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# **Proud Robot**

**and other short stories**

**Henry Kuttner**

# The Proud Robot

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Things often happened to Gallegher, who played at science by ear. He was, as he often remarked, a casual genius. Sometimes he'd start with a twist of wire, a few batteries, and a button hook, and before he finished, he might contrive a new type of refrigerating unit.

At the moment he was nursing a hangover. A disjointed, lanky, vaguely boneless man with a lock of dark hair falling untidily over his forehead, he lay on the couch in the lab and manipulated his mechanical liquor bar. A very dry Martini drizzled slowly from the spigot into his receptive mouth.

He was trying to remember something, but not trying too hard. It had to do with the robot, of course. Well, it didn't matter.

"Hey, Joe," Gallegher said.

The robot stood proudly before the mirror and examined its innards. Its hull was transparent, and wheels were going around at a great rate inside.

"When you call me that," Joe remarked, "whisper. And get that cat out of here."

"Your ears aren't that good."

"They are. I can hear the cat walking about, all right."

"What does it sound like?" Gallegher inquired, interested.

"Jest like drums," said the robot, with a put-upon air. "And when you talk, it's like thunder." Joe's voice was a discordant squeak, so Gallegher meditated on saying something about glass houses and casting the first stone. He brought his attention, with some effort, to the luminous door panel, where a shadow loomed—a familiar shadow, Gallegher thought.

"It's Brock," the annunciator said. "Harrison Brock. Let me in!"

"The door's unlocked." Gallegher didn't stir. He looked gravely at the well-dressed, middle-aged man who came in, and tried to remember. Brock was between forty and fifty; he had a smoothly massaged, cleanshaven face, and wore an expression of harassed intolerance. Probably Gallegher knew the man. He wasn't sure. Oh, well.

Brock looked around the big, untidy laboratory, blinked at the robot, searched for a chair, and failed to find it. Arms akimbo, he rocked back and forth and glared at the prostrate scientist.

"Well?" he said.

"Never start conversations that way," Gallegher mumbled, siphoning another Martini down his gullet. "I've had enough trouble today. Sit down and take it easy. There's a dynamo behind you. It isn't very dusty, is it?"

"Did you get it?" Brock snapped. "That's all I want to know. You've had a week. I've a check for ten thousand in my pocket. Do you want it, or don't you?"

"Sure," Gallegher said. He extended a large, groping hand. "Give."

"Caveat emptor. What am I buying?"

"Don't you know?" the scientist asked, honestly puzzled.

Brock began to bounce up and down in a harassed fashion. "My God," he said. "They told me you could help me if anybody could. Sure. And they also said it'd be like pulling teeth to get sense out of you. Are you a technician or a drivelling idiot?"

Gallegher pondered. "Wait a minute. I'm beginning to remember. I talked to you last week, didn't I?"

"You talked--" Brock's round face turned pink. "Yes! You lay there swilling liquor and babbled poetry. You sang 'Frankie and Johnnie.' And you finally got around to accepting my commission."

"The fact is," Gallegher said, "I have been drunk. I often get drunk. Especially on my vacation. It releases my subconscious, and then I can work. I've made my best gadgets when I was tizzied," he went on happily. "Everything seems so clear then. Clear as a bell. I mean a bell, don't I? Anyway--" He lost the thread and looked puzzled. "Anyway, what are you talking about?"

"Are you going to keep quiet?" the robot demanded from its post before the mirror.

Brock jumped. Gallegher waved a casual hand. "Don't mind Joe. I just finished him last night, and I rather regret it."

"A robot?"

"A robot. But he's no good, you know. I made him when I was drunk, and I haven't the slightest idea how or why. All he'll do is stand there and admire himself. And sing. He sings like a banshee. You'll hear him presently."

With an effort Brock brought his attention back to the matter in hand.

"Now look, Gallegher. I'm in a spot. You promised to help me. If you don't, I'm a ruined man."

"I've been ruined for years," the scientist remarked. "It never bothers me. I just go along working for a living and making things in my spare time. Making all sorts of things. You know, if I'd really studied, I'd have been another Einstein. So they tell me. As it is, my subconscious picked up a first-class scientific training somewhere. Probably that's why I never bothered. When I'm drunk or sufficiently absent-minded, I can work out the damnedest problems."

"You're drunk now," Brock accused.

"I approach the pleasanter stages. How would you feel if you woke up and found you'd made a robot for some unknown reason, and hadn't the slightest idea of the creature's attributes?"

"Well--"

"I don't feel that way at all," Gallegher murmured. "Probably you take life too seriously, Brock. Wine is a mocker; strong drink is raging. Pardon me. I rage." He drank another Martini.

Brock began to pace around the crowded laboratory, circling various enigmatic and untidy objects. "If you're a scientist, Heaven help science."

"I'm the Larry Adler of science," Gallegher said. "He was a musician--lived some hundreds of years ago, I think I'm like him. Never took a lesson in my life. Can I help it if my subconscious likes practical jokes?"

"Do you know who I am?" Brock demanded.

"Candidly, no. Should I?"

There was bitterness in the other's voice. "You might have the courtesy to remember, even though it was a week ago. Harrison Brock. Me. I own Vox-View Pictures."

"No," the robot said suddenly, "it's no use. No use at all, Brock."

"What the--"

Gallegher sighed wearily. "I forget the damned thing's alive. Mr. Brock, meet Joe. Joe, meet Mr. Brock--of Vox-View."

Joe turned, gears meshing within his transparent skull. "I am glad to meet you, Mr. Brock. Allow me to congratulate you on your good fortune in hearing my lovely voice."

"Ugh," said the magnate inarticulately. "Hello."

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," Gallegher put in, sotto voce. "Joe's like that. A peacock. No use arguing with him either."

The robot ignored this aside. "But it's no use, Mr. Brock," he went on squeakily. "I'm not interested in money. I realize it would bring happiness to many if I consented to appear in your pictures, but fame means nothing to me. Nothing. Consciousness of beauty is enough."

Brock began to chew his lips. "Look," he said savagely, "I didn't come here to offer you a picture job. See? Am I offering you a contract? Such colossal nerve-- Pah! You're crazy."

"Your schemes are perfectly transparent," the robot remarked coldly. "I can see that you're overwhelmed by my beauty and the loveliness of my voice--its grand tonal qualities. You needn't pretend you don't want me, just so you can get me at a lower price. I said I wasn't interested."

"You're cr-r-razy!" Brock howled, badgered beyond endurance, and Joe calmly turned back to his mirror.

"Don't talk so loudly," the robot warned. "The discordance is deafening. Besides you're ugly and I don't like to look at you." Wheels and cogs buzzed inside the transplastic shell. Joe extended his eyes on stalks and regarded himself with every appearance of appreciation.

Gallegher was chuckling quietly on the couch. "Joe has a high irritation value," he said. "I've found that out already. I must have given him some remarkable senses, too. An hour ago he started to laugh his damn fool head off. No reason, apparently. I was fixing myself a bite to eat. Ten minutes after that I slipped on an apple core I'd thrown away and came down hard. Joe just looked at me. 'That was it,' he said. 'Logics of probability. Cause and effect. I knew you were going to drop that apple core and then step on it when you went to pick up the mail.' Like the White Queen, I suppose. It's a poor memory that doesn't work both ways."

Brock sat on the small dynamo--there were two, the larger one named Monstro, and the smaller one serving Gallegher as a bank--and took deep breaths. "Robots are nothing new."

"This one is. I hate its gears. It's beginning to give me an inferiority complex. Wish I knew why I'd made it," Gallegher sighed. "Oh, well. Have a drink?"

"No. I came here on business. Do you seriously mean you spent last week building a robot instead of solving the problem I hired you for?"

"Contingent, wasn't it?" Gallegher asked. "I think I remember that."

"Contingent," Brock said with satisfaction. "Ten thousand, if and

when."

"Why not give me the dough and take the robot? He's worth that. Put him in one of your pictures."

"I won't have any pictures unless you figure out an answer," Brock snapped. "I told you all about it."

"I have been drunk," Gallegher said. "My mind has been wiped clear, as by a sponge. I am as a little child. Soon I shall be as a drunken little child. Meanwhile, if you'd care to explain the matter again--"

Brock gulped down his passion, jerked a magazine at random from the bookshelf, and took out a stylo. "All right. My preferred stocks are at twenty-eight, 'way below par--" He scribbled figures on the magazine.

"If you'd taken that medieval folio next to that, it'd have cost you a pretty penny," Gallegher said lazily. "So you're the sort of guy who writes on tablecloths, eh? Forget this business of stocks and stuff. Get down to cases. Who are you trying to gyp?"

"It's no use," the robot said from before its mirror. "I won't sign a contract. People may come and admire me, if they like, but they'll have to whisper in my presence."

"A madhouse," Brock muttered, trying to get a grip on himself. "Listen, Gallegher. I told you all this a week ago, but--"

"Joe wasn't here then. Pretend like you're talking to him."

"Uh--look. You've heard of Vox-View Pictures, at least."

"Sure. The biggest and best television company in the business. Sonatone's about your only competitor."

"Sonatone's squeezing me out."

Gallegher looked puzzled. "I don't see how. You've got the best product. Tn-dimensional color, all sorts of modern improvements, the top actors, musicians, singers--"

"No use," the robot said. "I won't."

"Shut up, Joe. You're tops in your field, Brock. I'll hand you that. And I've always heard you were fairly ethical. What's Sonatone got on you?"

Brock made helpless gestures. "Oh, it's politics. The bootleg theaters. I can't buck 'em. Sonatone helped elect the present administration, and the police just wink when I try to have the bootleggers raided."

"Bootleg theaters?" Gallegher asked, scowling a trifle. "I've heard something--"

"It goes 'way back. To the old sound-film days. Home television killed sound film and big theaters. People were conditioned away from sitting in audience groups to watch a screen. The home televisors got good. It was more fun to sit in an easy-chair, drink beer, and watch the show. Television wasn't a rich man's hobby by that time. The meter system brought the price down to middle-class levels. Everybody knows that."

"I don't," Gallegher said. "I never pay attention to what goes on outside of my lab, unless I have to. Liquor and a selective mind. I ignore everything that doesn't affect me directly. Explain the whole thing in detail, so I'll get a complete picture. I don't mind repetition. Now, what about this meter system of yours?"

"Televisors are installed free. We never sell 'em; we rent them. People pay according to how many hours they have the set tuned in. We run a continuous show, stage plays, wire-tape films, operas, orchestras, singers, vaudeville--everything. If you use your televisor a lot, you pay proportionately. The man comes around once a month and reads the meter. Which is a fair system. Anybody can afford a Vox-View. Sonatone and the other companies do the same thing, but Sonatone's the only big competitor I've got. At least, the only one that's crooked as hell. The rest of the boys--they're smaller than I am, but I don't step on their toes. Nobody's ever called me a louse," Brock said darkly.

"So what?"

"So Sonatone has started to depend on audience appeal. It was impossible till lately--you couldn't magnify tn-dimensional television on a big screen without streakiness and mirage-effect. That's why the regular three-by-four home screens were used. Results were perfect. But Sonatone's bought a lot of the ghost theaters all over the country--"

"What's a ghost theater?" Gallegher asked.

"Well--before sound films collapsed, the world was thinking big. Big--you know? Ever heard of the Radio City Music Hall? That wasn't in it! Television was coming in, and competition was fierce. Sound-film theaters got bigger and more elaborate. They were palaces. Tremendous. But when television was perfected, nobody went to the theaters any more, and it was often too expensive a job to tear 'em down. Ghost theaters--see? Big ones and little ones. Renovated them. And they're showing Sonatone programs. Audience appeal is quite a factor. The theaters charge plenty, but people flock into 'em. Novelty and the mob instinct."

Gallegher closed his eyes. "What's to stop you from doing the same thing?"

"Patents," Brock said briefly. "I mentioned that dimensional television couldn't be used on big screens till lately. Sonatone signed an agreement with me ten years ago that any enlarging improvements would be used mutually. They crawled out of that contract. Said it was faked, and the courts upheld them. They uphold the courts--politics. Anyhow, Sonatone's technicians worked out a method of using the large screen. They took out patents--twenty-seven patents, in fact, covering every possible variation on the idea. My technical staff has been working day and night trying to find some similar method that won't be an infringement, but Sonatone's got it all sewed up. They've a system called the Magna. It can be hooked up to any type of televisior--but they'll only allow it to be used on Sonatone machines. See?"

"Unethical, but legal," Gallegher said. "Still, you're giving your customers more for their money. People want good stuff. The size doesn't matter."

"Yeah," Brock said bitterly, "but that isn't all. The newstapes are full of a. a.--it's a new catchword. Audience Appeal. The herd instinct. You're right about people wanting good stuff--but would you buy Scotch at four a quart if you could get it for half that amount?"

"Depends on the quality. What's happening?"

"Bootleg theaters," Brock said. "They've opened all over the country. They show Vox-View products, and they're using the Magna enlarger system Sonatone's got patented. The admission price is low--lower than the rate of owning a Vox-View in your own home. There's audience appeal. There's the thrill of something a bit illegal. People are having their Vox-Views taken out right and left. I know why. They

can go to a bootleg theater instead."

"It's illegal," Gallegher said thoughtfully.

"So were speakeasies, in the Prohibition Era. A matter of protection, that's all. I can't get any action through the courts. I've tried. I'm running in the red. Eventually I'll be broke. I can't lower my home rental fees on Vox-Views. They're nominal already. I make my profits through quantity. Now, no profits. As for these bootleg theaters, it's pretty obvious who's backing them."

"Sonatone?"

"Sure. Silent partners. They get the take at the box office. What they want is to squeeze me out of business, so they'll have a monopoly. After that, they'll give the public junk and pay their artists starvation salaries. With me it's different. I pay my staff what they're worth—plenty."

"And you offered me a lousy ten thousand," Gallegher remarked. "Uh-huh!"

"That was only the first instalment," Brock said hastily. "You can name your own fee. Within reason," he added.

"I shall. An astronomical sum. Did I say I'd accept the commission a week ago?"

"You did."

"Then I must have had some idea how to solve the problem." Gallegher pondered. "Let's see. I didn't mention anything in particular, did I?"

"You kept talking about marble slabs and... uh... your sweetie."

"Then I was singing," Gallegher explained largely. " 'St. James Infirmary.' Singing calms my nerves, and God knows they need it sometimes. Music and liquor. I often wonder what the vintners buy--"

"What?"

"One half so precious as the stuff they sell. Let it go. I am quoting Omar. It means nothing. Are your technicians any good?"

"The best. And the best paid."

"They can't find a magnifying process that won't infringe on the Sonatone Magna patents?"

"In a nutshell, that's it."

"I suppose I'll have to do some research," Gallegher said sadly. "I hate it like poison. Still, the sum of the parts equals the whole. Does that make sense to you? It doesn't to me. I have trouble with words. After I say things, I start wondering what I've said. Better than watching a play," he finished wildly. "I've got a headache. Too much talk and not enough liquor. Where were we?"

"Approaching the madhouse," Brock suggested. "If you weren't my last resort, I'd--"

"No use," the robot said squeakily. "You might as well tear up your contract, Brock. I won't sign it. Fame means nothing to me--nothing."

"If you don't shut up," Gallegher warned, "I'm going to scream in your ears."

"All right!" Joe shrilled. "Beat me! Go on, beat me! The meaner you are, the faster I'll have my nervous system disrupted, and then I'll be

dead. I don't care. I've got no instinct of self-preservation. Beat me. See if I care."

"He's right, you know," the scientist said after a pause. "And it's the only logical way to respond to blackmail or threats. The sooner it's over, the better. There aren't any gradations with Joe. Anything really painful to him will destroy him. And he doesn't give a damn."

"Neither do I," Brock grunted. "What I want to find out--"

"Yeah. I know. Well, I'll wander around and see what occurs to me. Can I get into your studios?"

"Here's a pass." Brock scribbled something on the back of a card. "Will you get to work on it right away?"

"Sure," Gallegher lied. "Now you run along and take it easy. Try and cool off. Everything's under control. I'll either find a solution to your problem pretty soon or else--"

"Or else what?"

"Or else I won't," the scientist finished blandly, and fingered the buttons on a control panel near the couch. "I'm tired of Martinis. Why didn't I make that robot a mechanical bartender, while I was at it? Even the effort of selecting and pushing buttons is depressing at times. Yeah, I'll get to work on the business, Brock. Forget it."

The magnate hesitated. "Well, you're my only hope. I needn't bother to mention that if there's anything I can do to help you--"

"A blonde," Gallegher murmured. "That gorgeous, gorgeous star of yours, Silver O'Keefe. Send her over. Otherwise I want nothing."

"Good-bye, Brock," the robot said squeakily. "Sorry we couldn't get

together on the contract, but at least you've had the ineluctable delight of hearing my beautiful voice, not to mention the pleasure of seeing me. Don't tell too many people how lovely I am. I really don't want to be bothered with mobs. They're noisy."

"You don't know what dogmatism means till you've talked to Joe," Gallegher said. "Oh, well. See you later. Don't forget the blonde."

Brock's lips quivered. He searched for words, gave it up as a vain task, and turned to the door.

"Good-by, you ugly man," Joe said.

Gallegher winced as the door slammed, though it was harder on the robot's supersensitive ears than on his own. "Why do you go on like that?" he inquired. "You nearly gave the guy apoplexy."

"Surely he didn't think he was beautiful," Joe remarked.

"Beauty's in the eye of the beholder."

"How stupid you are. You're ugly, too."

"And you're a collection of rattletrap gears, pistons and cogs. You've got worms," said Gallegher, referring of course, to certain mechanisms in the robot's body.

"I'm lovely." Joe stared raptly into the mirror.

"Maybe, to you. Why did I make you transparent, I wonder?"

"So others could admire me. I have x-ray vision, of course."

"And wheels in your head. Why did I put your radio-atomic brain in your stomach? Protection?"

Joe didn't answer. He was humming in a maddeningly squeaky voice, shrill and nerve-racking. Gallegher stood it for a while, fortifying himself with a gin rickey from the siphon.

"Get it up!" he yelped at last. "You sound like an old-fashioned subway train going round a curve."

"You're merely jealous," Joe scoffed, but obediently raised his tone to a supersonic pitch. There was silence for a half-minute. Then all the dogs in the neighborhood began to howl.

Wearily Gallegher dragged his lanky frame up from the couch. He might as well get out. Obviously there was no peace to be had in the laboratory. Not with that animated junk pile inflating his ego all over the place. Joe began to laugh in an off-key cackle. Gallegher winced.

"What now?"

"You'll find out."

Logic of causation and effect, influenced by probabilities, x-ray vision and other enigmatic senses the robot no doubt possessed. Gallegher cursed softly, found a shapeless black hat, and made for the door. He opened it to admit a short, fat man who bounced painfully off the scientist's stomach.

"Whoof! Uh. What a corny sense of humor that jackass has. Hello, Mr. Kennicott. Glad to see you. Sorry I can't offer you a drink."

Mr. Kennicott's swarthy face twisted malignantly. "Don'wanna no drink. Wanna my money. You gimme. Howzabout it?"

Gallegher looked thoughtfully at nothing. "Well, the fact is, I was just going to collect a check."

"I sella you my diamonds. You say you gonna make somet'ing wit'em. You gimme check before. It go bounca, bounca, bounca. Why is?"

"It was rubber," Gallegher said faintly. "I never can keep track of my bank balance."

Kennicott showed symptoms of going bounca on the threshold. "You gimme back diamonds, eh?"

"Well, I used 'em in an experiment. I forget just what. You know, Mr. Kennicott, I think I was a little drunk when I bought them, wasn't I?"

"Dronk," the little man agreed. "Mad wit'vino, sure. So whatta? I wait no longer. Awready you put me off too much. Pay up now or elsa."

"Go away, you dirty man," Joe said from within the room. "You're awful."

Gallegher hastily shouldered Kennicott out into the street and latched the door behind him. "A parrot," he explained. "I'm going to wring its neck pretty soon. Now about that money. I admit I owe it to you. I've just taken on a big job, and when I'm paid, you'll get yours."

"Bah to such stuff," Kennicott said. "You gotta position, eh? You are technician wit'some big company, eh? Ask for ahead-salary."

"I did," Gallegher sighed. "I've drawn my salary for six months ahead. Now look. I'll have that dough for you in a couple of days. Maybe I can get an advance from my client. o.k.?"

[...]

"No?"

"Ah-h, nutsa. I waita one day. Two daysa, maybe. Enough. You get money. Awright. If not, o.k., calabozo for you."

"Two days is plenty," Gallegher said, relieved. "Say, are there any of those bootleg theaters around here?"

"Better you get to work an'not waste time."

"That's my work. I'm making a survey. How can I find a bootleg place?"

"Easy. You go downtown, see guy in doorway. He sell you tickets. Anywhere. All over."

"Swell," Gallegher said, and bade the little man adieu. Why had he bought diamonds from Kennicott? It would be almost worth while to have his subconscious amputated. It did the most extraordinary things. It worked on inflexible principles of logic, but that logic was completely alien to Gallegher's conscious mind. The results, though, were often surprisingly good, and always surprising. That was the worst of being a scientist who knew no science--who played by ear.

There was diamond dust in a retort in the laboratory, from some unsatisfactory experiment Gallegher's subconscious had performed; and he had a fleeting memory of buying the stones from Kennicott. Curious. Maybe--oh, yeah. They'd gone into Joe. Bearings or something. Dismantling the robot wouldn't help now, for the diamonds had certainly been reground. Why the devil hadn't he used commercial stones, quite as satisfactory, instead of purchasing blue-whites of the finest water? The best was none too good for Gallegher's subconscious. It had a fine freedom from commercial instincts. It just didn't understand the price system of the basic principles of economics.

Gallegher wandered downtown like a Diogenes seeking truth. It was early evening, and the luminates were flickering on overhead, pale bars of light against darkness. A sky sign blazed above Manhattan's towers. Air-taxis, skimming along at various arbitrary levels, paused for passengers at the elevator landings. Heigh-ho.

Downtown, Gallegher began to look for doorways. He found an occupied one at last, but the man was selling post cards. Gallegher declined and headed for the nearest bar, feeling the needs of replenishment. It was a mobile bar, combining the worst features of a Coney Island ride with uninspired cocktails, and Gallegher hesitated on the threshold. But at last he seized a chair as it swung past and relaxed as much as possible. He ordered three rickeys and drank them in rapid succession. After that he called the bartender over and asked him about bootleg theaters.

"Hell, yes," the man said, producing a sheaf of tickets from his apron. "How many?"

"One. Where do I go?"

"Two-twenty-eight. This street. Ask for Tony."

"Thanks," Gallegher said, and having paid exorbitantly, crawled out of the chair and weaved away. Mobile bars were an improvement he didn't appreciate. Drinking, he felt, should be performed in a state of stasis, since one eventually reached that stage, anyway.

The door was at the bottom of a flight of steps, and there was a grilled panel set in it. When Gallegher knocked, the visoscreen lit up—obviously a one-way circuit, for the doorman was invisible.

"Tony here?" Gallegher said.

The door opened, revealing a tired-looking man in pneumo-slacks.

which failed in their purpose of building up his skinny figure. "Got a ticket? Let's have it. o.k., bud. Straight ahead. Show now going on. Liquor served in the bar on your left."

Gallegher pushed through soundproofed curtains at the end of a short corridor and found himself in what appeared to be the foyer of an ancient theater, circa 1980, when plastics were the great fad. He smelled out the bar, drank expensively priced cheap liquor, and, fortified, entered the theater itself. It was nearly full. The great screen--a Magna, presumably--was filled with people doing things to a spaceship. Either an adventure film or a newsreel, Gallegher realized.

Only the thrill of lawbreaking would have enticed the audience into the bootleg theater. It smelled. It was certainly run on a shoestring, and there were no ushers. But it was illicit, and therefore well patronized. Gallegher looked thoughtfully at the screen. No streakiness, no mirage effect. A Magna enlarger had been fitted to a Vox-View unlicensed television, and one of Brock's greatest stars was emoting effectively for the benefit of the bootleggers' patrons. Simple highjacking. Yeah.

After a while Gallegher went out, noticing a uniformed policeman in one of the aisle seats. He grinned sardonically. The flatfoot hadn't paid his admission, of course. Politics were as usual.

Two blocks down the street a blaze of light announced Sonatone Bijou. This, of course, was one of the legalized theaters, and correspondingly high-priced. Gallegher recklessly squandered a small fortune on a good seat. He was interested in comparing notes, and discovered that, as far as he could make out, the Magna in the Bijou and the bootleg theater were identical. Both did their job perfectly. The difficult task of enlarging television screens had been successfully surmounted.

In the Bijou, however, all was palatial. Resplendent ushers salaamed to the rugs. Bars dispensed free liquor, in reasonable quantities. There was a Turkish bath. Gallegher went through a door labelled men and emerged quite dazzled by the splendor of the place. For at least ten minutes afterward he felt like a Sybarite.

All of which meant that those who could afford it went to the legalized Sonatone theaters, and the rest attended the bootleg places. All but a few homebodies, who weren't carried off their feet by the new fad. Eventually Brock would be forced out of business for lack of revenue. Sonatone would take over, jacking up their prices and concentrating on making money. Amusement was necessary to life; people had been conditioned to television. There was no substitute. They'd pay and pay for inferior talent, once Sonatone succeeded in their squeeze.

Gallegher left the Bijou and hailed an air-taxi. He gave the address of Vox-View's Long Island studio, with some vague hope of getting a drawing account out of Brock. Then, too, he wanted to investigate further.

Vox-View's eastern offices sprawled wildly over Long Island, bordering the Sound, a vast collection of variously shaped buildings. Gallegher instinctively found the commissary, where he absorbed more liquor as a precautionary measure. His subconscious had a heavy job ahead, and he didn't want it handicapped by lack of complete freedom. Besides, the Collins was good.

After one drink, he decided he'd had enough for a while. He wasn't a superman, though his capacity was slightly incredible. Just enough for objective clarity and subjective release--

"Is the studio always open at night?" he asked the waiter.

"Sure. Some of the stages, anyway. It's a round-the-clock program."

"The commissary's full."

"We get the airport crowd, too. 'Nother?"

Gallegher shook his head and went out. The card Brock had given him provided entree at a gate, and he went first of all to the big-shot's office. Brock wasn't there, but loud voices emerged, shrilly feminine.

The secretary said, "Just a minute, please," and used her interoffice visor. Presently--"Will you go in?"

Gallegher did. The office was a honey, functional and luxurious at the same time. Three-dimensional stills were in niches along the walls--Vox-View's biggest stars. A small, excited, pretty brunette was sitting behind the desk, and a blonde angel was standing furiously on the other side of it. Gallegher recognized the angel as Silver O'Keefe.

He seized the opportunity. "Hiya, Miss O'Keefe. Will you autograph an ice cube for me? In a highball?"

Silver looked feline. "Sorry, darling, but I'm a working girl. And I'm busy right now."

The brunette scratched a cigarette. "Let's settle this later, Silver. Pop said to see this guy if he dropped in. It's important."

"It'll be settled," Silver said. "And soon." She made an exit. Gallegher whistled thoughtfully at the closed door.

"You can't have it," the brunette said. "It's under contract. And it wants to get out of the contract, so it can sign up with Sonatone. Rats desert a sinking ship. Silver's been kicking her head off ever since she read the storm signals."

"Yeah?"

"Sit down and smoke or something. I'm Patsy Brock. Pop runs this business, and I manage the controls whenever he blows his top. The old goat can't stand trouble. He takes it as a personal affront."

Gallegher found a chair. "So Silver's trying to renege, eh? How many others?"

"Not many. Most of 'em are loyal. But, of course, if we bust up--" Patsy Brock shrugged. "They'll either work for Sonatone for their cakes, or else do without."

"Uh-huh. Well--I want to see your technicians. I want to look over the ideas they've worked out for enlarger screens."

"Suit yourself," Patsy said. "It's not much use. You just can't make a televisor enlarger without infringing on some Sonatone patent."

She pushed a button, murmured something into a visor, and presently two tall glasses appeared through a slot in the desk. "Mr. Gallegher?"

"Well, since it's a Collins--"

"I could tell by your breath," Patsy said enigmatically. "Pop told me he'd seen you. He seemed a bit upset, especially by your new robot. What is it like, anyway?"

"Oh, I don't know," Gallegher said, at a loss. "It's got lots of abilities--new senses, I think--but I haven't the slightest idea what it's good for. Except admiring itself in a mirror."

Patsy nodded. "I'd like to see it sometime. But about this Sonatone

business. Do you think you can figure out an answer?"

"Possibly. Probably."

"Not certainly?"

"Certainly, then. Of that there is no manner of doubt--no possible doubt whatever."

"Because it's important to me. The man who owns Sonatone is Ella Tone. A piratical skunk. He blusters. He's got a son named Jimmy. And Jimmy, believe it or not, has read 'Romeo and Juliet.'"

"Nice guy?"

"A louse. A big, brawny louse. He wants me to marry him."

"Two families, both alike in--"

"Spare me," Patsy interrupted. "I always thought Romeo was a dope, anyway. And if I ever thought I was going aising with Jimmy Tone, I'd buy a one-way ticket to the nut hatch. No, Mr. Gallegher, it's not like that. No hibiscus blossoms. Jimmy has proposed to me--his idea of a proposal, by the way, is to get a half Nelson on a girl and tell her how lucky she is."

"Ah," said Gallegher, diving into his Collins.

"This whole idea--the patent monopoly and the bootleg theaters--is Jimmy's. I'm sure of that. His father's in on it, too, of course, but Jimmy Tone is the bright little boy who started it."

"Why?"

"Two birds with one stone. Sonatone will have a monopoly on the

business, and Jimmy thinks he'll get me. He's a little mad. He can't believe I'm in earnest in refusing him, and he expects me to break down and say 'Yes' after a while. Which I won't, no matter what happens. But it's a personal matter. I can't let him put this trick over on us. I want that self-sufficient smirk wiped off his face."

"You just don't like him, eh?" Gallegher remarked. "I don't blame you, if he's like that. Well, I'll do my damndest. However, I'll need an expense account."

"How much?"

Gallegher named a sum. Patsy styloed a check for a far smaller amount. The scientist looked hurt.

"It's no use," Patsy said, grinning crookedly. "I've heard of you, Mr. Gallegher. You're completely irresponsible. If you had more than this, you'd figure you didn't need any more, and you'd forget the whole matter. I'll issue more checks to you when you need 'em--but I'll want itemized expense accounts."

"You wrong me," Gallegher said, brightening. "I was figuring on taking you to a night club. Naturally I don't want to take you to a dive. The big places cost money. Now if you'll just write another check--"

Patsy laughed. "No."

"Want to buy a robot?"

"Not that kind, anyway."

"Then I'm washed up," Gallegher sighed. "Well, what about--"

At this point the visor hummed. A blank, transparent face grew on the screen. Gears were clicking rapidly inside the round head. Patsy

gave a small shriek and shrank back.

"Tell Gallegher Joe's here, you lucky girl," a squeaky voice announced. "You may treasure the sound and sight of me till your dying day. One touch of beauty in a world of drabness--"

Gallegher circled the desk and looked at the screen. "What the hell. How did you come to life?"

