an exhaustive shaking, weighing, and measuring. As a final test he threw them forcefully against the hard floor, noted the combination that came up and then rolled them again. When they didn't repeat, he grunted, came back to the dice table, and handed them over to Bull.

"Guess they're all right," he said grudgingly.

Bull breathed a silent prayer that the rough treatment hadn't damaged whatever it was that was concealed inside the dice, scooped them up, and surreptitiously gave them the three rhythmic squeezes

that were supposed to trigger off their internal mechanisms. He made the obligatory invocation and spun the dice across the table.

"Seven come eleven!"

Seven!

Bull felt a wave of relief wash over him. They were working as they should. Impassively the house man slid ten blue chips across to him.

"Let 'em ride," said Bull, and rolled again.

Seven.

More chips were added to the pile at the edge of the table and Bull rolled again.

Seven!

The house man's eyes narrowed but he didn't say anything. Bull rolled again, conscious as he did so that the three bouncers had pressed in close behind him.

"Please, babies," he prayed silently as the white cubes spun out across the white table, "don't act up now."

Seven!

"I quit!" he said hurriedly. He reached for the dice with one hand and the chips with the other. The house man was ahead of him. He scooped up the dice and snapped, "Hold it, Mac!"

Bull started to lunge forward but froze suddenly as he felt the sharp nose of a small blaster jab into his back. His own gun was jerked from its holster. The house man eyed him coldly and then rolled the dice out with an experienced flip.

Seven.

He rolled them again. Again they sevensed. This time when he spoke into his lapel mike he didn't bother to whisper.

"Take him into the back office," he said a moment later. "Big Head wants to have a little talk with him."

Big Head McCall, the owner of the Rotunda, was a thin-faced man with a crew cut, a disarming smile, and as far as Bull could make out, a normal-sized cranium. When Bull was marched into his office he gave him a slap on the back and waved one hand at the small bar that was built into the far wall.

"Have a drink on the house, old man. I've got a hunch you're going to need it."

Bull shook his head and stood waiting tensely as the house man passed his gun and the dice over to the owner. Big Head examined the dice negligently and smiled unpleasantly.

"You're obviously short on brains, but you must be long on guts. Trying to take me with a pair of my own dice is one for the books. All of which brings up the interesting question of how you happened to get hold of them. Feel like talking?"

Bull shook his head sullenly.

Big Head shrugged. "It's a minor matter." He turned to the three hulking gunmen. "Take him out the back way and dispose of him. And when you blast him, let him

have it in the stomach. It takes longer that way. Once the word gets around it will have a salutary effect on his colleagues."

Bull suddenly felt himself grabbed and hustled toward the rear door of the office. He fought down a momentary impulse to panic. If Windy was waiting on the other side of the door as he was supposed to be, they'd cut him down. He made a sudden lunge for the gun that was sitting on Big Head's desk but the three were too quick for him. He was caught and thrown violently to the floor. Pain lanced through him as a heavy boot slammed into his chest.

"Don't," he gasped. "There's nothing wrong with those dice. I swear it."

"Is that so?" said Big Head softly. He thought for a moment and then showed white teeth in a mirthless grin. "I'll tell you what I'll do, spacer. I'll roll you for your life. These things have sevensed six times straight and the odds against seven in a row are astronomical. That fair enough?"

Bull got slowly to his feet and watched tensely as the gambler rolled the dice out across his glass-topped desk. Every pair of eyes in the room—with one exception—was fixed on them as they spun across the desk top.

The first cube wavered for a minute and then dropped over on one side, exposing a single black dot. The second was spinning on one

corner like a top. Slowly it began to wobble, finally tumbled to a stop. Before the watchers could make out the one dot on the top of the second die, both cubes exploded. A sudden soundless flood of actinic light flashed out like the nova of a small sun, and then the office echoed to howls of pain as hands were futilely clapped against seared eyeballs.

Bull quickly locked the door that led into the gambling room and then scooped up his blaster from the desk. A soft whistle came from behind him. He spun around. Windy was standing in the other doorway, grinning in delight as he watched Big Head and his three henchmen moaning and stumbling blindly around the room. Beside him stood the redheaded waitress. She held a tiny needle gun in her right hand.

"Meet the silent partner," Windy said. "The *Pelican's* waiting on the roof. You two haul Big Head up and get him stowed away. I'll keep things under control down here."

The *Pelican's* converters stuttered uneasily as Bull meshed the anti-gravs into lift. He cautiously eased the control lever forward another notch. The ship seemed to hunch herself and then with a sudden jerk was airborne. Up, up, fifty feet, a hundred, five hundred, and then after a stutter that dropped them a score of yards, her lifters settled down into a warm con-

tented hum. The ship swayed gently as the night breeze carried her out over the dark spaceport.

He was reaching for the hand throttle when the redheaded girl came into the control room.

"Windy says everything is set aft. You can blast when you want to." She slid into the copilot's seat and began to adjust the acceleration harness with practiced hands.

"Need any help?"

She eyed him coolly. "Not the kind you've got in mind."

Bull grinned. "I'm still looking for that variation," he said. "Hold your hat." He set the hand throttle at one-tenth normal and hit the firing stud. The cabin lights dimmed and there was a chatter of circuit breakers as the main switches threw open under overload.

"What's going on back there?" he yelled into the intercom.

"Guess back pressure is damping the starting arcs," said Windy's voice from the speaker. "Looks like I didn't get those injectors as clean as I thought I did."

"That's nice," said the girl dryly. "What now?"

"I could try to blow the injectors clean." There was a note of worry in Bull's voice. "If I build enough pressure, something's got to give."

"Such as?"

"Well, the injectors might blow themselves clean. And then again, the mixing chamber might give out first. It's a toss-up."

"What happens if the mixing chamber goes?"

"You won't feel a thing. It'll happen too fast."

The girl pulled a quarter-credit piece out of a pocket and flipped it. "Heads," she said. "Let's go."

"Go it is." He pulled the throttle out to two-thirds power. When the circuit breakers let loose this time, it sounded as if the whole aft end of the ship was tearing itself loose. A stench of scorching insulation came drifting forward.

Bull felt large wet patches growing under his arms. "You know something, Red?" he said. "I'm scared." And he slammed the throttle all the way over into the red zone.

"Here goes something!" He punched the firing stud again.

There was a splintering roar as the plugged injectors blew clean and the *Pelican* scabbled toward the heavens on a boiling pillar of flame. They were two hundred miles out before Bull, barely conscious, was able to inch an enormously heavy hand toward the cut-off activator and kill the screaming planetary drive. The redhead was unconscious, but she seemed all right.

"Everything all right aft?" he said into the intercom.

"Big Head's got a nosebleed," Windy's voice came back. "Real blood too, not ice water the way I figured. Aside from that everything's fine. I told you there wasn't

anything wrong with the old girl that a little tinkering wouldn't take care of."

Bull shook his head groggily. Tuning the *Pelican's* detection gear to maximum sensitivity, he scanned a broad arc behind them. There were no tell-tale blips to indicate pursuing ships.

"Okay so far," he said to the girl as she pulled herself painfully out of the acceleration harness.

"Whew!" she said with a crooked smile. "That was rough."

Bull nodded soberly. "I'm going down to check on Windy and our prize cargo. If anything shows up on the screen you let out a howl over the intercom. Here, I'll switch it on for you." When he did a familiar voice came booming through the speaker.

". . . and there I was with them three redheaded identical triplets on my hands. First thing I did was to try and set up some sort of a rotation system, but they wasn't having none of it. They said it had been share and share alike since they was born and they didn't see no reason for changing now."

Bull quickly switched the speaker off and the girl just as quickly switched it on.

"Sounds interesting," she said.

"Well, sir," the voice continued, "I'll admit that for a little while there I was stumped. I was supposed to meet them down by the hydroponics shed at eight, and by seven-thirty I was getting a mite

desperate. Then suddenly, just when I was about to give up, it hit me." There was a reflective chuckle. "Worked, too. Yes, sir, Big Head, I reckon I'm the only man in history that ever . . ."

Bull snapped off the speaker again and ducked out the door.

"Captive audience," said Windy as Bull came into the engine room. "Been trying to get somebody to sit through that story for the last twenty years and it looks like I'm finally going to get a chance to finish it." He had the gambler propped up against a bulkhead, with his arms and legs securely trussed, and an unkind adhesive-tape gag in place. There was an expression of confused fury in the man's red and streaming eyes.

"I think you two have met before," said Windy.

A moment later the girl came aft from the control room. "Nothing stirring on the plates," she said. She examined the gambler with savage interest. "Take off his gag, I want to talk to him."

Big Head let out a squawk of pain as the tape was jerked roughly from his mouth. He licked his bruised lips, obviously making an attempt to keep his emotions under control. Finally he said, "I know when I'm licked. What's your asking price to turn me loose?"

"This isn't a snatch," said Windy. "We're turning you over to the Patrol."

That hit hard. "What for?"

"For ten thousand credits, cash on the barrelhead."

"I'll give you twenty if you take me back," said Big Head quickly.

The redheaded girl stepped forward. Her fists were clinched so tightly that her knuckles showed white. "You don't buy your way out of this one," she said in a choked voice. "Cash Shirey is my father."

Big Head seemed to shrink suddenly.

"You remember Cash, don't you?" The question cracked like a whip-lash. "You remember the partner you skipped out on—the nice guy you let take the rap for the patrolman you'd gunned down?" She paused and looked at him with savage satisfaction. "It took me two years, Big Head, but I finally made it. Dad's going to be glad to see you."

The gambler's face froze. But when he spoke his voice was steady. "Putting me in won't get him out." He paused for effect and then said softly, "What if I could get Cash out from underneath that murder rap."

"You couldn't . . ." Her voice caught in her throat.

"But I could." He looked at her calculatingly. "A voluntary confession would do it."

Windy held up a cautioning hand. "Watch it, kid, he's slippery."

"Look," said the gambler earnestly, "I've got everything to gain and nothing to lose. The Patrol can't touch me as long as I stay on Eng-

strum. The fact that they have a confession in their files isn't going to hurt me any. But it will clear Cash. All they'll have him on then is the hijacking, and he's already served enough time to cover that."

The girl turned and looked questioningly at Windy and Bull. The old man shook his head.

"It's too easy," he said. "He's got something up his sleeve."

"Not this time," said the gambler quickly. "And don't worry about that reward money. I'll see that you're taken care of."

"That's what I'm afraid of." The old man put one thin hand on the girl's shoulder. "Look, honey," he said earnestly. "If I could help I would, but we'd just be cutting our own throats. Big Head has a reputation for always settling up a score. Even if he couldn't get off Engstrum to handle it himself, he's got hired guns who could."

She turned to Bull, her jade-green eyes looking up into his pleadingly. He felt himself being caught by a familiar emotion and fought against it. Every time he let himself get tangled up with either dice or women he ended up in trouble.

"I'm sorry, Red," he said uncomfortably, "but I'm afraid I'll have to go along with Windy."

She let out a strangled half-sob and started out of the engine room. At the door she paused, reached down as if to straighten her skirt, and then suddenly spun around, a

wicked looking little needle gun that had been concealed in a tiny holster strapped to her thigh leveled at them.

"Reach!" she snapped. "I'm not joking—get your hands up."

Bull took a tentative step toward her. "All right, so you aren't. But hand over that thing before it accidentally goes off and hurts somebody." He advanced another step, hand outstretched. "Come on, honey."

Her eyes narrowed and then without warning she fired. There was a soft *splat* and a needle beam scorched the air three inches above his head and burned a neat little hole in the bulkhead behind him.

Bull's hand and jaw dropped simultaneously.

"That was a deliberate miss," she said coldly. "Now get those hands up and face the wall."

"Yes, ma'am," said Bull and he and Windy turned obediently. He felt his heavy blaster jerked from its holster and then the girl said, "O.K., you can drop them now."

"What's going on around here?" demanded Windy, indignantly. "We're partners, remember? You don't have to come in here waving hardware at us. If you want something, all you have to do is ask."

"Sorry," she said. She seemed to be. "But what I'm after is going to cost you ten thousand credits. This way saves argument."

She waved the gun toward Big Head. "Untie him!"

"What for?" demanded Windy.

"Because I said so." She waved the gun again. "Get hopping." A moment later the gambler stood massaging his wrists. She gestured toward the door. "Get up to the control room." Big Head eyed her gun uneasily and obeyed.

Her voice softened somewhat as she turned to the two bewildered spacemen.

"I'm going to have to lock you in. I've got enough to worry about without you two wandering around the ship getting into mischief."

The hatch swung shut behind her with a clang and then there was a clanking sound as she dogged it down from outside. Bull thought regretfully of his useless blaster. If it were loaded he could have cut through the thick plate like butter.

"What now?" said Windy.

Bull thought for a moment and then went over and set the emergency dogs on the engine room side of the door.

"We can't get out, they can't get in." He went over to the control panel and threw the massive switches on the lines that piped power to the drive tubes and the Bensons. "What's more, unless they want to get out and push, they aren't about to take this old clunker anyplace. Give them a call on the intercom and break the news as gently as you can."

Stalemate.

The controls were forward and

the power was aft—and neither was any good without the other. The *Pelican* orbited aimlessly as one hour went by and then another. Three times Big Head offered a deal and three times Bull and Windy turned him down after careful thinking had uncovered the hidden joker. Now it was their turn. Bull turned on the intercom.

"Still there, Big Head? Windy and I have a feeling we aren't getting any place."

"Got something in mind?"

"Yeah. We'll admit we're whipped, but we want to keep on living. We'll take the deal you offered in the first place but we have to have some protection. Here's what we got in mind . . ."

Big Head McCall, clumsy in heavy space armor, looked with satisfaction at the image of Engstrum Four that completely filled the forward vision plate. In its center a large patch of winking lights marked the spaceport. There was a soft hum as the gambler made a final test of the small anti-grav units built into the back of the suit and then awkwardly he signed the detailed confession that would clear Cash Shirey. His gauntleted left hand held the gun the girl had given him.

Bull gestured at the screen. "We're only twenty miles up. This is as close in as I'm going. You can ride your anti-gravs down and be home in five minutes. And don't

get any bright ideas about taking a couple of snap shots at us on your way out. You've got to have power to operate the airlock and Windy'll cut the switches at the first sign anything is wrong."

"I know," said the gambler regretfully. "Maybe next time." He picked up the confession and with the gun still at ready, he backed into the emergency escape lock. Placing the thin sheet of paper in the jamb of the inner port, he pulled the heavy hatch shut. A corner of the paper stuck through into the control room.

"O.K., Bull," said the girl. "Everything's clear." The pilot pushed a release button and with a pop of escaping air, the gambler tumbled free into outer space.

She rushed over, jerked open the inner door of the emergency lock, and grabbed up the precious piece of paper. There were tears in her eyes when she turned to the pilot.

"I'm sorry for everything, Bull," she said miserably. "But I had to clear my father. He wouldn't have lasted much longer where he was."

Bull nodded soberly. "I suppose I'd have done the same if I'd been in your spot," he said. "Anyway, maybe things aren't as bad as they look. Let's go down and bail out Windy."

Two miles away from the *Pelican* a space-suited figure drifted slowly, trying dazedly to figure out why the planet that a short time before

had been so close that it filled the whole forward screen of the *Pelican* was now a distant glimmering disk, far beyond the reach of the limited little propulsion unit that was built into his suit. His attempts to understand what had happened weren't helped by the happy voice that sounded tinnily from the little suit speaker.

"And so," it continued, "like I was saying before I got so rudely interrupted, there I was behind the hydroponic shed with three red-headed identical triplets. The way I worked it was . . ."

Back on the *Pelican* a grinning Bull led a bewildered girl out of the control room and shut the door gently behind them.

"Bull," she protested, "I want to know what happened!"

"You're too young," he said virtuously.

She stamped one little foot impatiently. "You know very well what I mean. What happened with Big Head? Why's he still drifting alongside instead of floating down toward Engstrum on his anti-gravs? And how can the Patrol be coming to pick him up—we can't be more than twenty miles out of atmosphere?"

"Well, honey, it's this way," said Bull in a passable imitation of Windy's cracked voice. "Instead of coming, we went. We're twenty thousand miles out and getting farther away every minute."

He led her down into the en-

gine room, went over to the far wall where the scanner gear was mounted, and pointed to the two shielded leads that were plugged in at one end.

"Lead from the forward scanner," he said, tapping one, "and lead from the aft. Switch them around and a picture of what's behind comes in on the forward plate. What Big Head saw was a picture of what we were moving away from."

"But it kept getting bigger!"

"Sure it did." He pointed to an awkwardly constructed piece of equipment that was bolted to the side of the cabinet. "This is Windy's idea of a replacement for the amplification control on the forward screen. He just sat down here behind locked doors and kept jacking up the magnification." He grinned down at her. "It was just like he said, there's nothing wrong with the *Pelican* that a little tinkering can't fix up."

He stretched out comfortably and settled down in the engineer's chair.

He wasn't too surprised when she slid into his lap.

"It's too bad," he said as he put an arm around her.

"What is?"

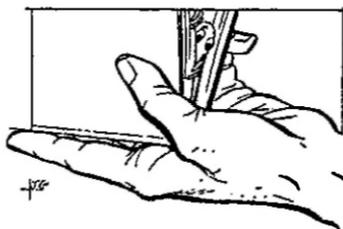
"That you aren't triplets. I wonder if it's really possible."

She made a little cat sound and snuggled closer.

"Couldn't we just pretend?" she said.

ON HAND: A Book

by THEODORE STURGEON



STURGEON has always wanted to review books, primarily because Sturgeon has always wanted to review books; beyond that he will not excuse himself. He will, however, explain his method.

He will read, and report on, everything sent him for review. He will sit around searching his soul until his poor squeezed deadline screams, and then choose one volume for a detailed review, consigning all others to be buffed or buffeted on a thumbnail. This will hurt everybody, which is fine, pain being the natural wake of criticism and creator of the cavitations of controversy, without which one has no valid test of one's convictions.

He will affect this third-person tactic, for it is his seasoned observation that the only sound riposte to critical injustice is "That's only *his* opinion." For a reviewer to say, in every review, "In my opinion . . ." would be initially obtrusive and ultimately meaningless. For him never to say it (and this is the practice of almost all critics) is to be The Oracle: "This is a bad book. This is a good book. This is not as good as his last book." There are two dangers in reviewing books from the altitude of the absolute. The lesser is that a reader—any reader—might conclude that he now knows The Truth about a certain book. The larger peril is that in time the reviewer might fall into the same error, as indeed most of them have.

So your *Venture* reviewer is no disembodied voice with a short line to sagacity, nor an intrusive "I," but "he," always "he," lest you (and he) forget that what he says is only what *he* says. I know him well, and have my own opinions on the worth of his. But I would not for the world attempt to graft my evaluation of his comments on yours. I just want you to know what *he* thinks.

And there he goes straight up the wall, uplifted and enthusiastic, bellying to all Convention Committees to polish up an award—possibly a brand new kind of award, say "For the Book Best Filling the Longest-Felt Need in Science Fiction."

It's COMING ATTRACTIONS (Ed. Martin Greenberg, Gnome Press, 254 pp, Illustrated, \$3.50) and he's never seen anything like it, and neither have you. It has made him sit back (up there on the picture mold-

ing) and ponder a moment on what he reads s f for anyway. Science? Fiction? No; they can be had elsewhere, more and often better. Well then, what about this quality "entertainment" which the proprietors of s f use to defend themselves when raided, like a landlady asserting she runs a decent place here? It isn't that either; lots of things are as entertaining as s f. Tell you what it is, he ruminates soberly as he comes down off the wall, knocking over the yoghurt: he reads s f because of its expansion of the known—its thrusting back of horizons. S f has no inhibitions when it penetrates or extrapolates or makes extensions. S f is bold and unabashed and not embarrassed by its speculations. This is the quality which, when added to good fiction, makes good s f; but this wonderful *reach* of the field is its heart. Conversely, subtract the fiction from the best s f thinking, and you hold this heart in your hand; and that, he shouts delightedly is what Marty Greenberg has done to make COMING ATTRACTIONS.

It isn't fiction. It's Willy Ley on "Geography for Time Travelers" and the nature of "Space War" and on the problems of writing "A Letter to the Martians" that Martians could be expected to understand, together with some ways and means of devising a calendar for Mars. It's deCamp on "Language for Time Travelers" and Kornbluth on "Time Travel and the Law"—both amusingly written and splendidly researched. There's R. S. Richardson on "Space Fix"—an attack not only on the problem of pinpointing a ship's position between worlds, but on the idea that it's as tough a problem as it looks. There's Malcolm Jameson on "Space War Tactics," a discussion on "Fuel for the Future"—the machine to be fueled happens to be human—by the articulate Jack Hatcher; a fine bit of tongue-in-cheek on the sad state of the copyright laws in the days of interstellar intercourse, by Donald F. Reines; and then there's your reviewer's personal favorite, as must needs be for one who has reduced the cosmos to Sturgeon's Law: *Nothing Is Always Absolutely So* from a lifelong search for something you can really count on—it's Frederik Pohl's "How to Count on Your Fingers."

These people (proclaims your reporter) know what they're talking about, reason like computers, and without exception write vividly, amusingly, understandably. They take you from the prehistoric to the far future, through applications of chemistry, astronomy, astronautics, information theory, law, semantics, mathematics, geology, ballistics, logistics, strategy, history, literature and *plenty* more, along with a good deal of human stupidity to balance it all out. They are researchers, educators, writers (in spots, *writer's* writers), and comedians when called upon.

Buy this book (he intones) and use it to knock out the front teeth of the next nudnick who equates s f with Buck Rogers and Captain

Video. Buy it if you don't know how far, how high, and how fast the mind—and that's *your* mind, bub—can travel. Buy it if you've always read s f, or if you've never read s f. Buy it if you think this field can't explosively criticize its own vast sloppiness. You can't pretend to be a s f author without it as a hand/hornbook. And if, like your ecstatic reviewer, you want great greedy chunks of the very material you've been rooting up, morsel by tidbit, for all your years as a s f reader, then this is for you.

He closes his rhapsody with a compliment to Dwight Wayne Batteau for a sprightly and sharp-edged introduction, and goes off to find that Convention Committee so he can promulgate that award. It would make sense, he says, because the following year it could conceivably be won (by Marty Greenberg again, if he has the wit to build it) with a collection of the most thought-provoking editorials from s f magazines.

Well, Marty?

And so, *Caviar Emptat*, which means:

The Sturgeon is all gone.

Offhand—



BOOK	TYPE & TIME	BUY IT—	REMARKS
<i>The Deep Range</i> A. C. Clarke Harcourt-Brace 238 pp \$3.95	Novel 21st-22nd Century	—to see marine biology meld with astronautics, sociology & religion	Fiction not up to science but science worth the price.
<i>The Winds of Time</i> Chad Oliver Doubleday 192 pp \$3.95	Novel 15,000 BC- 2450 AD; ET Interplanetary	—if you can afford 1 or 2 enjoyable evenings at this price.	Swift, intriguing, unweighty. Not really great but really good.
<i>Strangers in the Universe</i> Clifford Simak Simon & Schuster 371 pp \$3.50	Collection: 11 stories	—by all means!	Simak is the most underrated great s f writer alive.
<i>Best SF Stories & Novels '56</i> Ed. T. E. Dikty Frederick Fell 256 pp \$3.50	Anthology; 13 titles plus SF Year and Kemp's Book Index	—of course. Then give it to an intelligent non-reader of s f	Far and away Dikty's best yet. Fine Miller, Clifton, Budrys and others.
<i>Cycle of Fire</i> Hal Clement Ballantine 185 pp 35¢	ET adventure, future.	—if you like crystalline logic, strange settings.	Astonishing exercise in real science really applied to s f coupled with dialogue unseen since <i>Peewee Harris on the Trail</i> .



Evil men had stolen his treasure, and Raud set out with his deer rifle and his great dog Brave to catch the thieves before they could reach the Starfolk. That the men had negatron pistols meant little—Raud was the Keeper . . .

THE KEEPER

by H. BEAM PIPER

WHEN HE HEARD THE DEER crashing through brush and scuffing the dead leaves, he stopped and stood motionless in the path. He watched them bolt down the slope from the right and cross in

front of him, wishing he had the rifle, and when the last white tail vanished in the gray-brown woods he drove the spike of the ice-staff into the stiffening ground and took

both hands to shift the weight of the pack. If he'd had the rifle, he could have shot only one of them. As it was, they were unfrightened, and he knew where to find them in the morning.

Ahead, to the west and north, low clouds massed; the white front of the Ice-Father loomed clear and sharp between them and the blue of the distant forests. It would snow, tonight. If it stopped at day-break, he would have good tracking, and in any case, it would be easier to get the carcasses home over snow. He wrenched loose the ice-staff and started forward again, following the path that wound between and among and over the irregular mounds and hillocks. It was still an hour's walk to Keeper's House, and the daylight was fading rapidly.

Sometimes, when he was not so weary and in so much haste, he would loiter here, wondering about the ancient buildings and the long-vanished people who had raised them. There had been no woods at all, then; nothing but great houses like mountains, piling up toward the sky, and the valley where he meant to hunt tomorrow had been an arm of the sea that was now a three days' foot-journey away. Some said that the cities had been destroyed and the people killed in wars—big wars, not squabbles like the fights between sealing-companies from different villages. He didn't think so, himself. It was

more likely that they had all left their homes and gone away in starships when the Ice-Father had been born and started pushing down out of the north. There had been many starships, then. When he had been a boy, the old men had talked about a long-ago time when there had been hundreds of them visible in the sky, every morning and evening. But that had been long ago indeed. Starships came but seldom to this world, now. This world was old and lonely and poor. Like poor lonely old Raud the Keeper.

He felt angry to find himself thinking like that. Never pity yourself, Raud; be proud. That was what his father had always taught him: "Be proud, for you are the Keeper's son, and when I am gone, you will be the Keeper after me. But in your pride, be humble, for what you will keep is the Crown."

The thought of the Crown, never entirely absent from his mind, wakened the anxiety that always slept lightly if at all. He had been away all day, and there were so many things that could happen. The path seemed longer, after that; the landmarks farther apart. Finally, he came out on the edge of the steep bank, and looked down across the brook to the familiar low windowless walls and sharp-ridged roof of Keeper's House; and when he came, at last, to the door, and pulled the latchstring, he heard the dogs inside—the soft, coughing bark of Brave, and the anxious lit-

tle whimper of Bold—and he knew that there was nothing wrong in Keeper's House.

The room inside was lighted by a fist-sized chunk of lumicon, hung in a net bag of thongs from the rafter over the table. It was old—cast off by some rich Southron as past its best brilliance, it had been old when he had bought it from Yorn Nazvik the Trader, and that had been years ago. Now its light was as dim and yellow as firelight. He'd have to replace it soon, but this trip he had needed new cartridges for the big rifle. A man could live in darkness more easily than he could live without cartridges.

The big black dogs were rising from their bed of deerskins on the stone slab that covered the crypt in the far corner. They did not come to meet him, but stayed in their place of trust, greeting him with anxious, eager little sounds.

"Good boys," he said. "Good dog, Brave; good dog, Bold. Old Keeper's home again. Hungry?"

They recognized that word, and whined. He hung up the ice-staff on the pegs by the door, then squatted and got his arms out of the pack-straps.

"Just a little now; wait a little," he told the dogs. "Keeper'll get something for you."

He unhooked the net bag that held the lumicon and went to the ladder, climbing to the loft between the stone ceiling and the

steep snow-shed roof; he cut down two big chunks of smoked wild-ox beef—the dogs liked that better than smoked venison—and climbed down.

He tossed one chunk up against the ceiling, at the same time shouting: "Bold! Catch!" Bold leaped forward, sinking his teeth into the meat as it was still falling, shaking and mauling it. Brave, still on the crypt-slab, was quivering with hunger and eagerness, but he remained in place until the second chunk was tossed and he was ordered to take it. Then he, too, leaped and caught it, savaging it in mimicry of a kill. For a while, he stood watching them growl and snarl and tear their meat, great beasts whose shoulders came above his own waist. While they lived to guard it, the Crown was safe. Then he crossed to the hearth, scraped away the covering ashes, piled on kindling and logs and fanned the fire alight. He lifted the pack to the table and unlaced the deerskin cover.

Cartridges in plastic boxes of twenty, long and thick; shot for the duck-gun, and powder and lead and cartridge-primers; fills for the fire-lighter; salt; needles; a new file. And the deerskin bag of trade-tokens. He emptied them on the table and counted them—tokens, and half-tokens and five-tokens, and even one ten-token. There were always less in the bag, after each trip to the village. The South-

rons paid less and less, each year, for furs and skins, and asked more and more for what they had to sell.

He put away the things he had brought from the village, and was considering whether to open the crypt now and replace the bag of tokens, when the dogs stiffened, looking at the door. They got to their feet, neck-hairs bristling, as the knocking began.

He tossed the token-bag onto the mantel and went to the door, the dogs following and standing ready as he opened it.

The snow had started, and now the ground was white except under the evergreens. Three men stood outside the door, and over their shoulders he could see an airboat grounded in the clearing in front of the house.

"You are honored, Raud Keeper," one of them began. "Here are strangers who have come to talk to you. Strangers from the Stars!"

He recognized the speaker, in sealskin boots and deerskin trousers and hooded overshirt like his own—Vahr Farg's son, one of the village people. His father was dead, and his woman was the daughter of Gorth Sledmaker, and he was a house-dweller with his woman's father. A worthless youth, lazy and stupid and said to be a coward. Still, guests were guests, even when brought by the likes of Vahr Farg's son. He looked again at the airboat, and remembered seeing it, that day, made fast to the top-deck of

Yorn Nazvik's trading-ship, the *Issa*.

"Enter and be welcome; the house is yours, and all in it that is mine to give." He turned to the dogs. "Brave, Bold; go watch."

Obediently, they trotted over to the crypt and lay down. He stood aside; Vahr entered, standing aside also, as though he were the host, inviting his companions in. They wore heavy garments of woven cloth and boots of tanned leather with hard heels and stiff soles, and as they came in, each unbuckled and laid aside a belt with a holstered negatron pistol. One was stocky and broad-shouldered, with red hair; the other was slender, dark haired and dark eyed, with a face as smooth as a woman's. Everybody in the village had wondered about them. They were not of Yorn Nazvik's crew, but passengers on the *Issa*.

"These are Empire people, from the Far Stars," Vahr informed him, naming their names. Long names, which meant nothing; certainly they were not names the Southrons from the Warm Seas bore. "And this is Raud the Keeper, with whom your honors wish to speak."

"Keeper's House is honored. I'm sorry that I have not food prepared; if you can excuse me while I make some ready . . ."

"You think these noblemen from the Stars would eat your swill?" Vahr hooted. "Crazy old fool, these are—"

The slim man pivoted on his heel; his open hand caught Vahr just below the ear and knocked him sprawling. It must have been some kind of trick-blow. That or else the slim stranger was stronger than he looked.

"Hold your miserable tongue!" he told Vahr, who was getting to his feet. "We're guests of Raud the Keeper, and we'll not have him insulted in his own house by a cur like you!"

The man with red hair turned. "I am ashamed. We should not have brought this into your house; we should have left it outside." He spoke the Northland language well. "It will honor us to share your food, Keeper."

"Yes, and see here," the younger man said, "we didn't know you'd be alone. Let us help you. Dranigo's a fine cook, and I'm not bad, myself."

He started to protest, then let them have their way. After all, a guest's women helped the woman of the house, and as there was no woman in Keeper's House, it was not unfitting for them to help him.

"Your friend's name is Dranigo?" he asked. "I'm sorry, but I didn't catch yours."

"I don't wonder; fool mouthed it so badly I couldn't understand it myself. It's Salvadro."

They fell to work with him, laying out eating-tools—there were just enough to go around—and hunting for dishes, of which there

were not. Salvadro saved that situation by going out and bringing some in from the airboat. He must have realized that the lumicon over the table was the only light beside the fire in the house, for he was carrying a globe of the luminous plastic with him when he came in, grumbling about how dark it had gotten outside. It was new and brilliant, and the light hurt Raud's eyes, at first.