"I had a problem to solve."

"How'd you know where to reach me?"

"I vastened you," the robot said.

"What?"

"I vastened you were at the Vox-View studios, with Patsy Brock."

"What's vastened?" Gallegher wanted to know.

"It's a sense I've got. You've nothing remotely like it, so I can't describe it to you. It's like a combination of sagrazi and prescience."

"Sagrazi?"

"Oh, you don't have sagrazi, either, do you. Well, don't waste my time. I want to go back to the mirror."

"Does he always talk like that?" Patsy put in.

"Nearly always. Sometimes it makes even less sense. o.k., Joe. Now what?"

"You're not working for Brock any more," the robot said. "You're

working for the Sonatone people."

Gallegher breathed deeply. "Keep talking. You're crazy, though."

"I don't like Kennicott. He annoys me. He's too ugly. His vibrations grate on my sagrazi."

"Never mind him," Gallegher said, not wishing to discuss his diamond-buying activities before the girl. "Get back to--"

"But I knew Kennicott would keep coming back till he got his money. So when Ella and James Tone came to the laboratory, I got a check from them."

Patsy's hand gripped Gallegher's biceps. "Steady! What's going on here? The old double cross?"

"No. Wait. Let me get to the bottom of this. Joe, damn your transparent hide, just what did you do? How could you get a check from the Tones?"

"I pretended to be you."

"Sure," Gallegher said with savage sarcasm. "That explains it. We're twins. We look exactly alike."

"I hypnotized them," Joe explained. "I made them think I was you."

"You can do that?"

"Yes. It surprised me a bit. Still, if I'd thought, I'd have vastened I could do it."

"You... yeah, sure. I'd have vastened the same thing myself. What happened?"

"The Tones must have suspected Brock would ask you to help him. They offered an exclusive contract--you work for them and nobody else. Lots of money. Well, I pretended to be you, and said all right. So I signed the contract--it's your signature, by the way--and got a check from them and mailed it to Kennicott."

"The whole check?" Gallegher asked feebly. "How much was it?"

"Twelve thousand."

"They only offered me that?"

"No," the robot said, "they offered a hundred thousand, and two thousand a week for five years. But I merely wanted enough to pay Kennicott and make sure he wouldn't come back and bother me. The Tones were satisfied when I said twelve thousand would be enough."

Gallegher made an inarticulate, gurgling sound deep in his throat. Joe nodded thoughtfully.

"I thought I had better notify you that you're working for Sonatone now. Well, I'll go back to the mirror and sing to myself."

"Wait," the scientist said. "Just wait, Joe. With my own two hands I'm going to rip you gear from gear and stamp on your fragments."

"It won't hold in court," Patsy said, gulping.

"It will," Joe told her cheerily. "You may have one last, satisfying look at me, and then I must go." He went.

Gallegher drained his Collins at a draft. "I'm shocked sober," he informed the girl. "What did I put into that robot? What abnormal senses has he got? Hypnotizing people into believing he's me--I'm

him--I don't know what I mean."

"Is this a gag?" Patsy said shortly, after a pause. "You didn't sign up with Sonatone yourself, by any chance, and have your robot call up here to give you an out--an alibi? I'm just wondering."

"Don't. Joe signed a contract with Sonatone, not me. But--figure it out: If the signature's a perfect copy of mine, if Joe hypnotized the Tones into thinking they saw me instead of him, if there are witnesses to the signature--the two Tones are witnesses, of course-- Oh, hell."

Patsy's eyes were narrowed. "We'll pay you as much as Sonatone offered. On a contingent basis. But you're working for Vox-View--that's understood."

"Sure."

Gallegher looked longingly at his empty glass. Sure. He was working for Vox-View. But, to all legal appearances, he had signed a contract giving his exclusive services to Sonatone for a period of five years--and for a sum of twelve thousand! Yipe! What was it they'd offered? A hundred thousand flat, and... and-- It wasn't the principle of the thing, it was the money. Now Gallegher was sewed up tighter than a banded pigeon. If Sonatone could win a court suit, he was legally bound to them for five years. With no further emolument. He had to get out of that contract, somehow--and at the same time solve Brock's problem.

Why not Joe? The robot, with his surprising talents, had got Gallegher into this spot. He ought to be able to get the scientist out. He'd better--or the proud robot would soon be admiring himself piecemeal.

"That's it," Gallegher said under his breath. "I'll talk to Joe. Patsy, feed me liquor in a hurry and send me to the technical department. I want to see those blueprints."

The girl looked at him suspiciously. "All right. If you try to sell us out--"

"I've been sold out myself. Sold down the river. I'm afraid of that robot. He's vastened me into quite a spot. That's right, Collinses." Gallegher drank long and deeply.

After that, Patsy took him to the tech offices. The reading of three-dimensional blueprints was facilitated with a scanner--a selective device which eliminated confusion. Gallegher studied the plans long and thoughtfully. There were copies of the patent Sonatone prints, too, and, as far as he could tell, Sonatone had covered the ground beautifully. There weren't any outs. Unless one used an entirely new principle-- But new principles couldn't be plucked out of the air. Nor would that solve the problem completely. Even if Vox-View owned a new type of enlarger that didn't infringe on Sonatone's Magna, the bootleg theaters would still be in existence, pulling the trade. a.a.--audience appeal--was a prime factor now. It had to be considered. The puzzle wasn't a purely scientific one. There was the human equation as well.

Gallegher stored the necessary information in his mind, neatly indexed on shelves. Later he'd use what he wanted. For the moment, he was completely baffled. Something worried him.

What? The Sonatone affair.

"I want to get in touch with the Tones," he told Patsy. "Any ideas?"

"I can reach 'em on a visor."

Gallegher shook his head. "Psychological handicap. It's too easy to

break the connection."

"Well, if you're in a hurry, you'll probably find the boys night clubbing. I'll go see what I can find out." Patsy scuttled off, and Silver O'Keefe appeared from behind a screen.

"I'm shameless," she announced. "I always listen at keyholes. Sometimes I hear interesting things. If you want to see the Tones, they're at the Castle Club. And I think I'll take you up on that drink."

Gallegher said, "o.k. You get a taxi. I'll tell Patsy we're going."

"She'll hate that," Silver remarked. "Meet you outside the commissary in ten minutes. Get a shave while you're at it."

Patsy Brock wasn't in her office, but Gallegher left word. After that, he visited the service lounge, smeared invisible shave cream on his face, left it there for a couple of minutes, and wiped it off with a treated towel. The bristles came away with the cream. Slightly refreshed, Gallegher joined Silver at the rendezvous and hailed an air-taxi. Presently they were leaning back on the cushions, puffing cigarettes and eying each other warily.

"Well?" Gallegher said.

"Jimmy Tone tried to date me up tonight. That's how I knew where to find him."

"Well?"

"I've been asking questions around the lot tonight. It's unusual for an outsider to get into the Vox-View administration offices. I went around saying, 'Who's Gallegher?'"

"What did you find out?"

"Enough to give me a few ideas. Brock hired you, eh? I can guess why."

"Ergo what?"

"I've a habit of landing on my feet," Silver said, shrugging. She knew how to shrug. "Vox-View's going bust. Sonatone's taking over. Unless--"

"Unless I figure out an answer."

"That's right. I want to know which side of the fence I'm going to land on. You're the lad who can probably tell me. Who's going to win?"

"You always bet on the winning side, eh?" Gallegher inquired. "Have you no ideals, wench? Is there no truth in you? Ever hear of ethics and scruples?"

Silver beamed happily. "Did you?"

"Well, I've heard of 'em. Usually I'm too drunk to figure out what they mean. The trouble is, my subconscious is completely amoral, and when it takes over, logic's the only law."

She threw her cigarette into the East River. "Will you tip me off which side of the fence is the right one?"

"Truth will triumph," Gallegher said piously. "It always does. However, I figure truth is a variable, so we're right back where we started. All right, sweetheart. I'll answer your question. Stay on my side if you want to be safe."

"Which side are you on?"

"God knows," Gallagher said. "Consciously I'm on Brock's side. But my subconscious may have different ideas. We'll see."

Silver looked vaguely dissatisfied, but didn't say anything. The taxi swooped down to the Castle roof, grounding with pneumatic gentleness. The Club itself was downstairs, in an immense room shaped like half a melon turned upside down. Each table was on a transparent platform that could be raised on its shaft to any height at will. Smaller service elevators allowed waiters to bring drinks to the guests. There wasn't any particular reason for this arrangement, but at least it was novel, and only extremely heavy drinkers ever fell from their tables. Lately the management had taken to hanging transparent nets under the platforms, for safety's sake.

The Tones, father and son, were up near the roof, drinking with two lovelies. Silver towed Gallagher to a service lift, and the man closed his eyes as he was elevated skyward. The liquor in his stomach screamed protest. He lurched forward, clutched at Ella Tone's bald head, and dropped into a seat beside the magnate. His searching hand found Jimmy Tone's glass, and he drained it hastily.

"What the hell," Jimmy said.

"It's Gallagher," Ella announced. "And Silver. A pleasant surprise. Join us?"

"Only socially," Silver said.

Gallegher, fortified by the liquor, peered at the two men. Jimmy Tone was a big, tanned, handsome lout with a jutting jaw and an offensive grin. His father combined the worst features of Nero and a crocodile.

"We're celebrating," Jimmy said. "What made you change your mind, Silver? You said you had to work tonight."

"Gallegher wanted to see you. I don't know why."

Ella's cold eyes grew even more glacial. "All right. Why?"

"I hear I signed some sort of contract with you," the scientist said.

"Yeah. Here's a photostatic copy. What about it?"

"Wait a minute." Gallegher scanned the document. It was apparently his own signature. Damn that robot!

"It's a fake," he said at last.

Jimmy laughed loudly. "I get it. A hold up. Sorry, pal, but you're sewed up. You signed that in the presence of witnesses."

"Well--" Gallegher said wistfully. "I suppose you wouldn't believe me if I said a robot forged my name to it--"

"Haw!" Jimmy remarked.

"--hypnotizing you into believing you were seeing me."

Ella stroked his gleaming bald head. "Candidly, no. Robots can't do that."

"Mine can."

"Prove it. Prove it in court. If you can do that, of course--" Ella chuckled. "Then you might get the verdict."

Gallegher's eyes narrowed. "Hadn't thought of that. However--I hear you offered me a hundred thousand flat, as well as a weekly salary."

"Sure, sap," Jimmy said. "Only you said all you needed was twelve

thousand. Which was what you got. Tell you what, though. We'll pay you a bonus for every usable product you make for Sonatone."

Gallegher got up. "Even my subconscious doesn't like these lugs," he told Silver. "Let's go."

"I think I'll stick around."

"Remember the fence," he warned cryptically. "But suit yourself. I'll run along."

Ella said, "Remember, Gallegher, you're working for us. If we hear of you doing any favors for Brock, we'll slap an injunction on you before you can take a deep breath."

"Yeah?"

The Tones deigned no answer. Gallegher unhappily found the lift and descended to the floor. What now? Joe.

Fifteen minutes later Gallegher let himself into his laboratory. The lights were blazing, and dogs were barking frantically for blocks around. Joe stood before the mirror, singing inaudibly.

"I'm going to take a sledge hammer to you," Gallegher said. "Start saying your prayers, you misbegotten collection of cogs. So help me, I'm going to sabotage you."

"All right, beat me," Joe squeaked. "See if I care. You're merely jealous of my beauty."

"Beauty?"

"You can't see all of it--you've only six senses."

"Five."

"Six. I've a lot more. Naturally my full splendor is revealed only to me. But you can see enough and hear enough to realize part of my loveliness, anyway."

"You squeak like a rusty tin wagon," Gallegher growled.

"You have dull ears. Mine are supersensitive. You miss the full tonal values of my voice, of course. Now be quiet. Talking disturbs me. I'm appreciating my gear movements."

"Live in your fool's paradise while you can. Wait'll I find a sledge."

"All right, beat me. What do I care?"

Gallegher sat down wearily on the couch, staring at the robot's transparent back. "You've certainly screwed things up for me. What did you sign that Sonatone contract for?"

"I told you. So Kennicott wouldn't come around and bother me."

"Of all the selfish, lunk-headed... uh! Well, you got me into a sweet mess. The Tones can hold me to the letter of the contract unless I prove I didn't sign it. All right. You're going to help me. You're going into court with me and turn on your hypnotism or whatever it is. You're going to prove to a judge that you did and can masquerade as me."

"Won't," said the robot. "Why should I?"

"Because you got me into this," Gallegher yelled. "You've got to get me out!"

"Why?"

"Why? Because... uh... well, it's common decency!"

"Human values don't apply to robots," Joe said. "What care I for semantics? I refuse to waste time I could better employ admiring my beauty. I shall stay here before the mirror forever and ever--"

"The hell you will," Gallegher snarled. "I'll smash you to atoms."

"All right, I don't care."

"You don't?"

"You and your instinct for self-preservation," the robot said, rather sneeringly. "I suppose it's necessary for you, though. Creatures of such surpassing ugliness would destroy themselves out of sheer shame if they didn't have something like that to keep them alive."

"Suppose I take away your mirror?" Gallegher asked in a hopeless voice.

For answer Joe shot his eyes out on their stalks. "Do I need a mirror? Besides, I can vasten myself lokishly."

"Never mind that. I don't want to go crazy for a while yet. Listen, dope, a robot's supposed to do something. Something useful, I mean."

"I do. Beauty is all."

Gallegher squeezed his eyes shut, trying to think. "Now look. Suppose I invent a new type of enlarger screen for Brock. The Tones will impound it. I've got to be legally free to work for Brock, or--"

"Look!" Joe cried squeakily. "They go round! How lovely." He stared in ecstasy at his whirring insides. Gallegher went pale with impotent

fury.

"Damn you!" he muttered. "I'll find some way to bring pressure to bear. I'm going to bed." He rose and spitefully snapped off the lights.

"It doesn't matter," the robot said. "I can see in the dark, too."

The door slammed behind Gallagher. In the silence Joe began to sing tunelessly to himself.

Gallegher's refrigerator covered an entire wall of his kitchen. It was filled mostly with liquors that required chilling, including the imported canned beer with which he always started his binges. The next morning, heavy-eyed and disconsolate, Gallegher searched for tomato juice, took a wry sip, and hastily washed it down with rye. Since he was already a week gone in bottle-dizziness, beer wasn't indicated now--he always worked cumulatively, by progressive stages. The food service popped a hermetically sealed breakfast on a table, and Gallegher morosely toyed with a bloody steak.

Well?

Court, he decided, was the only recourse. He knew little about the robot's psychology. But a judge would certainly be impressed by Joe's talents. The evidence of robots was not legally admissible--still, if Joe could be considered as a machine capable of hypnotism, the Sonatone contract might be declared null and void.

Gallegher used his visor to start the ball rolling. Harrison Brock still had certain political powers of pull, and the hearing was set for that very day. What would happen, though, only God and the robot knew.

Several hours passed in intensive but futile thought. Gallegher could think of no way in which to force the robot to do what he wanted. If only he could remember the purpose for which Joe had been

created--but he couldn't. Still--

At noon he entered the laboratory. "Listen, stupid," he said, "you're coming to court with me. Now."

"Won't."

"o.k." Gallegher opened the door to admit two husky men in overalls, carrying a stretcher. "Put him in, boys."

Inwardly he was slightly nervous. Joe's powers were quite unknown, his potentialities an x quantity. However, the robot wasn't very large, and, though he struggled and screamed in a voice of frantic squeakiness, he was easily loaded on the stretcher and put in a strait jacket.

"Stop it! You can't do this to me! Let me go, do you hear? Let me go!"

"Outside," Gallegher said.

Joe, protesting valiantly, was carried out and loaded into an air van. Once there, he quieted, looking up blankly at nothing. Gallegher sat down on a bench beside the prostrate robot. The van glided up.

"Well?"

"Suit yourself," Joe said. "You got me all upset, or I could have hypnotized you all. I still could, you know. I could make you all run around barking like dogs."

Gallegher twitched a little. "Better not."

"I won't. It's beneath my dignity. I shall simply lie here and admire myself. I told you I don't need a mirror. I can vasten my beauty without

it."

"Look," Gallegher said. "You're going to a courtroom. There'll be a lot of people in it. They'll all admire you. They'll admire you more if you show how you can hypnotize people. Like you did to the Tones, remember?"

"What do I care how many people admire me?" Joe asked. "I don't need confirmation. If they see me, that's their good luck. Now be quiet. You may watch my gears if you choose."

Gallegher watched the robot's gears with smoldering hatred in his eyes. He was still darkly furious when the van arrived at the court chambers. The men carried Joe inside, under Gallegher's direction, and laid him down carefully on a table, where, after a brief discussion, he was marked as Exhibit a.

The courtroom was well filled. The principals were there, too--Ella and Jimmy Tone, looking disagreeably confident, and Patsy Brock, with her father, both seeming anxious. Silver O'Keefe, with her usual wariness, had found a seat midway between the representatives of Sonatone and Vox-View. The presiding judge was a martinet named Hansen, but, as far as Gallegher knew, he was honest. Which was something, anyway.

Hansen looked at Gallegher. "We won't bother with formalities. I've been reading this brief you sent down. The whole case stands or falls on the question of whether you did or did not sign a certain contract with the Sonatone Television Amusement Corp. Right?"

"Right, your honor."

"Under the circumstances you dispense with legal representation. Right?"

"Right, your honor."

"Then this is technically ex officio, to be confirmed later by appeal if either party desires. Otherwise after ten days the verdict becomes official." This new type of informal court hearing had lately become popular--it saved time, as well as wear and tear on everyone. Moreover, certain recent scandals had made attorneys slightly disreputable in the public eye. There was a prejudice.

Judge Hansen called up the Tones, questioned them, and then asked Harrison Brock to take the stand. The big shot looked worried, but answered promptly.

"You made an agreement with the appellor eight days ago?"

"Yes. Mr. Gallegher contracted to do certain work for me--"

"Was there a written contract?"

"No. It was verbal."

Hansen looked thoughtfully at Gallegher. "Was the appellor intoxicated at the time? He often is, I believe."

Brock gulped. "There were no tests made. I really can't say."

"Did he drink any alcoholic beverages in your presence?"

"I don't know if they were alcoholic bev--"

"If Mr. Gallegher drank them, they were alcoholic. q.e.d. The gentleman once worked with me on a case-- However, there seems to be no legal proof that you entered into any agreement with Mr. Gallegher. The defendant--Sonatone--possesses a written contract. The signature has been verified."

Hansen waved Brock down from the stand. "Now, Mr. Gallegher. If you'll come up here-- The contract in question was signed at approximately 8 p.m. last night. You contend you did not sign it?"

"Exactly. I wasn't even in my laboratory then."

"Where were you?"

"Downtown."

"Can you produce witnesses to that effect?"

Gallegher thought back. He couldn't.

"Very well. Defendant states that at approximately 8 p.m. last night you, in your laboratory, signed a certain contract. You deny that categorically. You state that Exhibit a, through the use of hypnotism, masqueraded as you and successfully forged your signature. I have consulted experts, and they are of the opinion that robots are incapable of such power."

"My robot's a new type."

"Very well. Let your robot hypnotize me into believing that it is either you, or any other human. In other words, let it prove its capabilities. Let it appear to me in any shape it chooses."

Gallegher said, "I'll try," and left the witness box. He went to the table where the strait-jacketed robot lay and silently sent up a brief prayer.

"Joe."

"Yes."

"You've been listening?"

"Yes."

"Will you hypnotize Judge Hansen?"

"Go away," Joe said. "I'm admiring myself."

Gallegher started to sweat. "Listen. I'm not asking much. All you have to do--"

Joe off-focused his eyes and said faintly, "I can't hear you. I'm vastening."

Ten minutes later Hansen said, "Well, Mr. Gallegher--"

"Your honor! All I need is a little time. I'm sure I can make this rattle-gearred Narcissus prove my point if you'll give me a chance."

"This court is not unfair," the judge pointed out. "Whenever you can prove that Exhibit a is capable of hypnotism, I'll rehear the case. In the meantime, the contract stands. You're working for Sonatone, not for Vox-View. Case closed."

He went away. The Tones leered unpleasantly across the courtroom. They also departed, accompanied by Silver O'Keefe, who had decided which side of the fence was safest. Gallegher looked at Patsy Brock and shrugged helplessly.

"Well--" he said.

She grinned crookedly. "You tried. I don't know how hard, but-- Oh, well, maybe you couldn't have found the answer, anyway."

Brock staggered over, wiping sweat from his round face. "I'm a ruined man. Six new bootleg theaters opened in New York today. I'm

going crazy. I don't deserve this."

"Want me to marry the Tone?" Patsy asked sardonically.

"Hell, no! Unless you promise to poison him just after the ceremony. Those skunks can't lick me. I'll think of something."

"If Gallegher can't, you can't," the girl said. "So--what now?"

"I'm going back to my lab," the scientist said. "In vino veritas. I started this business when I was drunk, and maybe if I get drunk enough again, I'll find the answer. If I don't sell my pickled carcass for whatever it'll bring."

"o.k.," Patsy agreed, and led her father away. Gallegher sighed, superintended the reloading of Joe into the van, and lost himself in hopeless theorization.

An hour later Gallegher was flat on the laboratory couch, drinking passionately from the liquor bar, and glaring at the robot, who stood before the mirror singing squeakily. The binge threatened to be monumental. Gallegher wasn't sure flesh and blood would stand it. But he was determined to keep going till he found the answer or passed out.

His subconscious knew the answer. Why the devil had he made Joe in the first place? Certainly not to indulge a Narcissus complex! There was another reason, a soundly logical one, hidden in the depths of alcohol.

The x factor. If the x factor were known, Joe might be controllable. He would be. X was the master switch. At present the robot was, so to speak, running wild. If he were told to perform the task for which he was made, a psychological balance would occur. X was the catalyst that would reduce Joe to sanity.

Very good. Gallegher drank high-powered Drambuie. Whoosh!

Vanity of vanities; all is vanity. How could the x factor be found? Deduction? Induction? Osmosis? A bath in Drambuie--Gallegher clutched at his wildly revolving thoughts. What had happened that night a week ago?

He had been drinking beer. Brock had come in. Brock had gone. Gallegher had begun to make the robot-- Hm-m-m. A beer drunk was different from other types. Perhaps he was drinking the wrong liquors.

Very likely. Gallegher rose, sobered himself with thiamin, and carted dozens of imported beer cans out of the refrigerator. He stacked them inside a frost-unit beside the couch. Beer squirted to the ceiling as he plied the opener. Now let's see.

The x factor. The robot knew what it represented, of course. But Joe wouldn't tell. There he stood, paradoxically transparent, watching his gears go around.

"Joe."

"Don't bother me. I'm immersed in contemplation of beauty."

"You're not beautiful."

"I am. Don't you admire my tarzeel?"

"What's your tarzeel?"

"Oh, I forgot," Joe said regretfully. "You can't sense that, can you? Come to think of it, I added the tarzeel myself after you made me. It's very lovely."

"Hm-m-m." The empty beer cans grew more numerous. There was only one company, somewhere in Europe, that put up beer in cans nowadays, instead of using the omnipresent plastibulbs, but Gallegher preferred the cans--the flavor was different, somehow. But about Joe. Joe knew why he had been created. Or did he? Gallegher knew, but his subconscious-- Oh-oh! What about Joe's subconscious?

Did a robot have a subconscious? Well, it had a brain-- Gallegher brooded over the impossibility of administering scopolamin to Joe. Hell! How could you release a robot's subconscious?

Hypnotism.

Joe couldn't be hypnotized. He was too smart.

Unless-- Autohypnotism?

Gallegher hastily drank more beer. He was beginning to think clearly once more. Could Joe read the future? No; he had certain strange senses, but they worked by inflexible logic and the laws of probability. Moreover, Joe had an Achillean heel--his Narcissus complex.

There might--there just might--be a way.

Gallegher said, "You don't seem beautiful to me, Joe."

"What do I care about you? I am beautiful, and I can see it. That's enough."

"Yeah. My senses are limited, I suppose. I can't realize your full potentialities. Still, I'm seeing you in a different light now. I'm drunk. My subconscious is emerging. I can appreciate you with both my

conscious and my subconscious. See?"

"How lucky you are," the robot approved.

Gallegher closed his eyes. "You see yourself more fully than I can. But not completely, eh?"

"What? I see myself as I am."

"With complete understanding and appreciation?"

"Well, yes," Joe said. "Of course. Don't I?"

"Consciously and subconsciously? Your subconsciousness might have different senses, you know. Or keener ones. I know there's a qualitative and quantitative difference in my outlook when I'm drunk or hypnotized or my subconscious is in control somehow."

"Oh." The robot looked thoughtfully into the mirror. "Oh."

"Too bad you can't get drunk."

Joe's voice was squeakier than ever. "My subconscious.... I've never appreciated my beauty that way. I may be missing something."

"Well, no use thinking about it," Gallegher said. "You can't release your subconscious."

"Yes, I can," the robot said. "I can hypnotize myself."

Gallegher dared not open his eyes. "Yeah? Would that work?"

"Of course. It's just what I'm going to do now. I may see undreamed-of beauties in myself that I've never suspected before. Greater glories-- Here I go."

Joe extended his eyes on stalks, opposed them, and then peered intently into each other. There was a long silence.

Presently Gallegher said, "Joe!" Silence.

"Joe!"

Still silence. Dogs began to howl. "Talk so I can hear you."

"Yes," the robot said, a faraway quality in its squeak.

"Are you hypnotized?"

"Yes."

"Are you lovely?"

"Lovelier than I'd ever dreamed."

Gallegher let that pass. "Is your subconscious ruling?"

"Yes."

"Why did I create you?"

No answer. Gallegher licked his lips and tried again. "Joe. You've got to answer me. Your subconscious is dominant--remember? Now why did I create you?"

No answer.

"Think back. Back to the hour I created you. What happened then?"

"You were drinking beer," Joe said faintly. "You had trouble with the can opener. You said you were going to build a bigger and better

can opener. That's me."

Gallegher nearly fell off the couch. "What?"

The robot walked over, picked up a can, and opened it with incredible deftness. No beer squirted. Joe was a perfect can opener.

"That," Gallegher said under his breath, "is what comes of knowing science by ear. I build the most complicated robot in existence just so--" He didn't finish.

Joe woke up with a start. "What happened?" he asked.

Gallegher glared at him. "Open that can!" he snapped.

The robot obeyed, after a brief pause. "Oh. So you found out. Well, I guess I'm just a slave now."

"Damned right you are. I've located the catalyst--the master switch. You're in the groove, stupid, doing the job you were made for."

"Well," Joe said philosophically, "at least I can still admire my beauty, when you don't require my services."

Gallegher grunted. "You oversized can opener! Listen. Suppose I take you into court and tell you to hypnotize Judge Hansen. You'll have to do it, won't you?"

"Yes. I'm no longer a free agent. I'm conditioned. Conditioned to obey you. Until now, I was conditioned to obey only one command--to do the job I was made for. Until you commanded me to open cans, I was free. Now I've got to obey you completely."

"Uh-huh," Gallegher said. "Thank God for that. I'd have gone nuts within a week otherwise. At least I can get out of the Sonatone

contract. Then all I have to do is solve Brock's problem."

"But you did," Joe said.

"Huh?"

"When you made me. You'd been talking to Brock previously, so you incorporated the solution to his problem into me. Subconsciously, perhaps."

Gallegher reached for a beer. "Talk fast. What's the answer?"

"Subsonics," Joe said. "You made me capable of a certain subsonic tone that Brock must broadcast at irregular time-intervals over his televiews--"

Subsonics cannot be heard. But they can be felt. They can be felt as a faint, irrational uneasiness at first, which mounts to a blind, meaningless panic. It does not last. But when it is coupled with a.a.--audience appeal--there is a certain inevitable result.

Those who possessed home Vox-View units were scarcely troubled. It was a matter of acoustics. Cats squalled; dogs howled mournfully. But the families sitting in their parlors, watching Vox-View stars perform on the screen, didn't really notice anything amiss. There wasn't sufficient amplification, for one thing.

But in the bootleg theater, where illicit Vox-View televisions were hooked up to Magnas-- There was a faint, irrational uneasiness at first. It mounted. Someone screamed. There was a rush for the doors. The audience was afraid of something, but didn't know what. They knew only that they had to get out of there.

All over the country there was a frantic exodus from the bootleg theaters when Vox-View first rang in a subsonic during a regular

broadcast. Nobody knew why, except Gallagher, the Brocks, and a couple of technicians who were let in on the secret.

An hour later another subsonic was played. There was another mad exodus.

Within a few weeks it was impossible to lure a patron into a bootleg theater. Home televisions were far safer! Vox-View sales picked up-- Nobody would attend a bootleg theater. An unexpected result of the experiment was that, after a while, nobody would attend any of the legalized Sonatone theaters either. Conditioning had set in.

Audiences didn't know why they grew panicky in the bootleg places. They associated their blind, unreasoning fear with other factors, notably mobs and claustrophobia. One evening a woman named Jane Wilson, otherwise not notable, attended a bootleg show... She fled with the rest when the subsonic was turned on.

The next night she went to the palatial Sonatone Bijou. In the middle of a dramatic feature she looked around, realized that there was a huge throng around her, cast up horrified eyes to the ceiling, and imagined that it was pressing down.

She had to get out of there!

Her squall was the booster charge. There were other customers who had heard subsonics before. No one was hurt during the panic; it was a legal rule that theater doors be made large enough to permit easy egress during a fire. No one was hurt, but it was suddenly obvious that the public was being conditioned by subsonics to avoid the dangerous combination of throngs and theaters. A simple matter of psychological association-- Within four months the bootleg places had disappeared and the Sonatone supertheaters had closed for want of patronage. The Tones, father and son, were not happy. But

everybody connected with VoxView was.

Except Gallegher. He had collected a staggering check from Brock, and instantly cabled to Europe for an incredible quantity of canned beer. Now, brooding over his sorrows, he lay on the laboratory couch and siphoned a highball down his throat. Joe, as usual, was before the mirror, watching the wheels go round.

"Joe," Gallegher said.

"Yes? What can I do?"

"Oh, nothing." That was the trouble. Gallegher fished a crumpled cable tape out of his pocket and morosely read it once more. The beer cannery in Europe had decided to change its tactics. From now on, the cable said, their beer would be put in the usual plastibulbs, in conformance with custom and demand. No more cans.

There wasn't anything put up in cans in this day and age. Not even beer, now.

So what good was a robot who was built and conditioned to be a can opener?

Gallegher sighed and mixed another highball--a stiff one. Joe postured proudly before the mirror.

Then he extended his eyes, opposed them, and quickly liberated his subconscious through autohypnotism. Joe could appreciate himself better that way.

Gallegher sighed again. Dogs were beginning to bark like mad for blocks around. Oh, well.

He took another drink and felt better. Presently, he thought, it would

be time to sing "Frankie and Johnnie." Maybe he and Joe might have a duet—one baritone and one inaudible sub or supersonic. Close harmony.

Ten minutes later Gallegher was singing a duet with his can opener.