"Are you truly from the Stars?" he asked, after the food was on the table and they had begun to eat. "Neither I nor any in the village have seen anybody from the Stars before."

The big man with the red hair nodded. "Yes. We are from Dremna."

Why, Dremna was the Great World, at the middle of everything! Dremna was the Empire. People from Dremna came to the cities of Awster and fabulous Antark as Southron traders from the Warm Seas came to the villages of the Northfolk. He stammered something about that.

"Yes. You see, we . . ." Dranigo began. "I don't know the word for it, in your language, but we're people whose work it is to learn things. Not from other people or from books, but new things, that nobody else knows. We came here to learn about the long-ago times on this world, like the great city that was here and is now mounds of stone and earth. Then, when we

go back to Dremna, we will tell other people what we have found out."

Vahr Farg's son, having eaten his fill, was fidgeting on his stool, looking contemptuously at the strangers and their host. He thought they were fools to waste time learning about people who had died long ago. So he thought the Keeper was a fool, to guard a worthless old piece of junk.

Raud hesitated for a moment, then said: "I have a very ancient thing, here in this house. It was worn, long ago, by great kings. Their names, and the name of their people, are lost, but the Crown remains. It was left to me as a trust by my father, who was Keeper before me and to whom it was left by his father, who was Keeper in his time. Have you heard of it?"

Dranigo nodded. "We heard of it, first of all, on Dremna," he said. "The Empire has a Space Navy base, and observatories and relay stations, on this planet. Space Navy officers who had been here brought the story back; they heard it from traders from the Warm Seas, who must have gotten it from people like Yorn Nazvik. Would you show it to us, Keeper? It was to see the Crown that we came here."

Raud got to his feet, and saw, as he unhooked the lumicon, that he was trembling. "Yes, of course. It is an honor. It is an ancient and wonderful thing, but I never thought

that it was known on Dremna." He hastened across to the crypt.

The dogs looked up as he approached. They knew that he wanted to lift the cover, but they were comfortable and had to be coaxed to leave it. He laid aside the deerskins. The stone slab was heavy, and he had to strain to tilt it up. He leaned it against the wall, then picked up the lumicon and went down the steps into the little room below, opening the wooden chest and getting out the bundle wrapped in bearskin. He brought it up again and carried it to the table, from which Dranigo and Salvadro were clearing the dishes.

"Here it is," he said, untying the thongs. "I do not know how old it is. It was old even before the Ice-Father was born."

That was too much for Vahr. "See, I told you he's crazy!" he cried. "The Ice-Father has been here forever. Gorth Sledmaker says so," he added, as though that settled it.

"Gorth Sledmaker's a fool. He thinks the world began in the time of his grandfather." He had the thongs untied, and spread the bearskin, revealing the blackened leather box, flat on the bottom and domed at the top. "How long ago do you think it was that the Ice-Father was born?" he asked Salvadro and Dranigo.

"Not more than two thousand years," Dranigo said. "The glaciation hadn't started in the time of

the Third Empire. There is no record of this planet during the Fourth, but by the beginning of the Fifth Empire, less than a thousand years ago, things here were very much as they are now."

"There are other worlds which have Ice-Fathers," Salvadro explained. "They are all worlds having one pole or the other in open water, surrounded by land. When the polar sea is warmed by water from the tropics, snow falls on the lands around, and more falls in winter than melts in summer, and so is an Ice-Father formed. Then, when the polar sea is all frozen, no more snow falls, and the Ice-Father melts faster than it grows, and finally vanishes. And then, when warm water comes into the polar sea again, more snow falls, and it starts over again. On a world like this, it takes fifteen or twenty thousand years from one Ice-Father to the next."

"I never heard that there had been another Ice-Father, before this one. But then, I only know the stories told by the old men, when I was a boy. I suppose that was before the first people came in starships to this world."

The two men of Dremna looked at one another oddly, and he wondered, as he unfastened the brass catches on the box, if he had said something foolish, and then he had the box open, and lifted out the Crown. He was glad, now, that Salvadro had brought in the new

lumicon, as he put the box aside and set the Crown on the black bearskin. The golden circlet and the four arches of gold above it were clean and bright, and the jewels were splendid in the light. Salvadro and Dranigo were looking at it wide-eyed. Vahr Farg's son was open-mouthed.

"Great Universe! Will you look at that diamond on the top!" Salvadro was saying.

"That's not the work of any Galactic art-period," Dranigo declared. "That thing goes back to the Pre-Interstellar Era." And for a while he talked excitedly to Salvadro.

"Tell me, Keeper," Salvadro said at length, "how much do you know about the Crown? Where did it come from; who made it; who were the first Keepers?"

He shook his head. "I only know what my father told me, when I was a boy. Now I am an old man, and some things I have forgotten. But my father was Runch, Raud's son, who was the son of Yorn, the son of Raud, the son of Runch." He went back six more generations, then faltered and stopped. "Beyond that, the names have been lost. But I do know that for a long time the Crown was in a city to the north of here, and before that it was brought across the sea from another country, and the name of that country was Brinn."

Dranigo frowned, as though he had never heard the name before.

"Brinn." Salvadro's eyes wid-

ened. "Brinn, Dranigo! Do you think that might be Britain?"

Dranigo straightened, staring. "It might be! Britain was a great nation, once; the last nation to join the Terran Federation, in the Third Century Pre-Interstellar. And they had a king, and a crown with a great diamond. . . ."

"The story of where it was made," Raud offered, "or who made it, has been lost. I suppose the first people brought it to this world when they came in starships."

"It's more wonderful than that, Keeper," Salvadro said. "It was made on this world, before the first starship was built. This world is Terra, the Mother-World; didn't you know that, Keeper? This is the world where Man was born."

He hadn't known that. Of course, there had to be a world like that, but a great world in the middle of everything, like Dremna. Not this old, forgotten world.

"It's true, Keeper," Dranigo told him. He hesitated slightly, then cleared his throat. "Keeper, you're young no longer, and some day you must die, as your father and his father did. Who will care for the Crown then?"

Who, indeed? His woman had died long ago, and she had given him no sons, and the daughters she had given him had gone their own ways with men of their own choosing and he didn't know what had become of any of them. And the village people—they would start

picking the Crown apart to sell the jewels, one by one, before the ashes of his pyre stopped smoking.

"Let us have it, Keeper," Salvadro said. "We will take it to Dremna, where armed men will guard it day and night, and it will be a trust upon the Government of the Empire forever."

He recoiled in horror. "Man! You don't know what you're saying!" he cried. "This is the Crown, and I am the Keeper; I cannot part with it as long as there is life in me."

"And when there is not, what? Will it be laid on your pyre, so that it may end with you?" Dranigo asked.

"Do you think we'd throw it away as soon as we got tired looking at it?" Salvadro exclaimed. "To show you how we'll value this, we'll give you . . . how much is a thousand imperials in trade-tokens, Dranigo?"

"I'd guess about twenty thousand."

"We'll give you twenty thousand Government trade-tokens," Salvadro said. "If it costs us that much, you'll believe that we'll take care of it, won't you?"

Raud rose stiffly. "It is a wrong thing," he said, "to enter a man's house and eat at his table, and then insult him."

Dranigo rose also, and Salvadro with him. "We had no mind to insult you, Keeper, or offer you a bribe to betray your trust. We only

offer to help you fulfill it, so that the Crown will be safe after all of us are dead. Well, we won't talk any more about it, now. We're going in Yorn Nazvik's ship, tomorrow; he's trading in the country to the west, but before he returns to the Warm Seas, he'll stop at Long Valley Town, and we'll fly over to see you. In the meantime, think about this; ask yourself if you would not be doing a better thing for the Crown by selling it to us."

They wanted to leave the dishes and the new lumicon, and he permitted it, to show that he was not offended by their offer to buy the Crown. He knew that it was something very important to them, and he admitted, grudgingly, that they could care for it better than he. At least, they would not keep it in a hole under a hut in the wilderness, guarded only by dogs. But they were not Keepers, and he was. To them, the Crown would be but one of many important things; to him it was everything. He could not imagine life without it.

He lay for a long time among his bed-ropes, unable to sleep, thinking of the Crown and the visitors. Finally, to escape those thoughts, he began planning tomorrow morning's hunt.

He would start out as soon as the snow stopped, and go down among the scrub-pines; he would take Brave with him, and leave Bold on guard at home. Brave was more obedient, and a better hunter. Bold

would jump for the deer that had been shot, but Brave always tried to catch or turn the ones that were still running.

He needed meat badly, and he needed more deerskins, to make new clothes. He was thinking of the new overshirt he meant to make as he fell asleep. . . .

It was past noon when he and Brave turned back toward Keeper's House. The deer had gone farther than he had expected, but he had found them, and killed four. The carcasses were cleaned and hung from trees, out of reach of the foxes and the wolves, and he would take Brave back to the house and leave him on guard, and return with Bold and the sled to bring in the meat. He was thinking cheerfully of the fresh meat when he came out onto the path from the village, a mile from Keeper's House. Then he stopped short, looking at the tracks.

Three men—no, four—had come from the direction of the village since the snow had stopped. One had been wearing sealskin boots, of the sort worn by all Northfolk. The others had worn Southron boots, with ribbed plastic soles. That puzzled him. None of the village people wore Southron boots, and as he had been leaving in the early morning, he had seen Yorn Nazvik's ship, the *Issa*, lift out from the village and pass overhead, vanishing in the west. Possibly these were deserters. In any case, they were not good people.

He slipped the heavy rifle from its snow-cover, checked the chamber, and hung the empty cover around his neck like a scarf. He didn't like the looks of it.

He liked it even less when he saw that the man in sealskin boots had stopped to examine the tracks he and Brave had made on leaving, and had then circled the house and come back, to be joined by his plastic-soled companions. Then they had all put down their packs and their ice-staffs, and advanced toward the door of the house. They had stopped there for a moment, and then they had entered, come out again, gotten their packs and ice-staffs, and gone away, up the slope to the north.

"Wait, Brave," he said. "Watch."

Then he advanced, careful not to step on any of the tracks until he reached the doorstep, where it could not be avoided.

"Bold!" he called loudly. "Bold!"

Silence. No welcoming whimper, no padding of feet, inside. He pulled the latchstring with his left hand and pushed the door open with his foot, the rifle ready. There was no need for that. What welcomed him, within, was a sickening stench of burned flesh and hair.

The new lumicon lighted the room brilliantly; his first glance was enough. The slab that had covered the crypt was thrown aside, along with the pile of deerskins, and between it and the door was a shapeless black heap that, in a dim-

mer light, would not have been instantly recognizable as the body of Bold. Fighting down an impulse to rush in, he stood in the door, looking about and reading the story of what had happened. The four men had entered, knowing that they would find Bold alone. The one in the lead had had a negatron pistol drawn, and when Bold had leaped at them, he had been blasted. The blast had caught the dog from in front—the chest-cavity was literally exploded, and the neck and head burned and smashed unrecognizably. Even the brass studs on the leather collar had been melted.

That and the ribbed sole-prints outside meant the same thing—Southrons. Every Southron who came into the Northland, even the common crewmen on the trading ships, carried some kind of an energy-weapon. They were good only for fighting—one look at the body of Bold showed what they did to meat and skins.

He entered, then, laying his rifle on the table, and got down the lumicon and went over to the crypt. After a while, he returned, hung up the light again, and dropped onto a stool. He sat staring at the violated crypt and tugging with one hand at a corner of his beard, trying desperately to think.

The thieves had known exactly where the Crown was kept and how it was guarded; after killing Bold, they had gone straight to it, taken it and gone away—three men

in plastic-soled Southron boots and one man in soft boots of sealskins, each with a pack and an ice-staff, and two of them with rifles.

Vahr Farg's son, and three deserters from the crew of Yorn Nazvik's ship.

It hadn't been Dranigo and Salvadro. They could have left the ship in their airboat and come back, flying low, while he had been hunting. But they would have grounded near the house, they would not have carried packs, and they would have brought nobody with them.

He thought he knew what had happened. Vahr Farg's son had seen the Crown, and he had heard the two Starfolk offer more trade-tokens for it than everything in the village was worth. But he was a coward; he would never dare to face the Keeper's rifle and the teeth of Brave and Bold alone. So, since none of the village folk would have part in so shameful a crime against the moral code of the Northland, he had talked three of Yorn Nazvik's airmen into deserting and joining him.

And he had heard Dranigo say that the *Issa* would return to Long Valley Town after the trading voyage to the west. Long Valley was on the other side of this tongue of the Ice-Father; it was a good fifteen days' foot-journey around, but by climbing and crossing, they could easily be there in time to meet Yorn Nazvik's ship and the

two Starfolk. Well, where Vahr Farg's son could take three Southrons, Raud the Keeper could follow.

Their tracks led up the slope beside the brook, always bearing to the left, in the direction of the Ice-Father. After an hour, he found where they had stopped and unslung their packs, and rested long enough to smoke a cigarette. He read the story they had left in the snow, and then continued, Brave trotting behind him pulling the sled. A few snowflakes began dancing in the air, and he quickened his steps. He knew, generally, where the thieves were going, but he wanted their tracks unobliterated in front of him. The snow fell thicker and thicker, and it was growing dark, and he was tiring. Even Brave was stumbling occasionally before Raud stopped, in a hollow among the pines, to build his tiny fire and eat and feed the dog. They bedded down together, covered by the same sleeping robes.

When he woke, the world was still black and white and gray in the early dawn-light, and the robe that covered him and Brave was powdered with snow, and the pine-branches above him were loaded and sagging.

The snow had completely obliterated the tracks of the four thieves, and it was still falling. When the sled was packed and the dog harnessed to it, they set out,

keeping close to the flank of the Ice-Father on their left.

It stopped snowing toward mid-day, and a little after, he heard a shot, far ahead, and then two more, one upon the other. The first shot would be the rifle of Vahr Farg's son; it was a single-loader, like his own. The other two were from one of the light Southron rifles, which fired a dozen shots one after another. They had shot, or shot at, something like a deer, he supposed. That was sensible; it would save their dried meat for the trip across the back of the Ice-Father. And it showed that they still didn't know he was following them. He found their tracks, some hours later.

Toward dusk, he came to a steep building-mound. It had fared better than most of the houses of the ancient people; it rose to twenty times a man's height and on the south-east side it was almost perpendicular. The other side sloped, and he was able to climb to the top, and far away, ahead of him, he saw a tiny spark appear and grow. The fire could not be more than two hours ahead.

He built no fire that evening, but shared a slab of pemmican with Brave, and they huddled together under the bearskin robe. The dog fell asleep at once. For a long time, Raud sat awake, thinking.

At first, he considered resting for a while, and then pressing forward and attacking them as they slept. He had to kill all of them to regain

the Crown; that he had taken for granted from the first. He knew what would happen if the Government Police came into this. They would take one Southron's word against the word of ten Northfolk, and the thieves would simply claim the Crown as theirs and accuse him of trying to steal it. And Dranigo and Salvadro—they seemed like good men, but they might see this as the only way to get the Crown for themselves. . . . He would have to settle the affair for himself, before the men reached Long Valley town.

If he could do it here, it would save him and Brave the toil and danger of climbing the Ice-Father. But could he? They had two rifles, one an autoloader, and they had in all likelihood three negatron pistols. After the single shot of the big rifle was fired, he had only a knife and a hatchet and the spiked and pickaxed ice-staff, and Brave. One of the thieves would kill him before he and Brave killed all of them, and then the Crown would be lost. He dropped into sleep, still thinking of what to do.

He climbed the mound of the ancient building again in the morning, and looked long and carefully at the face of the Ice-Father. It would take the thieves the whole day to reach that place where the two tongues of the glacier split apart, the easiest spot to climb. They would not try to climb that evening; Vahr, who knew the most

about it, would be the last to advise such a risk. He was sure that by going up at the nearest point he could get to the top of the Ice-Father before dark, and drag Brave up after him. It would be a fearful climb, and he would have most of a day's journey after that to reach the head of the long ravine up which the thieves would come, but when they came up, he could be there waiting for them. He knew what the old rifle could do, to an inch, and there were places where the thieves would be coming up where he could stay out of blaster-range and pick them all off, even with a single-loader.

He knew about negatron pistols, too. They shot little bullets of energy; they were very fast, and did not drop, like a real bullet, so that no judgment of range was needed. But the energy died quickly; the negatrons lived only long enough to go five hundred paces and no more. At eight hundred, he could hit a man easily. He almost felt himself pitying Vahr Farg's son and his companions.

When he reached the tumble of rocks that had been dragged along with and pushed out from the Ice-Father, he stopped and made up a pack—sleeping robes, all his cartridges, as much pemmican as he could carry, and the bag of trade-tokens. If the chase took him to Long Valley Town, he would need money. He also coiled about his waist a long rawhide climbing-rope,

and left the sled-harness on Brave, simply detaching the traces.

At first, they walked easily on the sloping ice. Then, as it grew steeper, he fastened the rope to the dog's harness and advanced a little at a time, dragging Brave up after him. Soon he was forced to snub the rope with his ice-staff and chop steps with his hatchet. Toward noon—at least he thought it was noon—it began snowing again, and the valley below was blotted out in a swirl of white.

They came to a narrow ledge, where they could rest, with a wall of ice rising sheerly above them. He would have to climb that alone, and then pull Brave up with the rope. He started working his way up the perpendicular face, clinging by the pick of his ice-staff, chopping footholds with the hatchet; the pack and the slung rifle on his back pulled at him and threatened to drag him down. At length, he dragged himself over the edge and drove the ice-staff in.

"Up, Brave!" he called, tugging on the rope. "Good dog, Brave; come up!"

Brave tried to jump and slipped back. He tried again, and this time Raud snubbed the rope and held him. Below the dog pawed frantically, until he found a paw-hold on one of the chopped-out steps. Raud hauled on the rope, and made another snub.

It seemed like hours. It probably was; his arms were aching,

and he had lost all sense of time, or of the cold, or the danger of the narrow ledge; he forgot about the Crown and the men who had stolen it; he even forgot how he had come here, or that he had ever been anywhere else. All that mattered was to get Brave up on the ledge beside him.

Finally Brave came up and got first his fore-paws and then his body over the edge. He lay still, panting proudly, while Raud hugged him and told him, over and over, that he was a good dog. They rested for a long time, and Raud got a slab of pemmican from the pack and divided it with Brave.

It was while they rested in the snow, munching, that he heard the sound for the first time. It was faint and far away, and it sounded like thunder, or like an avalanche beginning, and that puzzled him, for this was not the time of year for either. As he listened, he heard it again, and this time he recognized it—negatron pistols. It frightened him; he wondered if the thieves had met a band of hunters. No; if they were fighting Northfolk, there would be the reports of firearms, too. Or might they be fighting among themselves? Remembering the melted brass studs on Bold's collar, he became more frightened at the thought of what a negatron-blast could do to the Crown.

The noise stopped, then started again, and he got to his feet, calling to Brave. They were on a wide

ledge that slanted upward toward the north. It would take him closer to the top, and closer to where Vahr and his companions would come up. Together, they started up, Raud probing cautiously ahead of him with the ice-staff for hidden crevasses. After a while, he came to a wide gap in the ice beside him, slanting toward the top, its upper end lost in swirling snow. So he and Brave began climbing, and after a while he could no longer hear the negatron pistols.

When it was almost too dark to go farther, he suddenly found himself on level snow, and here he made camp, digging a hole and lining it with the sleeping robes.

The sky was clear when he woke, and a pale yellow light was glowing in the east. For a while he lay huddled with the dog, stiff and miserable, and then he forced himself to his feet. He ate, and fed Brave, and then checked his rifle and made his pack.

He was sure, now, that he had a plan that would succeed. He could reach the place where Vahr and the Southrons would come up long before they did, and be waiting for them. In his imagination, he could see them coming up in single file, Vahr Farg's son in the lead, and he could imagine himself hidden behind a mound of snow, the ice-staff upright to brace his left hand and the forestock of the rifle resting on his outthrust thumb and the butt against his shoulder. The first

bullet would be for Vahr. He could shoot all of them, one after another, that way . . .

He stopped, looking in chagrined incredulity at the tracks in front of him—the tracks he knew so well, of one man in sealskin boots and three men with ribbed plastic soles. Why, it couldn't be! They should be no more than half way up the long ravine, between the two tongues of the Ice-Father, ten miles to the north. But here they were, on the back of the Ice-Father and crossing to the west ahead of him. They must have climbed the sheer wall of ice, only a few miles from where he had dragged himself and Brave to the top. Then he remembered the negatron-blasts he had heard. While he had been chopping footholds with a hatchet, they had been smashing tons of ice out of their way.

"Well, Brave," he said mildly. "Old Keeper wasn't so smart, after all, was he? Come on, Brave."

The thieves were making good time. He read that from the tracks—straight, evenly spaced, no weary heel-dragging. Once or twice, he saw where they had stopped for a brief rest. He hoped to see their fire in the evening.

He didn't. They wouldn't have enough fuel to make a big one, or keep it burning long. But in the morning, as he was breaking camp, he saw black smoke ahead.

A few times, he had been in air-boats, and had looked down on the

back of the Ice-Father, and it had looked flat. Really, it was not. There were long ridges, sheer on one side and sloping gently on the other, where the ice had overridden hills and low mountains, or had cracked and one side had pushed up over the other. And there were deep gullies where the prevailing winds had scooped away loose snow year after year for centuries, and drifts where it had piled, many of them higher than the building-mounds of the ancient cities. But from a distance, as from above, they all blended into a featureless white monotony.

At last, leaving a tangle of cliffs and ravines, he looked out across a broad stretch of nearly level snow and saw, for the first time, the men he was following. Four tiny dots, so far that they seemed motionless, strung out in single file. Instantly, he crouched behind a swell in the surface and dragged Brave down beside him. One of them, looking back, might see him, as he saw them. When they vanished behind a snow-hill, he rose and hastened forward, to take cover again. He kept at this all day; by alternately resting and running, he found himself gaining on them, and toward evening, he was within rifle-range. The man in the lead was Vahr Farg's son; even at that distance he recognized him easily. The others were Southrons, of course; they wore quilted garments of cloth, and quilted hoods. The man next to

Vahr, in blue, carried a rifle, as Vahr did. The man in yellow had only an ice-staff, and the man in green, at the rear, had the Crown on his pack, still in the bearskin bundle.

He waited, at the end of the day, until he saw the light of their fire. Then he and Brave circled widely around their camp, and stopped behind a snow-ridge, on the other side of an open and level stretch a mile wide. He dug the sleeping-hole on the crest of the ridge, making it larger than usual, and piled up a snow breastwork in front of it, with an embrasure through which he could look or fire without being seen.

Before daybreak, he was awake and had his pack made, and when he saw the smoke of the thieves' campfire, he was lying behind his breastwork, the rifle resting on its folded cover, muzzle toward the smoke. He lay for a long time, watching, before he saw the file of tiny dots emerge into the open.

They came forward steadily, in the same order as on the day before, Vahr in the lead and the man with the Crown in the rear. The thieves suspected nothing; they grew larger and larger as they approached, until they were at the range for which he had set his sights. He cuddled the butt of the rifle against his cheek. As the man who carried the Crown walked under the blade of the front sight, he squeezed the trigger.

The rifle belched pink flame and roared and pounded his shoulder. As the muzzle was still rising, he flipped open the breech, and threw out the empty. He inserted a fresh round.

There were only three of them, now. The man with the bearskin bundle was down and motionless. Vahr Farg's son had gotten his rifle unslung and uncovered. The Southron with the other rifle was slower; he was only getting off the cover as Vahr, who must have seen the flash, fired hastily. Too hastily; the bullet kicked up snow twenty feet to the left. The third man had drawn his negatron pistol and was trying to use it; thin hairlines of brilliance were jetting out from his hand, stopping far short of their mark.

Raud closed his sights on the man with the autoloading rifle; as he did, the man with the negatron pistol, realizing the limitations of his weapon, was sweeping it back and forth, aiming at the snow fifty yards in front of him. Raud couldn't see the effect of his second shot—between him and his target, blueish light blazed and twinkled, and dense clouds of steam rose—but he felt sure that he had missed. He reloaded, and watched for movements on the edge of the rising steam.

It cleared, slowly; when it did, there was nothing behind it. Even the body of the dead man was gone. He blinked, bewildered. He'd

picked that place carefully; there had been no gully or ravine within running distance. Then he grunted. There hadn't been—but there was now. The negatron pistol again. The thieves were hidden in a pit they had blasted, and they had dragged the body in with them.

He crawled back to reassure Brave, who was guarding the pack, and to shift the pack back for some distance. Then he returned to his embrasure in the snow-fort and resumed his watch. For a long time, nothing happened, and then a head came briefly peeping up out of the pit. A head under a green hood. Raud chuckled mirthlessly into his beard. If he'd been doing that, he'd have traded hoods with the dead man before shoving up his body to draw fire. This kept up, at intervals, for about an hour. He was wondering if they would stay in the pit until dark.

Then Vahr Farg's son leaped out of the pit and began running across the snow. He had his pack, and his rifle; he ran, zig-zag, almost directly toward where Raud was lying. Raud laughed, this time in real amusement. The Southrons had chased Vahr out, as a buck will chase his does in front of him when he thinks there is danger in front. If Vahr wasn't shot, it would be safe for them to come out. If he was, it would be no loss, and the price of the Crown would only have to be divided in two, rather than three, shares. Vahr came to within

two hundred yards of Raud's unseen rifle, and then dropped his pack and flung himself down behind it, covering the ridge with his rifle.

Minutes passed, and then the Southron in yellow came out and ran forward. He had the bearskin bundle on his pack; he ran to where Vahr lay, added his pack to Vahr's, and lay down behind it. Raud chewed his underlip in vexation. This wasn't the way he wanted it; that fellow had a negatron pistol, and he was close enough to use it effectively. And he was sheltered behind the Crown; Raud was afraid to shoot. He didn't miss what he shot at—often. But no man alive could say that he never missed.

The other Southron, the one in blue with the autoloading rifle, came out and advanced slowly, his weapon at the ready. Raud tensed himself to jump, aimed carefully, and waited. When the man in blue was a hundred yards from the pit, he shot him dead. The rifle was still lifting from the recoil when he sprang to his feet, turned, and ran. Before he was twenty feet away, the place where he had been exploded; the force of the blast almost knocked him down, and steam blew past and ahead of him. Ignoring his pack and ice-staff, he ran on, calling to Brave to follow. The dog obeyed instantly; more negatron-blasts were thundering and blazing and steaming on the crest of the ridge. He swerved left, ran up another slope, and slid down

the declivity beyond into the ravine on the other side.

There he paused to eject the empty, make sure that there was no snow in the rifle bore, and reload. The blasting had stopped by then; after a moment, he heard the voice of Vahr Farg's son, and guessed that the two surviving thieves had advanced to the blasted crest of the other ridge. They'd find the pack, and his tracks and Brave's. He wondered whether they'd come hunting for him, or turn around and go the other way. He knew what he'd do, under the circumstances, but he doubted if Vahr's mind would work that way. The Southron's might; he wouldn't want to be caught between blaster-range and rifle-range of Raud the Keeper again.

"Come, Brave," he whispered, looking quickly around and then starting to run.

Lay a trail down this ravine for them to follow. Then get to the top of the ridge beside it, double back, and wait for them. Let them pass, and shoot the Southron first. By now, Vahr would have a negatron pistol too, taken from the body of the man in blue, but it wasn't a weapon he was accustomed to, and he'd be more than a little afraid of it.

The ravine ended against an up-thrust face of ice, at right angles to the ridge he had just crossed; there was a V-shaped notch between them. He turned into this; it would

be a good place to get to the top . . .

He found himself face to face, at fifteen feet, with Vahr Farg's son and the Southron in yellow, coming through from the other side. They had their packs, the Southron had the bearskin bundle, and they had drawn negatron pistols in their hands.

Swinging up the rifle, he shot the Southron in the chest, making sure he hit him low enough to miss the Crown. At the same time, he shouted:

"Catch, Brave!"

Brave never jumped for the deer or wild-ox that had been shot; always for the one still on its feet. He launched himself straight at the throat of Vahr Farg's son—and into the muzzle of Vahr's blaster. He died in a blue-white flash.

Raud had reversed the heavy rifle as Brave leaped; he threw it, button, like a seal-spear, into Vahr's face. As soon as it was out of his fingers, he was jumping forward, snatching out his knife. His left hand found Vahr's right wrist, and he knew that he was driving the knife into Vahr's body, over and over, trying to keep the blaster pointed away from him and away from the body of the dead Southron. At last, the negatron-pistol fell from Vahr's fingers, and the arm that had been trying to fend off his knife relaxed.

He straightened and tried to stand—he had been kneeling on

Vahr's body, he found—and reeled giddily. He got to his feet and stumbled to the other body, kneeling beside it. He tried for a long time before he was able to detach the bearskin bundle from the dead man's pack. Then he got the pack open, and found dried venison. He started to divide it, and realized that there was no Brave with whom to share it. He had just sent Brave to his death.

Well, and so? Brave had been the Keeper's dog. He had died for the Crown, and that had been his duty. If he could have saved the Crown by giving his own life, Raud would have died too. But he could not—if Raud died the Crown was lost.

The sky was darkening rapidly, and the snow was whitening the body in green. Moving slowly, he started to make camp for the night.

It was still snowing when he woke. He started to rise, wondering, at first, where Brave was, and then he huddled back among the robes—his own and the dead men's—and tried to go to sleep again. Finally, he got up and ate some of his pemmican, gathered his gear and broke camp. For a moment, and only a moment, he stood looking to the east, in the direction he had come from. Then he turned west and started across the snow toward the edge of the Ice-Father.

The snow stopped before he reached the edge, and the sun was

shining when he found a slanting way down into the valley. Then, out of the north, a black dot appeared in the sky and grew larger, until he saw that it was a Government airboat—one of the kind used by the men who measured the growth of the Ice-Father. It came curving in and down toward him, and a window slid open and a man put his head out.

"Want us to lift you down?" he asked. "We're going to Long Valley Town. If that's where you're going, we can take you the whole way."

"Yes. That's where I'm going." He said it as though he were revealing, for the first time, some discovery he had just made. "For your kindness and help, I thank you."

In less time than a man could walk two miles with a pack, they were letting down in front of the Government House in Long Valley Town.

He had never been in the Government House before. The walls were clear glass. The floors were plastic, clean and white. Strips of bright new lumicon ran around every room at the tops of all the walls. There were no fires, but the great rooms were as warm as though it were a midsummer afternoon.

Still carrying his pack and his rifle, Raud went to a desk where a Southron in a white shirt sat.

"Has Yorn Nazvik's ship, the *Isa*, been here lately?" he asked.

"About six days ago," the Southron said, without looking up from

the papers on his desk. "She's on a trading voyage to the west now, but Nazvik's coming back here before he goes south. Be here in about ten days." He looked up. "You have business with Nazvik?"

Raud shook his head. "Not with Yørn Nazvik, no. My business is with the two Starfolk who are passengers with him. Dranigo and Salvadro."

The Southron looked displeased. "Aren't you getting just a little above yourself, old man, calling the Prince Salsavadran and the Lord Dranigrastan by their familiar names?" he asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Those were the names they gave me; I didn't know they had any others."

The Southron started to laugh, then stopped.

"And if I may ask, what is your name, and what business have you with them?" he inquired.

Raud told him his name. "I have something for them. Something they want very badly. If I can find a place to stay here, I will wait until they return—"

The Southron got to his feet. "Wait here for a moment, Keeper," he said. "I'll be back soon."

He left the desk, going into another room. After a while, he came back. This time he was respectful.

"I was talking to the Lord Dranigrastan—whom you know as Dranigo—on the radio. He and the Prince Salsavadran are lifting clear

of the *Issa* in their airboat and coming back here to see you. They should be here in about three hours. If, in the meantime, you wish to bathe and rest, I'll find you a room. And I suppose you'll want something to eat, too . . ."