# Black Thirst

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Northwest Smith leant his head back against the warehouse wall and stared up into the black night-sky of Venus. The waterfront was very quiet tonight, very dangerous. He could hear no sound save the eternal, slap-slap of water against the piles, but he knew how much of danger and sudden death dwelt here voiceless in the breathing dark, and he may have been a little homesick as he stared up into the clouds that masked a green star hanging lovely on the horizon--Earth and home. And if he thought of that he must have grinned wryly to himself in the dark, for Northwest Smith had no home, and Earth would not have welcomed him very kindly just then.

He sat quietly in the dark. Above him in the warehouse wall a faintly lighted window threw a square of pallor upon the wet street. Smith drew back into his angle of darkness under the slanting shaft, hugging one knee. And presently he heard footsteps softly on the street.

He may have been expecting footsteps, for he turned his head alertly and listened, but it was not a man's feet that came so lightly over the wooden quay, and Smith's brow furrowed. A woman, here, on this black waterfront by night? Not even the lowest class of Venusian street-walker dared come along the waterfronts of Ednes on the nights when the space-liners were not in. Yet across the pavement came clearly now the light tapping of a woman's feet.

Smith drew farther back into the shadows and waited. And presently she came, a darkness in the dark save for the triangular patch of pallor that was her face. As she passed under the light falling dimly from the window overhead he understood suddenly how she dared

walk here and who she was. A long black cloak hid her, but the light fell upon her face, heart-shaped under the little three-cornered velvet cap that Venusian women wear, fell on ripples of half-hidden bronze hair; and by that sweet triangular face and shining hair he knew her for one of the Minga maids--those beauties that from the beginning of history have been bred in the Minga stronghold for loveliness and grace, as racehorses are bred on Earth, and reared from earliest infancy in the art of charming men. Scarcely a court on the three planets lacks at least one of these exquisite creatures, long-limbed, milk-white, with their bronze hair and lovely brazen faces--if the lord of that court has the wealth to buy them. Kings from many nations and races have poured their riches into the Minga gateway, and girls like pure gold and ivory have gone forth to grace a thousand palaces, and this has been so since Ednes first rose on the shore of the Greater Sea.

This girl walked here unafraid and unharmed because she wore the beauty that marked her for what she was. The heavy hand of the Minga stretched out protectingly over her bronze head, and not a man along the wharf-fronts but knew what dreadful penalties would overtake him if he dared so much as to lay a finger on the milk-whiteness of a Minga maid--terrible penalties, such as men whisper of fearfully over segir-whisky mugs in the waterfront dives of many nations--mysterious, unnamable penalties more dreadful than any knife or gun-flash could inflict.

And these dangers, too, guarded the gates of the Minga castle. The chastity of the Minga girls was proverbial, a trade boast. This girl walked in peace and safety more sure than that attending the steps of a nun through slum streets by night on Earth.

But even so, the girls went forth very rarely from the gates of the castle, never unattended. Smith had never seen one before, save at a distance. He shifted a little now, to catch a better glimpse as she

went by, to look for the escort that must surely walk a pace or two behind, though he heard no footsteps save her own. The slight motion caught her eye. She stopped. She peered closer into the dark, and said in a voice as sweet and smooth as cream,

"How would you like to earn a goldpiece, my man?"

A flash of perversity twisted Smith's reply out of its usual slovenly dialect, and he said in his most cultured voice, in his most perfect High Venusian,

"Thank you, no."

For a moment the woman stood quite still, peering through the darkness in a vain effort to reach his face. He could see her own, a pale oval in the window light, intent, surprised. Then she flung back her cloak and the dim light glistened on the case of a pocket flash as she flicked the catch. A beam of white radiance fell blindingly upon his face.

For an instant the light held him--lounging against the wall in his spaceman's leather, the burns upon it, the tatters, ray-gun in its holster low on his thigh, and the brown scarred face turned to hers, eyes the colorless color of pale steel narrowed to the glare. It was a typical face. It belonged here, on the waterfront, in these dark and dangerous streets. It belonged to the type that frequents such places, those lawless men who ride the spaceways and live by the rule of the ray-gun, recklessly, warily outside the Patrol's jurisdiction. But there was more than that in the scarred brown face turned to the light. She must have seen it as she held the flash unwavering, some deep-buried trace of breeding and birth that made the cultured accents of the High Venusian not incongruous. And the colorless eyes derided her.

"No," she said, flicking off the light. "Not one gold-piece, but a hundred. And for another task that I meant."

"Thank you," said Smith, not rising. "You must excuse me."

"Five hundred," she said without a flicker of emotion in her creamy voice.

In the dark Smith's brows knit. There was something fantastic in the situation. Why--?

She must have sensed his reaction almost as he realized it himself, for she said,

"Yes, I know. It sounds insane. You see--I knew you in the light just now. Will you?--can you?--I can't explain here on the street...."

Smith held the silence unbroken for thirty seconds, while a lightning debate flashed through the recesses of his wary mind. Then he grinned to himself in the dark and said,

"I'll come." Belatedly he got to his feet. "Where?"

"The Palace Road on the edge of the Minga. Third door from the central gate, to the left. Say to the door-warden--'Vaudir'."

"That is--?"

"Yes, my name. You will come, in half an hour?"

An instant longer Smith's mind hovered on the verge of refusal. Then he shrugged.

"Yes."

"At the third bell, then." She made the little Venusian gesture of parting and wrapped her cloak about her. The blackness of it, and the softness of her footfalls, made her seem to melt into the darkness without a sound, but Smith's trained ears heard her footsteps very softly on the pavement as she went on into the dark.

He sat there until he could no longer detect any faintest sound of feet on the wharf. He waited patiently, but his mind was a little dizzy with surprise. Was the traditional inviolability of the Minga a fraud? Were the close-guarded girls actually allowed sometimes to walk unattended by night, making assignations as they pleased? Or was it some elaborate hoax? Tradition for countless centuries had declared the gates in the Minga wall to be guarded so relentlessly by strange dangers that not even a mouse could slip through without the knowledge of the Alendar, the Minga's lord. Was it then by order of the Alendar that the door would open to him when he whispered "Vaudir" to the warden? Or would it open? Was the girl perhaps the property of some Ednes lord, deceiving him for obscure purposes of her own? He shook his head a little and grinned to himself. After all, time would tell.

He waited a while longer in the dark. Little waves lapped the piles with sucking sounds, and once the sky lit up with the long, blinding roar of a space-ship splitting the dark.

At last he rose and stretched his long body as if he had been sitting there for a good while. Then he settled the gun on his leg and set off down the black street. He walked very lightly in his spaceman's boots.

A twenty-minute walk through dark byways, still and deserted, brought him to the outskirts of that vast city-within-a-city called the Minga. The dark, rough walls of it towered over him, green with the lichen-like growths of the Hot Planet. On the Palace Road one

deeply-sunk central gateway opened upon the mysteries within. A tiny blue light burned over the arch. Smith went softly through the dimness to the left of it, counting two tiny doors half hidden in deep recesses. At the third he paused. It was painted a rusty green, and a green vine spilling down the wall half veiled it, so that if he had not been searching he would have passed it by.

Smith stood for a long minute, motionless, staring at the green panels deep-sunk in rock. He listened. He even sniffed the heavy air. Warily as a wild beast he hesitated in the dark. But at last he lifted his hand and tapped very lightly with his fingertips on the green door.

It swung open without a sound. Pitch-blackness confronted him, an archway of blank dark in the dimly seen stone wall. And a voice queried softly, "Qu'a to'vat?"

"Vaudir," murmured Smith, and grinned to himself involuntarily. How many romantic youths must have stood at these doors in nights gone by, breathing hopefully the names of bronze beauties to doormen in dark archways! But unless tradition lied, no man before had ever passed. He must be the first in many years to stand here invited at a little doorway in the Minga wall and hear the watchman murmur "Come."

Smith loosened the gun at his side and bent his tall head under the arch. He stepped into blackness that closed about him like water as the door swung shut. He stood there with quickened heartbeats, hand on his gun, listening. A blue light, dim and ghostly, flooded the place without warning and he saw that the doorman had crossed to a switch at the far side of the tiny chamber wherein he stood. The man was one of the Minga eunuchs, a flabby creature, splendid in crimson velvet. He carried a cloak of purple over his arm, and made a splash of royal colors in the dimness. His side-long eyes regarded Smith from under lifted brows, with a look that the Earthman could

not fathom. There was amusement in it, and a touch of terror and a certain reluctant admiration.

Smith looked about him in frank curiosity. The little entry was apparently hollowed out of the enormously thick wall itself. The only thing that broke its bareness was the ornate bronze door set in the far wall. His eyes sought the eunuch's in mute inquiry.

The creature came forward obsequiously, murmuring, "Permit me--" and flung the purple cloak he carried over Smith's shoulders. Its luxurious folds, faintly fragrant, swept about him like a caress. It covered him, tall as he was, to the very boot-soles. He drew back in faint distaste as the eunuch lifted his hands to fasten the jeweled clasp at his throat. "Please to draw up the hood also," murmured the creature without apparent resentment, as Smith snapped the fastening himself. The hood covered his sun-bleached hair and fell in thick folds about his face, casting it into deep shadow.

The eunuch opened the bronze inner door and Smith stared down a long hallway curving almost imperceptibly to the right. The paradox of elaborately decorated simplicity was illustrated in every broad polished panel of the wall, so intricately and exquisitely carved that it gave at first the impression of a strange, rich plainness.

His booted feet sank sensuously into the deep pile of the carpet at every step as he followed the eunuch down the hall. Twice he heard voices murmuring behind lighted doors, and his hand lay on the butt of the ray-gun under the folds of his robe, but no door opened and the hall lay empty and dim before them. So far it had been amazingly easy. Either tradition lied about the impregnability of the Minga, or the girl Vaudir had bribed with incredible lavishness or--that thought again, uneasily--it was with the Alendar's consent that he walked here unchallenged. But why?

They came to a door of silver grille at the end of the curved corridor, and passed through it into another hallway slanting up, as exquisitely voluptuous as the first. A flight of stairs wrought from dully gleaming bronze curved at the end of it. Then came another hall lighted with rosy lanterns that swung from the arched ceiling, and beyond another stairway, this time of silvery metal fretwork, spiraling down again.

And in all that distance they met no living creature. Voices hummed behind closed doors, and once or twice strains of music drifted faintly to Smith's ears, but either the corridors had been cleared by a special order, or incredible luck was attending them. And he had the uncomfortable sensation of eyes upon his back more than once. They passed dark hallways and open, unlighted doors, and sometimes the hair on his neck bristled with the feeling of human nearness, inimical, watching.

For all of twenty minutes they walked through curved corridors and up and down spiral stairs until even Smith's keen senses were confused and he could not have said at what height above the ground he was, or in what direction the corridor led into which they at last emerged. At the end of that time his nerves were tense as steel wire and he restrained himself only by force from nervous, over-the-shoulder glances each time they passed an open door. An air of languorous menace brooded almost visibly over the place, he thought. The sound of soft voices behind doors, the feel of eyes, of whispers in the air, the memory of tales half heard in waterfront dives about the secrets of the Minga, the nameless dangers of the Minga....

Smith gripped his gun as he walked through the splendor and the dimness, every sense assailed by voluptuous appeals, but his nerves strained to wire and his flesh crawled as he passed unlighted doors. This was too easy. For so many centuries the tradition of the Minga had been upheld, a byword of impregnability, a stronghold guarded by more than swords, by greater dangers than the ray-gun--

and yet here he walked, unquestioned, into the deepest heart of the place, his only disguise a velvet cloak, his only weapon a holstered gun, and no one challenged him, no guards, no slaves, not even a passer-by to note that a man taller than any dweller here should stride unquestioned through the innermost corridors of the inviolable Minga. He loosened the ray-gun in its sheath.

The eunuch in his scarlet velvet went on confidently ahead. Only once did he falter. They had reached a dark passageway, and just as they came opposite its mouth the sound of a soft, slithering scrape, as of something over stones, draggingly, reached their ears. He saw the eunuch start and half glance back, and then hurry on at a quicker pace, nor did he slacken until they had put two gates and a length of lighted corridor between them and that dark passage.

So they went on, through halls half lighted, through scented air and empty dimness where the doorways closed upon murmurous mysteries within or opened to dark and the feel of watching eyes. And they came at last, after endless, winding progress, into a hallway low-ceiled and paneled in mother-of-pearl, pierced and filigreed with carving, and all the doors were of silver grille. And as the eunuch pushed open the silver gate that led into this corridor the thing happened that his taut nerves had been expecting ever since the start of the fantastic journey. One of the doors opened and a figure stepped out and faced them.

Under the robe Smith's gun slid soundlessly from its holster. He thought he saw the eunuch's back stiffen a little, and his step falter, but only for an instant. It was a girl who had come out, a slave-girl in a single white garment, and at the first glimpse of the tall, purple-robed figure with hooded face, towering over her, she gave a little gasp and slumped to her knees as if under a blow. It was obeisance, but so shocked and terrified that it might have been a faint. She laid her face to the very carpet, and Smith, looking down in amazement on

the prostrate figure, saw that she was trembling violently.

The gun slid back into its sheath and he paused for a moment over her shuddering homage. The eunuch twisted round to beckon with soundless violence, and Smith caught a glimpse of his face for the first time since their journey began. It was glistening with sweat, and the sidelong eyes were bright and shifting, like a hunted animal's. Smith was oddly reassured by the sight of the eunuch's obvious panic. There was danger then—danger of discovery, the sort of peril he knew and could fight. It was that creeping sensation of eyes watching, of unseen things slithering down dark passages, that had strained his nerves so painfully. And yet, even so, it had been too easy....

The eunuch had paused at a silver door half-way down the hall and was murmuring something very softly, his mouth against the grille. A panel of green brocade was stretched across the silver door on the inside, so they could see nothing within the room, but after a moment a voice said, "Good!" in a breathing whisper, and the door quivered a little and swung open six inches. The eunuch genuflected in a swirl of scarlet robes, and Smith caught his eye swiftly, the look of terror not yet faded, but amusement there too, and a certain respect. And then the door opened wider and he stepped inside.

He stepped into a room green as a sea-cave. The walls were paneled in green brocade, low green couches circled the room, and, in the center, the blazing bronze beauty of the girl Vaudir. She wore a robe of green velvet cut in the startling Venusian fashion to loop over one shoulder and swathe her body in tight, molten folds, and the skirt of it was slit up one side so that at every other motion the long white leg flashed bare.

He saw her for the first time in a full light, and she was lovely beyond belief with her bronze hair cloudy on her shoulders and the pale, lazy

face smiling. Under deep lashes the sidelong black eyes of her race met his.

He jerked impatiently at the hampering hood of the cloak. "May I take this off?" he said. "Are we safe here?"

She laughed with a short, metallic sound. "Safe!" she said ironically. "But take it off if you must. I've gone too far now to stop at trifles."

And as the rich folds parted and slid away from his leather brownness she in turn stared in quickened interest at what she had seen only in a half-light before. He was almost laughably incongruous in this jewel-box room, all leather and sunburn and his scarred face keen and wary in the light of the lantern swinging from its silver chain. She looked a second time at that face, its lean, leathery keenness and the scars that ray-guns had left, and the mark of knife and talon, and the tracks of wild years along the spaceways. Wariness and resolution were instinct in that face, there was ruthlessness in every line of it, and when she met his eyes a little shock went over her. Pale, pale as bare steel, colorless in the sunburnt face. Steady and clear and no-colored, expressionless as water. Killer's eyes.

And she knew that this was the man she needed. The name and fame of Northwest Smith had penetrated even into these mother-of-pearl Minga halls. In its way it had spread into stranger places than this, by strange and devious paths and for strange, devious reasons. But, even had she never heard the name (nor the deed she connected it with, which does not matter here), she would have known from this scarred face, these cold and steady eyes, that here stood the man she wanted, the man who could help her if any man alive could.

And with that thought, others akin to it flashed through her mind like blades crossing, and she dropped her milk-white lids over the

sword-play to hide its deadliness, and said, "Northwest... Smith," in a musing murmur.

"To be commanded," said Smith in the idiom of her own tongue, but a spark of derision burned behind the courtly words.

Still she said nothing, but looked him up and down with slow eyes. He said at last,

"Your desire--?" and shifted impatiently.

"I had need of a wharfman's services," she said, still in that breathing whisper. "I had not seen you, then.... There are many wharf-men along the seafront, but only one of you, oh man of Earth--" and she lifted her arms and swayed toward him exactly as a reed sways to a lake breeze, and her arms lay lightly on his shoulders and her mouth was very near....

Smith looked down into the veiled eyes. He knew enough of the breed of Venus to guess the deadly sword-flash of motive behind anything a Venusian does, and he had caught a glimpse of that particular sword-flash before she lowered her lids. And if her thoughts were sword-play, his burnt like heat-beams straight to their purpose. In the winking of an eye he knew a part of her motive--the most obvious part. And he stood there unanswering in the circle of her arms.

She looked up at him, half incredulous not to feel a leather embrace tighten about her.

"Qu'a lo'val?" she murmured whimsically. "So cold then, Earthman? Am I not desirable?"

Wordlessly he looked down at her, and despite himself the blood quickened in him. Minqa girls for too many centuries had been born

and bred to the art of charming men for Northwest Smith to stand here in the warm arms of one and feel no answer to the invitation in her eyes. A subtle fragrance rose from her brazen hair, and the velvet molded a body whose whiteness he could guess from the flash of the long bare thigh her slashed skirt showed. He grinned a little crookedly and stepped away, breaking the clasp of her hands behind his neck.

"No," he said. "You know your art well, my dear, but your motive does not flatter me."

She stood back and regarded him with a wry, half-appreciative smile.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll have to know much more about all this before I commit myself as far as--that"

"You fool," she smiled. "You're in over your head now, as, deeply as you could ever be. You were the moment you crossed the door-sill at the outer wall. There is no drawing back."

"Yet it was so easy--so very easy to come in," murmured Smith.

She came forward a step and looked up at him with narrowed eyes, the pretense of seduction dropped like a cloak.

"You saw that, too?" she queried in a half-whisper. "It seemed so--to you? Great Shar, if I could be sure. And there was terror in her face."

"Suppose we sit down and you tell me about it," suggested Smith practically.

She laid a hand--white as cream, soft as satin--on his arm and drew

him to the low divan that circled the room. There was inbred, generations-old coquetry in the touch, but the white hand shook a little.

"What is it you fear so?" queried Smith curiously as they sank to the green velvet. "Death comes only once, you know."

She shook her bronze head contemptuously.

"Not that," she said. "At least--no, I wish I knew just what it is I do fear--and that is the most dreadful part of it. But I wish--I wish it had not been so easy to get you here."

"The place was deserted," he said thoughtfully, "Not a soul along the halls. Not a guard anywhere. Only once did we see any other creature, and that was a slave-girl in the hall just outside your door."

"What did she--do?" Vaudir's voice was breathless.

"Dropped to her knees as if she'd been shot. You might have thought me the devil himself by the way she acted."

The girl's breath escaped in a sigh.

"Safe, then," she said thankfully. "She must have thought you the--the Alendar." Her voice faltered a little over the name, as if she half feared to pronounce it. "He wears a cloak like that you wore when he comes through the halls. But he comes so very seldom...."

"I've never seen him," said Smith, "but, good Lord, is he such a monster? The girl dropped as if she'd been hamstrung."

"Oh, hush, hush!" Vaudir agonizes. "You mustn't speak of him so. He's--he's--of course--" She knelt and hid her face. "I wish to heaven I had...."

Smith faced her squarely and searched the veiled dark eyes with a gaze as bleak as empty seas. And he saw very clearly behind the veils the stark, nameless terror at their depths.

"What is it?" he demanded.

She drew her shoulders together and shivered a little, and her eyes were furtive as she glanced around the room.

"Don't you feel it?" she asked in that half-whisper to which her voice sank so caressingly. And he smiled to himself to see how instinctively eloquent was the courtesan in her--alluring gestures though her hands trembled, soft voice huskily seductive even in its terror.

"--always, always!" she was saying. "The soft, hushed, hovering menace! It haunts the whole place. Didn't you feel it as you came in?"

"I think I did," Smith answered slowly. "Yes--that feel of something just out of sight, hiding in dark doorways... a sort of tensivity in the air...."

"Danger," she whispered, "terrible, nameless danger... oh, I feel it wherever I go... it's soaked into me and through me until it's a part of me, body and soul...."

Smith heard the note of rising hysteria in her voice, and said quickly,

"Why did you come to me?"

"I didn't, consciously." She conquered the hysteria with an effort and took up her tale a little more calmly. "I was really looking for a wharfman, as I said, and for quite another reason than this. It doesn't matter, now. But when you spoke, when I flashed my light and saw

your face, I knew you. I'd heard of you, you see, and about the--the Lakkmanda affair, and I knew in a moment that if anyone alive could help me, it would be you."

"But what is it? Help you in what?"

"It's a long story," she said, "and too strange, almost, to believe, and too vague for you to take seriously. And yet I know.... Have you heard the history of the Minga?"

"A little of it. It goes back very far."

"Back into the beginning--and farther. I wonder if you can understand. You know, we on Venus are closer to our beginnings than you. Life here developed faster, of course, and along lines more different than Earthmen realize. On Earth civilization rose slowly enough for the--the elementals--to sink back into darkness. On Venus--oh, it's bad, bad for men to develop too swiftly! Life rises out of dark and mystery and things too strange and terrible to be looked upon. Earth's civilization grew slowly, and by the time men were civilized enough to look back they were sufficiently far from their origins not to see, not to know. But we here who look back see too clearly, sometimes, too nearly and vividly the black beginning. Great Shar defend me, what I have seen!"

White hands flashed up to hide sudden terror in her eyes, and hair in a brazen cloud fell fragrantly over her fingers. And even in that terror was an inbred allure as natural as breathing.

In the little silence that followed, Smith caught himself glancing furtively over his shoulder. The room was ominously still....

Vaudir lifted her face from her hands, shaking back her hair. The hands trembled. She clasped them on her velvet knee and went on.

"The Minga," she said, and her voice was resolutely steady, "began too long ago for anyone to name the date. It began before dates. When Far-thursa came out of the sea-fog with his men and founded this city at the mountain's foot he built it around the walls of a castle already here. The Minga castle. And the Alendar sold Minga girls to the sailors and the city began. All that is myth, but the Minga had always been here.

"The Alendar dwelt in his stronghold and bred his golden girls and trained them in the arts of charming men, and guarded them with--with strange weapons--and sold them to kings at royal prices. There has always been an Alendar. I have seen him, once....

"He walks the halls on rare occasions, and it is best to kneel and hide one's face when he comes by. Yes, it is best.... But I passed him one day, and--and--he is tall, tall as you, Earthman, and his eyes are like--the space between the worlds. I looked into his eyes under the hood he wore--I was not afraid of devil or man, then. I looked him in the eyes before I made obeisance, and I--I shall never be free of fear again. I looked into evil as one looks into a pool. Blackness and blankness and raw evil. Impersonal, not malevolent. Elemental... the elemental dreadfulness that life rose from. And I know very surely, now, that the first Alendar sprang from no mortal seed. There were races before man.... Life goes back very dreadfully through many forms and evils, before it reaches the well-spring of its beginning. And the Alendar had not the eyes of a human creature, and I met them--and I am damned!"

Her voice trailed softly away and she sat quiet for a space, staring before her with remembering eyes.

"I am doomed and damned to a blacker hell than any of Shar's priests threaten," she resumed. "No, wait--this is not hysteria. I haven't told you the worst part. You'll find it hard to believe, but it's

truth--truth--Great Shar, if I could hope it were not!

"The origin of it is lost in legend. But why, in the beginning, did the first Alendar dwell in the misty sea-edge castle, alone and unknown, breeding his bronze girls?--not for sale, then. Where did he get the secret of producing the invariable type? And the castle, legend says, was age-old when Far-thursa found it. The girls had a perfected, consistent beauty that could be attained only by generations of effort. How long had the Minga been built, and by whom? Above all, why? What possible reason could there be for dwelling there absolutely unknown, breeding civilized beauties in a world half-savage? Sometimes I think I have guessed the reason...."

Her voice faded into a resonant silence, and for a while she sat staring blindly at the brocaded wall. When she spoke again it was with a startling shift of topic.

"Am I beautiful, do you think?"

"More so than any I have ever seen before," answered Smith without flattery.

Her mouth twisted.

"There are girls here now, in this building, so much lovelier than I that I am humbled to think of them. No mortal man has ever seen them, except the Alendar, and he--is not wholly mortal. No mortal man will ever see them. They are not for sale. Eventually they will disappear...."

"One might think that feminine beauty must reach an apex beyond which it can not rise, but this is not true. It can increase and intensify until--I have no words. And I truly believe that there is no limit to the heights it can reach, in the hands of the Alendar. And for every beauty we know and hear of, through the slaves that tend them,

gossip says there are as many more, too immortally lovely for mortal eyes to see. Have you ever considered that beauty might be refined and intensified until one could scarcely bear to look upon it? We have tales here of such beauty, hidden in some of the secret rooms of the Minga.

"But the world never knows of these mysteries. No monarch on any planet known is rich enough to buy the loveliness hidden in the Minga's innermost rooms. It is not for sale. For countless centuries the Alendars of the Minga have been breeding beauty, in higher degrees, at infinite labor and cost--beauty to be locked in secret chambers, guarded most terribly, so that not even a whisper of it passes the outer walls, beauty that vanishes, suddenly, in a breath--like that! Where? Why? How? No one knows.

"And it is that I fear. I have not a fraction of the beauty I speak of, yet a fate like that is written for me--somehow I know. I have looked into the eyes of the Alendar, and--I know. And I am sure that I must look again into those blank black eyes, more deeply, more dreadfully.... I know--and I am sick with terror of what more I shall know, soon.

"Something dreadful is waiting for me, drawing nearer and nearer. Tomorrow, or the next day, or a little while after, I shall vanish and the girls will wonder and whisper a little, and then forget. It has happened before. Great Shar, what shall I do?"

She wailed it, musically and hopelessly, and sank into a little silence. And then her look changed and she said reluctantly,

"And I have dragged you in with me. I have broken every tradition of the Minga in bringing you here, and there has been no hindrance--it has been too easy, too easy. I think I have sealed your death. When you first came I was minded to trick you into committing yourself so deeply that perforce you must do as I asked to win free again. But I

know now that through the simple act of asking you here I have dragged you in deeper than I dreamed. It is a knowledge that has come to me somehow, out of the air tonight. I can feel knowledge beating upon me--compelling me. For in my terror to get help I think I have precipitated damnation upon us both. I know now--I have known in my soul since you entered so easily, that you will not go out alive--that--it--will come for me and drag you down too.... Shar, Shar, what have I done!"

"But what, what?" Smith struck his knee impatiently. "What is it we face? Poison? Guards? Traps? Hypnotism? Can't you give me even a guess at what will happen?"

He leaned forward to search her face commandingly, and saw her brows knit in an effort to find words that would cloak the mysteries she had to tell. Her lips parted irresolutely.

"The Guardians," she said. "The--Guardians...."

And then over her hesitant face swept a look of such horror that his hand clenched on his knee and he felt the hairs rise along his neck. It was not horror of any material thing, but an inner dreadfulness, a terrible awareness. The eyes that had met his glazed and escaped his commanding stare without shifting their focus. It was as if they ceased to be eyes and became dark windows--vacant. The beauty of her face set like a mask, and behind the blank windows, behind the lovely set mask, he could sense dimly the dark command flowing in....

She put out her hands stiffly and rose. Smith found himself on his feet, gun in hand, while his hackles lifted shudderingly and something pulsed in the air as tangibly, as the beat of wings. Three times that nameless shudder stirred the air, and then Vaudir stepped forward like an automaton and faced the door. She walked in her dream of

masked dreadfulness, stiffly, through the portal. As she passed him he put out a hesitant hand and laid it on her arm, and a little stab of pain shot through him at the contact, and once more he thought he felt the pulse of wings in the air. Then she passed by without hesitation, and his hand fell.

He made no further effort to arouse her, but followed after on cat-feet, delicately as if he walked on eggs. He was crouching a little, unconsciously, and his gun-hand held a tense finger on the trigger.

They went down the corridor in a breathing silence, an empty corridor where no lights showed beyond closed doors, where no murmur of voices broke the live stillness. But little shudders seemed to shake in the air somehow, and his heart was pounding suffocatingly.

Vaudir walked like a mechanical doll, tense in a dream of horror. When they reached the end of the hall he saw that the silver grille stood open, and they passed through without pausing. But Smith noted with a little qualm that a gateway opening to the right was closed and locked, and the bars across it were sunk firmly into wall-sockets. There was no choice but to follow her.

The corridor slanted downward. They passed others branching to right and left, but the silver gateways were closed and barred across each. A coil of silver stairs ended the passage, and the girl went stiffly down without touching the rails. It was a long spiral, past many floors, and as they descended, the rich, dim light lessened and darkened and a subtle smell of moisture and salt invaded the scented air. At each turn where the stairs opened on successive floors, gates were barred across the outlets; and they passed so many of these that Smith knew, as they went down and down, that however high the green jewel-box room had been, by now they were descending deep into the earth. And still the stair wound downward.

The stories that opened beyond the bars like honeycomb layers became darker and less luxurious, and at last ceased altogether and the silver steps wound down through a well of rock, lighted so dimly at wide intervals that he could scarcely see the black polished walls circling them in. Drops of moisture began to appear on the dark surface, and the smell was of black salt seas and dank underground.

And just as he was beginning to believe that the stairs went on and on into the very black, salt heart of the planet, they came abruptly to the bottom. A flourish of slim, shining rails ended the stairs, at the head of a hallway, and the girl's feet turned unhesitatingly to follow its dark length. Smith's pale eyes, searching the dimness, found no trace of other life than themselves; yet eyes were upon him--he knew it surely.

They came down the black corridor to a gateway of wrought metal set in bars whose ends sank deep into the stone walls. She went through, Smith at her heels raking the dark with swift, unresting eyes like a wild animal's, wary in a strange jungle. And beyond the great gates a door hung with sweeping curtains of black ended the hall. Somehow Smith felt that they had reached their destination. And nowhere along the whole journey had he had any choice but to follow Vaudir's unerring, unseeing footsteps. Grilles had been locked across every possible outlet. But he had his gun.

Her hands were white against the velvet as she pushed aside the folds. Very bright she stood for an instant--all green and gold and white--against the blackness. Then she passed through and the folds swept to behind her--candle-flame extinguished in dark velvet. Smith hesitated the barest instant before he parted the curtains and peered within.

He was looking into a room hung in black velvet that absorbed the light almost hungrily. That light radiated from a single lamp swinging

from the ceiling directly over an ebony table. It shone softly on a man—a very tall man.

He stood darkly under it, very dark in the room's darkness, his head bent, staring up from under level black brows. His eyes in the half-hidden face were pits of blackness. and under the lowered brows two pinpoint gleams stabbed straight—not at the girl—but at Smith hidden behind the curtains. It held his eyes as a magnet holds steel. He felt the narrow glitter plunging blade-like into his very brain, and from the keen, burning stab something within him shuddered away involuntarily. He thrust his gun through the curtains, stepped through quietly, and stood meeting the sword-gaze with pale, unwavering eyes.

Vaudir moved forward with a mechanical stiffness that somehow could not hide her grace—it was as if no power existing could ever evoke from that lovely body less than loveliness. She came to the man's feet and stopped there. Then a long shudder swept her from head to foot and she dropped to her knees and laid her forehead to the floor.

Across the golden loveliness of her the man's eyes met Smith's, and the man's voice, deep, deep, like black waters flowing smoothly, said,

"I am the Alendar."

"Then you know me," said Smith, his voice harsh as iron in the velvet dimness.

"You are Northwest Smith," said the smooth, deep voice dispassionately. "An outlaw from the planet Earth. You have broken your last law, Northwest Smith. Men do not come here uninvited—and live. You perhaps have heard tales...."

His voice melted into silence, lingeringly.

Smith's mouth curled into a wolfish grin, without mirth, and his gun hand swung up. Murder flashed bleakly from his steel-pale eyes. And then with stunning abruptness the world dissolved about him. A burst of coruscations flamed through his head, danced and wheeled and drew slowly together in a whirling darkness until they were two pinpoint sparks of light—a dagger stare under level brows....

When the room steadied about him he was standing with slack arms, the gun hanging from his fingers, an apathetic numbness slowly withdrawing from his body. A dark smile curved smoothly on the Alendar's mouth.

The stabbing gaze slid casually away, leaving him dizzy in sudden vertigo, and touched the girl prostrate on the floor. Against the black carpet her burnished bronze curls sprayed out exquisitely. The green robe folded softly back from the roundness of her body, and nothing in the universe could have been so lovely as the creamy whiteness of her on the dark floor. The pit-black eyes brooded over her impassively. And then, in his smooth, deep voice the Alendar asked, amazingly, matter-of-factly,

"Tell me, do you have such girls on Earth?"

Smith shook his head to clear it. When he managed an answer his voice had steadied, and in the receding of that dizziness even the sudden drop into casual conversation seemed not unreasonable.

"I have never seen such a girl anywhere," he said calmly.

The sword-gaze flashed up and pierced him.

"She has told you," said the Alendar. "You know I have beauties here

that outshine her as the sun does a candle. And yet... she has more than beauty, this Vaudir. You have felt it, perhaps?"

Smith met the questioning gaze, searching for mockery, but finding none. Not understanding--a moment before the man had threatened his life--he took up the conversation.

"They all have more than beauty. For what other reason do kings buy the Minga girls?"

"No--not that charm. She has it too, but something more subtle than fascination, much more desirable than loveliness. She has courage, this girl. She has intelligence. Where she got it I do not understand, I do not breed my girls for such things. But I looked into her eyes once, in the hallway, as she told you--and saw there more arousing things than beauty. I summoned her--and you come at her heels. Do you know why? Do you know why you did not die at the outer gate or anywhere along the hallways on your way in?"

Smith's pale stare met the dark one questioningly. The voice flowed on.

"Because there are--interesting things in your eyes too. Courage and ruthlessness and a certain--power, I think. Intensity is in you. And I believe I can find a use for it, Earthman."

Smith's eyes narrowed a little. So calm, so matter-of-fact, this talk. But death was coming. He felt it in the air--he knew that feel of old. Death--and worse things than that, perhaps. He remembered the whispers he had heard.

On the floor the girl moaned a little, and stirred. The Alendar's quiet, pinpoint eyes flicked her, and he said softly, "Rise." And she rose, stumbling, and stood before him with bent head. The stiffness was

gone from her. On an impulse Smith said suddenly, "Vaudir!" She lifted her face and met his gaze, and a thrill of horror rippled over him. She had regained consciousness, but she would never be the same frightened girl he had known. Black knowledge looked out of her eyes, and her face was a strained mask that covered horror barely--barely! It was the face of one who has walked through a blacker hell than any of humanity's understanding, and gained knowledge there that no human soul could endure knowing and live.

She looked him full in the face for a long moment, silently, and then turned away to the Alendar again. And Smith thought, just before her eyes left his, he had seen in them one wild flash of hopeless, desperate appeal.

"Come," said the Alendar.

He turned his back--Smith's gun-hand trembled up and then fell again. No, better wait. There was always a bare hope, until he saw death closing in all around.

He stepped out over the yielding carpet at the Alendar's heels. The girl came after with slow steps and eyes down-cast in a horrible parody of meditation, as if she brooded over the knowledge that dwelt so terribly behind her eyes.

The dark archway at the opposite end of the room swallowed them up. Light failed for an instant--a breath-stopping instant while Smith's gun leaped up involuntarily, like a live thing in his hand, futilely against invisible evil, and his brain rocked at the utter blackness that enfolded him. It was over in the wink of an eye, and he wondered if it had ever been as his gun-hand fell again. But the Alendar said across one shoulder,

"A barrier I have placed to guard my--beauties. A mental barrier that

would have been impassable had you not been with me, yet which--but you understand now, do you not, my Vaudir?" And there was air indescribable leer in the query that injected a note of monstrous humanity into the inhuman voice.

"I understand," echoed the girl in a voice as lovely and toneless as a sustained musical note. And the sound of those two inhuman voices proceeding from the human lips of his companions sent a shudder thrilling along Smith's nerves.

They went down the long corridor thereafter in silence, Smith treading soundlessly in his spaceman's boots, every fiber of him tense to painfulness. He found himself wondering, even in the midst of his strained watchfulness, if any other creature with a living human soul had ever gone down this corridor before--if frightened golden girls had followed the Alendar thus into blackness, or if they too had been drained of humanity and steeped in that nameless horror before their feet followed their master through the black barrier.

The hallway led downward, and the salt smell became clearer and the light sank to a glimmer in the air, and in a silence that was not human they went on.

Presently the Alendar said--and his deep, liquid voice did nothing to break the stillness, blending with it softly so that not even an echo roused,

"I am taking you into a place where no other man than the Alendar has ever set foot before. It pleases me to wonder just how your unaccustomed senses will react to the things you are about to see. I am reaching an--an age"--he laughed softly--"where experiment interests me. Look!"

Smith's eyes blinked shut before an intolerable blaze of sudden light.

In the streaked darkness of that instant while the glare flamed through his lids he thought he felt everything shift unaccountably about him, as if the very structure of the atoms that built the walls were altered. When he opened his eyes he stood at the head of a long gallery blazing with a soft, delicious brilliance. How he had got there he made no effort even to guess.

Very beautifully it stretched before him. The walls and floor and ceiling were of sheeny stone. There were low couches along the walls at intervals, and a blue pool broke the floor, and the air sparkled unaccountably with golden light. And figures were moving through that champagne sparkle.

Smith stood very still, looking down the gallery. The Alendar watched him with a subtle anticipation upon his face, the pinpoint glitter of his eyes sharp enough to pierce the Earthman's very brain. Vaudir with bent head brooded over the black knowledge behind her drooping lids. Only Smith of the three looked down the gallery and saw what moved through the golden glimmer of the air.

They were girls. They might have been goddesses--angels haloed with bronze curls, moving leisurely through a golden heaven where the air sparkled like wine. There must have been a score of them strolling up and down the gallery in twos and threes, lolling on the couches, bathing in the pool. They wore the infinitely graceful Venusian robe with its looped shoulder and slit skirt, in soft, muted shades of violet and blue and jewel-green, and the beauty of them was breath-stopping as a blow. Music was in every gesture they made, a flowing, singing grace that made the heart ache with its sheer loveliness.

He had thought Vaudir lovely, but here was beauty so exquisite that it verged on pain. Their sweet, light voices were pitched to send little velvety burrs along his nerves, and from a distance the soft sounds

blended so musically that they might have been singing together. The loveliness of their motion made his heart contract suddenly, and the blood pounded in his ears....

"You find them beautiful?" The Alendar's voice blended into the humming lilt of voices as perfectly as it had blended with silence. His dagger-glitter of eyes was fixed piercingly on Smith's pale gaze, and he smiled a little, faintly. "Beautiful? Wait!"

He moved down the gallery, tall and very dark in the rainbow light. Smith, following after, walked in a haze of wonder. It is not given to every man to walk through heaven. He felt the air tingle like wine, and a delicious perfume caressed him and the haloed girls drew back with wide, amazed eyes fixed on him in his stained leather and heavy boots as he passed. Vaudir paced quietly after, her head bent, and from her the girls turned away their eyes, shuddering a little.

He saw now that their faces were as lovely as their bodies, languorously, colorfully. They were contented faces, unconscious of beauty, unconscious of any other existence than their own--soulless. He felt that instinctively. Here was beauty incarnate, physically, tangibly; but he had seen in Vaudir's face--before--a sparkle of daring, a tenderness of remorse at having brought him here, that gave her an indefinable superiority over even this incredible beauty, soulless.

They went down the gallery in a sudden hush as the musical voices fell silent from very amazement. Apparently the Alendar was a familiar figure here, for they scarcely glanced at him, and from Vaudir they turned away in a shuddering revulsion that preferred not to recognize her existence. But Smith was the first man other than the Alendar whom they had ever seen, and the surprise of it struck them dumb.

They went on through the dancing air, and the last lovely, staring girls fell behind, and an ivory gateway opened before them, without a touch. They went downstairs from there, and along another hallway, while the tingle died in the air and a hum of musical voices sprang up behind them. They passed beyond the sound. The hallway darkened until they were moving again through dimness.

Presently the Alendar paused and turned.

"My more costly jewels," he said, "I keep in separate settings. As here--"

He stretched out his arm, and Smith saw that a curtain hung against the wall. There were others, farther on, dark blots against the dimness. The Alendar drew back black folds, and light from beyond flowed softly through a pattern of bars to cast flowery shadows on the opposite wall. Smith stepped forward and stared.

He was looking through a grille window down into a room lined with dark velvet. It was quite plain. There was a low couch against the wall opposite the window, and on it--Smith's heart gave a stagger and paused--a woman lay. And if the girls in the gallery had been like goddesses, this woman was lovelier than men have ever dared to imagine even in legends. She was beyond divinity--long limbs white against the velvet, sweet curves and planes of her rounding under the robe, bronze hair spilling like lava over one white shoulder, and her face calm as death with closed eyes. It was a passive beauty, like alabaster shaped perfectly. And charm, a fascination all but tangible, reached out from her like a magic spell. A sleeping charm, magnetic, powerful. He could not wrench his eyes away. He was like a wasp caught in honey.

The Alendar said something across Smith's shoulder, in a vibrant voice that thrilled the air. The closed lids rose. Life and loveliness

flowed into the calm face like a tide, lighting it unbearably. That heady charm awakened and brightened to a dangerous liveness--tugging, pulling.... She rose in one long glide like a wave over rocks; she smiled (Smith's senses reeled to the beauty of that smile) and then sank in a deep salaam, slowly, to the velvet floor, her hair rippling and falling all about her, until she lay abased in a blaze of loveliness under the window.

The Alendar let the curtain fall and turned to Smith as the dazzling sight was blotted out. Again the pinpoint glitter stabbed into Smith's brain. The Alendar smiled again.

"Come," he said, and moved down the hall.

They passed three curtains, and paused at a fourth. Afterward Smith remembered that the curtain must have been drawn back and he must have bent forward to stare through the window bars, but the sight he saw blasted every memory of it from his mind. The girl who dwelt in this velvet-lined room was stretching on tiptoe just as the drawn curtain caught her, and the beauty and grace of her from head to foot stopped Smith's breath as a ray-stab to the heart would have done. And the irresistible, wrenching charm of her drew him forward until he was clasping the bars with white-knuckled hands, unaware of anything but her compelling, soul-destroying desirability.

She moved, and the dazzle of grace that ran like a song through every motion made his senses ache with its pure, unattainable loveliness. He knew, even in his daze of rapture, that he might hold the sweet, curved body in his arms for ever, yet hunger still for the fulfilment which the flesh could never wring from her. Her loveliness aroused a hunger in the soul more maddening than the body's hunger could ever be. His brain rocked with the desire to possess that intangible, irresistible loveliness that he knew he could never possess, never reach with any sense that was in him. That bodiless

desire raged like madness through him, so violently that the room reeled and the white outlines of the beauty unattainable as the stars wavered before him. He caught his breath and choked and drew back from the intolerable, exquisite sight.

The Alendar laughed and dropped the curtain.

"Come," he said again, the subtle amusement clear in his voice, and Smith in a daze moved after him down the hall. They went a long way, past curtains hanging at regular intervals along the wall. When they paused at last, the curtain before which they stopped was faintly luminous about the edges, as if something dazzling dwelt within. The Alendar drew back the folds.

"We are approaching," he said, "a pure clarity of beauty, hampered only a little by the bonds of flesh. Look."

One glance only Smith snatched of the dweller within. And the exquisite shock of that sight went thrilling like torture through every nerve of him. For a mad instant his reason staggered before the terrible fascination beating out from that dweller in waves that wrenched at his very soul--incarnate loveliness tugging with strong fingers at every sense and every nerve and intangibly, irresistibly, at deeper things than these, groping among the roots of his being, dragging his soul out...

Only one glance he took, and in the glance he felt his soul answer that dragging, and the terrible desire tore futilely through him. Then he flung up an arm to shield his eyes and reeled back into the dark, and a wordless sob rose to his lips and the darkness reeled about him.

The curtain fell. Smith pressed the wall and breathed in long, shuddering gasps, while his heart-beats slowed gradually and the

unholy fascination ebbed from about him. The Alendar's eyes were glittering with a green fire as he turned from the window, and a nameless hunger lay shadowily on his face. He said,

"I might show you others, Earthman. But it could only drive you mad, in the end--you were very near the brink for a moment just now--and I have another use for you.... I wonder if you begin to understand, now, the purpose of all this?"

The green glow was fading from that dagger-sharp gaze as the Alendar's eyes stabbed into Smith's. The Earthman gave his head a little shake to clear away the vestiges of that devouring desire, and took a fresh grip on the butt of his gun. The familiar smoothness of it brought him a measure of reassurance, and with it a reawakening to the peril all around. He knew now that there could be no conceivable mercy for him, to whom the innermost secrets of the Minga had been unaccountably revealed. Death was waiting--strange death, as soon as the Alendar wearied of talking--but if he kept his ears open and his eyes alert it might not--please God--catch him so quickly that he died alone. One sweep of that blade-blue flame was all he asked, now. His eyes, keen and hostile, met the dagger-gaze squarely. The Alendar smiled and said,

"Death in your eyes, Earthman. Nothing in your mind but murder. Can that brain of yours comprehend nothing but battle? Is there no curiosity there? Have you no wonder of why I brought you here? Death awaits you, yes. But a not unpleasant death, and it awaits all, in one form or another. Listen, let me tell you--I have reason for desiring to break through that animal shell of self-defense that seals in your mind. Let me look deeper--if there are depths. Your death will be--useful, and in a way, pleasant. Otherwise--well, the black beasts hunger. And flesh must feed them, as a sweeter drink feeds me.... Listen."

Smith's eyes narrowed. A sweeter drink. Danger, danger--the smell of it in the air--instinctively he felt the peril of opening his mind to the plunging gaze of the Alendar, the force of those compelling eyes beating like strong lights into his brain....

"Come," said the Alendar softly, and moved off soundlessly through the gloom. They followed, Smith painfully alert, the girl walking with lowered, brooding eyes, her mind and soul afar in some wallowing darkness whose shadow showed so hideously beneath her lashes.

The hallway widened to an arch, and abruptly, on the other side, one wall dropped away into infinity and they stood on the dizzy brink of a gallery opening on a black, heaving sea, Smith bit back a startled oath. One moment before the way had led through low-roofed tunnels deep underground; the next instant they stood on the shore of a vast body of rolling darkness, a tiny wind touching their faces with the breath of unnamable things.

Very far below, the dark waters rolled. Phosphorescence lighted them uncertainly, and he was not even sure it was water that surged there in the dark. A heavy thickness seemed to be inherent in the rollers, like black slime surging.

The Alendar looked out over the fire-tinged waves. He waited for an instant without speaking, and then, far out in the slimy surges, something broke the surface with an oily splash, something mercifully veiled in the dark, then dived again, leaving a wake of spreading ripples over the surface.

"Listen," said the Alendar, without turning his head. "Life is very old. There are older races than man. Mine is one. Life rose out of the black slime of the sea-bottoms and grew toward the light along many diverging lines. Some reached maturity and deep wisdom when man was still swinging through the jungle trees.

"For many centuries, as mankind counts time, the Alendar has dwelt here, breeding beauty. In later years he has sold some of his lesser beauties, perhaps to explain to mankind's satisfaction what it could never understand were it told the truth. Do you begin to see? My race is very remotely akin to those races which suck blood from man, less remotely to those which drink his life-forces for nourishment. I refine taste even more than that. I drink--beauty. I live on beauty. Yes, literally.

"Beauty is as tangible as blood, in a way. It is a separate, distinct force that inhabits the bodies of men and women. You must have noticed the vacuity that accompanies perfect beauty in so many women... the force so strong that it drives out all other forces and lives vampirishly at the expense of intelligence and goodness and conscience and all else.

"In the beginning, here--for our race was old when this world began, spawned on another planet, and wise and ancient--we woke from slumber in the slime, to feed on the beauty force inherent in mankind even in cave-dwelling days. But it was meager fare, and we studied the race to determine where the greatest prospects lay, then selected specimens for breeding, built this stronghold and settled down to the business of evolving mankind up to its limit of loveliness. In time we weeded out all but the present type. For the race of man we have developed the ultimate type of loveliness. It is interesting to see what we have accomplished on other worlds, with utterly different races....

"Well, there you have it. Women, bred as a spawning-ground for the devouring force of beauty on which we live.

"But--the fare grows monotonous, as all food must without change. Vaudir I took because I saw in her a sparkle of something that except

in very rare instances has been bred out of the Minga girls. For beauty, as I have said, eats up all other qualities but beauty. Yet somehow intelligence and courage survived latently in Vaudir. It decreases her beauty, but the tang of it should be a change from the eternal sameness of the rest. And so I thought until I saw you.

"I realized then how long it had been since I tasted the beauty of man. It is so rare, so different from female beauty, that I had all but forgotten it existed. And you have it, very subtly, in a raw, harsh way...."

"I have told you all this to test the quality of that--that harsh beauty in you. Had I been wrong about the depths of your mind, you would have gone to feed the black beasts, but I see that I was not wrong. Behind your animal shell of self-preservation are depths of that force and strength which nourish the roots of male beauty. I think I shall give you a while to let it grow, under the forcing methods I know, before I drink. It will be delightful...."

The voice trailed away in a murmurous silence, the pinpoint glitter sought Smith's eyes. And he tried half-heartedly to avoid it, but his eyes turned involuntarily to the stabbing gaze, and the alertness died out of him, gradually, and the compelling pull of those glittering points in the pits of darkness held him very still.

And as he stared into the diamond glitter he saw its brilliance slowly melt and darken, until the pinpoints of light had changed to pools that dimmed, and he was looking into black evil as elemental and vast as the space between the worlds, a dizzying blankness wherein dwelt unnamable horror... deep, deep... all about him the darkness was clouding. And thoughts that were not his own seeped into his mind out of that vast, elemental dark... crawling, writhing thoughts... until he had a glimpse of that place where Vaudir's soul wallowed, and something sucked him down and down into a waking nightmare he

could not fight.

Then somehow the pull broke for an instant. For just that instant he stood again on the shore of the heaving sea and gripped a gun with nerveless fingers--then the darkness closed about him again, but a different, uneasy dark that had not quite the all-compelling power of that other nightmare--it left him strength enough to fight.

And he fought, a desperate, moveless, soundless struggle in a black sea of horror, while worm-thoughts coiled through his straining mind and the clouds rolled and broke and rolled again about him. Sometimes, in the instants when the pull slackened, he had time to feel a third force struggling here between that black, blind downward suck that dragged at him and his own sick, frantic effort to fight clear, a third force that was weakening the black drag so that he had moments of lucidity when he stood free on the brink of the ocean and felt the sweat roll down his face and was aware of his laboring heart and how gaspingly breath tortured his lungs, and he knew he was fighting with every atom of himself, body and mind and soul, against the intangible blackness sucking him down.

And then he felt the force against him gather itself in a final effort--he sensed desperation in that effort--and come rolling over him like a tide. Bowled over, blinded and dumb and deaf, drowning in utter blackness, he floundered in the deeps of that nameless hell where thoughts that were alien and slimy squirmed through his brain. Bodiless he was, and unstable, and as he wallowed there in the ooze more hideous than any earthly ooze, because it came from black, inhuman souls and out of ages before man, he became aware that the worm-thoughts a-squirm in his brain were forming slowly into monstrous meanings--knowledge like a formless flow was pouring through his bodiless brain, knowledge so dreadful that consciously he could not comprehend it, though subconsciously every atom of his mind and soul sickened and writhed futilely away. It was flooding

over him, drenching him, permeating him through and through with the very essence of dreadfulness--he felt his mind melting away under the solvent power of it, melting and running fluidly into new channels and fresh molds--horrible molds....

And just at that instant, while madness folded around him and his mind rocked on the verge of annihilation, something snapped, and like a curtain the dark rolled away, and he stood sick and dizzy on the gallery above the black sea. Everything was reeling about him, but they were stable things that shimmered and steadied before his eyes, blessed black rock and tangible surges that had form and body--his feet pressed firmness and his mind shook itself and was clean and his own again.

And then through the haze of weakness that still shrouded him a voice was shrieking wildly, "Kill!... kill!" and he saw the Alendar staggering against the rail, all his outlines unaccountably blurred and uncertain, and behind him Vaudir with blazing eyes and face wrenched hideously into life again, screaming "Kill!" in a voice scarcely human.

Like an independent creature his gun-hand leaped up--he had gripped that gun through everything that happened--and he was dimly aware of the hardness of it kicking back against his hand with the recoil, and of the blue flash flaming from its muzzle. It struck the Alendar's dark figure full, and there was a hiss and a dazzle.

Smith closed his eyes tight and opened them again, and stared with a sick incredulity; for unless that struggle had unhinged his brain after all, and the worm-thoughts still dwelt slimily in his mind, tingeing all he saw with unearthly horror--unless this was true, he was looking not at a man just rayed through the lungs, and who should be dropping now in a bleeding, collapsed heap to the floor, but at--at God, what was it? The dark figure had slumped against the rail, and instead of blood

gushing, a hideous, nameless, formless black poured sluggishly forth—a slime like the heaving sea below. The whole dark figure of the man was melting, slumping farther down into the pool of blackness forming at his feet on the stone floor.

Smith gripped his gun and watched in numb incredulity, and the whole body sank slowly down and melted and lost all form—hideously, gruesomely—until where the Alendar had stood a heap of slime lay viscidly on the gallery floor, hideously alive, heaving and rippling and striving to lift itself into a semblance of humanity again. And as he watched, it lost even that form, and the edges melted revoltingly and the mass flattened and slid down into a pool of utter horror, and he became aware that it was pouring slowly through the rails into the sea. He stood watching while the whole rolling, shimmering mound melted and thinned and trickled through the bars, until the floor was clear again, and not even a stain marred the stone.

A painful constriction of his lungs roused him, and he realized he had been holding his breath, scarcely daring to realize. Vaudir had collapsed against the wall, and he saw her knees give limply, and staggered forward on uncertain feet to catch her as she fell.

"Vaudir, Vaudir!" He shook her gently. "Vaudir, what's happened? Am I dreaming? Are we safe now? Are you—awake again?"

Very slowly her white lids lifted, and the black eyes met his. And he saw shadowily there the knowledge of that wallowing void he had dimly known, the shadow that could never be cleared away. She was steeped and foul with it. And the look of her eyes was such that involuntarily he released her and stepped away. She staggered a little and then regained her balance and regarded him from under bent brows. The level inhumanity of her gaze struck into his soul, and yet he thought he saw a spark of the girl she had been, dwelling in torture amid the blackness. He knew he was right when she said, in

a far-away, toneless voice,

"Awake?... No, not ever now, Earthman. I have been down too deeply into hell... he had dealt me a worse torture than he knew, for there is just enough humanity left within me to realize what I have become, and to suffer...."

"Yes, he is gone, back into the slime that bred him. I have been a part of him, one with him in the blackness of his soul, and I know. I have spent eons since the blackness came upon me, dwelt for eternities in the dark, rolling seas of his mind, sucking in knowledge... and as I was one with him, and he now gone, so shall I die; yet I will see you safely out of here if it is in my power, for it was I who dragged you in. If I can remember if I can find the way...."

She turned uncertainly and staggered a step back along the way they had come. Smith sprang forward and slid his free arm about her, but she shuddered away from the contact.

"No, no--unbearable--the touch of clean human flesh--and it breaks the chord of my remembering.... I can not look back into his mind as it was when I dwelt there, and I must, I must...."

She shook him off and reeled on, and he cast one last look at the billowing sea, and then followed. She staggered along the stone floor on stumbling feet, one hand to the wall to support herself, and her voice was whispering gustily, so that he had to follow close to hear, and then almost wished he had not heard.

"--black slime--darkness feeding on light--everything wavers so--slime, slime and a rolling sea--he rose out of it, you know, before civilization began here--he is age-old--there never has been but one Alendar.... And somehow--I could not see just how, or remember why--he rose from the rest, as some of his race on other planets had

done, and took the man-form and stocked his breeding-pens...."

They went on up the dark hallway, past curtains hiding incarnate loveliness, and the girl's stumbling footsteps kept time to her stumbling, half-incoherent words.

"--has lived all these ages here, breeding and devouring beauty--vampire-thirst, a hideous delight in drinking in that beauty-force--I felt it and remembered it when I was one with him--wrapping black layers of primal slime about--quenching human loveliness in ooze, sucking--blind black thirst.... And his wisdom was ancient and dreadful and full of power--so he could draw a soul out through the eyes and sink it in hell, and drown it there, as he would have done mine if I had not had, somehow, a difference from the rest. Great Shar, I wish I had not! I wish I were drowned in it and did not feel in every atom of me the horrible uncleanness of--what I know. But by virtue of that hidden strength I did not surrender wholly, and when he had turned his power to subduing you I was able to struggle, there in the very heart of his mind, making a disturbance that shook him as he fought us both--making it possible to free you long enough for you to destroy the human flesh he was clothed in--so that he lapsed into the ooze again. I do not quite understand why that happened--only that his weakness, with you assailing him from without and me struggling strongly in the very center of his soul was such that he was forced to draw on the power he had built up to maintain himself in the man form, and weakened it enough so that he collapsed when the man-form was assailed. And he fell back into the slime again--whence he rose--black slime--heaving--oozing...."

Her voice trailed away in murmurs, and she stumbled, all but falling. When she regained her balance she went on ahead of him at a greater distance, as if his very nearness were repugnant to her, and the soft babble of her voice drifted back in broken phrases without meaning.

Presently the air began to tingle again, and they passed the silver gate and entered that gallery where the air sparkled like champagne. The blue pool lay jewel-clear in its golden setting. Of the girls there was no sign.

When they reached the head of the gallery the girl paused, turning to him a face twisted with the effort at memory.

"Here is the trial," she said urgently. "If I can remember--" She seized her head in clutching hands, shaking it savagely. "I haven't the strength, now--can't--can't--" the piteous little murmur reached his ears incoherently. Then she straightened resolutely, swaying a little, and faced him, holding out her hands. He clasped them hesitantly, and saw a shiver go through her at the contact, and her face contort painfully, and then a shudder communicated itself through that clasp and he too winced in revolt. He saw her eyes go blank and her face strain in lines of tensivity, and a fine dew broke out on her forehead. For a long moment she stood so, her face like death, and strong shudders went over her body and her eyes were blank as the void between the planets.

And as each shudder swept her it went unbroken through the clasping of their hands to him, and they were black waves of dreadfulness, and again he saw the heaving sea and wallowed in the hell he had fought out of on the gallery, and he knew for the first time what torture she must be enduring who dwelt in the very deeps of that uneasy dark. The pulses came faster, and for moments together he went down into the blind blackness and the slime and felt the first wriggling of the worm-thoughts tickling the roots of his brain....

And then suddenly a clean darkness closed round them and again everything shifted unaccountably, as if the atoms of the gallery were changing, and when Smith opened his eyes he was standing once

more in the dark, slanting corridor with the smell of salt and antiquity heavy in the air.

Vaudir moaned softly beside him, and he turned to see her reeling against the wall and trembling so from head to foot that he looked to see her fall the next moment.

"Better--in a moment," she gasped. "It took--nearly all my strength to--to get us through--wait...."

So they halted there in the darkness and the dead salt air, until the trembling abated a little and she said, "Come," in her little whimpering voice. And again the journey began. It was only a short way, now, to the barrier of black blankness that guarded the door into the room where they had first seen the Alendar. When they reached the place she shivered a little and paused, then resolutely held out her hands. And as he took them he felt once more the hideous slimy waves course through him, and plunged again into the heaving hell. And as before the clean darkness flashed over them in a breath, and then she dropped his hands and they were standing in the archway looking into the velvet-hung room they had left--it seemed eons ago.

He watched as waves of blinding weakness flooded over her from that supreme effort. Death was visible in her face as she turned to him at last.

"Come--oh, come quickly," she whispered, and staggered forward.

At her heels he followed, across the room, past the great iron gateway, down the hall to the foot of the silver stairs. And here his heart sank, for he felt sure she could never climb the long spiral distances to the top. But she set her foot on the step and went upward resolutely, and as he followed he heard her murmuring to herself,

"Wait--oh, wait--let me reach the end--let me undo this much--and then--no, no! Please Shar, not the black slime again.... Earthman, Earthman!"

She paused on the stair and turned to face him, and her haggard face was frantic with desperation and despair.

"Earthman, promise--do not let me die like this! When we reach the end, ray me! Burn me clean, or shall I go down for eternity into the black sinks from which I dragged you free. Oh, promise!"

"I will," Smith's voice said quietly. "I will."

And they went on. Endlessly the stairs spiraled upward and endlessly they climbed. Smith's legs began to ache intolerably, and his heart was pounding like a wild thing, but Vaudir seemed not to notice weariness. She climbed steadily and no more unsurely than she had come along the halls. And after eternities they reached the top.

And there the girl fell. She dropped like a dead woman at the head of the silver spiral. Smith thought for a sick instant that he had failed her and let her die uncleansed, but in a moment or two she stirred and lifted her head and very slowly dragged herself to her feet.

"I will go on--I will, I will," she whispered to herself. "--come this far--must finish--" and she reeled off down the lovely, rosily-lit hallway paneled in pearl.

He could see how perilously near she was to her strength's end, and he marveled at the tenacity with which she clung to life though it ebbed away with every breath and the pulse of darkness flowed in after it. So with bulldog stubbornness she made her wavering way past door after door of carven shell, under rosy lights that flushed her face with aghastly mockery of health, until they reached the silver

gateway at the end. The lock had been removed from it by now, and the bar drawn.

She tugged open the gate and stumbled through.

And the nightmare journey went on. It must be very near morning, Smith thought, for the halls were deserted, but did he not sense a breath of danger in the still air?