He was waiting at the front of the office, looking out the glass wall, when the airboat came in and grounded, and Salvadro and Dranigo jumped out and came hurrying up the walk to the doorway.

"Well, here you are, Keeper," Dranigo greeted him, clasping his hand. Then he saw the bearskin bundle under Raud's arm. "You brought it with you? But didn't you believe that we were coming?"

"Are you going to let us have it?" Salvadro was asking.

"Yes; I will sell it to you, for the price you offered. I am not fit to be Keeper any longer. I lost it. It was stolen from me, the day after I saw you, and I have only yesterday gotten it back. Both my dogs were killed, too. I can no longer keep it safe. Better that you take it with you to Dremna, away from this world where it was made. I have thought, before, that this world and I are both old and good for nothing any more."

"This world may be old, Keeper," Dranigo said, "but it is the Mother-World, Terra, the world that sent Man to the Stars. And you—when you lost the Crown, you recovered it again."

"The next time, I won't be able to. Too many people will know that the Crown is worth stealing, and the next time, they'll kill me first."

"Well, we said we'd give you twenty thousand trade-tokens for it," Salvadro said. "We'll have them for you as soon as we can draw them from the Government bank, here. Or give you a check and let you draw them as you want them." Raud didn't understand that, and Salvadro didn't try to explain. "And then we'll fly you home."

He shook his head. "No, I have no home. The place where you saw

me is Keeper's House, and I am not the Keeper any more. I will stay here and find a place to live, and pay somebody to take care of me . . ."

With twenty thousand trade-tokens, he could do that. It would buy a house in which he could live, and he could find some woman who had lost her man, who would do his work for him. But he must be careful of the money. Dig a crypt in the corner of his house for it. He wondered if he could find a pair of good dogs and train them to guard it for him . . .

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THE EDUCATION OF TIGRESS MACARDLE

by C. M. KORNBLUTH

*Being a sobering report of perils encountered
by a young couple seeking a breeding permit. . . .*

*A tale on no account recommended to those now
planning to undertake the pleasures of parenthood.*

WITH THE UNANIMITY THAT HAD always characterized his fans, as soon as they were able to vote they swept him into office as President of the United States. Four years later the 28th Amendment was ratified, republican institutions yielded gracefully to the usages of monarchy, and King Purvis I reigned in the land.

Perhaps even then all would have gone well if it had not been for another major entertainment personage, the insidious Dr. Fu Manchu, that veritable personification of the Yellow Peril, squatting like some great evil spider in the center of his web of intrigue. The insidious doctor appeared to have so much fun on his television series, what with a lovely concubine to paw him and a dwarf to throw knives, that it quite turned the head of Gerald Wang, a hitherto-peaceable antique dealer of San Francisco. Gerald decided that he too

would become a veritable personification of the Yellow Peril, and that he too would squat like some great evil spider in the center of a web of intrigue, and that he would *really* accomplish something. He found it remarkably easy since nobody believed in the Yellow Peril any more. He grew a mandarin mustache, took to uttering cryptic quotations from the sages, and was generally addressed as "doctor" by the members of his organization, though he made no attempt to practice medicine. His wife drew the line at the concubine, but Gerald had enough to keep him busy with his personifying and squatting.

His great coup occurred in 1978 when after patient years of squatting and plotting one of his most insidious ideas reached the attention of His Majesty via a recommendation rideder onto the annual population-resources report. The recommendation was implemented

as the Parental Qualifications Program, or P.Q.P., by royal edict. "Ow rackon thet'll make um mahnd they P's and Q's," quipped His Majesty, and everybody laughed heartily—but none more heartily than the insidious Dr. Wang, who was present in disguise as Tuner of the Royal Git-tar.

A typical PQP operation (at least when judged typical by the professor of Chronoscope History Seminar 201 given by Columbia University in 2756 A.D., who ought to know) involved George Macardle. . . .

George Macardle had a *good* deal with his girl friend, Tigress Moone. He dined her and bought her pretties and had the freedom of the bearskin rug in front of her wood-burning fireplace. He had beaten the game; he had achieved a delightful combination of bachelor irresponsibility and marital gratification.

"George," Tigress said thoughtfully one day . . . so they got married.

With prices what they were in 1998 she kept her job, of course—at least until she again said thoughtfully: "George . . ."

She then had too much time on her hands; it was absurd for a healthy young woman to pretend that taking care of a two-room city apartment kept her occupied . . . so she thoughtfully said, "George?" and they moved to the suburbs.

George happened to be a rising young editor in the Civil War Book-of-the-Week Club. He won his spurs when he got **MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD: A STUDY OF PENS AND PENCILS IN THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC, 1863—1865** whipped into shape for the printer. They then assigned him to the infinitely more difficult and delicate job of handling writers. A temperamental troll named Blount was his special trial. Blount was writing a novelized account of Corporal Piggott's Raid, a deservedly obscure episode which got Corporal Piggott of the 104th New York (Provisional) Heavy Artillery Regiment deservedly court-martialled in the summer of '63. It was George's responsibility to see that Blount novelized the verdict of guilty into a triumphant acquittal followed by an award of the Medal of Honor, and Blount was being unreasonable about it.

It was after a hard day of screaming at Blount, and being screamed back at, that George dragged his carcass off the Long Island Rail Road and into the family car. "Hi, dear," he said to Mrs. Macardle, erstwhile tigress-Diana, and off they drove, and so far it seemed like the waning of another ordinary day. But in the car Mrs. Macardle said thoughtfully: "George . . ."

She told him what was on her mind, and he refrained from striking her in the face because they were in rather tricky traffic and she was driving.

She wanted a child.

It was necessary to have a child, she said. Inexorable logic dictated it. For one thing, it was absurd for just the two of them to live in a great barn of a six-room house.

For another thing, she needed a child to fulfill her womanhood. For a third, the brains and beauty of the Moone-Macardle strain should not die out; it was their duty to posterity.

(*The students in Columbia's Chronoscope History Seminar 201 retched as one man at the words.*)

For a fourth, everybody was having children.

George thought he had her there, but no. The statement was perfectly correct if for "everybody" you substituted "Mrs. Jacques Truro," their next-door neighbor.

By the time they reached their great six-room barn of a place she was consolidating her victory with a rapid drumfire of simple declarative sentences which ended with "Don't you?" and "Won't we?" and "Isn't it?" to which George, hanging onto the ropes, groggily replied: "We'll see . . . we'll see . . . we'll see . . ."

A wounded thing inside him was soundlessly screaming: *youth! joy! freedom! gone beyond recall, slain by wedlock, confined by a mortgage, now to be entombed beneath a reeking Everest of diapers!*

"I believe I'd like a drink before dinner," he said. "Had quite a time with Blount today," he said as the

Martini curled quietly in his stomach. He was pretending nothing very bad had happened. "Kept talking about his integrity. Writers! They'll never learn . . . Tigress? Are you with me?"

His wife noticed a slight, complaining note in his voice, so she threw herself on the floor, began to kick and scream, went on to hold her breath until her face turned blue, and finished by letting George know that she had abandoned her Career to assuage his bachelor misery, moved out to this dreary wasteland to satisfy his whim, and just once in her life requested some infinitesimal consideration in return for her ghastly drudgery and scrimping.

George, who was a kind and gentle person except with writers, dried her tears and apologized for his brutality. They would have a child, he said contritely. "Though," he added, "I hear there are some complications about it these days."

"For Motherhood," said Mrs. Macardle, getting off the floor, "no complications are too great." She stood profiled like a statue against their picture window, with its view of the picture window of the house across the street.

The next day George asked around at his office.

None of the younger men, married since the P.Q.P. went into effect, seemed to have had children.

A few of them cheerily admitted

they had not had children and were not going to have children, for they had volunteered for D-Bal shots, thus doing away with a running minor expense and, more importantly, ensuring a certain peace of mind and unbroken continuity during tender moments.

"Ugh," thought George.

(The Columbia University professor explained to his students: "It is clearly in George's interest to go to the clinic for a painless, effective D-Bal shot and thus resolve his problem, but he does not go; he shudders at the thought. We cannot know what fear of amputation stemming from some early traumatic experience thus prevents him from action, but deep-rooted psychological reasons explain his behavior, we can be certain." The class bent over the chronoscope.)

And some of George's co-workers slunk away and would not submit to questioning. Young MacBirney, normally open and incisive, muttered vaguely and passed his hand across his brow when George asked him how one went about having a baby—red-tape-wise, that is.

It was Blount, come in for his afternoon screaming match, who spilled the vengeful beans. "You and your wife just phone P.Q.P. for an appointment," he told George with a straight face. "They'll issue you—everything you need." George in his innocence thanked him, and Blount turned away and grinned the twisted, sly grin of an author.

A glad female voice answered the phone on behalf of the P.Q.P. It assured George that he and Mrs. Macardle need only drop in any time at the Empire State Building and they'd be well on their way to parenthood.

The next day Mr. and Mrs. Macardle dropped in at the Empire State Building. A receptionist in the lobby was buffing her nails under a huge portrait of His Majesty. A beautifully lettered sign displayed the words with which His Majesty had decreed that P.Q.P. be enacted: "Ow Racken Theah's a Raht Smaht Ah-dee, Boys."

"Where do we sign up, please?" asked George.

The receptionist pawed uncertainly through her desk. "I know there's some kind of book," she said as she rummaged, but she did not find it. "Well, it doesn't matter. They'll give you everything you need in Room 100."

"Will I sign up there?" asked George nervously, conditioned by a life-time of red tape and uncomfortable without it.

"No," said the receptionist.

"But for the tests—"

"There aren't any tests."

"Then the interviews, the deep probing of our physical and psychological fitness for parenthood, our heredity—"

"No interviews."

"But the evaluation of our financial and moral standing without which no permission can be—"

"No evaluation. Just Room 100." She resumed buffing her nails.

In Room 100 a cheerful woman took a Toddler out of a cabinet, punched the non-reversible activating button between its shoulder-blades, and handed it to Mrs. Macardle with a cheery: "It's all yours, madame. Return with it in three months and depending on its condition you will, or will not, be issued a breeding permit. Simple, isn't it?"

"The little darling!" gurgled Mrs. Macardle, looking down into the Toddler's pretty face.

It spit in her eye, punched her in the nose and sprang a leak.

"Gracious!" said the cheerful woman. "Get it out of our nice clean office, if you please."

"How do you work it?" yelled Mrs. Macardle, juggling the Toddler like a hot potato. "How do you turn it off?"

"Oh, you *can't* turn it off," said the woman. "And you'd better not swing it like that. Rough handling goes down on the tapes inside it and we read them in three months and now if you *please*, you're getting our nice office *all wet*—"

She herded them out.

"Do something, George!" yelled Mrs. Macardle. George took the Toddler. It stopped leaking and began a ripsaw scream that made the lighting fixtures tremble.

"Give the poor thing to me!" Mrs. Macardle shouted. "You're hurting it holding it like that—"

She took the Toddler back. It stopped screaming and resumed leaking.

It quieted down in the car. The sudden thought seized them both—*too quiet?* Their heads crashed together as they bent simultaneously over the glassy-eyed little object. It laughed delightedly and waved its chubby fists.

"Clumsy oaf!" snapped Mrs. Macardle, rubbing her head.

"Sorry, dear," said George. "But at least we must have got a good mark out of *it* on the tapes. I suppose it scores us good when it laughs."

Her eyes narrowed. "Probably," she said. "George, do you think if you fell heavily on the sidewalk—?"

"No," said George convulsively. Mrs. Macardle looked at him for a moment and held her peace.

("Note, young gentlemen," said the history professor, "the turning point, the seed of rebellion." They noted.)

The Macardles and the Toddler drove off down Sunrise Highway, which was lined with filling stations; since their '98 Landcruiser made only two miles to the gallon, it was not long before they had to stop at one.

The Toddler began its ripsaw shriek when they stopped. A hollow-eyed attendant shambled over and peered into the car. "Just get it?" he asked apathetically.

"Yes," said Mrs. Macardle, fran-

tically trying to juggle the Toddler, to change it, to burp it, to do anything that would end the soul-splitting noise.

"Half pint of white 90-octane gas is what it needs," mumbled the attendant. "Few drops of SAE 40 oil. Got one myself. Two weeks to go. I'll never make it. I'll crack. I'll—I'll . . ." He tottered off and returned with the gasoline in a nursing bottle, the oil in an eyedropper.

The Toddler grabbed the bottle and began to gulp the gas down contentedly.

"Where do you put the oil?" asked Mrs. Macardle.

He showed her.

"Oh," she said.

"Fill her up," said George. "The car, I mean. I . . . ah . . . I'm going to wash my hands, dear."

He cornered the attendant by the cash register. "Look," he said. "What, ah, would happen if you just let it run out of gas? The Toddler, I mean?"

The man looked at him and put a compassionate hand on his shoulder. "It would *scream*, buddy," he said. "The main motors run off an atomic battery. The gas engine's just for a sideshow and for having breakdowns."

"Breakdowns? Oh, my God! How do you fix a breakdown?"

"The best way you can," the man said. "And buddy, when you burp it, watch out for the fumes. I've seen some ugly explosions . . ."

They stopped at five more filling stations along the way when the Toddler wanted gas.

"It'll be better-behaved when it's used to the house," said Mrs. Macardle apprehensively as she carried it over the threshold.

"Put it down and let's see what happens," said George.

The Toddler toddled happily to the coffee table, picked up a large bronze ashtray, moved to the picture window and heaved the ashtray through it. It gurgled happily at the crash.

"You little—!" George roared, making for the Toddler with his hands clawed before him.

"George!" Mrs. Macardle screamed, snatching the Toddler away. "It's only a machine!"

The machine began to shriek.

They tried gasoline, oil, wiping with a clean lint-free rag, putting it down, picking it up and finally banging their heads together. It continued to scream until it was ready to stop screaming, and then it stopped and gave them an enchanting grin.

"Time to put it to—away for the night?" asked George.

It permitted itself to be put away for the night.

From his pillow George said later: "Think we did pretty well today. Three months? Pah!"

Mrs. Macardle said: "You were wonderful, George."

He knew that tone. "My Tigress," he said.

Ten minutes later, at the most inconvenient time in the world, bar none, the Toddler began its ripsaw screaming.

Cursing, they went to find out what it wanted. They found out. What it wanted was to laugh in their faces.

(*The professor explained: "In-dubitably, sadism is at work here, but harnessed in the service of humanity. Better a brutal and concentrated attack such as we have been witnessing than long-drawn-out tortments." The class nodded respectfully.*)

Mr. and Mrs. Macardle managed to pull themselves together for another try, and there was an exact repeat. Apparently the Toddler sensed something in the air.

"Three months," said George, with haunted eyes.

"You'll live," his wife snapped.

"May I ask just what kind of a crack that was supposed to be?"

"If the shoe fits, my good man —"

So a fine sex quarrel ended the day.

Within a week the house looked as if it had been liberated by a Mississippi National Guard division. George had lost ten pounds because he couldn't digest anything, not even if he seasoned his food with powdered Equanil instead of salt. Mrs. Macardle had gained fifteen pounds by nervous gobbling during the moments when the Toddler left her unoccupied. The pic-

ture window was boarded up. On George's salary, and with glaziers' wages what they were, he couldn't have it replaced twice a day.

Not unnaturally, he met his next-door neighbor, Jacques Truro, in a bar.

Truro was rye and soda, he was dry martini; otherwise they were identical.

"It's the little whimper first that gets me, when you know the big screaming's going to come next. I could jump out of my skin when I hear that whimper."

"Yeah. The waiting. Sometimes one second, sometimes five. I count."

"I forced myself to stop. I was throwing up."

"Yeah. Me too. And nervous diarrhea?"

"All the time. Between me and that goddam thing the house is awash. Cheers."

They drank and shared hollow laughter.

"My stamp collection. Down the toilet."

"My fishing pole. Three clean breaks and peanut butter in the reel."

"One thing I'll never understand, Truro. *What* decided you two to have a baby?"

"Wait a minute, Macardle," Truro said. "Marguerite told me that *you* were going to have one, so *she* had to have one—"

They looked at each other in shared horror.