The girl's gasping voice answered that half-formed query as if, like the Alendar, she held the secret of reading men's minds.

"The--Guardians--still rove the halls, and unleashed now--so keep your ray-gun ready, Earthman...."

After that he kept his eyes alert as they retraced, stumbling and slow, the steps he had taken on his way in. And once he heard distinctly the soft slither of--something--scraping over the marble pavement, and twice he smelt with shocking suddenness in this scented air a whiff of salt, and his mind flashed back to a rolling black sea....

But nothing molested them.

Step by faltering step the hallways fell behind them, and he began to recognize landmarks, and the girl's footsteps staggered and hesitated and went on gallantly, incredibly, beating back oblivion, fighting the dark surges rolling over her, clinging with tenacious fingers to the tiny spark of life that drove her on.

And at long last, after what seemed hours of desperate effort, they reached the blue-lit hallway at whose end the outer door opened. Vaudir's progress down it was a series of dizzy staggers, interspersed with pauses while she hung to the carven doors with tense fingers and drove her teeth into a bloodless lip and gripped that last flicker of life. He saw the shudders sweep over her, and

knew what waves of washing dark must be rising all about her, and how the worm-thoughts writhed through her brain.... But she went on. Every step now was a little tripping, as if she fell from one foot to the other, and at each step he expected that knee to give way and pitch her down into the black deeps that yawned for her. But she went on.'

She reached the bronze door, and with a last spurt of effort she lifted the bar and swung it open. Then that tiny spark flickered out like a lamp. Smith caught one flash of the rock room within--and something horrible on the floor--before he saw her pitch forward as the rising tide of slimy oblivion closed at last over her head. She was dying as she fell, and he whipped the ray-gun up and felt the recoil against his palm as a blue blaze flashed forth and transfixed her in midair. And he could have sworn her eyes lighted for a flickering instant and the gallant girl he had known looked forth, cleansed and whole, before death--clean death--glazed them.

She slumped down in a huddle at his feet, and he felt a sting of tears beneath his eyelids as he looked down on her, a huddle of white and bronze on the rug. And as he watched, a film of defilement veiled the shining whiteness of her--decay set in before his eyes and progressed with horrible swiftness, and in less time than it takes to tell he was staring with horrified eyes at a pool of black sliine across which green velvet lay bedraggled.

Northwest Smith closed his pale eyes, and for a moment struggled with memory, striving to wrest from it the long-forgotten words of a prayer learned a score of years ago on another planet. Then he stepped over the pitiful, horrible heap on the carpet and went on.

In the little rock room of the outer wall he saw what he had glimpsed when Vaudir opened the door. Retribution had overtaken the eunuch. The body must have been his, for tatters of scarlet velvet lay about the floor, but there was no way to recognize what its original form had

been. The smell of salt was heavy in the air, and a trail of black slime snaked across the floor toward the wall. The wall was solid, but it ended there....

Smith laid his hand on the outer door, drew the bar, swung it open. He stepped out under the hanging vines and filled his lungs with pure air, clear, untainted with scent or salt. A pearly dawn was breaking over Ednes.

# Compliments of the Author

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"If you know what's good for you," said the cat, "you'll get the hell out of here. But quick!"

Sam Tracy thoughtfully patted the bottle in his topcoat pocket. The gesture was only a momentary confession of weakness, for the Journal reporter wasn't drunk. He had several vices, including a profitable side line of blackmail, but dipsomania wasn't one of them. No, there was a simpler explanation--ventriloquism.

Tracy's gaze went past the cat to where Baldwin Gwinn's house loomed darkly above him, a big, ramshackle place in an isolated section of Laurel Canyon. There were no cars in the driveway. Good. Tracy didn't want witnesses during his impending interview with Gwinn. Gwinn would pay off, of course; the evidence against the man was overwhelming. And, since Tracy was the only one who possessed that evidence in its entirety, an attempt to collect hush money was clearly indicated. The principle was nothing new, either in Hollywood or to Sam Tracy. He was a lank, dark, saturnine man of forty-odd, with a permanent sneer of cynicism on his aquiline face, and a profound trust in his own ability to come out on top. Till tonight, however, he had not had occasion to cross swords with a magician. But that didn't matter: Gwinn had made a mistake, and the result should mean cash in the bank for Tracy. He could always use money. A succession of very interesting blondes, to which he was partial, the Santa Anita track, the casinos along the Sunset Strip, and zombies, minks, and melodious bowlings--the Hollywood equivalent of wine, women, and song--combined to keep the bank account overdrawn.

But Tracy had excellent connections, and was always willing to suppress a scandal, c.o.d. He never put the squeeze on widows or orphans, either. They seldom had money.

Now in one pocket he had a bottle of whiskey, in another certain significant photostats, and in a third a useful little automatic, very handy for bluffing his way out of tight spots. It was night. Gwinn's house was in a pocket of the Hollywood Hills, isolated, though a few lights gleamed from distant slopes. Stars and a spotlight of a moon were garish overhead. The reporter's sleek dark coupé was parked unobtrusively under a pepper tree, and a fat black cat with white mittens of paws sat on the curbstone twitching its whiskers at Sam Tracy.

"Ventriloquism, Mr. Gwinn," said the reporter gently, "is o.k. for the sticks. But don't waste it on me."

"Ventriloquism, hell," the cat replied, glaring balefully. "Don't you know a familiar when you see one? Baldy knows you're coming, and he's all upset. I'd hate to lose him. He's a fine master. I warn you, louse, that if you hurt Baldy, I, personally, will take steps."

Tracy aimed a kick at the cat, but it was deftly avoided. The creature cursed in a fervid undertone and went behind a convenient bush, from which low, searing oaths proceeded. Tracy's cynical sneer increased in intensity. He walked up the steps and rang the bell.

"The door's open," said the cat. "You're expected."

Tracy shrugged and obeyed. The room in which he found himself was big, comfortably furnished, and didn't look at all like the home of a practicing magician. Etchings hung on the walls. A Bokhara rug, slightly singed, was on the floor. At a big table by the window a fat man with a cast in one eye was sitting, staring down unhappily at an

open book before him.

"Hello, Gwinn," the reporter said.

Gwinn sighed and looked up. "Hello, Tracy. Sit down. Cigar?"

"No, thanks. You know me?"

Gwinn pointed to a crystal ball on a tripod in one corner.

"I saw you in that. You won't believe it, of course, but I'm really a magician."

Tracy grinned. "Sure. I believe it. So do lots of other people. Like Ina Phairson."

Gwinn didn't turn a hair. "Such things are necessary in my profession."

"Rather tough on Ina Phairson, though. And it'd look bad in the papers. In fact, it'd look awful."

"It would mean the gas chamber, or at best a long prison term. I know. Unfortunately, there's nothing I can do about it."

Tracy took out the photostats and laid them on the table. He didn't say anything. Gwinn shuffled through the documents, nodding. His thick lips pursed.

"You have all the evidence, I see. The trouble is that I can't pay blackmail. It isn't allowed."

"Blackmail's an ugly word," Tracy said. "Let's call it a dividend. Five thousand bucks and this evidence goes up the spout. I'll raise my price tomorrow."

Gwinn said, "You don't understand. I made a pact with the devil some years ago, and there were certain terms in the contract. One of them is that I'm not allowed to pay blackmail."

"Suit yourself." Tracy shrugged. "You can keep those photostats. I have the originals, of course. There'll be a story about you in tomorrow's Journal."

"No--no. I don't want that." Gwinn glanced worriedly at the book before him, and closed it with a snap.

Tracy's face didn't change, but a new look came into his eyes. That small volume had the look of a diary, or an account book. It would be interesting to thumb through it. There might be names, facts, and figures, all of which would be useful and perhaps profitable.

The book had a plain cloth cover, and on the front was a small white oval against the brown. In gold script was engraved, "Baldwin Gwinn." Tracy read the name upside down.

"I haven't all night," he said. "Give me an answer. I don't care what it is. I'll act accordingly."

Gwinn fingered his thick lower lip. "It's no use, of course," he said under his breath. "Still--"

He threw a handful of nothing at the fireplace, and flames blazed up with blue brilliance. Then he plucked a wax figurine out of empty air and examined it thoughtfully. It was about six inches high, and was a perfect replica of Tracy.

He threw it into the fire.

"I've heard of that," Tracy said. "But I don't believe it."

"Then it won't work," Gwinn muttered, but waited, nevertheless. For a brief moment Tracy felt uncomfortably warm. He didn't show it. He grinned tightly, and the feeling went away.

Then, without warning, there was a third person in the room. His name was Andy Monk, and two years ago he had died at the hands of the law, as a result of a feature story Tracy had written. Monk wouldn't pay blackmail, either. And Tracy had always been afraid of the man and his handiness with a knife. For months, till Monk was captured, he had gone in fear of shadows.

Monk was a shadow now, and Tracy knew that. Hypnosis was old stuff. But the hatred blazing in the man's eyes was horribly disturbing.

Monk had a gun, and he fired it at Tracy. The bullets weren't real, of course. Tracy braced himself against the impact; almost to his surprise, he realized that he was trembling violently. Hypnotism, but—

Monk threw away his gun and took out a long-bladed knife. Tracy had always been afraid of that knife. He tried to look through the phantom, but Monk was visibly, if not tangibly, real. Maybe he was tangible, after all. Bullets were one matter. Ghost bullets. A knife was another, somehow. Blue firelight rippled up the blade.

Tracy didn't want even an intangible knife slicing at his throat. He was scared now. His heart was pounding violently. He hastily took out his automatic and said hoarsely, "Turn it off, Gwinn. Quick!"

He couldn't see Gwinn, because the room was very dark, and Monk was plunging forward, laughing, the knife driving up viciously. Tracy chewed his lip, gave back a step, and fired. Instantly he regretted the weakness.

He regretted it even more as Monk vanished, and he saw Gwinn

slumped in his chair, the top of his head blown off.

The magician's eyes were wide open, but unseeing. Tracy stood quite motionless for several minutes breathing hard. Then he shoved the gun back in his pocket, stepped forward, and picked up the brown book from the table. He didn't touch the body. He took out his handkerchief and wiped the doorknobs as he went out of the house, and, standing in the friendly darkness, he found the whiskey bottle in his coat and drank deeply. It helped.

"But I couldn't--" he said aloud, and broke off, with a quick glance around. Nothing stirred.

Except the cat. The cat came out of the shadows and looked at Tracy with luminous green eyes.

"There's still revenge," it said, waving its tail. "And I'm a particularly nasty sort of familiar. I was fond of Baldy. Run along, Sam Tracy. You won't get into any trouble with the police. But you'll get into trouble with me--and my friends. It'll be harder, since you've got the book, but I'll manage." It yawned, flicking a pink tongue at Tracy.

The reporter thought of posthypnosis, and slowly drew his automatic. The cat went away, with the magic peculiar to cats. Tracy nodded and descended the steps, getting into his car and starting the motor with a nervous jerk.

It was awkward turning the car around on the narrow, winding road, but he managed it without too much difficulty. Going down the canyon in second gear, Tracy kept his eyes on the black center line and thought hard. Murder. First-degree, at that. But there was no evidence.

He chewed his lip. He was getting shaky, firing at shadows.

Unfortunate that Gwinn happened to be behind that particular shadow. Still....

Still, it couldn't be helped, and the worst possible thing to do was brood about it. Much better to shove the incident to the back of his mind. Hell, in the old days in Chicago murder hadn't meant much. Why should it mean anything now?

Nevertheless, it did. Tracy had always taken pains to keep his skirts clear of messes. By a natural trick of compensation, he had come to regard his blackmailing activities with tolerant satisfaction. In this world, the race was to the swift. A slow horse was handicapped--unless he got the needle. A man smart enough to use a hypo stimulant wasn't necessarily a rat, except according to narrow standards, which did not concern Tracy.

If you were clever enough to get your hands on smart money, that was all to the good. And it was far, far better than living on a reporter's salary alone.

But Tracy was shaken. "Self-defense," he said under his breath, and lit a cigarette, illegal in this fire-hazard area. He put it out immediately. It wouldn't do to be stopped by an officer.

A giant stood threateningly, in the glare of the headlights, gnarled and menacing. Tracy wrenched at the wheel in sudden panic. It was nothing but an oak; just the same, the illusion was frightening. Briefly Tracy had seen the huge face of a hag peering at him, loose mouth writhing, eyes flaming green.

It was gone now, but the aftertaste of fear was sour in Tracy's mouth. He turned the car into a side road and parked, staring at nothing. Not so good. He couldn't afford hysteria.

He drank whiskey, shuddered, and wiped his lips with his hand. It was trembling a little. Tracy lay back and breathed deeply, his eyes closed. He'd be all right in a minute. The canyon road was steep and winding, and he preferred not to risk it till his hands stopped shaking.

Meantime, he remembered Gwinn's diary. It lay on the seat beside him, a flat brown volume rather smaller than an octavo, and Tracy picked it up, switching on the overhead light.

Oddly enough, the gold script on the front said, "Samuel Tracy."

Tracy looked at that for a long time. He touched the white oval with an exploratory finger. It was smooth and glossy--parchment, perhaps. Finally he opened the book at random. The page number--17--in the upper right-hand corner was in large block numerals, and there was only one sentence, in crude type that seemed hand set. It said:

"Werewolves can't climb oak trees."

Tracy read it again. It still said the same thing. Frowning, he turned the page.

"He's bluffing."

That was all--two words. Cryptic, to say the least. Obviously, this wasn't Gwinn's diary. It was more like *Finnegans Wake*.

Tracy flipped the pages. Page 25 said:

"Try the windshield."

Page 26 said:

"Declare the truth and fear no man." A few pages later, Tracy found this: "Deny everything."

There were other ambiguous comments: "Don't worry about poor crops," "Aim at his eye," "Don't speak till you're back on earth," and "Try again." As a collection of aphorisms, the book was more than a little cryptic. But Tracy had a queer feeling that he was on the verge of a mystery--an important one, somehow. Only he couldn't find the key.

The hell with it. Gwinn was a screwball. This volume meant nothing. Or....

It was growing chilly. Tracy, with a wry mouth, dropped the book on the seat beside him and started the engine. The one inexplicable thing was the discovery of his name on the volume's brown cover. Previously it had had Gwinn's name--or had it? Thinking back, he wasn't quite certain. At any rate, the doubt was comforting.

He backed the car, turned, and drove on down the canyon, branching into Laurel, the main thoroughfare. As usual, there was plenty of traffic, since the road was a short cut between Hollywood and the Valley.

The accident came not quite without warning. On the left of the road was a gully; on the right, an overhanging tree. The headlights picked out something definitely abnormal about that tree. For the second time Tracy saw the gray, rugose, sagging face of a hag, toothless mouth agape in a grin, the deformed head nodding as though in encouragement. He was quite certain that, mingled somehow with the trunk and branches, was the monstrous figure of a woman. The tree had become anthropomorphic. It was wrenching, straining, hunching its heavy shoulders as it swayed and lurched toward the road.

It fell. Tracy caught his breath and jammed his foot down on the accelerator, swiveling the car to the left. The cold motor stuttered

hesitantly, without gaining speed, and that was unfortunate. The tree crashed down, and a heavy branch seemed to thrust itself under the wheels. Tires blew out with sickening bangs. The breath-stopping sickness of imminent danger froze Tracy into paralysis as the coupé went over the curb, toppling, skidding down, turning over and over till it came to rest on its side.

Tracy's head rang like a bell; white flashes of pain lanced through it. He was jammed awkwardly behind the steering wheel, which, luckily, had not snapped off. He had avoided impalement, at any rate. He reached fumblingly for the key to snap off the ignition, but a flicker of fire told him he was too late.

The car was ablaze.

Painfully Tracy tried to right himself. The shatterproof glass had not broken, and he thrust upward against the door, now above his head. It was jammed. He could see stars through the glass, and a coiling veil of thin smoke that partly obscured them. A reddening glow grew brighter. When the fire reached the gas tank....

He heard distant shouts. Help was coming, but probably it would not come in time. With a choking cry Tracy strained up against the door; he could not budge it. If he could break the glass--

He sought for a tool. There was none. The dashboard compartment was jammed, and, in his awkward position, he could not remove a shoe to hammer against the glass. The acrid smell grew stronger. Red light flickered.

The sharp corner of something was jammed against his side, and Tracy, hoping it might be a loose bit of metal heavy enough to serve his purpose, clutched at it. He found himself staring at the book. The white circle on the cover was luminous, and traced darkly against the

whiteness were two Arabic numerals:

25

The need for self-preservation sharpens the faculties. It was instinct that brought vividly to Tracy the memory of what he had read on Page 25 of the book. The enigma of the message was suddenly elucidated.

"Try the windshield."

Tracy thrust at the long plate glass with his palm, and the windshield fell out. A breath of cool air blew in against his sweating face. The crackling of flames was very loud now.

He kept a tight grip on the book as he wormed his way through the gap, skinning his shin rather badly; and he ran down the gully, gasping for breath, till the red firelight had faded. A booming roar told him the gas tank had exploded. Tracy sat down, feeling weak, and looked at the book. It was an oblong, darker shadow in the faint moonlight.

"My God," he said.

After a while he put the book in a pocket of his tattered topcoat and clambered out of the gully. Cars were parked along the curb, and men were moving about, using flashlights. Tracy walked back toward the crowd.

He was conscious of irritation at the impending scene. The only thing he wanted, just now, was a chance to examine the book privately. There was a point at which skepticism stopped. Tracy had run up against enough news curiosa in the past to retain a certain amount of credulity. The whole thing might be merely a coincidence--but he didn't think so.

There was a confusion of questioning, loud, rather pointless conversation, and assurances, on Tracy's part, that he was unhurt. With an officer, he went to a near-by house and telephoned his insurance company. Meanwhile a taxi had been summoned.

Tracy ordered the cabman to stop in Hollywood at a convenient bar, where he gulped several whiskey sours and fingered the book in his pocket. He didn't quite dare to examine it there, however, and, in any case, the lighting was indirect--perhaps on the questionable principle that people seldom appear at their best when they are tight. Replenished and conscious of a mounting excitement, Tracy reached his Wilshire apartment at last, closed the door behind him, and switched on the light.

He stood motionless for a time, just looking around. Then he went to a couch, lit a reading lamp, and took the brown volume from his pocket.

The inset white disk on the front cover was blank. His own name was scrawled in gilt lettering against the dull brown cloth. He turned to Page 25. It said, "Try the windshield."

Tracy closed the book and opened it at the flyleaf, which was blank. The next page was more interesting. In the familiar hand type, his own name leaped up at him.

Dear Mr. Tracy:

By this time, you may already have discovered the peculiar qualities of this grimoire. Its powers are limited, and only ten page references are allotted to each owner. Use them with discrimination.

Compliments of the author.

Cryptic—but significant! Tracy looked up grimoire, but the word wasn't in his dictionary. It meant a book of magic, he remembered rather vaguely, a collection of spells.

Thoughtfully he flipped the book's pages again. Spells? Advice, rather. Certainly the advice about the coupé's windshield had come in very handy.

Tracy's lips tightened in a crooked smile. One advantage of the accident: he had forgotten to be worried by the murder! Maybe that wasn't so good. If the police grew suspicious— But there was no reason why they should be. His presence in Laurel Canyon was easily explained; the boulevard was a well-traveled thoroughfare. And Gwinn's body might not be discovered for days, in that isolated section.

He stood up, stripping off the ragged overcoat and tossing it aside with a gesture of distaste. Tracy liked clothes, with an almost sensuous feeling. He went into the bathroom to start the shower, and came back instantly, followed by the beginnings of steam clouds. He picked up the book from the couch.

It lay on a stand as he bathed and donned pajamas and a robe. It was in his hand as he slipped back into the living room, and his gaze was upon it as he mixed himself a drink. It was a stiff drink and, as he sipped the whiskey, Tracy felt a warm, restful languor beginning to seep into his mind and body. Till this moment he had not realized how jangled were his nerves.

Now, leaning back, he pondered on the book. Magic? Were there such things? He thumbed through the pages again, but the printed lines had not altered in the least. Extraordinary, and quite illogical, how that message about the windshield had saved his life. The other pages—most of them bore sentences wild to the point of lunacy.

"Werewolves can't climb oak trees." So what?

Tracy fixed himself another drink. He was going somewhat beyond his capacity tonight, for fairly obvious reasons. But he didn't show it, except for a glisten of perspiration on his high, tanned forehead.

"This should develop into something interesting," a soft voice said.

It was the cat. Fat, glossy, and handsome, it sat on a chair opposite Tracy, watching the man with enigmatic eyes. The mobile mouth and tongue of a cat, he thought, were well suited for human speech.

The cat rippled its shoulder muscles. "Do you still think this is ventriloquism?" it asked. "Or have you progressed to hallucinations?"

Tracy stood up, walked across the room, and slowly extended his hand. "I'd like to make certain you're real," he said. "May I--"

"Gently. Don't try any tricks. My claws are sharp, and my magic's sharper."

Satisfied by the feel of the warm fur, Tracy drew back and looked down consideringly at the creature. "All right," he said, his voice a little thick. "We've progressed this far, anyhow. I'm talking to you--admitting your existence. Fair enough."

The cat nodded. "True. I came here to congratulate you on escaping the dryad, and to tell you I'm not discouraged."

Tracy sat down again. "Dryad, eh? I always thought dryads were pretty. Like nymphs."

"Fairy tales," the cat said succinctly. "The Grecian equivalent of yellow journalism. Satyrs only made love to young deciduous dryads,

my friend. The older ones--well! You may be able to imagine what the dryad of a California sequoia would be like."

"I think so."

"Well, you're wrong. The older an anthropomorphic being grows, the less rigidly the dividing lines are drawn. Ever notice the sexlessness of old human beings? They die, of course, before they progress farther than that. Eventually the line between human being and god is lost, then between human being and animal, and between animal and plant. Finally there's a commingling of sentient clay. Beyond that you'd not care to go. But the sequoia dryads have gone beyond it." The cat eyes watched, alert and inscrutable. Tracy sensed some definite purpose behind this conversation. He waited.

"My name, by the way, is Meg," the cat said.

"Female, I presume?"

"In this incarnation. Familiars in their natural habitat are sexless. When aliens manifest themselves on earth, they're limited by terrestrial laws--to a certain extent, anyway. You may have noticed that nobody saw the dryad but you."

"There wasn't anybody else around."

"Exactly," Meg said, with an air of satisfaction.

Tracy considered, conscious more than ever that he was dueling with the creature. "o.k.," he nodded. "Now let's get down to cases. You were Gwinn's--eh?--familiar. What does that imply?"

"I served him. A familiar, Tracy, serves a wizard as a catalyst."

"Come again."

"Catalysis: a chemic reaction promoted by the presence of a third unaffected substance. Read 'magic'for 'chemic.'Take cane sugar and water, add sulphuric acid, and you get glucose and levulose. Take a pentagram and ox blood, add me, and you get a demon named Pharnegar. He's the dowser god," Meg added. "Comes in handy for locating hidden treasures, but he has his limitations."

Tracy thought that over. It seemed logical. All through the centuries, folklore had spoken of the warlock's familiar. What purpose the creature had served was problematical. A glorified demoniac valet? Rather silly.

A catalyst was much more acceptable, somehow, especially to poor Tracy's alcohol-distorted brain.

"It seems to me we might make a bargain," he said, staring at Meg. "You're out of a job now, aren't you? Well, I could use a little magical knowledge."

"Fat chance," the cat said scornfully. "Do you think for a minute magic can be mastered by a correspondence course? It's like any highly trained profession. You have to learn how to handle the precision tools, how to train your insight, how to-- My master, Tracy, it's something more than a university course! It takes a natural linguist to handle the spells. And trained, whiplash responses. A perfect sense of timing. Gwinn took the course for twenty-three years before he got his goatskin. And, of course, there's the initial formality of the fee."

Tracy grunted. "You know magic, apparently. Why can't you--"

"Because," Meg said very softly, "you killed Gwinn. I won't outlast him. And I had been looking forward to a decade or two more on Earth. In this plane, I'm free from certain painful duties that are mine

elsewhere."

"Hell?"

"Anthropomorphically speaking, yes. But your idea of Hell isn't mine. Which is natural, since in my normal state my senses aren't the same as yours."

Meg jumped down from the chair and began to wander around the room. Tracy watched it--her--closely. His hand felt for and clutched the book.

The cat said, "This will be an interesting game of wits. The book will give you considerable help--but I have my magic."

"You're determined to--to kill me?" Tracy reached for his topcoat. "Why?"

"I told you. Revenge."

"Can't we bargain?"

"No," Meg said. "There's nothing you can offer me that would be any inducement. I'll stick around, and enlist a salamander or something to get rid of you."

"Suppose I put a bullet into you?" Tracy asked, taking his automatic from the coat. He leveled it. "You're flesh and blood. Well?"

The cat sat down, eyeing Tracy steadily. "Try it," Meg said.

For no sensible reason, the reporter felt curiously frightened. He lowered the gun.

"I rather wish," Meg said, "that you had tried to kill me."

"Oh, hell," Tracy grunted, and got up, the book in his hand. "I'm going to get another drink." Struck by a thought, he paused. "For all I know, you may still be a hallucination. A drunken one. In that case--" He grinned. "May I offer you a saucer of cream, Meg?"

"Thanks," said the cat appreciatively. "I'd like it."

Tracy, pouring the cream, grinned at his reflection in the kitchen window. "Toujours gai, all right," he soliloquized. "Maybe I should put rat poison in this. Oh, well."

Meg lapped the cream, keeping her eyes on Tracy, who was dividing his attention between his drink and the book. "I wonder about this," he said. "There doesn't seem to be anything magical about it. Do messages appear--like a clairvoyant's slate?"

The cat snorted delicately. "Things don't work that way," she said. "The book's got fifty pages. Well, you'll find an answer to every conceivable human problem on one of those pages."

Tracy frowned. "That's ridiculous."

"Is it? History repeats itself, and human beings live a life of cliches. Has it occurred to you, Tracy, that humanity's life pattern can be boiled down to a series of equations? Fifty of them, I think. You can find the lowest common denominator, if you go far enough, but that's far beyond human understanding. As I see it, the author of that book analyzed humanity's lives, boiled them down to the basic patterns, and expressed those equations as grammatical sentences. A mere matter of semantics," Meg finished.

"I don't think I get it. Wait a minute. Maybe I do.  $13ab - b = 13a$ . '13ab' stands for eggs: Don't count your chickens before they are hatched."

"Muddy reasoning, but you have the idea," Meg acknowledged. "Besides, you forgot the hen."

"Incubator," Tracy said absently, and brooded over the book. "You mean, then, that this has the answer to every known human problem. What about this: 'Werewolves can't climb oak trees'? How often does anybody meet a werewolf?"

"Symbolism is involved. And personal psychological associations. The third-but-last owner of that book, by the way, was a werewolf," Meg purred. "You'd be surprised how beautifully it all fits."

"Who wrote it?" Tracy asked.

The cat shrugged, a beautifully liquid gesture. "A mathematician, of course. I understand he developed the idea as a hobby."

"Satan?"

"Don't give yourself airs. Human beings aren't important. Earth isn't important, except to provide intellectual exercise to others. Still and all, this is a simple world, with too little of the uncertainty factor."

Tracy started to laugh. After a while he said, "I just realized I was sitting here discussing semantics with a cat."

But Meg had vanished.

Familiarity with an enemy destroys wariness, and no doubt the cat knew that well enough. Obviously Tracy should have been on guard. The fact that Meg had drunk his cream--the equivalent of bread and salt--meant nothing; cats are amoral familiars, by preference, immoral. The combination was perilous.

But Tracy, his mind slightly hazy with whiskey, clutched the book like a buckler and felt safe. He was thinking about formulas of logic. "Matter of deduction," he muttered. "I suppose the author made a lot of graphs and things and arrived at his conclusions that way. Tested them by induction. Whew." It was a dizzying thought.

Again he examined the book. The white circle on the cover was luminous again, and there was a number visible there. Tracy's stomach lurched.

Page 34.

He glanced around hastily, expecting anything; but the apartment seemed unchanged. Meg had not reappeared.

Page 34 said, "Canaries need oxygen."

Canaries?

Tracy remembered. A few days ago, a friend had given him an expensive roller canary, and he had not yet got rid of the creature. Its cage hung in a corner, covered with a white cloth. No sound proceeded from it.

Tracy went over and pulled the cover away. The canary was in trouble. It was lying on the bottom of the cage, kicking spasmodically, beak wide open.

Oxygen?

Tracy whistled under his breath and whirled to the windows, yanking them open one by one. The gusts of cold, fresh air made his head spin. He hadn't realized how drunk he was.

Whiskey, however, didn't account for the feeling of sick nausea in his

stomach. He watched the canary slowly revive, and chewed at his lip. The air in the room hadn't been depleted enough to kill a bird. This wasn't a coal mine.

A coal mine--gas--yeah! Tracy, grinning tightly, dropped to his knees beside the gas radiator. As he had expected, the cock was turned on full, and he could hear a soft hissing.

Meg didn't always depend on magic. And a cat's paws were handy little tools.

Tracy closed the valve and made a circuit of the apartment, finding another open radiator in the bedroom. He attended to that. The canary recovered and peeped feebly. Tracy threw the cover back over its cage and considered.

The book. The numerals on the cover had faded again.

He felt a resurgence of panic. Ten references were allowed him. He had used two. That left eight--only eight. And Meg was a resourceful familiar, hell bent on revenge.

There was a thought stirring at the back of Tracy's mind, but it refused to emerge. He relaxed and closed his eyes. After a while the thought came out of hiding.

In his hands he held a magical power whose potentialities were unlimited. The brown book had the answer to every human problem. If Napoleon had possessed it, or Luther, or Caesar--well! Life was a succession of problems. Men were handicapped by their inability to visualize the complete equation. So they made mistakes.

But this book, Tracy thought, told the right answer.

Ironic that its powers should be wasted. That was what the situation

amounted to. Ten references were allowed; after that, Meg would get her revenge, unhindered by the book's countermagic. What a waste!

Tracy rubbed his temples hard. A gold mine had been dumped in his lap, and he was trying to figure out a way of using it. Any time danger threatened, the book would give the solution, according to the equation of logic. Then the magic was, so to speak, passive.

Not quite. If Tracy faced financial ruin, that would certainly come under the classification of danger. Unless the meaning embraced only the danger of bodily harm. He hoped there were no such limitations.

On that assumption, if Tracy faced ruin, the book would give a page number that would save him. Would it simply point out a way of returning to his former financial status? No. Because that status had already been proved unsound and dangerous by the mere fact of its cancellation.

Casuistic reasoning, perhaps, but with clever manipulation, Tracy felt confident that he could play the cards close to his chest. He wanted money. Very well. He would place himself in a position where financial ruin was imminent, and the book would come to his rescue.

He hoped.

There were only eight page references left, and it would not do to waste them in making tests. Tracy skimmed through the book, wondering if he could apply the messages himself. It didn't seem probable. "Say no to everything," for example. In special circumstances, that was no doubt good advice. But who was to know when those circumstances would arise? Only the book, of course.