"Suckered," said Macardle in an awed voice.

"Women," breathed Truro.

They drank a grim toast and went home.

"It's beginning to talk," Mrs. Macardle said listlessly, sprawled in a chair, her hand in a box of chocolates. "Called me 'old pig-face' this afternoon." She did look somewhat piggish with fifteen superfluous pounds.

George put down his briefcase. It was loaded with work from the office which these days he was unable to get through in time. He had finally got the revised court-martial scene from Blount, and would now have to transmute it into readable prose, emending the author's stupid lapses of logic, illiterate blunders of language and raspingly ugly style.

"I'll wash up," he said.

"Don't use the toilet. Stopped up again."

"Bad?"

"He said he'd come back in the morning with an eight-man crew. Something about jacking up a corner of the house."

The Toddler toddled in with a bottle of bleach, made for the briefcase, and emptied the bleach into it before the exhausted man or woman could comprehend what was going on, let alone do anything about it.

George incredulously spread the pages of the court-martial scene on the gouged and battered coffee ta-

ble. His eyes bulged as he watched the thousands of typed words vanishing before his eyes, turning pale and then white as the paper.

Blount kept no carbons. Keeping carbons called for a minimal quantity of prudence and brains, but Blount was an author and so he kept no carbons. The court-martial scene, the product of six months' screaming, was *gone*.

The Toddler laughed gleefully.

George clenched his fists, closed his eyes and tried to ignore the roaring in his ears.

The Toddler began a whining chant:

"Da-dy's an au-thor!
Da-dy's an au-thor!"

"*That did it!*" George shrieked. He stalked to the door and flung it open.

"Where are you going?" Mrs. Macardle quavered.

"To the first doctor's office I find," said her husband in sudden icy calm. "There I will request a shot of D-Bal. When I have had a D-Bal shot, a breeding permit will be of no use whatever to us. Since a breeding permit will be useless, we need not qualify for one by being tortured for another eleven weeks by that obscene little monster, which we shall return to P.Q.P. in the morning. And unless it behaves, it will be returned in a basket, for them to reassemble at their leisure."

"I'm so glad," his wife sighed.

The Toddler said: "May I congratulate you on your decision. By voluntarily surrendering your right to breed, you are patriotically reducing the population pressure, a problem of great concern to His Majesty. We of the P.Q.P. wish to point out that your decision has been arrived at not through coercion but through education; i.e., by presenting you in the form of a Toddler with some of the arguments against parenthood."

"I didn't know you could talk that well," marveled Mrs. Macardle.

The Toddler said modestly: "I've been with the P.Q.P. from the very beginning, ma'am; I'm a veteran Toddler operator, I may say, working out of Room 4567 of the Empire State. And the improved model I'm working through has reduced the breakdown time an average thirty-five percent. I foresee a time, ma'am, when we experienced operators and ever-improved models will do the job in one day!"

The voice was fanatical.

Mrs. Macardle turned around in sudden vague apprehension. George had left for his D-Bal shot.

("And thus we see," said the professor to the seminar, "the genius of the insidious Dr. Wang in full flower." He snapped off the chronoscope. "The first boatloads of Chinese landed in California three generations—or should I say non-generations?—later, unopposed by the scanty, elderly population." He groomed his mandarin mustache and looked out for a moment over the great rice paddies of Central Park. It was spring; blue-clad women stooped patiently over the brown water, and the tender, bright-green shoots were just beginning to appear.

(The seminar students bowed and left for their next lecture, "The Hound Dog as Symbol of Juvenile Aggression in Ancient American Folk Song." It was all that remained of the reign of King Purvis I.)

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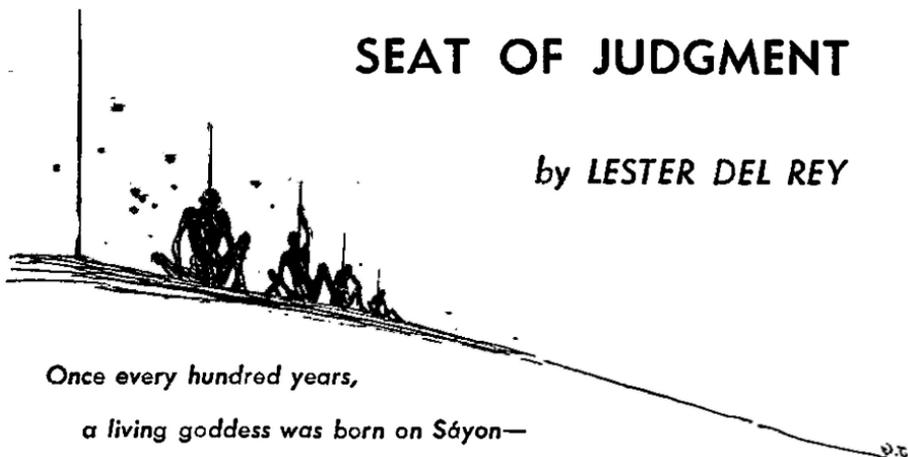
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SEAT OF JUDGMENT

by LESTER DEL REY



Once every hundred years,

a living goddess was born on Sáyon—

one who could work true miracles. But as Eli Judson

learned, the real miracle was the goddess herself—

she was almost too human . . . too desirable

Night had fallen, and the hell that had begun in the afternoon was waning, but the city gleamed with the angry red of dying fires, and the crowds still fought back and forth across the streets, howling in sorrow and rage. In front of the barracks beyond the Earth palace, however, the fighting seemed spent, and the mob had thinned to a scattering of huddled, dazed figures.

Lorg, one of the Ludh mercenaries, broke from a side street in an exhausted attempt to run. Two

arms hung useless, his clothing was ripped to shreds, his bow was gone, and his body was covered with wounds; he no longer felt them—his mind was filled only with the need for a weapon.

He hesitated, listening for pursuit. Then, with a final staggering run, he burst through the barracks door and headed for the bow racks.

Light hit his eyes, jerking him to a stop. They'd guessed his destination and beaten him here! There were a dozen of them, headed by the renegade Pors, whose bow was already pulled taut.

Pors' voice was sick as he stared at his fellow Ludh, nodding to the



others. "He's one of the butchers," he said heavily. The bowstring stretched tighter.

"Renegade! Adominist!" Lorg screamed the words, knowing it was too late for pleas. "When the men of Earth catch you—!"

"Earth!" Pors spat the word out harshly. "The men of Earth are dead a hundred years, Lorg. Only the Judsons are left. They'll never act until they have to—and then too late. Pray to your own false gods, Lorg, not to Earth!"

Lorg leaped, but the arrow was already in flight. It was a sliver, a wand, a lance—then a stake driving toward him.

Pors dropped the bow and leaned against the wall, sobbing harshly—but not for the death of Lorg.

Beyond the high walls of the spaceport, Sáyon seemed almost unchanged by the thirty years since Eli Judson had last seen the planet. Time might have ceased to exist here, though it had dealt sternly enough with him. The grayish blue uniform of the Colonial Service hung slackly on his sinewy, old man's body. The black was almost gone from his hair, bitter lines had been etched across his hollow-cheeked face, and his sight was almost useless without his glasses. In a few more years, it would be too late for even the geriatric treatments back on Earth to help him.

He grunted uncomfortably as the llama-like beast he rode jolted up

the rough road to the top of a hill. At the crest, he held up his hand to stop his escort. "It looks peaceful enough," he observed.

"So does a fusion bomb until it goes off," Dupont answered in his irritatingly high-pitched voice. His stout face was sweating profusely, and he made nervously futile gestures with a handkerchief.

Earth must be hard-up to pick such a man for planet administrator, even on a backwater world like this, Judson thought. He shrugged and reached for his binoculars to survey the valley below.

The air was crystal clear in the aftermath of one of the seasonal storms. Groves of dense-fruited faya berries, and pastures dotted with flocks of green-wooled thëom, covered the hillsides. Downtrail, a caravan was meandering upwards, loaded with precious spices, perfumes and uranium ore for the space trade. The harbor to the east was crowded with galleys and gaudy with their multicolored sails.

Kalva, the city beyond the quays, had grown until its maze of low buildings and twisting little streets now stretched far beyond the old walls. Judson knew that most of the city was filled with squalor and filth, but distance softened that. The yellow brick and the dark tile roofs seemed to sparkle serenely in the afternoon sunlight.

Over the center of the city, the great Temple reared its seven marble tiers, capped by a flattened

dome of burnished gold plate. Judson shifted to higher magnification to study the square in front of the building. The crowds seemed thick there, but hardly anyone was going up the great steps to worship. With the festival of Mesèa due to begin tomorrow evening, that was a jarringly false note.

Dupont coughed nervously. "We'd better get going. If there's any trouble . . ."

"From one Sáyonese?" Judson asked.

"Mohammet was only one man, and a sick one," Dupont pointed out. "Besides, these people have many legends of human gods."

"Goddesses," Judson corrected him. Then he grimaced as memories came pouring back. Meía was thirty years in his past and should have been forgotten. He stiffened in the saddle and motioned the party on.

This time two of the bowmen of Ludh moved in front. They were the usual mercenaries used by Earth in this section of the galaxy—yellow, hairless apes with wolf-like muzzles. As soldiers, they were so good that one should have been guard enough, instead of the six Dupont had brought.

They came to the caravan he had seen, drawn aside to let them pass. The Sáyonese were more nearly human than most off-Earth races, but still alien enough. The women's chests were flat under their brief halters—naturally, since they were

marsupials—and their pouches showed clearly above the slit skirts. Their wrinkled skin and coarse hair were both greenish gray, while their ears and noses were disproportionately large. With their squat, heavy bodies they might have been trolls from Earth's mythology.

Even their customs and religions resembled some Earth had once known, though their Great Goddess was a righteous, demanding Mother-Principle. Earth had expected easy conquest, counting on the nature of their legendary goddesses, who were worshipped as incarnations of the Great Goddess. One of these goddesses, it was said, appeared roughly every hundred years, born to normal Sáyonese parents—and what made Earth optimistic about conquest was that the goddesses had all been practically perfect images of human women. One theory was that they adopted human shape because of the reverence that centuries ago had greeted the first exploring Earthmen to land on Sáyon—more popular was the belief that they were simply mutations who happened to look human.

Whatever theory was correct, Judson remembered, conquest had not proved simple, though an arrangement with the priestesses of the Temple had finally worked out fairly well—at least until now.

"Have you seen this Oè Athon—this prophet you reported?" he asked Dupont.

The man shook his head, reach-

ing for his handkerchief again. "Only films from a distance. He came out of the desert a year ago and stuck to the provinces, picking up converts. It wasn't until last week he moved to Kalva for the holidays. And you can't believe all the reports. They're a mess of lies about miracles."

"You haven't picked him up for questioning?"

"I'm not supposed to mess in local religion. You know that!" Dupont's voice was petulant. "It's up to you and the high priestess, the Fas Kaia. She's the one who asked for help from the Sector Governor."

Judson sighed. When the Fas Kaia asked for help, something had to be done. As high priestess of the Temple, she was the ruler of the planet. Theoretically, the Temple decided only on religious matters, but religious laws covered almost every normal activity, and the Temple even conducted business of any remotely "moral" nature, such as brothels and money-lending. Of course, in matters affecting Earth the Temple was *not* all powerful. But the Temple's cooperation was vital to Earth's control, and every reasonable effort was made to keep the Fas Kaia happy.

In this case, the request as forwarded by Dupont had been for a warship and a company of Earth guards. The Sector Governor had a warship, but no adequate crew of fighting men for it—the youth of Earth was too busy enjoying the lux-

uries from a thousand worlds to bother controlling the planets now, it seemed. So Eli Judson had been sent instead, over his protests. As a mere vice-governor, he was expendable.

They were entering Kalva now, heading toward the Temple and the Earth Administration palace beyond. Judson studied the crowds, realizing time had brought changes. Poverty was worse and the slaves looked ill-fed. The Temple taxes must be murderous. The streets were jammed with people and more pilgrims were arriving with every caravan, many wearing swords in defiance of Meséa custom. The old market was solid with skin tents and crude shelters, filling the air with stench and clamor. One skin-rotter could infect the whole area.

"Converts to Oè Athon, the prophet," Dupont commented, making a mispronounced mockery of the title. "It thins out beyond the temple. There'll be time for a bath before the Fas Kaia reaches the palace, I guess."

The huddled ranks of unwashed Sáyonese made way for them reluctantly. Their greenish faces, filled with a curious, expectant ecstasy, stared at the humans and Ludh without seeming to see them. They seemed peaceful enough—but fanatics could seek peace one minute and start a jihad the next.

Now the street swept around the huge Temple, and the crowd grew thinner. Ahead lay the palace, the

Ludh barracks, and the ugly, barren cemetery hill at the end of the street. Judson glanced at the forbidding mound, then yanked out his binoculars, cursing.

Near the top of the cemetery hill, four thin posts carried the rotting flesh of Sáyonese bodies. Nearby, another wretch was still alive, sitting on the sharpened point of a stake. It had been greased until his straining hands couldn't hold his weight, and his feet rested on a mound of sand that sifted away with each writhing, tortured movement. Slowly but steadily, his body was sinking lower around the point.

At a time like this, the fools had revived the Seat!

Judson swung out of the saddle to the ground, shaking his head as Dupont slowed. "Go on, damn it. I'll handle this my way," he shouted. The huddles of Sáyonese parted to let him through, until he was past them, climbing up the steep steps to the Temple.

The priestesses must have been watching. There was a shout, and two of them trotted down to meet him. "Tell the Fas Kaía I'm here," he ordered.

"The Fas Kaía greets the Oè Eli," a heavy alto voice answered from the top of the steps, speaking in pure high Sáyonese.

She was an old woman, so fat that her greenish skin was stretched almost free of wrinkles, and her bloated body was loaded with jewels. But there was a firmness about

her as she waved the lesser priestesses away. She and Judson studied each other, and then she nodded.

"You're a strong man and a realist, I think. Thank *Her* for that."

"Realist enough to know you can't tax people to starvation and hold them by torture," he told her sharply. He gestured toward the hill. "Did you think I was too stupid to see that?"

She sighed, turning one ear toward the screams of the dying man that came faintly over the noise from the streets.

"I expected you to see it," she said quietly. "These are bad times, Oé Eli—so bad that those rogues dared to try looting the Temple. I may have lied in calling them followers of Athon, the prophet out of the desert, but their sentence was legal. As for the tax—I get what I can, but I don't starve my people. They do that themselves. Every fool on Sáyon is in Kalva, to see this Athon or watch what I do to him. I've emptied my own stores, and there still isn't enough food for all."

Slowly the anger ran out of him. Even under the codex Earth had drafted, the Seat was approved for anyone who profaned the Temple. "My apologies, Kaía."

"There was no offense, Eli," she told him, smiling quickly at the ritual of names. "Now, if you'll consent, we can talk better in my quarters."

In the little room behind the great gold and jade statue of *Her*, she waved the slaves aside and served him mild faya wine and the matchless Kalvan cheese. Then she sank back gratefully onto her cushions, setting up a tinkling of ornaments.

"A wise man has many swords," she quoted. "I am glad your Governor sent you instead of the warship the administrator requested—which could have done no good. Perhaps together you and I can find a solution. . . . Eli, when you were here before, how much did you learn of *Her* incarnations and their Power?"

He could feel the muscles of his face tense, but he forced himself to remain calm. "I met the current goddess and saw what she could do," he answered.

"Meia—yes, I heard rumors, though I was only serving in the Temple brothel at the time. . . . Well, as you probably know, all have been girls, except the first, who founded our religion in a series of bloody holy wars. Some legends make it seem that he was fertile, unlike the girls, and that they may all have been seed from his loins. But the people believe they are incarnations of the Great Goddess, and they don't disturb the Temple too much. Athon, who claims the same miraculous powers, does."

"Yet you didn't have him assassinated when he first appeared?" Judson asked.

"I tried," she admitted. "More than once. But he converted my assassins and my spies. Then I tried to persuade the administrator to state officially that Athon was a human pretending to be Sayonese—there was a missionary woman here once who tried that."

Judson frowned thoughtfully. That plan would almost certainly have wiped out Athon's influence at a stroke—the Sayonese regarded any alien dabbling in their religion as the ultimate abomination.

"I suppose Dupont took it under advisement and warned you not to touch the man until it could be proved he wasn't human?" he guessed. At her nod, he swore softly. Damn Dupont! The man could have used his brains instead of the rulebook once in his life. "Do you think this Athon is human?"

She shrugged, glancing bitterly at a framed copy of the Earth-Sayon covenant. "Who knows what a male incarnation would be like? And how can I tell about Earthmen when every one I have seen is different in size, shape—and even color? Whatever he is, he preaches both a Father-principle and a Mother-principle! He wants the riches of the Temple stripped away and divided among everyone. He claims all races are equal. Eli, consider what that would do to Earth's position! Or think how impossible it would be for you to deal with Sayon without the Temple—as the Temple cannot do without Earth

now. Is Earth strong enough in this Sector today to hold Sáyon against a fanatic people—or to hold the other worlds if this planet breaks away?"

Abruptly, she stopped to study him. Then a slow, hard smile lifted the corners of her mouth. "I was desperate enough to think of bribing you, Eli. But a man who is poor after forty years in your Service must be honest. Still, you can at least see what I chose for you."

It lay on the bottom of the box, gleaming iridescently—a necklace of the almost mythical moonpearls. On Earth, one of the pearls would buy full geriatric treatments, and ten would win the governorship of almost any Sector he could name. His hand shook, but he managed a smile as he reached out to close the lid.

Her own laugh sounded strained as she put the box away. "Well, perhaps someday the Great Goddess will reward you for honesty. One can always hope," she said. Then she heaved herself up and turned to the doorway. "I've got a chariot waiting to take you to the palace."

A priestess was at the reins, and as the chariot started off, Judson was cursing to himself and at himself. Kaía had given him a little information, shoved the entire responsibility on him, and—yes, damn it—with those final words, she'd managed to offer him the moonpearls for his help! And all within an hour of meeting him.

Yet on her own ground and in her own specialty, she couldn't handle the problem she'd given him!

Abruptly, the chariot jerked to a jarring halt and began backing. He looked up. The street they had been about to enter—the main street between palace and Temple—was crammed with some kind of procession. In the very center, however, there was a clear space where one heavily robed figure moved by itself.

He caught the priestess' hands as she tried to turn the team around. "Wait. Is that Athon?"

She nodded, hate and sickness on her face.

The binoculars did little good. The light was already failing, and the slow-moving figure seemed completely covered in a robe and hood. Judson turned to glance at the crowd, then focussed in shock on two Ludh bowmen, marching in the rear! They had no business here! If even the Ludh could be converted by this prophet . . .

A startled noise from the mob broke the weird minor chant that had been rising—a Sáyonese man was running toward the solitary marching figure. In one arm he was brandishing a sword weakly, shouting as he ran. The flesh on his body was covered with the great scabs of brown skin-rot, and he was wasted to almost skeletal thinness.

The men nearest him started forward. He staggered—but he still had strength enough for his pur-

pose. With a final yell, he raised the sword and plunged it deep into his own breast.

The robed figure stopped beside the threshing body on the cobbled street. A hand came out of the robe to pluck the sword easily from the wound, almost without touching it. Then the hand withdrew, and Athon bent over, as if chiding the dying man. Finally he straightened. The swordsman was quiet for a second more. Then the body stirred, sat up, sprang to its feet with a wild cry of joy, and dashed back into the crowd. There were no brown scabs left on the emaciated figure.

The chant rose to a wild frenzy and the procession moved on. In the center, the robed figure seemed to shake its head sadly.

At Judson's nod, the priestess got the chariot turned and headed back and around through twisted alleys toward the Earth Administration palace. Judson's mind was churning. What he had just seen was so completely beyond any healing power known to Earth that it could only be called a miracle. If word of such things got back to Earth, there'd be ships headed here in droves—cultists, hypochondriacs, profiteers, curiosity seekers, truly sick people—and among them might well be some impressionable members of the hereditary president's family! Fas Kaia had been more accurate than she knew when she equated her danger with

Earth's. In the unstable conditions back there, just the knowledge that such things could be would threaten the whole system. The goddess Meia had been a danger once; Athon was doom!

At the palace, Dupont, his homely wife, and the eight human assistants who comprised all the Earthmen in Kalva, had prepared a vague attempt at a welcoming party; but they seemed relieved when Judson pleaded extreme fatigue. They'd probably turn it into a dope binge now, from rumors of what went on here, with Dupont's wife being passed around from man to man. But that was none of Judson's business. With the decreasing number of women who came away from Earth for any reason now, men couldn't be blamed for making the most of whatever situation they were in. And consorting with aliens not only earned stiff penalties, but also was almost invariably unattractive and unsatisfying. *Almost* invariably . . .

He dropped the thought and unpacked in the apartment assigned to him. From the bottom of his small bag he drew a final piece—a tissue copy of *Selected Books of the Testaments*. He'd never read it, though he'd considered doing so; few men had read any part of the old Bible since the long ago rise of the cults. But this book had become his luck piece.

By now the fatigue he had used as an excuse was turning to real-

ity. He should call a slave to bathe him and prepare him for bed, but it was too much trouble. He made another futile attempt to think about his problems, then dropped onto the bed. He'd undress in a moment . . .

Priestesses, goddesses, prophets! The last thing he had ever wanted was to get mixed into another Sáyonese religious mess. Once had been bad enough—and yet . . .

Thirty years before he grew old, a man could have plans for the future, even on an outworld assignment in the Colonial Service. Eli's hopes were based on a book he was writing, dealing with the oddities in the ecological balance of a world where marsupials had won the race for domination. He was spending his bi-annual vacation by himself in the retreat of a village a hundred miles north of Kalva, using a building the Service had owned but abandoned. The book was nearly finished, too, and he'd been practically assured publication. Then there'd be recognition, promotion, a chance to return to Earth; in time, there'd be a wife to make up for ten years without women; there'd be children.

It might have worked, except for an unexpected storm that caught him taking a walk to clear his mind. The same storm found a window he'd carelessly left open and among other things, it ruined his antibiotic kit and his radio.

That left only the native doctor, who knew nothing about pneumonia. Eli passed into a delirium with the unpleasant idea that he'd wake up only in heaven—in which he had no belief.

When he came to, he was less sure. He felt rotten, and his sight was cloudy, but there was either an angel or an Earth girl in the room, talking Sáyonese with an old man. She wore native clothes, but no native had smooth white skin like that—or provocative hips—or such shoulders. Then as she turned, he grunted in surprise. Damned few Earth women looked that good without makeup, either. He began to consider the angel idea seriously.

She shook her head at him, switching to English that had almost none of the lipped dentals caused by Sáyonese slotted palates. "I'm only a goddess," she told him. "That is, I will be in another month. You're lucky I hadn't gone to Kalva yet, though—you were almost dead. And your cells are—well, they're different. I had a hard time with you." She bent closer, long yellow hair falling over his face. "Are you really an Earthman, Eli?"

"I'm as much from Earth as you are," he mumbled, reaching for her.

She seemed puzzled at his efforts to kiss her, but made no protests until the old Sáyonese uttered something that sounded like teasing. Then she disengaged herself, running her hands over her chest.

With a shock, he realized it was as flat as his own.

"What's a breasts, Uncle Kleon?" she asked.

"A breast, or two breasts—they come in pairs," the Sáyonese told her, grinning in amusement. "Read his mind a little deeper and you'll find out quite a few things about them, I'll bet." His English was as easy and idiomatic as hers, though less clearly pronounced.

For a moment, she stared down at Eli. Then she turned away, and she was giggling like a schoolgirl as she left the room.

Kleon came over to drop heavily onto the bed. "I'm not really her uncle," he said. "I'm her teacher, more or less, until she reaches the Temple. I'm one of the few Sáyonese who were admitted to one of our extension schools, before Earth decided to keep us on our own world and gave up any idea of raising our living standard."

"But what about her?" Eli asked.

The old man grinned affectionately. "She's a lot more interesting than I am, I'll admit. She's what she says—a goddess. And a good thing, too. You were already in death shock when she got here. Haven't you ever heard of our virgin goddesses?"

Eli had heard some stories, but he hadn't really believed them. There had been a girl born rather more than a century before who looked like an Earth woman and who had some fantastic power to

heal the sick and restore the maimed. But not *that* human! He looked outside to where the girl was talking to a couple of Sáyonese. Then he frowned. In the sunlight, there seemed to be an undertone of green to her skin, and there was a hint of a line across her abdomen where a Sáyonese girl would have had a pouch. He shook his head, suddenly aware again of his weakness.

"That's her father and mother saying goodbye to her again," Kleon said casually, indicating the two Sáyonese natives.

Eli fainted. When he next regained consciousness, his body seemed to be completely recovered, though it could have been only a couple of hours later. He drank some of the hot cheese soup Kleon offered him, and swung out of bed.

Outside, a wailing procession was coming up the road. Some had skin-rot, others were crippled, a few were blind. Then, as they spotted Meía, their wails turned to cries of delight. Apparently, from what Eli could pick up of their degraded dialect, they had arrived late at her home village and been told she'd gone off to Kalva for her birthday. Finding her here was like a reprieve from hell.

One by one, she took care of them, sometimes talking to them, sometimes laying on her hands. Eli stood nearby and watched, trying to spot the gimmick, and finally gave up. Under her fingers, flesh

that had begun to corrode away literally grew new skin. Bones knit. Cataracts vanished from eyes. And once, to get at a broken spine, she casually levitated a native from the ground, spun him over, and pressed her hands to his back.

When they were finally all cared for and spread out among the huts of the village, she turned to Eli. "It's harder than it looks," she told him. "But it feels good, too. Now, tell me about Earth."

He tried to satisfy her curiosity . . . but sometimes he wasn't too clear about what he was saying. It wasn't easy to get used to the idea that a pretty, innocent young girl could be half alien kangaroo, half miracle-working semi-divine.

"I think we'll stay here a few days," she decided abruptly. "I want to know more about Earth people. Maybe I can even go to Earth and cure people."

It was bad enough trying to go to sleep while he knew she was lying naked in the next room—she'd insisted that he quarter Kleon and herself. But the picture of her on Earth eventually blotted all that out. The planet administrator here was a neo-Blavatskyite of the worst kind, and he'd love nothing better than sponsoring the visit to Earth of a real goddess, law or no law. Once the senatorial families discovered what she could do, all hell would break loose. There'd be at least a dozen kidnaping attempts a month, and probably half

as many palace revolutions to control her. She'd be worse than the Tarshian hypnotic lizard of the last century. Besides, there'd be trouble here at the idea of letting her go, and she'd probably get killed before she really saw Earth.

He tried to argue her out of the idea during the next few days, sometimes with the casual help of Kleon. But she was quite sure she could handle anything, and she'd made up her mind.

"Besides, nobody hurts a virgin goddess," she told him, as if that had anything to do with his arguments. It did serve to throw him off the subject, though.

"Why a virgin, anyhow?" he asked. "You have a Great Goddess you call the Mother-principle, but she incarnates only in virgins. Isn't that contradictory? I suppose she'd blast you asunder if you lost that one virtue."

"She'd leave me, because she's the All-Mother, not the one-Mother. Anyhow, I can't really breed—I'm not naturally fertile. Maybe, if it were possible, I would be willing to give up being a goddess for children and if I loved a man—but I'm not going to lose what I have for nothing."

Her words jerked his own thoughts back to level, with the sharp realization that he'd begun thinking of her as human again. Damn it, she might look like a woman, but even their basic cell structure was different. It would

be easier to breed with an Earth tree than to have children with her. Not one of his chromosomes would match with hers. And it was in Judson's morality that no matter what other elements were involved, sex was related to having children. Anyhow, he knew nothing about Sáyonese anatomy—under her skirt, she might not be human at all.

She giggled. "Eli, if you want me to take off my clothes, why don't you ask? I don't mind, really. Then you can see for yourself."

"Go to hell!" he told her, and stomped off, determined to pack and leave at once. A man could stand just so much. Innocent she might be, but she knew she had him going and she was enjoying it. . . .

He was still there on the fifth day, when he really should have been beginning the trip back to Kalva. Of course, they could have travelled together, but that would have been awkward. Instead of packing, he was walking beside her toward one of his favorite loafing spots on the side of a little hill.

They came to a little dip in the ground that cut off the wind and he threw down a blanket and dropped onto it. He hadn't slept well the night before, and he intended to nap now. She'd brought along the single book Kleon had preserved from his schooling—a tissue edition of some of the books of Earth's old Bible. She and Kleon must have memorized it, but they

still pored over it regularly. He sprawled out and she snuggled down beside him. Probably deliberately, she was closer than she had to be. He could feel her breasts move against him as she breathed.

He sat up with a yelp, staring at her. Breasts? She'd been absolutely flat-chested when he first saw her! But she wasn't now—not by a long ways.

"You wanted them, so I changed," she said contentedly. "It's about time you noticed! And I took away the green in my skin you didn't like and made the line where I should have a pouch disappear, too. See?"

He saw, but at the moment he was more fascinated by what was there than by what wasn't. If she was using padding, she was doing a darned good job of it.

"They're real," she told him. "I picked the ones in your mind you liked best. You can feel, if you don't believe me. I don't mind. After all, it won't mean anything to—me . . ."

But her breath caught as sharply as his, when his fingers slipped under the halter. He felt her tremble, and she was lifting and eager for his hands.

For a minute, she leaned to him, her lips parting and reaching for his. Then abruptly she tore away, staring at him with wide, startled eyes. For the first time, he saw fear on her face.

"No!" she whispered.

But it had to be—he saw it clearly now. Once she gave herself to him, she'd lose her dangerous powers and be just another girl. Maybe the change in her would be only a loss of faith in herself, but that didn't matter. It was his solution. Earth would never hear of her, and . . . and it had been ten years since he'd held a girl!

He started toward her. Her face paled. Something seemed to explode in his head, and he staggered, missed his footing and fell.

"No," she repeated. "Not now. Not yet. I have to think."

This time he waited, knowing he could do nothing to force a creature with the powers of a goddess. The pressures in him rose and fought for expression, but he could only lie and wait. And in the end, it was she who came to him, slowly pulling the halter off as she moved toward him. He lay immobile until she was almost touching him before he groped for her. She pulled closer, straining against him.

"Show me in your mind again. Show me everything," she whispered. "I have to be sure."

His hands had found the slit in her skirt by then, and the buckle, but he tried to follow her wishes with his unclear, churning thoughts. And suddenly she was completely against him, with nothing between, panting in his ear. "I'm sure. Eli, I'm sure!"

The last Eli saw of Meía, she was sleeping in complete exhaustion,

but with a touch of a smile on her lips. She muttered something in a weak voice, and he kissed her lightly, trying to keep his mind from thinking too loud.

It was dark before he reached his house. He located his riding beast, saddled it, and started toward the building to collect his manuscript. Then he saw Kleon reading it, and gave up. He was in no condition to face the questions of the old man. He mounted quickly, and headed for Kalva.

It was a long ride, and there was time for more than enough thought. Sometimes he gloated to himself over the end of her power, as if his victory proved that she had never been more than he was. Sometimes shame came over him, either at the breaking of the Earth taboo against aliens, or at what he had done to her. And always there were the feelings that he cursed and ranted against, but which lasted longer than the others.

At the end of a year, when his transfer was okayed, he spent all his money to send her a box of luxuries, using the village as her address. When his transfer ship was delayed, he began to fear she might trace him back.

Instead, it was the aged Kleon who came, and by then it didn't matter. Judson was inside the passenger fence, getting final clearance, and no natives were permitted. Kleon tried to pass and was turned back. Then, as he saw Eli,

one thick arm swept forward, tossing something over the fence.

It was the thin, worn little mission book Meia had been reading. Shaking proved there was no note between the pages, and nothing was written inside the covers. He stood holding it, trying to guess what it meant, as Kleon left, and the call came to board ship. . . .

Judson woke early, bothered by the light streaming from the windows on two sides of his apartment. He groaned, still aching, and fumbled about blindly until he found his glasses. A slave must have come in during the night to undress him, and one entered now, bringing his freshened clothes and a welcome cup of coffee.