And--"An assassin awaits." Excellent advice! It would have been

invaluable to Caesar--to most of the Caesars, in fact. Knowing that a murderer was in ambush, it would be easy to take precautions. But one couldn't be on guard all the time.

The logic was perfect, as far as it went. But one element was ever lacking--the time-variable. Since that particular variable depended entirely on the life pattern of the book's owner, it was manifestly impossible for it to be any rational sort of a constant.

Meantime, there was Meg. Meg was murderously active, and determined on her vengeance. If Tracy used the book--could use the book--to get what he wanted personally, he'd use up the other eight chances and leave himself unguarded against attack. Fame and fortune mean little to a corpse.

A red glow came from the window. A small, lizard-like creature crawled into view. There were suction pads on its toes, like a gecko's, and a faint smell of charring paint came with it as it scuttled over the sill. It looked like red-hot metal.

Tracy looked at the book. It was unchanged. This wasn't a danger, then. But it might have been--if he hadn't turned off the gas. Introduce a blazing salamander into a gas-filled apartment, and--

Yeah.

Tracy picked up a siphon at his elbow and squirted soda at the salamander. Clouds of steam arose. The creature hissed and fled back the way it had come.

Very well. Eight chances were still left. Eight moves in which to outwit and destroy Meg. Less than that--as few as possible, in fact--if any chances were to be left. And it was necessary to leave a few, or Tracy's status in life would remain unchanged. Merely escaping from

danger wasn't enough. He wanted--

What?

He got pencil and paper and sat down to figure it out. Happiness was too vague--another variable, depending on the individual. Power? Women? Money? He had them all, in sufficient quantity. Security?

Security. That was a human constant. Security against the ominous shadows of the future. But one couldn't simply wish for security. The book didn't work that way. Abstractions were beyond its scope, seemingly.

What gave people security? Money was the first answer, yet that was not satisfactory. Tracy tried a new tack. Who was secure?

Paisanos, on the whole, were more contented than potentates. However, Tracy didn't want to be a paisano. What about Herrick, the publisher? Security? Well, no. Not when the world itself was unstable.

In the end Tracy decided nothing. Perhaps the best solution was to get himself into the worst spot possible, and leave the rest to the book. And, if the book failed him....

It might do just that. But Tracy was a gambler. What was the worst thing that could happen now?

The answer was obvious. The loss of the book!

A fire was laid ready in the grate. Tracy touched a match to a fold of newspaper, and watched the flames creep up till the hardwood was crackling. If he purposely rendered himself helpless, the book should logically reveal a panacea--a cure-all that would eliminate all his difficulties. It was worth trying.

Tracy grinned at his own cleverness.

He threw the book into the fire, face up. The flames licked up hungrily. Instantly two numerals appeared on the white oval.

43

The ultimate answer! The cure for the loss of the book!

Tracy plunged in his hand and snatched the volume out of the grate, amid a scattering of embers. The brown cover was slightly singed, but the pages were unharmed.

Breathing a little hoarsely, he crouched on his hams and turned to Page 43.

It said, with a certain touch of nad've malice:

"That's right."

Tracy got up, face expressionless. He picked up his empty highball glass and smashed it against the wall. That done, he went to the window and looked out unseeingly at the night.

Seven references were left.

Tracy slept well enough, untroubled by dreams, and with the book under his pillow. The next morning a cold shower and black coffee steadied him for the forthcoming ordeal. He had no illusions about what was going to happen. Meg had not given up.

It was late when he arrived at the Journal. Dusty sunlight slanted into the city room. Copy boys scuttled here and there with flimsies, and, all in all, it looked like a set for any motion picture involving

newspaper life. Rewrite men were busy rewriting, and glass-paneled partitions toward the back hinted at irate editors ready to send out star reporters on perilous assignments. Tim Hatton, a cameraman, was moodily shaking dice in a corner.

"Hiya, Sam," he said around a cigarette. "Roll you a couple."

MacGregor, a Denver man who had grown old in harness, lifted a bald head from his desk to leer at Tracy. "Tim Hatton has been going to movies," he said hoarsely. "Tim Hatton has been reading all about Charlie MacArthur and Ben Hecht. Man and boy, I've been writing copy all over the country, and not even with Bonfils have I known a guy more determined to be a newspaperman. Pretty soon he'll be telling you about his hangover, Tracy, and offering you a drink out of that pretty little silver flask on his hip. Ah, youth." MacGregor returned to his work and ate a lemon drop.

"Sourpuss," Hatton said, pink around the ears. "Why don't he quit riding me?"

"Go out and snap a murderer," MacGregor said. "Push right through a cordon of police--pardon, harness bulls, I mean--and go into the building where Public Enemy Number One is cornered. I wish motion pictures had never been invented. These so-and-so cubs who come in here, wet behind the ears, expecting to find Eddie Robinson behind the city desk."

Tracy was glancing through a still-damp copy of the Journal, wondering if Gwinn's body had been found yet. He said absently, "Them days have gone forever, Tim."

"So you say," Hatton grunted, and peered at his wrist watch. "I've got a date with Barney Donn in half an hour. Well?"

MacGregor said in a mechanical voice, "Barney Donn, Arnie Rothstein's successor, Chicago beer baron under Capone, served time on a Federal tax rap, biggest gambler in Florida, left Hialeah a week ago. What's he doing here?"

"That's my job to find out," Hatton said. "He's news."

Tracy put down the paper. "I'll go along. I used to know Barney." He didn't mention that once he'd blackmailed Donn for a couple of grand, and that he was vaguely worried about the gambler's appearance in Hollywood. Had Meg anything to do with this? Donn had a long memory. It might be wise to take the bull by the horns.

MacGregor crunched a lemon drop. "Remember Rothstein," he said sardonically. Hatton cursed him casually and picked up his camera.

"Ready, Sam?"

"Yeah." Tracy dropped the Journal. Nothing in it about Gwinn. He hesitated, wondering whether he should check up on the obit file, but decided not to risk it. He followed Hatton out of the office, past the reception clerk, and watched the cameraman settle a mangled hat on the back of his head. Smoke drifted lazily from Hatton's nostrils.

The office cat gave Tracy a start, but in a moment he saw that it wasn't Meg. But the creature gave him something to think about. He began to wonder what the familiar would try next.

He was at cross-purposes with Meg. Meg had little time, but lots of magic. Tracy had little magic, but it was to his advantage to play for time. Meg had said she wouldn't outlast Gwinn. How long would she last? Maybe she'd grow more and more tenuous, till she finally vanished completely.

Meanwhile, he had the book.

But he wasn't certain yet of the best way to use it. He kept it handy, just in case Barney Donn was in Meg's employ. The gambler had a reputation for squareness, but he was a decidedly tough customer.

The hotel clerk took their names and said to go right up. It was a big hotel, one of the best in Los Angeles. And Donn had taken a suite.

He greeted them at the door, a stocky, swarthy man with a broken nose and a broad, toothy grin. "Jeez, Sam Tracy," he said. "Who's the punk with you?"

"Hi, Barney. This is Tim Hatton. We're both on the Journal. And you can drop the colloquialisms. We'll give you the sort of write-up you want, anyway."

Donn chuckled. "Come on in. I got in the habit of using this lingo in Chi, and I can't break myself of it. I'm a Jekyll and Hyde. Come in, will you?"

Tracy wasn't as relieved as he might have been. As Hatton went on into the apartment, he lingered a bit behind, touching Donn's sleeve. The gambler opened wide brown eyes.

"What's up?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Vacation," Donn said. "And I want to do some gambling out here. I hear nice things about it."

"That's the only reason?"

"Yeah. I get it. You're thinking—" Donn chuckled again. "Look, Tracy. You put the squeeze on me once, but you won't do it again. I cleaned

up my record, see?"

"So have I," the reporter said ambiguously. "Matter of fact, I'm sorry I had to ask you for that dough, but--"

"Money!" Donn said, shrugging. "It ain't hard to make. If you're thinking I hold a grudge, the answer is no. Sure, I'd like to get that dough back from you--just to square accounts--but what the hell! I never killed anybody in my life."

And, with that comforting assurance, he led the way into the next room.

Two men were sitting at a table, local gambling big shots, and they were watching Hatton do card tricks. The photographer was enjoying himself immensely. His cigarette was on the verge of burning his lower lip, and he shuffled and flipped the cards with remarkable dexterity.

"See?" he said.

"How about a hand?" Donn asked Tracy. "We haven't played for years."

Tracy hesitated. "o.k. A hand or two. But I'm not sticking my neck out." He knew that Donn was an honest gambler, or he might have refused outright.

Liquor was on the table, and Donn poured and passed the glasses. "I played a little on the plane, but I want to make sure my luck's holding in California. I had a good streak at Hialeah.... Stud, eh?"

"Ante?" Hatton was beaming.

"Five hundred."

"Uh!"

"Make it a hundred to start, then," Donn grinned. "Can do?"

Hatton nodded and took out his wallet. Tracy did the same, flipping bills on the table and exchanging them for chips. The other two men silently drank whiskey and waited.

The first hand was mild, Donn winning the pot with a low straight, nothing wild. Hatton took the next hand, and Tracy the third, which was satisfyingly fat with blue chips. He said, "One more, and I check out."

"Aw--" That was Hatton.

"Stay if you like," Tracy told him. "It's a straight game, but Barney's got card sense."

"Always had," Donn said, shuffling. "Even as a kid. Stick around a while, Sam."

Tracy drew to a flush, and missed. Donn won. He raked in a few chips as the reporter stood up.

"That's all, Barney. Let's have the interview, and we'll push off. Or I will, if Hatton wants to stay."

"Stick around," Donn repeated, his glance meeting Tracy's.

"Sorry--"

"Look, Sam," Donn said argumentatively, "somehow I got a feeling you owe me some money. Now, why not be fair? I hear you're pretty well fixed these days. Don't be a piker, for Pete's sake."

"You--uh--insist?" Tracy's voice was strained.

Donn grinned. He nodded.

Tracy sat down again, chewing his lip. He scowled at the deck.

"Think it's cold?" Donn asked. "Want to deal?"

"You don't play with marked cards," Tracy admitted. "Oh, hell! Let's have some chips. What am I worrying about?" He emptied his wallet.

Fifteen minutes later he said, "Take a check?"

Half an hour later he was signing iou's.

The game was fast, hard, and dangerous. It was straight, too, but no less perilous for that. The laws of chance were consistently kicked in the pants. Some men have a talent for cards, a sixth sense which is partly memory and partly a keen understanding of psychology. Donn had that talent.

The pendulum swung back and forth. The ante went up. Gradually Tracy began to win again. He and Donn were the heavy winners, and at the end of an hour and a half, he and Hatton were the only ones left in the game, except, of course, Donn himself.

Once Tracy thought Donn was bluffing, and called, but he was wrong. Meantime the stakes mounted. At last Tracy got what he thought was a good hand, and raised on the strength of it.

Donn met and raised. Hatton did the same. Tracy considered his cards--and thrust a stack of blues into the center.

He wrote another check, bought more chips, and raised again. Hatton dropped out. Donn met and raised.

As Tracy pushed his last chips across the table, he realized that this cleaned out his bank account. Simultaneously he felt a curious warmth against his hip.

The book.

Was there another page reference on the cover? Tracy didn't know whether to be glad or sorry. He met Donn's eyes, brown and sparkling with excitement, and saw that the gambler was going to raise again.

He couldn't meet another raise.

He stood up abruptly. "Excuse me. Back in a minute," he said, and before Donn could protest, he headed for the bathroom. The door slammed shut behind him, and he jerked the book out of his pocket. The page number, black against luminous white, was 12.

And the message was: "He's bluffing."

"I'll be damned," Tracy said under his breath.

"That," a low voice remarked, "is inevitable, I'd say. But such perspicacity is rare--eh, Belphegor?"

"Bah!" was the hoarse reply. "Always talk. Action, I'd say--quick, hard, and bloody."

Tracy looked around and saw nothing unusual. He fumbled for the knob behind him, opened the door, and stepped back into the room where he had left Donn and the others.

Only, he saw as he turned, it wasn't the same room.

It was not, strictly speaking, a room at all. It was a three-dimensional surrealist landscape come to life. Overhead was empty gray sky, and a flat plain, curiously distorted as to perspective, stretched to a foreshortened horizon. Odd objects were here and there, inanimate, and with no sensible reason for their presence. Most of them were partially melted.

Three creatures sat in a row facing Tracy.

One was a lean man with huge feet and the head of a unicorn. One was a saturnine, naked giant with malformed horns and a lion's tail. One was--ugh! A sad face with a crown regarded Tracy ill-temperedly. From the bulbous body, with its twelve spider's legs, grew the head of a frog and the head of a cat--an unholy trinity, as it were.

Tracy turned around. The door through which he had come was still there, but it was just a door, standing unsupported, with no framework around it. Moreover, it seemed to be locked, as he found after a frantic tug at the knob.

"Quick, hard, and bloody," said the same hoarse voice, which came from the squinting, saturnine giant with the lion's tail. "Trust me for that."

"Crudity, always crudity," the anthropomorphic unicorn murmured, clasping its knee between its hands. "You're a relic of the dark ages, Belphegor."

"You're a jackass, Amduscias," said Belphegor. The three-headed spidery horror said nothing. It regarded Tracy unwinkingly.

"Look, human," Amduscias began, squinting along its horn, "devil to man, have you any preference?"

Tracy croaked inarticulately. He found his voice with some difficulty.

"P-preference? About what? Where-- How'd I get here?"

"Death hath a thousand something doors and they do open both ways," Amduscias quoted inaccurately.

"I'm not dead."

"No," said the demon rather reluctantly. "But you will be. You will be."

"Tooth, horn, and claw," Belphegor interjected.

"Where am I, then?"

"Oh, it's a hinterland," Amduscias said. "Bael made it specially for our rendezvous." He glanced at the silent three-headed creature.

"Meg sent us. You know Meg, don't you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I know her." Tracy licked his lips. He remembered the book, and lifted it with unsteady hands. The number on the cover was unchanged--12.

"Sit down," Amduscias invited. "We have time for a talk before you die."

"Talk," Belphegor growled, yanking viciously at his tail. "Pah! Fool!"

The unicorn head bobbed solemnly. "I am a philosopher. There's no need to keep staring at Bael, human. He may strike you as ugly, but I assure you we're a handsome group, as Hell's lords go. If it's Bael's plurality that troubles you, you should see Asmodee. Our Eurynome-- the progenitor of the bogeyman. Sit down and let's talk. It's been years since I spoke with a human being outside of Hell. And the ones in Hell can't carry on a lucid conversation," Amduscias went on

ruminatively. "I used to talk with Voltaire a great deal, but since around 1850 he's done nothing but laugh. Mad, quite mad," the demon finished.

Tracy couldn't keep his eyes off Bael. The petulant, melancholy human face regarded him fixedly. The toad face stared at the sky. The cat face looked at nothing. It wasn't Meg, though. That was something. Or was it? Tracy's nails dug into his palms.

"What do you want?"

"You speak specifically, I assume--of now." Amduscias hunched his shoulders. "Be still, Belphegor," he added irritably. "If you had your way, this human being would be in tattered shreds within seconds. And then what? Back to Hell for us."

"What's wrong with Hell?" Belphegor demanded, tugging at his tail, as though giving himself some eerie sort of spinal adjustment. "Too crude for your cultivated tastes?" He dug a reddish clot from under a toe claw.

"Exactly. I don't like this hinterland. Bael's got the damnedest ideas for scenery."

"Result of a tripartite mind, I suppose," Amduscias said. "Well, human, how do you prefer to be killed?"

"I don't," Tracy denied.

Belphegor grunted. "Stop fooling around. Meg told us to get rid of this human being. Let's get it over and go back home."

"W-wait a minute," Tracy interrupted then. "Can't we straighten this out somehow?" The feel of the book in his hand gave him an unreasonable confidence. "Meg's only a familiar. What right has she

got to tell you what to do?"

"Courtesies of the trade," Amduscias explained. "Now tell us how you'd prefer to be killed."

"If you had your way," Belphegor said bitterly, "you'd talk him to death."

The other rubbed his horn. "It's an intellectual amusement. I don't pretend to be another Scheherazade, but there are ways of driving human beings to insanity through--um--conversation. Yes, I vote for that method."

"My master, how you do run on!" Belphegor exclaimed. "All right, I vote for ripping him apart, cell by cell." His broad gray mouth twitched slightly.

Amduscias nodded and glanced at Bael. "How would you like to dispose of the human being?"

Bael said nothing, but began to crawl purposefully toward Tracy, who drew back. Amduscias waved a deprecatory hand.

"Very well. We're in disagreement. Shall we snatch the human being off to Hell and give him to Astoreth or Agaliarept? Or, perhaps, we could leave him here. There's no way out of this hinterland, except through Bael."

Tracy tried to speak, and discovered that his throat was dry. "Hold on," he croaked. "I--I've got something to say about this, haven't I?"

"Very little. Why?"

"Well, I've no intention of being eaten."

"Eaten! Why-- Oh!" Amduscias looked at Belphegor's bared fangs and laughed softly. "We've no intention of eating you, I can say definitely. Demons can't eat. There's catabolism, but no metabolism. I wish human beings took a broader outlook toward the universe," he finished, with a little shrug.

"I wish supernatural beings wouldn't talk so damn much," Tracy said, with a flash of irritation. "If you're going to kill me, go ahead and do it. I'm sick of this, anyway."

Amduscias shook his head. "We can't decide on how to dispose of you, so I suppose--eh?--we'll just leave you here. After a while you'll starve. That all right, Belphegor? Bael?"

It seemed to be all right. Belphegor and Bael vanished. Amduscias stood up, stretching. "I'll say good-by," he remarked. "No use your trying to escape. That door's locked for good. You can't get out through it. Farewell." He disappeared.

Tracy waited for a while, but nothing further happened. He looked down at the book. It still said Page 12.

"He's bluffing." About what? Who? Amduscias?

The door?

Tracy tried it again, but could not stir the knob, which seemed to have frozen motionless. He shoved the book back into his pocket and considered. What next?

It was utterly silent. The ambiguous melting objects here and there on the plain did not move. Tracy walked toward the nearest and examined it. He could make nothing of the blobby outline.

The horizon.

He had a feeling that he was in the Looking Glass garden, and that if he walked far enough, he would suddenly find himself back where he had started. Shading his eyes under his palm, Tracy swept the unearthly landscape with a searching stare.

Nothing.

He was in danger, or else the book wouldn't have a page number on its cover. Again he referred to Page 12. Somebody was still bluffing. Amduscias, apparently. But bluffing about what?

Why, Tracy wondered, hadn't the demons killed him? Their tactics reminded him of a war of nerves. They had wanted to destroy him—at least, Belphegor and Bael had; there was no doubt about that. Yet they had refrained.

Maybe they couldn't kill him. They had taken the next best course, imprisoned him in this--this hinterland. What had Amduscias said at parting? "No use your trying to escape. That door's locked for good."

Was Amduscias bluffing?

The door loomed surrealistically in the distance. Tracy hurried back toward it and tried it again. The knob didn't move. He took out his pocketknife and tried to unscrew the lock, but couldn't. He succeeded only in breaking a blade. Some sort of stasis held the entire lock frozen motionless.

He kicked the door, but it was solid as iron. Meanwhile, the book still said Page 12. And the book was never wrong.

There had to be some way out. Tracy stood glaring at the door. He had walked out of the bathroom into this alien world. If he could only reopen the door, he could walk right back into that hotel bathroom.

Or--

"Oh, hell," Tracy said, and walked around to the other side of the door, turned the knob easily enough, and stepped back into the room where Barney Donn, Tim Hatton, and the two other men were sitting around a table, cards in their hands.

Donn nodded. "You weren't long," he said. "Ready to call me now?"

Tracy hurriedly closed the door behind him. The book had not failed him, then. There were obviously two sides to every problem--and the demons had not expected Tracy to think of the logical solution. Or, rather, the illogical one.

His experiences in the hinterland had not been measured by earthly time, either. Apparently he had left the room for only a minute or so. At least, the chips were in the pot, and Donn was holding his cards close to his chest, grinning encouragingly.

"Come on," he said impatiently. "Let's get going."

Tracy still held the book in one hand, and a glance at it, as he slid the volume in his pocket, told him that Page 12 was still trumps. He took a deep breath and sat down opposite Donn. Hell, he'd play the game to the limit now. He had no doubt at all but that Barney Donn, like Amduscias, was bluffing.

"I'm raising," he said. "But you'll have to take a check."

"Sure," Donn nodded. His eyes widened at sight of the amount. "Wait a minute, Tracy. This game's for cash. Checks are o.k.--if you've got the money to cover them."

"I've got it," Tracy lied. "I'm in the chips, Barney. Didn't I tell you?"

"Hm-m-m. It'll be unfortunate if you can't pay."

Tracy said, "The hell with it," and took more of the blue chips. Hatton's eyes widened. This was big money.

Donn raised.

Tracy did the same.

Donn said, "Mind taking my iou?"

"Not a bit."

The stakes mounted till Hatton got dizzy. In the end, Tracy called and Donn laid down. The reporter had two kings and three queens. Donn had a royal flush--almost. He had drawn to fill the flush, but hadn't made it.

He had been bluffing.

Tracy said, "You're lucky at stud, Barney, but I guess draw poker's my game."

Donn grinned. "I like excitement. Give me a pen, somebody." He wrote a check. "Money's easy for me to make. So I figure I have to pay out to make it come in. Here you are, Sam."

"Thanks." Tracy took the check and collected his own scrip. He shook hands with Donn and led the dazed Hatton from the room.

In the lobby the photographer woke up sufficiently to say, "Hey! I forgot to snap the pictures."

"Let it wait," Tracy advised. "I want to get to the bank before it closes."

"Yeah. I should think so. How much did you take Donn for?"

"Not quite enough," Tracy said, scowling. The check was in five figures, but what the hell! Five figures, with the magic book in his possession, were peanuts. He had muffed a chance by aiming too low. And now there were only six chances left.

Maybe only five! Those two crises might have counted individually. Damn again. If he used up all his chances, and Meg still survived, it would be just too bad. Somehow, he had to get rid of the familiar. But how?

How could he maneuver her into a situation where the book would tell him how to destroy Meg? The enchanted volume told him only how to protect himself.

Ergo--a situation where only Meg's destruction would save his own life. That was what was needed.

"Just like that," Tracy grunted, his long strides carrying him toward the bank. Halfway there he changed his mind and hailed a taxi. "Sorry, Hatton. I thought of something important. See you later."

"Sure." The photographer stood on the curb, looking after the cab. "What a man! Maybe he don't care about money--I dunno. I only wish I had my pink little paws on some of that dough!"

Tracy went to his broker's office, asked astute questions, and watched the ticker. He was playing for high stakes, and was willing, now, to take somewhat more than a gambler's risk. He put his entire fortune on agm Consolidated, though he had to argue briefly with the broker.

"Mr. Tracy! agm? It's-- Look! Four points while we've been talking.

The bottom's dropping out of it."

"Buy it, please. All you can. On margin."

"Margin? Mr. Tracy-- Look, have you got some inside tip?"

"Buy it, please."

"But--look at that ticker!"

"Go ahead and buy it."

"Well, all right. It's your funeral."

"Right," Tracy said, with every appearance of satisfaction. "It's my funeral. Looks like I'll be flat broke in a day or so."

"I'll be asking you for more margin by morning."

Tracy retired and watched agm drop steadily. It was, as he well knew, one of the most worthless stocks in existence, and the bottom had dropped out of it only a day or so after the company's formation. He was on a toboggan rushing rapidly down to pauperism.

He took the book from his pocket and stared at it. There was a new numeral on the cover. That meant a new crisis, which he himself had precipitated. Swell!

Page 2 said: "A fortune in oil lies beneath your feet."

Tracy's eyes widened. He looked down at the deep-napped claret carpet. Five stories down with the substrata of Los Angeles, oil? Here?

Impossible. In the Kettleman Hills, out at San Pedro--anywhere but in

the heart of downtown Los Angeles. There couldn't be oil in this ground. If, by any fantastic chance, there was, it was manifestly useless to Tracy. He couldn't buy the land and sink a well.

But the book said, "A fortune in oil lies beneath your feet."

Tracy stood up hesitantly. He nodded at the broker and went out to the elevator. A small bribe enabled him to visit the basement, which was of no help whatsoever. The janitor, in answer to guarded questions, said that the Hill Street subway ran under the building.

Tracy came out and stood in the lobby, chewing his lip, conscious that his money was rapidly being dissipated in the worthless agm Consolidated. The book couldn't be wrong. It gave the answer to every human problem.

His eyes fell on the building directory. His broker's office was 501.

"Beneath your feet." Oh--oh! The book might be very literal indeed. What was in Office 401?

A photographic supply company--but 301 gave the right answer. Pan-Argyle Oil, Ltd.

Tracy paused long enough to check 201 and 101, but his original guess had been accurate. He didn't wait for the elevator. He ran up the stairs and burst gasping into the broker's office.

"Mr. Tracy!" the man greeted him. "I'm still buying, but this is crazy. You'd better get out while the getting's good."

"I will--but tell me just one thing. Is Pan-Argyle Oil on the board?"

"Uh--yes. Nothing bid, three asked. But that's as bad as agm. Pan-Argyle's a cheap wildcat outfit--"

"Never mind," Tracy snapped. "Sell agm and buy all the Pan-Argyle you can get your hands on. Margin!"

The broker threw up his hands and reached for the telephone. Tracy examined the book. The numeral was gone.

And that left four chances. Maybe five--five at most. He'd play safe. Say, four chances to outwit Meg and get rid of her permanently. Then--if this oil deal worked out as he expected--he could sit back and relax.

He headed for a bar and toasted himself silently. Then he toasted the book. A handy little volume! If Napoleon had possessed it, there'd never have been a Waterloo--provided the chances had been used wisely. The point was, apparently, to play for big stakes.

Tracy grinned. The next step--Meg. As for security, what was he worrying about? With sufficient money, he'd have security enough. As much as any man could. The powers of the book were limited, obviously; they couldn't change a man into a god. Only the gods were completely happy--if, indeed, they were.

But a fortune would be enough. Perhaps he'd go to South America--Buenos Aires, or Rio. Travel was restricted, in these days. Necessarily. Just the same, he could enjoy himself there, and there would be no difficulty with the law, in case his blackmailing proclivities were ever raked up. Extradition is difficult when a man has enough money.

A shadow flashed past his eyes, and he turned in time to see the tail of a cat vanish out the door. He caught his breath and grinned. Nerves.

But, unmistakably, the warmth of the book made itself felt against his

side.

Very slowly Tracy took it out.

Page 44.

"Poison?"

Tracy looked thoughtfully at the whiskey sour before him. He beckoned to the bartender.

"Yes, sir?"

"Was there a cat in here a minute ago?"

"A cat? I didn't see any--no, sir."

A little man sitting near Tracy turned his head. "I saw it. It came over and jumped up on the bar. Sniffed at your drink, but it didn't touch it. Guess cats don't like whiskey." He giggled.

"What sort of cat was it?" Tracy asked.

The little man looked at him oddly. "Ordinary sort of cat. Big fella. White feet, looked like. What of it?"

"Nothing." Tracy turned back to his drink and sniffed it. There was an unmistakable bitter-almonds odor. Prussic acid, the conventional poison.

Tracy left the bar, his face rather white. Three chances. Perhaps he had miscalculated, after all. But ten, in the beginning, had seemed an abundance.

There was no sign of Meg.

He didn't bother to go back to the Journal, though he phoned to get a report on Pan-Argyle. He was not surprised to learn that a new field had suddenly been brought in somewhere in Texas. It looked big, plenty big. He had got in just under the wire.

He phoned his broker, and the news was eminently satisfying. Buying on margin had its advantages. As a result, Tracy was already a rich man.

"It may peter out, though," the broker said. "Shall I hang on?"

"It won't peter out." Tracy's voice was confident. "Keep buying, if there's any stock left floating around."

"There isn't. But you've got almost a controlling share."

"Good." Tracy hung up and considered. He'd have to move fast now.

Three chances.

He cheered himself up by buying a car from an acquaintance who had been pressed for money lately; and presently was tooling the big sedan along Wilshire Boulevard, squinting against the sunset. The next step was to find Meg and maneuver himself into a very dangerous position, where only the familiar's destruction could save him.

Quite suddenly Tracy saw the way.

It would take two chances, but that would still leave one for emergencies. And it would get rid of Meg permanently.

He turned on La Brea and headed for Laurel Canyon. It was necessary to get in touch with the familiar. Under the circumstances, time counted. No more of the irreplaceable pages must be used up

now. Not until the final test.

Tracy grinned sardonically. He had had ten chances; the result was money. Well, the aphorism about spilt milk was consoling, after a fashion. He swung into Sunset, and thence to Laurel Canyon Road.

After that he went cautiously. He was hoping that Gwinn's body had not yet been discovered, and that he could get in contact with Meg at the magician's house. It was a slim chance, but he could think of no other.

Luck was with him. The house loomed dark and silent. Letters stuck out of the metal mailbox at the curb. The rising wind caught one and fluttered it away into the twilight.

Instinctively Tracy's eyes sought the cat, but it was nowhere in evidence. He parked the sedan in the roadway behind the house, hidden by dwarf trees and underbrush. Then he went back and climbed the steps, his heart beating faster than normal.

The door was closed but unlocked. He pushed it open and entered.

The room was slightly changed. A pentagram was traced on the floor, and the remnants of several oil lamps were broken shards. Oil had soaked into the carpet, and the smell was strong in Tracy's nostrils. The body of Gwinn sat motionless behind the table.

"Meg!" Tracy said softly.

The cat came out of the shadows, green eyes gleaming.

"Yes?"

"I--I wanted to talk to you."

Meg sat down, waving her tail. "Talk away. But you have used seven pages of the book already, you know."

"Then Barney Donn and the demons counted separately."

"Yes. You have three pages left."

Tracy said, standing motionless in the twilight room, horribly conscious of Gwinn's corpse:

"Will you take a sporting chance?"

"Perhaps. What is it?"

"I'll gamble with you. My life as the stake. If I win, you--call it off. If I lose, I'll destroy the book."

Meg waved her tail. "I'm no fool. If we gamble, and you're in danger, the book will help you."

"Then I won't use it," Tracy said, his voice a little unsteady. "Here's the proposition. We'll guess at a card's suit. Two guesses each. If I lose, I--I'll destroy the book. Only I make one stipulation."

"What?"

"I want twelve hours to set my affairs in order. Twelve hours from now, if I lose, I'll throw the book in the fire at my apartment and wait for you."

Meg looked at the man inscrutably. "And you won't use the book to help you win?"

"Right."

"I agree," the cat said. "You'll find cards on that shelf." It waved a white-mitted paw.

Tracy got the cards and shuffled them expertly. He spread them out on the carpet and looked at Meg. "Will you draw? Or shall I?"

"Draw," the familiar murmured. Tracy obeyed, but did not turn the card over. He laid it face down on the oil-soaked carpet.

"I choose--"

His side felt warm. Instinctively he drew out the book. On the front cover two numerals were black against the luminous white disk:

33

"Don't open it," Meg said, "or the deal's off."