One wall of windows faced north toward the hill, he saw. The other opened on a rear garden. He threw one of the windows open, letting in fresh air and a babble of childish voices. There were three little boys, from six to eleven, playing outside. From their looks, one of them was Dupont's—the others weren't. The man had been a fool to permit the children, but envy was thick in Judson as he watched them.

He shut the window again, just as Dupont himself came in. The man looked sick and scared. "The Fas Kaia has arrested Athon!" he screamed, wasting no time on civilities. "She's holding trial on him for profaning the Temple. After I

ordered her to leave him alone. Come on, we've got to stop it!"

The rulebook was torn up, and Dupont's carefully built shelter was gone. It was a shock to Judson too, but no cause for panic.

"I countermanded your order," he said. He realized he was committing himself; in effect, if not in intention, he was accepting Kaia's bribe. But there was no use trying to undo what she had done—at this point that would only make the over-all situation worse than it was. "If you're worried, Dupont, maybe you'd better get your wife and your boys to the ship."

The sickness in the man abruptly washed out all the fear. But he nodded at last. He shook himself, pulling at some strength inside him to put on a normal appearance, then headed for the garden.

Judson hurried out to the street. There was no chariot waiting, of course; Fas Kaia obviously meant to have a fait accompli when he heard of it. He set out for the Temple on foot, elbowing his way, pushing and shouldering through the crowd streaming toward the Temple.

Inside the Temple, a reluctant priestess led him to a great gold and silver door and swung it open for him. He could see Kaia at the far end of the huge room, addressing a prisoner, in the hands of two Ludh. How the Temple rated Ludh guards would have to be explained later.

She looked up and motioned him to her, standing up as he drew near. "I couldn't get a chariot and message to you through the hostile crowd," she lied easily in a low voice. "So I went ahead, hoping you'd hear. Here, I've already judged him an imposter of Earth stock, and handed him over to the Temple as a spy in Temple uniform—his robe really is an old Temple one. I found rules about jurisdiction over spies in an old covenant of Earth and used them."

"So you didn't need me, after all?" he asked bitterly. He could admire her solution; with the detail of the Temple uniform, it might even be legal.

She shook her head, smiling faintly. "I'm glad you're here, Eli. I'd rather not forge the papers. Here, take the seat of judgment and finish. You can certify to his being human, too."

He found himself seated in the great chair, with the papers in front of him. They were in good order and in English. Kaia was thorough. But after her arrogant assumption that she could control him, if he had even a shred of doubt about the man, she could go whistle . . .

Abruptly, he saw the prisoner, and the anticlimax took all the stubbornness out of him. The man was unimpressive and plain, with mild blue eyes and carrotty-red hair that could only come from Earth.

There was even a hint of freckles across the nose.

Reluctantly, Judson signed. There was no doubt left, and nothing else to do. One man couldn't count against whole worlds, any more than Meia had counted against Earth. But his hand shook as he put the pen back.

"Hear the judgment," Kaia called immediately. "For sacrilege within the Temple, let the self-termed Oè Athon die on the pointed seat this day. Take him away."

The prisoner stood his ground, and spoke in a rich, ringing voice that seemed to fill the whole room. "The world has judged and the world is judged," Athon pronounced slowly. His eyes lingered briefly on Judson, and his hand came up in a strange gesture. Then he shrugged and let the guards move him away.

Judson felt his eyes smarting; and his vision seemed to blur. He reached for his glasses automatically and began cleaning them. Then shock hit him as he glanced at the papers before him. Without the glasses, the smallest text was clearly visible. There had been a final miracle, even inside the Temple.

Kaia was in front of him as he stumbled to his feet, and there was a package in her hands. "Sometimes the Goddess is quick to reward," she chuckled. "Naturally, to refuse *Her* gift is to profane *Her* name. The Temple thanks you, too, Eli."

He took the package and thrust it into his pocket, knowing it bound him to her, and not caring at the moment. "You are kind, Fas Kaia," he said formally. Then he headed for the exit and toward the street.

But now the crowd was thicker, pressing inward. As he came to the steps, he found himself swallowed by it, almost carried by it. It had always been a faceless, abstract crowd to him before—one with no character or feeling. He hadn't really realized that it could claw and tear and smother with its solidity. And he was too old to bull through it.

Then another shock registered. A few feet away, the face of Kleon appeared, with the old eyes staring straight toward him, before the movement of the mob drove them apart. The surprise seemed to clear his mind, though. He lifted his voice to a shout. "They are taking him to the hill for the Seat. Kaia has ordered the Seat for him!"

Other voices picked up the cry and spread it. Now suddenly the crowd began to turn, trying to get away from the Temple and toward the hill. Judson was forced along with them, but they were moving north, at least, toward the Earth palace as well as the hill. He put all his failing energies to the task of working sideways, looking for a chance to drop out before they passed the palace.

Somehow, he made it. He had no memory of it, nor of passing

out on his bed. But he came to, filthy and torn, some time later. There was no answer when he yelled for a slave. He struggled through a hasty bath and into one of the standard Service uniforms in the closet. Then the silence of the house and the low rumble of sound from the north finally registered, and he looked out.

Kalva was deserted now. The entire populace was at the hill, where Ludh guards with crossbows held a small circle open at the top. In the middle of that, there was a quiet figure. Judson hoped that the tortured man was dead—from here it was impossible to tell.

Athon had not saved himself. The judgment was fulfilled.

And in the sky, dark clouds were piling up for one of the periodic storms. Judson gazed at it, beginning to worry again. This was a primitive world, where omens were all-important. A storm now would indicate divine displeasure—it would damn him and Kaia more than all logic or law—more than he could damn himself, perhaps.

It was no time to linger.

He packed hastily, leaving the book and the package for the last. Then he ripped away the wrapping, to study the necklace. The thirty jewels on it were silvery white in the shadows where he held them. They meant a measure of youth again—a wife to give him sons—life on Earth or any planet he

chose. They offered everything he wanted, except peace with himself.

But he had done only what had to be. A man could never stand idly by and see his world ruined, even though the fools in it were bent on riding downhill to perdition. At least in his time, Earth must retain her dominion.

Lightning flashed, a heavy bolt that crashed down against the roof of the Temple. It was natural, since the gold dome was the highest point in the city, but it would be more food for the superstitious. The thunder rolled out, drowning the sound of the rain, and almost covering the footsteps behind him.

He looked around slowly, with no surprise. "It's been a long time, Kleon."

"Too long, Eli," the old voice said. Amazingly, the man looked no older than he had in the village, but there was fatigue and pain in every movement he made. "Your guards are gone, so I left my beasts and came in."

"Vengeance?" Judson asked.

The head shook slowly. "I leave anger to others, Eli. Perhaps that is why I have lived so long. Anyhow, vengeance for what? Meía wanted you. And *he*—he knew it had to be and brought it on himself. I was only a teacher, not a disciple, though I loved the man. No, I followed you to see you, and to take back word of you to Meía. She still lives in the village, and still thinks of you."

Judson shook his head. He'd schooled himself to think of her as being dead. But there was nothing he could say.

The storm seemed to be thinning out, almost as quickly as it had come. Kleon moved to the windows, staring toward the hill. There were tears in his eyes, but his sigh was one of relief. "It is finished," he said.

He bowed his head and seemed to be quoting. "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. . . . For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fires.' I can't blame you for trying to stop a battle that will not be confined to this world, Eli, though the time for any man to take action has passed—as even our priestess seems to know, to her sorrow."

"I stopped it once," Judson protested harshly.

Kleon stared at him, surprise on his old face. He glanced at the book on the table, and the surprise deepened. "I wondered, when you didn't return. And yet . . . How could you fail to get her message and yet have the book all these years, Eli?"

He moved to the thin volume, pulling it open with a cord that lay between the pages. Then he hesitated, and picked up the binoc-

ulars instead. "Look, Eli. Look carefully, and beneath the surface!"

Judson moved uncertainly to the window, unwilling but unable to resist. He focused on the figure that was still upright. Now, when it should have been dulled in death, the face had picked up a strange strength and nobility, and it seemed to stare at the sky, triumphant and waiting. But it was drawn thin by the hours of suffering, and there was something about the features—the nose, the shape of the chin. . . .

"No!" It ripped out of Judson, while the binoculars crashed to the floor. "It's impossible! Physically impossible!"

Kleon shook his head. "Not to one who had the Power, Eli. She burned herself out in one effort—but she succeeded. Here's the message I brought you from her, thirty years ago."

There was a dark circle around one verse on the page, followed by a thick, heavy exclamation point. Below that, Meia's signature was scrawled in English script. Judson bent over the book, focussing on the ancient print within the circle.

Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.

His eyes wavered from the page to the sight of the necklace that was to have given him youth again, and a wife—and a son; rejuvenation to give him more years to realize what he had done and to watch what must become of the power his race had won. Years to think—and sometimes to wonder what a too-human woman in a village on Sáyon might be thinking.

He took one last look up the hill, dry-eyed and frozen. Then he turned to follow Kleon out of the empty palace, knowing he could never leave Sáyon again. The two men turned the corner outside together, climbed silently onto the waiting beasts, and moved slowly north, away from the distant spaceport and the hell that was beginning already in the city.

Night was falling, and the city began to gleam with the angry red of growing fires, while the crowds fought back and forth across the streets, howling in sorrow and rage. . . .

Behind, the book lay open on the table. Wind came in from the windows, turning the pages slowly to the last chapter of Isaiah. Then a sudden gust blew the book closed.

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The Harvest

by

TOM

GODWIN

*Soon they would come, the maddeningly
delicious fralings that filled the body and mind with a
singing, ecstatic fire. If too many came, though,
there would be no more Harvests . . .*

IT WAS HARVEST TIME.

The Sky People waited where the last tenuous vestiges of atmosphere met the nothing of outer space, invisible to the land creatures below who had no way of perceiving life forms that were almost pure energy. Harthon and Ledri waited a little apart from the others, soaring restlessly on scintillating wings in the light-stream from the sun.

For many days the Release Field had enveloped the world below, clouding and distorting the surface of it to the perception of the Sky People with the violence of its psycho-persuasion bands. Now the field was lifted, its work done. There remained only the last little while of waiting before the fralings came; the intoxicating, maddeningly delicious fralings that filled the body and mind with a singing, ecstatic fire. . . .

"There are so many of us this time," Ledri said. "Do you think there will be enough fralings?"

"Of course," Harthon reassured

her. "There are more of *them*, too, and they've learned how to send us as many as we need. There will be more fralings this time than ever before."

"The Harvest—" Ledri's thought was like a nostalgic sigh. "What fun they are! Do you remember the last one, Harthon? And the night we danced down the moonbeams to meet the fralings coming up, before they had ever reached the nets of the Gatherer?"

"I remember. And afterward we followed the sun-stream out, so far out that the world and the moon were like a big and little star behind us. And we sang . . ."

"And you. And then we were hungry again and we let the sun-stream carry us back to the feast where the others were laughing because someone had almost let a fraling escape. Everyone was so happy and the world and the stars were so beautiful. The poor creatures down below—" a touch of sadness came over her—"they don't

know and can never know what it's like . . ."

"It has to be that way," Harthon said. "Would you change it if you could?"

"Oh, no! They have to stay there and we have to watch over them. But what if they should do something beyond our control, as the Wise Ones say they may do some day, and then there would be the Last Harvest and never again any fralings for us?"

"I know. But that may not happen for a long time. And this isn't the day for worrying, little shining one—not when the feast begins so soon."

Their wings touched as they turned in their soaring and looked down upon the great curve of the world below. The eastern sea was blue and cloudless; the western continent going into the evening and the huge mass of the eastern continent coming out of the night. The turning of the world was visible as they watched; the western rim of the western continent creeping very slowly into the extinction of the horizon.

"Can the land people tell when we're watching them like this?" Ledri asked.

"No. They know we're up here, but that's all."

"How did they ever—"

A little sun blazed into being on the western continent, brighter than the real sun. Others followed, swiftly; then they began to flare into life

on the eastern continent—two fields of vivid flowers that bloomed briefly and were gone. Where they had been were tall, dark clouds that rose higher still, swelling and spreading, hiding the land beneath.

The Summoner gave the call that was like the song of a trumpet and the one who had been appointed Gatherer poised his far-flung nets.

"They're coming—the fralings!" Ledri cried. "Look at them, Harthon. But there are so many—" the worry came back to her—"so many that maybe this is the Last Harvest."

"There aren't *that* many," Harthon said, and he laughed at her concern. "Besides, will we care tonight?"

The quick darkness of her mood vanished and she laughed with him. "Tonight we'll dance down the moonbeams again. And tomorrow we'll follow the sun-stream out, farther than ever before."

The fralings drew swiftly closer, hurrying like bright silver birds.

"They're coming to us," Ledri said. "They know that this is where they must go. But how did the land people ever learn of us?"

"Once, many centuries ago, a fraling escaped the nets long enough to go back for a little while. But fralings and land people can't communicate very well with one another and the land people misunderstood most of what it tried to tell them about us."

The fralings struck the invisible nets and the Gatherer gave the command to draw them closed.

"Let's go—the others are already starting." Harthon said, and they went with flashing wings toward the nearer net.

"Do the land people have a name for us?" Ledri asked.

"They call us 'angels,' and they call the Gatherer 'God.'"

The fralings, finally understand-

ing, were trying frantically to escape and the terror of the small ones was a frightened, pleading wail.

"And what do they call the fralings?"

"They call them their 'souls.' We'll eat the small, young ones first—they're the best and there will be plenty for all."

In future issues of Venture S F . . .

At the moment of this writing, the lineup for the next issue of *Venture* is not final, but we can tell you that we have either stories on hand or definite promises from a clutch of distinguished writers—such as:

Clifford Simak	•	Walter M. Miller, Jr.	•	Isaac Asimov
C. M. Kornbluth	•	Edmond Hamilton	•	Leigh Brackett
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Venturings

• The proprietors of *Venture S F* recently came across an astonishing and unsettling fact—the discoverer and distinguished proponent of that basic maxim known as “Sturgeon’s Law” (see page 78) has never made regular public disclosure of his opinions on science fiction books and allied matters! Hastening to repair this appalling condition, the editorial staff has ripped a bloody chunk out of the gleaming underbelly of this issue to make room for the first regular instalment of STURGEON-on-books. This time, Mr. Sturgeon is polite and cheerful; he promises he will not always be so—that he has a few shocking things he has been wanting to say, and that scales will fall in future columns. . . .

• JAMES E. GUNN, who led off the last issue with what we considered a vivid and realistic story of an early attempt to reach Mars, in this issue probes into what life might be like if our present day increase in hypochondria were to continue to spread. It’s an adventure story, but a disturbing one, and it may well ruffle a few feathers. In this connection, it seems important to say that *Venture* considers its chief function to be in providing stimulating entertainment—we have no axes to grind. If another author disagrees with any important implication of “Not So Great an Enemy,” and makes a good story out of his disagreement, *Venture* will be glad to publish it. Science fiction is an exciting field because it offers room for all kinds of speculation—and you can’t easily have all kinds of speculation coming from any one strongly governing editorial slant. . . . Mr. Gunn, incidentally, says, “Believe it or not, I am not anti-medicine. My own family, for instance, has frequently demonstrated the benefits of antibiotics. But any virtue can become an evil through over-emphasis. . . .”

• Back in 1955, PAUL JANVIER wrote a story called “Nobody Bothers Gus;” it was the first of a series (of which “And Then She Found Him . . .” is the most recent) written about a group of people that have come to be known as “Gus-type supermen.” Mr. Janvier says “. . . I’m not at all sure they’re supermen. I regret now having *once* used the word “psi” in describing their abilities. For one thing, what they have in the way of either abnormal abilities or handicaps falls into no clearcut psionic category as these have been defined in science fiction. . . . Actually, these people have only one real consistency—a consistency of attitude. That attitude consists of doing what is best and right, even under circumstances which sometimes cannot be fully understood. . . . I do not worry that I might be accused of changing the rules with every story, because inconsistency and variation in talent are part of being human, and that is what these people are.”

—RPM

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