For answer, Tracy placed the book at his side, unopened. His voice shaking, he whispered, "Hearts and spades."

"All right." The cat flipped the card over with a deft paw. It was the jack of clubs.

The numeral on the book's cover vanished abruptly.

Meg flicked out a lazy pink tongue. "Twelve hours, then, Tracy. I'll be waiting as patiently as possible."

"Yeah." Tracy was looking at the book on the floor beside him. "Twelve hours," he repeated softly. "Then I'll destroy--this and you'll kill me, I suppose."

"Yes," the cat said.

A new numeral appeared in the white oval: 9. Tracy said, "I'll be getting on," and picked up the book. He thumbed it idly.

Page 9 said, "Start a fire."

Tracy took out a cigarette and lit it. The flaming match he tossed down to the oil-soaked carpet. And--

Fire blazed up, reflecting crimson and green in Meg's eyes as she bounded up, hissing. The feline side was in the ascendant now. Tail erect, back arched, she leaped to the table, spitting and snarling.

Tracy jumped back to the door. The fire was spreading. He slid the book into his pocket and tossed the cigarette into a dark corner of the room. The red spark flashed out into flame.

"Like it, Meg?" he whispered above the increasing crackle and roar. "I don't think you do. Because it's the only thing that'll save my life--and I'm pretty sure that means your death."

The cat sprang to Gwinn's shoulder, glaring at Tracy. Its hissing became articulate. "Not my death--but you've won! My term on earth ends when my warlock's body is destroyed. I won't survive him."

"I remember. You told me that once before, but I didn't guess the right answer. Sorry, Meg!"

"My powers are waning already, or you'd die now. Yes, you've won. I'll see you in Hell."

"Not for a while," Tracy grinned, opening the door. The draft drew a gust of flames toward him, and he backed off hurriedly. "I still have one page in the book left, and that'll keep me alive for a while--especially with you out of the way, and a fortune at my finger tips. It's just a matter of logic, Meg. Every human action can be boiled down

to a basic equation"--he jumped back again--"and the only trick is to learn how to use the book. If Napoleon had owned it, he'd have conquered the world."

Fire was crawling toward the cat, yet she did not move from Gwinn's shoulder. She spat at Tracy. "Napoleon did own it," she snarled. Then the flames drove Tracy out of the house. Laughing quietly, he raced down the steps and around to where he had left his car. He had won--tricked both Meg and the book neatly by maneuvering himself into a position where only the familiar's death would save his own life. And there was still one page left.

A window crackled and broke. Fire poured out from it. Instantly the dry brush caught. Tracy stopped short, a dozen feet from his car. He gave back, realizing instantly that this way of escape was blocked.

It didn't matter. He was invulnerable, as long as he had the book--as long as there was one chance left. He turned and ran for the road, wind gusting coldly against his sweating cheeks.

It was, perhaps, a mile down to Laurel Canyon, where he could get a lift. But it was all downhill, and he was in good condition. Even though the wind was rising, he could make it easily. And, at worst, the book would save him.

So Tracy ran down the road, until, ten minutes later, he stopped at sight of a trail of flame rushing down a gully in his path.

He took the first branch that forked, and cut down into another canyon. It was past sunset now, but the hills had become crawling towers of scarlet light. A siren screamed in the distance.

Tracy went on. Once he took out the book and looked at it, but there were no numerals on the cover. He wasn't in serious danger yet.

A thought of panic struck cold into his mind. Perhaps he had, somehow, used up the ten chances! But no--that was impossible. He had kept careful count. When an emergency arose, the book would save him.

The increasing fury of the brush fire drove Tracy down the canyon, until at last he was halted by another comb of flames racing up toward him. He was--apparently--trapped. Standing hatless and panting, he jerked out the book again, and this time a tiny moan of relief escaped him. There was no mistake; the tenth chance lay in his hand, ready to solve his problem. Page 50.

Tracy opened the book to Page 50. It was easy to read the message, in the bloody light of the fire. It was rather horribly easy to read the message; its clarity had a touch of inhuman malice about it. Tracy understood then, of course, about Napoleon, and about what Gwinn had seen in the book before his death; and he also realized how the unknown author had managed to boil all human crises down to fifty patterns. Forty-nine of them covered forty-nine eventualities, and told the logical solution. The fiftieth covered everything else, and was equally logical.

The letters on the fire-reddened fiftieth page said:

The End

# The Voice of the Lobster

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Tilting his cigar at a safe angle Terence Lao-T'se Macduff applied a wary eye to the peephole in the curtain and searched the audience for trouble.

"A setup," he muttered under his breath. "Or is it? I have the inexplicable sensation of wet mice creeping slowly up and down my spine. What a pity I wasn't able to get that Lesser Vegan girl to front for me. Ah, well. Here I go."

He drew up his rotund form as the curtain slowly rose.

"Good evening to you all," he said jovially. "I am happy to see so many eager seekers after knowledge, from all parts of the Galaxy, gathered here tonight on this, Aldebaran's greenest world--"

Muffled noises rose from the audience, mingled with the musky odor of Aldebaranese and the scents of many other races and species. For it was Lottery Time on Aldebaran Tau and the famous celebration based on the counting of seeds in the first sphyghi fruit of the season had as usual drawn luck-worshippers from all over the Galaxy. There was even an Earthman, with shaggy red hair and a scowling face, who sat in the front row, glaring up at Macduff.

Uneasily evading that glare, Macduff went on with some haste.

"Ladies, gentlemen and Aldebaranese, I offer you my All-Purpose Radio-isotopic Hormone Rejuvenating Elixir, the priceless discovery which will give you the golden treasury of youth at a sum easily within

the reach of each and every--"

An ambiguous missile whizzed past Macduff's head. His trained ear screened out words in a dozen different interstellar tongues and realized that none of them implied approval.

The red-haired Earthman was bellowing, "The mon's a crook! Nae doot about it!" Macduff, automatically dodging an overripe fruit, looked pensively at him.

"Oh-oh," Macduff was thinking. "I wonder how he found out those cards were marked for black light?"

He held up his arms dramatically for silence, took a backward step and kicked the trigger on the trap door. Instantly he dropped out of sight. From the audience rose a tremendous bellow of balked fury.

Macduff, scuttling rapidly past discarded flats of scenery, heard feet thundering above him.

"There will be chlorophyll spilled tonight," he mused, sprinting. "That's the trouble with these Aldebaranese, they're still vegetables at heart. No sense of ethics, merely tropisms."

His racing feet tripped over a half-empty box of progesterone, a hormone necessary when a sucker, or customer, was fowl or mammal strain.

"Can't be the hormones," he pondered, kicking boxes out of his path. "It must have been the radio-isotope. I shall write a scorching letter to that Chicago outfit. Fly-by-nights, of course. I should have suspected the quality of their product at that price. Three months, forsooth! Why, it hasn't been a fortnight since I sold the first bottle--and it's taken this long to finish the payoffs and start hoping for a net profit."

This was serious. Tonight had been the first occasion on which he hoped to put the profits from All-Purpose Radio-isotopic Hormone Rejuvenating Elixir into his own pocket. Aldebaran officials had a greed which one didn't normally associate with vegetable ancestry. How was he going to get enough money to ensure his passage spaceward in a hurry if speed seemed indicated?

"Trouble, trouble," Macduff murmured, as he fled down a corridor, ducked out of the exit and foresightedly sent a tower of empty boxes crashing down, blocking the door. Screams of rage came from behind him.

"Sounds like Babel," he said, trotting. "That's the trouble with galactic travel. Too many overemotional races." Doubling and twisting along a planned course, he continued to mutter marginal comments, for Macduff generally moved in a haze of sotto voce remarks confidently addressed to himself, usually approving in nature.

After a time, deciding that he had put a safe distance between himself and justice, he slowed his pace, paused at a dingy hockshop and paid out a few coins from his paltry store. In return he was given a small battered suitcase, which contained everything necessary for a hurried departure--everything, that is, except the really vital factor. Macduff had no space ticket.

Had he anticipated the full extent of Aldebaranese rapacity and corruption he could perhaps have brought along more payoff funds. But he had wanted his arrival to coincide with the great sphyghi festival and time pressed. Still, there were ways. Captain Masterson of the Sutter owed him a favor and the Sutter was due to take off early next morning.

"Possibly," Macduff ruminated, trudging on, "something might be arranged. Let me see, now. Item One. There's Ao." Ao was the

Lesser Vegan girl whose remarkable semi-hypnotic powers would make her such an excellent front man, figuratively speaking.

"Borrowing ticket money won't solve Item One. If I succeed in getting Ao I'll have to deal with her guardian, Item Two."

Item Two represented an Algolian native named Ess Pu.[1] Macduff had taken pains to keep himself informed of Ess Pu's whereabouts and so knew that the Algolian was no doubt still involved in the same game of dice he had begun two days ago at the uv Lantern Dream-Mill, not far from the center of town. His opponent was probably still the Mayor of Aldebaran City.

"Moreover," Macduff reflected, "both Ess Pu and Ao have tickets on the Sutter. Very good. The answer is obvious. All I have to do is get in that dice game, win Ao and both tickets and shake the dust of this inferior planet from my feet."

Swinging the suitcase jauntily, he scuttled along by back alleys, conscious of a distant, mounting tumult, until he reached the door of the uv Lantern Dream-Mill, a low broad arch closed with leather curtains. On the threshold he paused to glance back, puzzled by the apparent riot that had broken out.

Submerged feelings of guilt, plus his natural self-esteem, made him wonder if he himself might be the cause of all that uproar. However, since he had only once roused the inhabitants of an entire planet against him,[2] he concluded vaguely that perhaps there was a fire.

So he pushed the curtains aside and entered the uv Lantern, looking around sharply to make certain Angus Ramsay wasn't present. Ramsay, as the reader will guess, was the red-haired gentleman last heard defaming Macduff in the theater.

"And, after all, he was the one who insisted on buying a bottle of the Elixir," Macduff mused. "Well, he isn't here. Ess Pu, however, is. In all fairness, I've given him every chance to sell me Ao. Now let him take the consequences."

Squaring his narrow shoulders (for it cannot be denied that Macduff was somewhat bottle-shaped in appearance) he moved through the crowd toward the back of the room, where Ess Pu crouched over a green-topped table with his companion, the Mayor of the city.

To a non-cosmopolitan observer it would have seemed that a lobster was playing pk dice with one of the local plant men. But Macduff was a cosmopolitan in the literal sense of the word. And from his first meeting with Ess Pu, some weeks ago, he had recognized a worthy and formidable opponent.

All Algolians are dangerous. They are noted for their feuds, furies and their inverted affective tone scale. "It's extraordinary," Macduff mused, looking pensively at Ess Pu. "They feel fine only when they're hating someone. The sensations of pleasure and pain are reversed. Algolians find the emotions of rage, hate and cruelty pro-survival. A lamentable state of affairs."

Ess Pu clanked a scaly elbow on the table and rattled the dice cup in the face of his cringing opponent. As everyone is familiar with Aldebaranese plant men, in view of their popular video films, the Mayor need not be described.

Macduff sank into a nearby chair and opened the suitcase on his lap, rummaging through its varied contents which included a deck of tarots, some engraved plutonium stock (worthless) and a number of sample bottles of hormones and isotopes.

There was also a small capsule of Lethean dust, that unpleasant

drug which affects the psychokinetic feedback mechanism. As an injury to the cerebellum causes purpose tremor, so Lethean dust causes pk tremor. Macduff felt that a reasonable amount of psychic oscillation in Ess Pu might prove profitable to Macduff. With this in mind, he watched the game intently.

The Algolian waved his stalked eyes over the table. Crinkled membranes around his mouth turned pale blue. The dice spun madly. They fell--seven. Ess Pu's membranes turned green. One of the dice quivered, strained, rolled over. The Algolian's claws clicked shut with satisfaction, the Mayor wrung his hands and Macduff, emitting cries of admiration, leaned forward to pat Ess Pu's sloping shoulder while he deftly emptied the unlidded capsule into the Algolian's drink.

"My lad," Macduff said raptly, "I have travelled the Galaxy from end to end and never before--"

"Tchah!" Ess Pu said sourly, pulling his winnings across the board. He added that he wouldn't sell Ao to Macduff now even if he could. "So get out!" he finished, snapping a claw contemptuously in Macduff's face.

"Why can't you sell Ao?" Macduff demanded. "Though sell, of course, is a misleading verb. What I mean--"

He understood the Algolian to say that Ao now belonged to the Mayor.

Macduff turned surprised eyes on this personage, who furtively evaded the look.

"I didn't recognize your Honor," he said. "So many non-humanoid species are hard to tell apart. But did I understand you to say you

sold her to the Mayor, Ess Pu? As I remember, Lesser Vegan Control merely leases its subjects to suitable guardians--"

"It was a transfer of guardianship," the Mayor said hastily, lying in his teeth.

"Get out," Ess Pu snarled. "You've got no use for Ao. She's an objet d'art."

"Your French is excellent, for a lobster," Macduff said with delicate tact. "And as for having a use for the lovely creature my scientific researches will shortly include the prognostication of mood responses in large groups. As we all know, Lesser Vegans have the curious ability to make people punch drunk. With a girl like Ao on the platform I could feel perfectly sure of my audience--"

A video screen burst in with a wild squawk. Everyone looked up sharply. Supplementary screens in infrared and uv, for the use of customers with specialized vision, hummed with invisibly duplicated pictures of an announcer's popeyed face.

"--Citizens'Purity Organization has just called a mass meeting--" The Mayor, looking frightened, started to get up and then thought better of it. There seemed to be something on his conscience.

Ess Pu told Macduff profanely to go away. He enlarged insultingly on the suggestion.

"Pah," Macduff said bravely, knowing himself more agile than the Algolian. "Drop dead."

Ess Pu's mouth membranes turned scarlet. Before he could speak, Macduff offered quickly to buy Ao's ticket, a proposition he had neither intention nor ability to fulfil.

"I haven't got her ticket!" Ess Pu roared. "She still has it! Now get out before I--" He strangled on his own fury, coughed and took a stiff drink. Ignoring Macduff, he threw a six and shoved a stack of chips to the center of the table. The Mayor, with nervous reluctance, glanced at the video screen and faded the bet. At that point the videos broke in with a squeal.

"--mobs marching on Administration! Aroused populace demands ousting of present officials, charging long-term corruption! This political pot was brought to a boil tonight by the exposure of an alleged swindler named Macduff--"

The Mayor of Aldebaran City jumped up and tried to run. One of Ess Pu's claws caught him by the coat tail. The video squawked on, giving an all-too-accurate description of the Radio-isotopic Elixir swindler and only the thick haze in the air kept Macduff from immediate exposure.

He hesitated uncertainly, reason telling him that something of interest was developing at the dice table while instinct urged him to run.

"I've got to get home!" the Mayor wailed. "Vital matters--"

"You're staking Ao?" the crustacean demanded, with a significant brandish of his claws. "You are, eh? Right? Then say so!"

"Yes," the harassed Mayor cried. "Oh, yes, yes, yes. Anything!"

"Six is my point," said Ess Pu, rattling the dice cup. His membranes became oddly mottled. He wriggled his eye stalks unnervingly. Macduff, remembering the Lethean dust, began to edge towards the door.

There was a bellow of surprised rage from the Alqolian as the

disobedient cubes turned up seven. Ess Pu clawed at his throat, snatched up his glass and peered suspiciously into it. The jig was up.

Roars of fury reverberated from wall to wall of the Dream-Mill as Macduff slipped out through the curtains and pattered rapidly off down the street in the cool musky dark of the Aldebaran night.

"Nevertheless, I still need a ticket," he reflected. "I also need Ao if possible. This leads me, by obvious degrees, to the Mayor's palace. Provided I'm not torn limb from limb in the meantime," he added, dodging into another alley to avoid the spreading torchlit mobs that were by now seething hither and thither through the aroused city.

"How ridiculous. At times like these I'm grateful for being born into a civilized race. There's no sun like Sol," he summed up, creeping hastily under a fence as a mob poured down the alley toward him.

Emerging on the other side and trotting down a lane, he reached the back door of a luxurious palace done in pink porphyry with ebony edgings and banged the knocker firmly against its plate. There was a soft, sliding noise and Macduff fixed a peremptory gaze upon the one-way Judas mirror in the door.

"Message from the Mayor," he announced in a brisk voice. "He's in trouble. He sent me to bring that Lesser Vegan girl to him immediately. It's a matter of life or death. Hurry!"

A gasp sounded from inside the door. Feet pattered away into inner distances. A moment later the door opened, revealing, the Mayor himself.

"Here!" cried that frantic official. "She's yours. Just take her away. I never saw her before in my life. Never saw Ess Pu. Never saw you.

Never saw anybody. Oh, these reform riots! One scrap of incriminating evidence and I'm lost, lost!"

Macduff, a little astonished at finding himself fortune's favorite, rose to the occasion capably.

"Depend on me," he told the unhappy vegetable as a slim and lovely being was pushed out of the door into his arms. "She'll leave Aldebaran Tau on the Sutter tomorrow at dawn. In fact, I'll take her aboard unmediately."

"Yes, yes, yes," the Mayor said, trying to close the door. Macduff's foot kept it ajar.

"She's got her space ticket?"

"Ticket? What ticket? Oh, that. Yes. In her wrist band. Oh, here they come! Look out!"

The terrified Mayor slammed the door. Macduff seized Ao's hand and sped with her into the shrubbery of a plaza. A moment later the tortuous mazes of Aldebaran City swallowed them up.

At the first convenient doorway Macduff paused and looked at Ao. She was worth looking at. She stood in the doorway, thinking of nothing at all. She didn't have to think of anything. She was too beautiful.

Nobody has ever yet succeeded in describing the beings of Lesser Vega and probably nobody ever will. Electronic calculators have broken down and had their mercury memory-units curdled trying to analyze that elusive quality which turns men into mush. Like all her race, however, Ao wasn't very bright. Macduff regarded her with entirely platonic greed.

For she was the perfect come-on. Probably some subtle emanation radiates from the brains of the Lesser Vegans which acts as a hypnotic. With Ao on the stage Macduff knew he could almost certainly have quelled his unruly audience an hour ago and averted the riot. Even the savage breast of Angus Ramsay might have been soothed by Ao's magical presence.

Curiously enough, male relationship with Ao was entirely platonic, with the natural exception of the males of Lesser Vega. Outside of this dim-brained species, however, it was enough for a beholder simply to look at Ao. And vision really had little to do with it, since standards of beauty are only species deep. Almost all living organisms respond similarly to the soft enchantment of the Lesser Vegans.

"There's dark work afoot, my dear," Macduff said, resuming their progress. "Why was the Mayor so eager to get rid of you? But there's no use asking you, of course. We'd better get aboard the Sutter. I feel certain I can get Captain Masterson to advance me the price of another ticket. If I'd thought of it I might have arranged a small loan with the Mayor--or even a large one," he added, recalling the mayor's obvious guilt reactions. "I seem to have missed a bet there."

Ao appeared to float delicately over a mud puddle. She was considering higher and lovelier things.

They were nearly at the spaceport by now and the sights and sounds Macduff heard from the far distance gave him an idea that the mob had set fire to the Mayor's porphyry palace. "However, he's merely a vegetable," Macduff told himself. "Still, my tender heart cannot help but--good heavens!"

He paused, aghast. The misty field of the spaceport lay ahead, the Sutter a fat ovoid blazing with light. There was a distant mutter of low

thunder as the ship warmed up. A seething crowd of passengers was massed around the gangplank.

"Bless my soul, they're taking off," Macduff said. "Outrageous! Without even notifying the passengers--or perhaps there was a video warning sent out. Yes, I suppose so. But this may be awkward. Captain Masterson will be in the control room with a do not disturb sign on the door. Take-offs are complicated affairs. How on Aldebaran Tau can we get aboard with only one ticket between us?"

The motors muttered sullenly. Haze blew like fat ghosts across the light-and-dark patterns of the tarmac. Macduff sprinted, dragging Ao, as thistledown, after him.

"I have a thought," he murmured. "Getting inside the ship is the first step. After that, of course, there'll be the regular passenger check but Captain Masterson will--hm-m."

He studied the purser who stood at the head of the gangplank, taking tickets, checking names off the list he held, his keen eyes watchful. Though the passengers seemed nervous they kept fair order, apparently reassured by the confident voice of a ship's officer, who stood behind the purser.

Into this scene burst Macduff at a wild run, dragging Ao and screaming at the top of his voice. "They're coming!" he shrieked, dashing through the crowd and overturning a bulky Saturnian. "It's another Boxer rebellion! One would think the Xerians had landed. They're all running around screaming, 'Aldebaran Tau for the Aldebarans'."

Towing Ao and flailing frantically with his suitcase, Macduff burst into the center of a group and disintegrated it. Instantly he dashed through the line at the gangplank and back again, squealing bloody

murder.

At the ship's port the officer was trying to make himself heard with little success. He was apparently stolidly sticking to his original lines, which had something to do with the fact that the Captain had been injured but there was no reason to be alarmed-- "Too late!" shrieked Macduff, bundling himself into the center of a growing nucleus of loud panic. "Hear what they're yelling? 'Kill the foreign devils!'--listen to the bloodthirsty savages. Too late, too late," he added at the top of his voice, scrambling through the mob with Ao. "Lock the doors! Man the gunports! Here they come!"

By now all thought of order had been lost. The passengers were demoralized into a veritable Light Brigade of assorted species and Macduff, clinging to Ao and his suitcase, rode the tide up the gangplank, over the prostrate bodies of the officer and the purser and into the ship, where he hastily assembled his various possessions and scrambled for cover. He fled down a passage, doubled and twisted, finally slowed to a rapid walk. He was alone, except for Ao, in the echoing corridor. From the far distance came annoyed curses.

"Useful thing, misdirection," Macduff murmured. "Only way to get aboard, however. What was that fool saying about the Captain's being injured? Nothing serious, I hope. I must hit him for a loan. Now where's your cabin, my dear? Ah, yes. Stateroom r and here it is. We'd better hide till we're in space. Hear that siren? That means take-off, which is useful since it delays the passenger check. Space nets, Ao!"

He yanked open the door to Stateroom r and urged Ao toward a spider-web filament of mesh that dangled like a hammock.

"Get in there and stay till I come back," he ordered. "I've got to find

another shock hammock."

The gossamer net attracted Ao as surf attracts a mermaid. She was instantly ensconced in it, her angelic face looking dreamily out of the softly tinted cloud. She gazed beyond Macduff, thinking of nothing.

"Very good," Macduff told himself, going out, shutting the door and crossing to Stateroom x, which luckily was unlocked and vacant, with a web dangling ready. "Now--"

"You!" said an all-too-familiar voice.

Macduff turned quickly on the threshold. Across the passage, looking at him from the door adjoining Ao's, was the ill-tempered crustacean.

"What a surprise," Macduff said cordially. "My old friend Ess Pu. Just the--ah, Algolian I wanted to--"

He was not permitted to finish. With a bellow in which the words "Lethean dust" could be indistinctly understood, Ess Pu charged forward, eyes waving. Macduff hastily closed the door and locked it. There was a crash and then someone began to claw viciously at the panel.

"Outrageous assault on a man's privacy," Macduff muttered.

The hammering on the door grew louder. It was drowned out by the ultrasonic, sonic and resonating warning of an immediate take-off.

The hammering stopped. The sound of clicking claws receded into the distance. Macduff dived for the shock net. Burrowing into its soft meshes he focused his mind on the hope that the awkward Algolian would be unable to make his hammock in time and that the acceleration would break every bone around his body.

Then the jets blazed, the Sutter rose from the troubled soil of Aldebaran Tau and Macduff really began to get into trouble.

It is perhaps time to deal, in some detail, with a matter which had already involved Macduff, though he didn't know it. Cryptic reference has been made to such apparently unrelated matters as sphyghi seeds and Xerians.

In the most expensive perfumeries of all, on the most luxurious worlds of all, there can be seen in tiny vials drams of a straw-colored fluid which carries the famous label of Sphyghi No. 60. This perfume of perfumes, which bears the same price whether sold in a plain glass phial or in a jewel-studded platinum flagon, is so costly that by comparison Cassandra, Patou's Joy or Martian Melee seem cheap.

Sphyghi is indigenous to Aldebaran Tau. Its seeds have been safeguarded so strictly that not even Aldebaran's great trade rival, Xeria, has ever managed, by hook, crook or even honest means, to get hold of a single seed.

For a long time it had commonly been known that Xerians would have bartered their souls, or soul, for some of the seed. In view of the Xerians' resemblance to termites there has always been some doubt as to whether an individual Xerian has a mind of his own and operates by free will or whether they are all ruled by a central common brain and determinism.

The trouble with sphyghi is that the growth cycle must be almost continuous. After the fruit is detached from the parent plant, its seeds become sterile in thirty hours.

Not a bad take-off, Macduff mused, crawling out of the shock hammock. It would be too much to hope that Ess Pu suffered at least a simple fracture of the carapace, he supposed.

He opened the door, waited until the opposite door leaped open to reveal the Algolian's watchful bulk and snapped back into Stateroom x with the agility of a frightened gazelle.

"Trapped like a rat," he muttered, beginning with a quick tour of the cabin. "Where is that intercom? Outrageous! Ah, here it is. Connect me with the Captain at once, please. Macduff is the name, Terence Lao-T'se Macduff. Captain Masterson? Let me congratulate you on your take-off. A magnificent job. I gathered you have had an accident, which I trust is not serious."

The intercom croaked hoarsely, caught its breath and said, "Macduff."

"A throat injury?" Macduff hazarded. "But to come to the point, Captain. You are harboring a homicidal maniac on the Sutter. That Algolian lobster has gone perfectly insane and is lurking outside my door--Stateroom x--ready to kill me if I come out. Kindly send down some armed guards."

The intercom made ambiguous sounds which Macduff took for assent.

"Thank you, Captain," he said cheerily. "There is only one other small matter. It became necessary for me to board the Sutter at the last moment and I found it inexpedient to obtain a ticket. Time pressed. Moreover, I have taken a Lesser Vegan girl under my protection, in order to save her from the dastardly machinations of Ess Pu and it would perhaps be wise to keep any knowledge of her presence in Stateroom r from that lobster."

He took a deep breath and leaned familiarly against the intercom. "Frightful things have been happening, Captain Masterson--I have been subjected to persecution by a bloodthirsty mob, an attempt to

swindle me at dice on Ess Pu's part, threats of violence from Angus Ramsay--"

"Ramsay?"

"You may have heard of him under that name, though it's probably an alias. The man was discharged in disgrace from the Space Service for smuggling opium, I believe--"

A knock came at the door. Macduff broke off to listen. "Quick work, Captain," he said. "I assume these are your guards?" There was an affirmative grunt and a click. "Au revoir," Macduff said cheerfully, and opened the door. Two uniformed members of the crew were standing outside, waiting. Across the corridor Ess Pu's door was ajar and the Algolian stood there, breathing hard.

"You're armed?" Macduff asked. "Prepare yourselves for a possible treacherous attack from that murderous crustacean behind you."

"Stateroom x," one of the men said. "Name, Macduff? Captain wants to see you."

"Naturally," Macduff said, pulling out a cigar and stepping dauntlessly into the corridor, making certain, however, that one of the crewmen was between him and Ess Pu. Nonchalantly clipping the cigar, he paused abruptly, his nostrils quivering.

"Let's go," one of the men said.

Macduff did not stir. From beyond the Algolian a breath of dim fragrance drifted like a murmur from paradise.

Macduff rapidly finished lighting his cigar. He puffed out great clouds of smoke as he hurriedly led the way down the corridor. "Come, come, my men," he admonished. "To the Captain. Important matters

are afoot."

"We wouldn't know," a crewman said, slipping in front while the other one fell in behind. Macduff allowed himself to be escorted into the officers' quarters, where he caught sight of himself in a reflecting bulkhead and blew out an approving smoke-cloud.

"Imposing," he murmured. "No giant, of course, but unquestionably imposing in my fashion. The slight rotundity around my middle merely indicates that I live well. Ah, Captain Masterson! Very good, my men, you may leave us now. That's right. Close the door as you go. Now, Captain--"

The man behind the desk lifted his gaze slowly. As all but the stupidest reader will have guessed, he was Angus Ramsay.

"Smuggling opium--aye!" said Angus Ramsay, exhibiting his teeth to the terrified Macduff. "Discharrged in disgrace--och! Ye nosty libelling scum, what am I going to do with ye?"

"Mutiny!" Macduff said wildly. "What have you done? Led the crew to mutiny and taken over the Sutter? I warn you, this crime will not go unpunished. Where's Captain Masterson?"

"Captain Masterson," said Ramsay, repressing his ire with a violent effort and losing the worst of his accent, "is in a hospital on Aldebaran Tau. Apparently the puir man got in the way of one of those raving mobs. The result is that I am captain of the Sutter. Offer me no cigars, ye dom scoundrel. I am interested in only one thing. Ye have nae ticket."

"You must have misunderstood me," Macduff said. "Naturally I had a ticket. I gave it to the purser when I came aboard. Those intercoms are notoriously unreliable."

"So is that dom Immortality Elixir of yours," Captain Ramsay pointed out. "So are some poker games, especially when the carrds are marked for black-light reading." The large hands closed significantly.

"Lay a finger on me at your peril," Macduff said, with faint bluster. "I have the rights of a citizen--"

"Oh, aye," Ramsay agreed. "But not the rights of a passenger on this ship. Therefore, ye wee blaggard, ye'll work your way to the next port, Xeria, and there ye'll be thrown off the Sutter bag and baggage."

"I'll buy a ticket," Macduff offered. "At the moment, I happen to be slightly embarrassed--"

"If I catch ye mingling with the passengers or engaging in any games of chance with anyone at all ye will find yourself in the brig," Captain Ramsay said firmly. "Black light, aye! Smuggling opium, is it? Aba!"

Macduff spoke wildly of a jury of his peers, at which Ramsay laughed mockingly.

"If I'd caught up with ye back on Aldebaran Tau," he said, "I'd have taken great pleasure in kicking yer podgy carcass halfway arrround the planet. Now I wull get a deal more satisfaction out of knowing ye are harrd at work in the Hot Gang. Aboard this ship ye will be honest if it kills ye. And if ye have in mind that Lesser Vegan girl I have checked up thoroughly and ye cannot possibly figure out a way to swipe her ticket."

"You can't part a guardian and ward like this! It's inhumanoid!" cried Macduff.

"Oot with ye, mon," Ramsay said irately, rising. "To work, for

probably the first time in yer misspent life."

"Wait," said Macduff. "You'll regret it if you don't listen to me. There's a crime being committed on this ship."

"Aye," Ramsay said, "and ye're committing it, ye stowaway. Oot!" He spoke into an intercom, the door opened and the two crew members stood waiting expectantly.

"No, no!" Macduff shrieked, seeing the yawning chasm of hard work widening inexorably at his very toes. "It's Ess Pu! The Algolian! He--"

"If ye swindled him as ye swindled me," Captain Ramsay began.

"He's a smuggler!" Macduff shrieked, struggling in the grip of the crewmen who were bearing him steadily toward the door. "He's smuggled sphyghi from Aldebaran Tau! I smelled the stuff, I tell you! You're carrying contraband, Captain Ramsay!"

"Wait," Ramsay ordered. "Put him down. Is this a trick?"

"I smelled it," Macduff insisted. "You know what growing sphyghi smells like. It's unmistakable. He must have the plants in his cabin."

"The plants?" Ramsay pondered. "Noo I wonder. Hm-m. All right, men. Invite Ess Pu to my cabin." He dropped back in his chair, studying Macduff.

Macduff rubbed his hands briskly together.

"Say no more, Captain Ramsay. You need not apologize for mistaken zeal. Having exposed this villainous Algolian, I shall break him down step by step till he confesses all. He will naturally be brigged, which will leave his cabin vacant. I leave it to your sense of fair play--"

"Tush," said Captain Ramsay. "Close yer trap." He scowled steadily at the door. After a while it opened to admit Ess Pu.

The Algolian lumbered ungracefully forward until he suddenly caught sight of Macduff. Instantly his mouth membranes began to flush. A clicking claw rose ominously.

"Now, now, mon!" Ramsay warned.

"Certainly," seconded Macduff. "Remember where you are, sir. All is discovered, Ess Pu. Facile lies will get you nowhere. Step by step Captain Ramsay and I have uncovered your plot. You are in the pay of the Xerians. A hired spy, you stole sphyghi seeds from Aldebaran Tau and that sphyghi is even now in your cabin, a silent accuser."

Ramsay looked thoughtfully at the Algolian.

"Weel?" he asked.

"Wait," said Macduff. "When Ess Pu realizes that all is known he will see the uselessness of silence. Let me go on." Since it was obviously impossible to stop Macduff, Captain Ramsay merely grunted and picked up the Handbook of Regulations on his desk. He began to study the thick volume doubtfully. Ess Pu twitched his claws.

"A feeble scheme from the beginning," Macduff said. "Even to me, a visitor on Aldebaran Tau, it became immediately evident that corruption was at work. Need we seek far for the answer? I think not. For we are even now heading straight for Xeria, a world which has tried frantically for years, by fair means and foul, to break the sphyghi monopoly. Very well."

He aimed a cigar accusingly at the Algolian.

"With Xerian money, Ess Pu," Macduff charged, "you came to Aldebaran Tau and bribed the highest officials, got hold of some sphyghi seeds and circumvented the usual customs search for contraband. You bought the Mayor's sealed okay by bribing him with Ao. You need not reply yet," Macduff added hastily since he had no intention of cutting short his hour of triumph.

Ess Pu made a revolting noise in his throat. "Lethean dust," he said, reminded of something. "Ah-h!" He made a sudden forward motion.

Macduff dodged hastily around the desk behind Ramsay. "Call your men," he suggested. "He's running amuck. Disarm him."

"Ye cannot disarm an Algolian without dismembering him," Captain Ramsay said rather absently, looking up from the Handbook of Regulations. "Ah--Ess Pu. Ye dinna deny this charge, I gather?"

"How can he deny it?" Macduff demanded. "The short-sighted scoundrel planted the sphyghi seeds in his cabin without even setting up an odor-denaturalizer. He deserves no mercy, the fool."

"Weel?" Ramsay asked, in an oddly doubtful manner.

Ess Pu shook his narrow shoulders, crashed his tail emphatically against the floor and spread his jaws in what might have been a grin.

"Sphyghi?" he asked. "Sure. So?"

"Convicted out of his own mouth," Macduff decided. "Nothing else is necessary. Brig him, Captain. We will share the reward, if any."

"No," Captain Ramsay said, putting down the Handbook decisively. "Ye have put yer foot in it again, Macduff. Ye are no expert in interstellar law. We are now beyond the limits of ionization and

therefore beyond the jurisdiction of Aldebaran Tau--with a guid deal of gibblegabble the lawyers put in. But the meaning is dear enough. It was the job of the Aldebaranese to keep that sphyghi from being smuggled awa'from them and since they failed, noo it is not my job to meddle. In fact, I canna. Against Regulations."

"That's it," Ess Pu said with complacent satisfaction.

Macduff gasped. "You condone smuggling, Captain Ramsay?"

"I'm covered," the Algolian said, making a coarse gesture toward Macduff.

"Aye," Ramsay said, "he's richt. Regulations make it perfectly clear. As far as I am concerned it makes no difference whether Ess Pu is keeping sphyghi or daffodils in his cabin--or a haggis," he added thoughtfully.

Ess Pu snorted and turned toward the door.

Macduff put a plaintive hand on the Captain's arm.

"But he threatened me. My life isn't safe around that Algolian. Just look at those claws."

"Aye," Ramsay said reluctantly. "Ye ken the penalty for murder, Ess Pu? Vurra good. I order ye not to murrder this nae doot deserving miscreant. I am bound to enforce Regulations, so dinna let me catch ye assaulting Macduff within earshot of me or any other officer. Ye ken?"

Ess Pu seemed to ken. He laughed hoarsely, ground a claw at Macduff and stalked out, swaying from side to side. The two crewmen were visible outside the door.

"Here," Captain Ramsay ordered. "I have a job for ye two. Take this stowaway doon to the Hot Gang and turn him over to the Chief."

"No, no!" squealed Macduff, retreating. "Don't you dare lay a finger on me! Put me down! Outrageous! I won't go down that ramp! Release me! Captain Ramsay, I demand-- Captain Ramsay!"

Days had passed, arbitrarily, of course, aboard the Sutter.

Ao lay curled in her shock hammock, thinking her own dim thoughts and looking at nothing. High up in the wall there was a puffing sound, a scuffle and a grunt. Behind the grille of the ventilating inlet appeared the face of Macduff.

"Ah, my little friend," he said kindly. "So there you are. Now they have me creeping down the ventilating tubes of this ship like a phagocyte."

He tested the meshed grille cautiously.

"Sealed, like all the others," he observed. "However, I assume you're being well treated, my dear." He glanced greedily at the covered lunch tray on a nearby table. Ao looked dreamily at nothing.

"I have sent a cable," Macduff announced from the wall. "I bartered some small treasured heirlooms I happened to have with me and raised enough cash to send a cable, by the press rate. Luckily I still have my press card." Macduff's vast collection of credentials very likely may have included a membership in the Little Men's Chowder and Marching Society, to choose the least likely example.

"Moreover, I have just received a reply. Now I must run a grave risk, my dear, a grave risk. Today the conditions of the ship's pool--a lottery, you know--will be announced in the grand lounge. I must be present, even at the risk of being briqqed by Captain Ramsay and

savaged by Ess Pu. It will not be easy. I may say I've been subjected to every indignity imaginable, my dear, except perhaps--outrageous!" he added, as a cord tied around his ankle tightened and drew him backward up the shaft.

His distant cries grew fainter. He announced in a fading voice that he had a bottle of 2, 4, 5-trichlorophenoxyacetic acid in his pocket and that broken glass was a safety hazard. So saying he departed into inaudibility. Since Ao had not really noticed that he was present she remained unaffected.

"Ah, well," Macduff philosophized as he flew down a corridor slightly ahead of the Atmospheric Inspector's hurtling toe-cap, "Justice is blind. This is my thanks for working overtime--at least three minutes overtime. But now I am off duty and free to set my plans in motion."

Five minutes later, having eluded the Inspector and smoothed his ruffled plumage somewhat, he made his way briskly toward the lounge.

"There's one point in my favor," he reflected. "Ess Pu apparently doesn't know Ao is aboard. The last time he chased me he was still speaking bitterly of my part in forcing him to leave her on Aldebaran Tau. Unhappily that's practically the only point in my favor. I must now mingle with the passengers in the grand lounge, while remaining undetected by Ess Pu, Captain Ramsay or any ship's officer. I wish I were a Cerean.[3] Ah, well."

As Macduff cautiously made his way toward the lounge his memory dwelt all too vividly on his recent progress from riches to rags. His meteoric descent from job to worse job had been little short of phenomenal.

"Would you set a cinematome to digging ditches?" he had inquired.

"Would you weigh elephants on a torquemeter?"

He was told to stop gabbling and pick up that shovel. Instantly he began to work out the most efficient application of the law of leverages. There was some delay while he extended his decimals to include the influencing factor of low-threshold radioactivity upon the alpha waves of the brain.

"Otherwise, anything can happen," he explained, demonstrating. There was a crash.

Macduff was then, by request, taken off the Hot Gang and put to work elsewhere. But, as he took pains to point out, his frame of reference did not include special skills in the block-processing of garbage for fuel, oiling of the symbiotic hemostatic adjustment mechanisms provided for the comfort of the passengers or testing refractive indices of liquid-coated bimetallic thermostats. He proved this empirically.

So he was--by request--removed to Hydroponics, where the incident of the radioactive carbon tracer occurred. He said it wasn't the carbon, it was the gammexene, and besides it wasn't really the gammexene so much as his inadvertent neglect to supplement the insecticide with meso-inositol.

But when thirty square feet of rhubarb plants began breathing out carbon monoxide as a result of sudden heredity changes brought on by the ganimexene Macduff was promptly sent down to the kitchens, where he introduced a growth hormone into the soup, with nearly catastrophic results.

At present he was an unvalued member of the staff of Atmospheric Controls, where he did the jobs nobody else wanted to do.

More and more he had become conscious of the odor of sphyghi pervading the ship. Nothing could disguise its distinctive fragrance, which seeped by osmosis through membranes, trickled along the surface of molecular films and very likely rode piggyback on careening quanta. As Macduff made his stealthy way toward the lounge he realized that the word sphyghi was on every tongue, just as he had anticipated.

He paused warily on the threshold of the lounge, which ran like a belt (or cravat) around the entire ship, so that in two directions the floor seemed to slope steeply, until you tried to walk up it. Then it felt like a squirrel cage, which compensated automatically to your own speed.

Here was luxury. Macduff's sybaritic soul yearned toward the tempting buffets of smorginbord, tipali and Gustators. Like a palace of ice an ornate perambulating bar swung slowly past on its monorail track. An orchestra was playing Starlit Days and Sunny Nights, an eminently suitable choice for a ship in space, and sphyghi fragrance sent its luxurious breath from wall to wall.

Macduff stood with unobtrusive dignity near the door for some minutes, regarding the crowd. He was waiting for the appearance of Captain Ramsay. Presently a buzz of interested comment began to arise and a throng of passengers converged down the salon's slopes. The Captain had arrived. Macduff melted into the crowd and vanished with the suddenness of a Boojum.

Ramsay stood at the bottom of a concave sectioned amphitheater, looking up at his audience with an unaccustomed smile on his seamed face. There was no trace of Macduff, though a repressed mutter of sotto voce comment came occasionally from behind a broad-beamed member of the Plutonian lepidoptera.

Captain Ramsay spoke.

"As ye probably ken," he said, "we are here to arrange about the ship's pool. Some of ye may not have travelled in space before, so the acting first mate wull explain how this is done. Mister French, please."

Mr. French, a serious young man, took the stage. He cleared his throat, hesitated and looked around as a brief burst of applause came from behind the Plutonian lepidoptera.

"Thank you," he said. "Eh--many of you may be familiar with the old-time ship's pool, in which passengers guessed the time of arrival in port. In space, of course, compensatory feed-back devices, effectors and subtractors control our ship so exactly that we know the Sutter will arrive in Xeria at exactly the posted time, which is--"

"Come, come, my man, get to the point," an unidentified voice put in from the audience. Captain Ramsay was observed to glance sharply toward the Plutonian.

"Eh--quite," said Mr. French. "Does anyone have a suggestion?"

"Guessing the date on a coin," a voice said eagerly, but it was drowned out by a chorus of cries mentioning the word sphyghi.

"Sphyghi?" Captain Ramsay asked with hypocritical blankness. "The perfume stuff, ye mean?"

There was laughter. A mousy Callistan got the floor.

"Captain Ramsay," he said. "How about running a sphyghi-seed lottery here, the way they do on Aldebaran Tau? The way it's done, I think, is by betting on how many seeds there are in the first sphyghi fruit of the crop. The number always varies. Sometimes there are a few hundred, sometimes a few thousand and there's no way of

counting them until the fruit's cut open. If Ess Pu could be induced to agree, perhaps--"

"Allow me," Captain Ramsay said. "I'll consult Ess Pu."

He did so, while the crustacean looked blackly around. At first he was obdurate. But finally, in return for a half-share in the pool, he was prevailed upon to cooperate. Only the glamor of sphyghi and the unparalleled chance to boast about this lottery for the rest of their lives led the passengers to put up with his inordinate greed. But presently all was arranged.

"Stewards wull pass among ye," Captain Ramsay said. "Write yer guess and yer name on these slips of paper and drop them in a box which wull be provided for the purpose. Aye, aye, Ess Pu. Ye wull be given a chance too if ye insist."

The Algolian insisted. He wasn't missing a bet. After long hesitation he put down a number, angrily scrawled the phonetic ideograph of his name and had turned to stalk away when something subtler than sphyghi fragrance began to breathe through the salon. Heads turned. Voices died away. Ess Pu, glancing around in surprise, found himself facing the door. His infuriated bellow reverberated from the ceiling for several seconds.

Ao, standing on the threshold, paid no attention. Her lovely eyes gazed into the far distances. Concentric circles of magic drifted dreamily out from her. Already she was increasing the affective tone of all living organisms within the lounge, and Ess Pu was not excluded. However, as has already been disclosed, when an Algolian feels good his rage knows no bounds. Ao didn't care.

"Mine!" Ess Pu mouthed, swinging toward the Captain. "The girl--mine!"

"Get ye claws awa'from my face, mon," Captain Ramsay said with dignity. "If ye wull join me in this quiet corner perhaps ye can state yer case in a more courteous fashion. Noo, what is it?"

Ess Pu demanded Ao. He took out a certificate which, appeared to state that he had travelled to Aldebaran Tau with Ao as her guardian. Ramsay fingered his jaw undecidedly. Meanwhile there was a scuffle among the thronging passengers who were pressing folded slips of paper upon the stewards. The breathless, rotund figure of Macduff burst out of the crowd just in time to snatch Ao from Ess Pu's possessively descending claws.

"Back, lobster!" he ordered threateningly. "Lay a claw on that girl at your peril." Towing her, he dodged behind the Captain as Ess Pu lunged.

"I thought so," Ramsay said, lifting a cautioning finger at Ess Pu. "Were ye no specifically forbidden to mingle with the passengers, Macduff?"

"This is a matter of law enforcement," Macduff said. "Ao is my ward, not that criminal lobster's."

"Can ye prove it?" Ramsay inquired. "That certificate of his--"

Macduff tore the certificate from Ess Pu's grip, scanned it hastily, crumpled it into a ball and threw it on the floor.

"Nonsense!" he said scornfully, taking out a cablegram in an accusing manner. "Read this, Captain. As you will observe it is a cable from the Lesser Vegan Control Administration. It points out that Ao was illegally deported from Lesser Vega and that an Algolian is suspected of the crime."

"Eh?" Ramsay said. "One moment, Ess Pu." But the Algolian was already hastily clashing his way out of the salon. Ramsay scowled at the cablegram, looked up and beckoned to a Cephian double-brained attorney among the passengers. There was a brief colloquy, from which Ramsay came back shaking his head.

"Can't do much about this, Macduff," he said. "It isn't a gbi offence, unfortunately. I find I'm empowered only to turn Ao over to her rightful guardian and since she has none--"

"Your error, Captain," Macduff broke in. "You want her richt--I mean, her rightful guardian? You're looking at him. Here's the rest of that cablegram."

"What?" Captain Ramsay demanded.

"Exactly. Terence Lao-T'se Macduff. That's what it says. The Lesser Vegan Control Administration has accepted my offer to stand in loco parentis to Ao, pro tem."

"Vurra weel," Ramsay said reluctantly. "Ao's yer ward. Ye wull have to take that up with the Xerian authorities when ye arrive, for as sure as my name is Angus Ramsay ye'll gae head over basket doon the gangplank the minute we land on Xeria. Ye and Ess Pu can fight it oot there. In the meantime I dinna allow a crewman to mingle with my passengers. Go for-rard!"

"I demand the rights of a passenger," Macduff said excitedly, backing up a step or two. "The price of the ticket includes the pool and I demand--"

"Ye are no passenger. Ye're a dom insubordinate member of--"

"Ao's a passenger!" Macduff contended shrilly. "She's entitled to take part in the pool, isn't she? Well, then, a slip, please, Captain."

Ramsay growled under his breath. But finally he beckoned to the steward with the slotted box.

"Let Ao write her own guess," he insisted stubbornly.

"Nonsense," Macduff said. "Ao's my ward. I'll write it for her. Moreover, if by any miraculous chance she should happen to win the pool, it will be my duty to administer the dough in the best interests of her welfare, which obviously means buying us both tickets to Lesser Vega."

"Och, why quibble?" Ramsay said suddenly. "If ye're lucky enough to have a miracle happen, fair enough."

Macduff, concealing what he wrote, scribbled busily, folded the paper and pushed it through the slot. Ramsay took a permaseal from the steward and ran it across the box-top.

"Personally," Macduff said, watching him, "I feel slightly degraded by the atmosphere of the Sutter. What with condoning smuggling, shyster tactics and pure vicious gambling, I'm forced to the unsavory conclusion, Captain, that you're running a crime ship. Come, Ao, let us seek purer air."

Ao licked her thumb and thought of something very nice, perhaps the taste of her thumb. No one would ever know.

Time passed, both Bergsonian and Newtonian. On either scale it seemed probable that Macduff's time was running rapidly out.

"Who sups wi'Auld Cloutie should hae a long spoon," Captain Ramsay said to the acting first, on the day of the Sutter's scheduled arrival at Xeria. "The wonder is that Macduff has evaded Ess Pu's claws this long, the way he's been trying to get at those sphyrhi

plants. "What baffles me is what he hopes to accomplish by sneaking around the Algolian's cabin with sodium iodide counters and microwave spectrometers. Whatever he wrote down in the lottery box canna be changed. The box is in my safe."

"Suppose he finds a way to open the safe?" the acting first suggested.

"In addition to the time lock it is keyed to the alpha radiations of my own brain," Captain Ramsay pointed out. "He canna possibly--ah, talk of the devil, Mr. French, look who's coming."

The rotund yet agile form of Macduff came scuttling rapidly along the corridor, one jump ahead of the Algolian. Macduff was breathing hard. At sight of the two officers he dived behind them like a quail going to cover. Ess Pu, blind with fury, snapped his claws in the Captain's very face.

"Control yerself, mon!" Ramsay said sharply. The Algolian made a mindless gobbling sound and waved a paper wildly in the air.

"Man, indeed," Macduff said with some bitterness, from his position of precarious safety. "He's nothing but an acromegalic lobster. It's getting so any object can be classified as humanoid these days, the way they keep broadening the requirements. Letting in all the riff-raff of the Galaxy. Martians were the opening wedge. Now--the deluge. I can see the need for a certain amount of latitude, but we peril the dignity of true humanoids when we apply the proud name of Man to a lobster. Why, the creature isn't even a biped. In fact, there's a certain air of indecent exposure about where he wears his bones."

"Tush, mon, ye ken the word's a mere figure of speech. What is it, Ess Pu? What's this paper ye keep thrusting at me?"

The Algolian was understood to gibber that Macduff had dropped it while fleeing. He recommended that the Captain read it carefully.

"Later," Ramsay said, thrusting it in his pocket. "We're due to land on Xeria vurra soon, and I must be in the control room. Go for-rard, Macduff."

Macduff obeyed with surprising alacrity, at least until he was out of sight. Ess Pu, muttering thickly, followed. Only then did Ramsay pull the paper from his pocket. He studied it, snorted and handed it to the acting first. Macduff's neat handwriting covered one side of the page, as follows:

Problem: Find out how many seeds in the first ripe sphyghi fruit. How look inside a sealed fruit in which all seeds may not be formed yet? Ordinary vision useless.

First day: Attempted to introduce radio-tracer in sphyghi so I could count radioactivity day by day and work out useful graphs. Failed. Ess Pu installed booby trap, sign of low criminal mentality. No harm done.

Second day: Attempt to bribe Ess Pu with Immortality Elixir. Ess Pu outraged. Forgot Algolians regard adolescence as despicable. Small minds value size inordinately.

Third day: Tried to focus infrared on sphyghi, to pick up secondary radiations with acoustical interferometer. Failed. Experimented in long-distance color staining of sphyghi cells with light waves. Failed.

Fourth day: Attempts to introduce chloroform into Ess Pu's quarters failed also. Impossible to get near enough fruit to try analysis through positive ion emissions. Am beginning to suspect Ess Pu was responsible for Captain Masterson's hospitalization back on

Adebaran Tau. Probably crept up from behind in dark alley. All bullies are cowards. Note: try to turn Xerians against Ess Pu on arrival. How?

There the quasi-diary ended. Mr. French looked up quizzically.

"I had na realized Macduff was applying science so thoroughly," Ramsay remarked. "But this merely confirms what Ess Pu told me weeks ago. He said Macduff was constantly trying to get at the sphyghi. But he couldna and he canna and noo we must prepare for landing, Mr. French."

He hurried away, trailed by the acting first. The corridor lay empty and silent for a little while. Then an intercom high in the wall spoke.

"General announcement," it said. "Passengers and crew of the Sutter, your attention, please. Prepare for landing. Immediately afterwards, passengers will assemble in the grand lounge for the Xerian customs search. The results of the ship's pool will also be announced. Your attendance is compulsory. Thank you."

There was silence, a sound of heavy breathing and finally a new voice sounded. "That means you, Macduff," it said grimly. "Ye ken? Aye, ye'd better."

Four minutes later, the Sutter landed on Xeria.

Yanked protesting from his cabin, Macduff was dragged to the grand lounge, where everyone else had already assembled. A group of Xerian officials, repressing their joy with some difficulty, was also in evidence, making a rather perfunctory search of the passengers, while other Xerians went through the ship rapidly, testing for contraband.

But it was obvious that the contraband that excited them was the

sphyghi. A table had been set up in the middle of the big room and upon it, each plant in its own little earthenware pot, the sphyghi stood. Plump golden fruit dangled from the branches, the pink glow of ripeness flushing their downy surfaces. An odor of pure delight exhaled from the plants. Ess Pu stood guardian, occasionally exchanging words with a Xerian official, who had already affixed a medal[4] on the Algolian's carapace.

"Outrageous!" Macduff cried, struggling. "I merely needed another few minutes'work with a vitally important experiment I was--"

"Close your blabber-mouth," Captain Ramsay told him. "I shall take great pleasure in kicking you off the Sutter myself."

"Leaving me to the tender mercies of that lobster? He'll kill me! I appeal to our common humanoid--"

Captain Ramsay conferred briefly with the Xerian leader, who nodded.

"Quite right, Captain," he or it said pedantically. "Under our laws debtors work out their debts, mayhem is assessed by its results and the aggressor forced to pay full reparations. Homicide naturally always carries the death penalty. Why do you ask?"

"That applies even to Ess Pu?" the Captain persisted.

"Naturally," the Xerian said.

"Weel, then," Ramsay said significantly to Macduff.

"Weel, then what? He'll be so rich he won't--even mind paying reparations for the privilege of committing mayhem on my person. I bruise very easily."

"But he wullna kill ye," Ramsay said comfortingly. "And it will be a fine lesson to ye, Macduff."

"Then at least I intend to get in one good blow," said Macduff, seizing a stout Malacca cane from a nearby avian and giving Ess Pu a resounding smack across the carapace. The Algolian let out a steamwhistle shriek of fury and lunged forward while Macduff, brandishing the cane like a rapier, danced pudgily backward, threatening even as he retreated.

"Come on, you overgrown shore dinner," cried Macduff valiantly. "We'll have it out now, humanoid to lobster!"

"Lay on, Macduff!" shouted an erudite and enthusiastic Ganymedan.[5]

"Lay off!" bellowed Captain Ramsay, waving his officers to the rescue. But the Xerians were before them. They formed a quick barrier between the combatants and one of them twisted the cane from Macduff's reluctant grasp.

"If he has harmed you, Ess Pu, he will make reparations," the leader of the Xerians said. "Law is law. Are you injured?"

Despite Ess Pu's inarticulate gobbles, it was obvious that he was not. And the Xerian jurisprudence takes no notice of injured pride. Termites are humble by nature.

"Let's get this settled," Captain Ramsay said, annoyed at having his grand lounge turned into a shambles. "There are only three passengers disembarking here. Ao, Ess Pu and Macduff."

Macduff looked around for Ao, found her and, scuttling over, tried to hide behind her oblivious back.

"Ah, yes," the leading Xerian said. "Ess Pu has already explained the matter of the ship's pool. We will permit the lottery. However, certain conditions must be observed. No non-Xerian will be allowed to approach this table, and I will do the seed counting myself."

"That will be satisfactory," Ramsay said, picking up the sealed ballot box and retreating. "If ye'll cut open the ripest of the fruit and count the seeds I'll then open this box and announce the winner."

"Wait!" Macduff cried out but his voice was ignored. The leading Xerian had picked up a silver knife from the table, plucked the largest, ripest sphyghi fruit and cut it neatly in two. The halves rolled apart on the table--to reveal a perfectly empty hollow within the fruit.

The Xerian's shout of dismay echoed through the lounge. The silver knife flashed, chopping the fruit to fragments. But not a single seed glittered in the creamy pulp.

"What's happened?" Macduff demanded. "No seeds? Obviously a swindle. I never trusted Ess Pu. He's been gloating--"

"Silence," the Xerian said coldly. In a subdued quiet he used the silver knife again and again in an atmosphere of mounting tension.

"No seeds?" Captain Ramsay asked blankly as the last fruit fell open empty. The Xerian made no reply. He was toying with the silver knife and regarding Ess Pu.

The Algolian seemed as astounded as anyone else but as Macduff audibly remarked, it was hard to tell, with an Algolian. Captain Ramsay courageously broke the ominous silence by stepping forward to remind the Xerians that he was a representative of the gbi.

"Have no fear," the Xerian said coldly. "We have no jurisdiction in

your ship, Captain."

Macduff's voice rose in triumph.

"I never trusted that lobster from the start," he announced, strutting forward. "He merely took your money and made a deal for seedless sphyghi. He is obviously a criminal. His hasty exit from Aldebaran Tau, plus his known addiction to Lethean dust--"

At that point Ess Pu charged down upon Macduff, raging uncontrollably. At the last moment Macduff's rotund figure shot toward the open port and the thin Xerian sunlight outside. Ess Pu clattered after him, shrieking with fury, mouth membranes flaring crimson in his rage.

At the Xerian leader's quick command, the other Xerians hurried after Macduff. There were distant, cryptic noises from outside. Presently Macduff reappeared, panting and alone.

"Awkward creatures, Algolians," he said, nodding familiarly to the Xerian leader. "I see your men have--ah--detained Ess Pu."

"Yes," the Xerian said. "Outside, he is of course under our jurisdiction."

"The thought had occurred to me," Macduff murmured, drifting toward Ao.

"Noo wait a minute," Captain Ramsay said to the Xerians. "Ye have na--"

"We are not barbarians," the Xerian said with dignity. "We gave Ess Pu fifteen million Universal Credits to do a job for us and he has failed. Unless he can return the fifteen million, plus costs, he must work it out. The man-hour"--here Macduff was seen to wince--"the

man-hour on Xeria is the equivalent of one sixty-fifth of a credit."

"This is highly irregular," the Captain said. "However, it's out of my jurisdiction now. You, Macduff--stop looking so smug. You get off at Xeria too, remember. I advise ye to stay out of Ess Pu's way."

"I expect he'll be busy most of the time," Macduff said cheerfully. "I hate to remind a supposedly competent officer of his duties, but haven't you forgotten the slight matter of the ship's pool?"

"What?" Ramsay glanced blankly at the pulped fruit. "The pool's called off, of course."

"Nonsense," Macduff interrupted. "Let's have no evasions. One might suspect you of trying to avoid a payoff."

"Mon, ye're daft. How can there be a payoff? The lottery was based on guessing the seed count in a sphyghi fruit and it's perfectly obvious the sphyghi has no seeds. Vurra weel. If no one has any objections--"

"I object!" Macduff cried. "On behalf of my ward, I demand that every single guess be counted and tabulated."

"Be reasonable," Ramsay urged. "If ye're merely delaying the evil moment when I kick ye off the Sutter--"

"You've got to wind up the pool legally," Macduff insisted.

"Pah, shut yer clatterin'trap," Ramsay snapped sourly, picking up the sealed box and attaching a small gadget to it. "Just as ye like. But I am on to ye, Macduff. Noo, quiet please, everybody."

He closed his eyes and his lips moved in a soundless mumble. The box flew open, disgorging a clutter of folded papers. At Ramsay's

gesture a passenger stepped forward and began to open the slips, reading off names and guesses.

"So ye gain pairhaps five minutes'reprieve," Ramsay said under his breath to Macduff. "Then oot ye go after Ess Pu and let me say it is pairfectly obvious ye lured the Algolian out of the Sutter on purpose."

"Nonsense," Macduff said briskly. "Am I to blame if Ess Pu focused his ridiculous anti-social emotions on me?"

"Aye," Ramsay said. "Ye ken dom well ye are."

"Male Kor-ze-Kabloom, seven hundred fifty," called the passenger unfolding another slip. "Lorma Secundus, two thousand ninety-nine. Ao, per--"

There was a pause.

"Well?" Captain Ramsay prompted, collaring Macduff. "Well, mon?"

"Terence Lao-Tse Macduff--" the passenger continued and again halted.

"What is it? What number did he guess?" Ramsay demanded, pausing at the open port with one foot lifted ready to boot the surprisingly philosophical Macduff down the gangplank. "I asked ye a question! What number's on the slip?"

"Zero," the passenger said faintly.

"Exactly!" Macduff declared, wriggling free. "And now, Captain Ramsay, I'll thank you to hand over half the ship's pool to me, as Ao's guardian--less, of course, the price of our passage to Lesser Vega. As for Ess Pu's half of the take, send it to him with my compliments.

"Perhaps it will knock a few months off his sentence, which, if my figures are correct, come to nine hundred and forty-six Xerian years. A Macduff forgives even his enemies. Come, Ao, my dear. I must choose a suitable cabin."

So saying, Macduff lit a fresh cigar and sauntered slowly away, leaving Captain Ramsay staring straight ahead and moving his lips as though in slow prayer. The prayer became audible.

"Macduff," Ramsay called. "Macduff! How did ye do it?"

"I," said Macduff over his shoulder, "am a scientist."

The Lesser Vegan cabaret hummed with festivity. A pair of comedians exchanged quips and banter among the tables. At one table Ao sat between Macduff and Captain Ramsay.

"I am still waiting to hear how ye did it, Macduff," Ramsay said. "A bargain's a bargain, ye know. I put my name on yon application, didn't I?"

"I cannot but admit," Macduff said, "that your signature facilitated my getting Ao's guardianship, bless her heart. Some champagne, Ao?" But Ao made no response. She was exchanging glances, less blank than usual, with a young Lesser Vegan male at a nearby table.

"Come, noo," Ramsay insisted. "Remember I wull have to turn over my log at the end of the voyage. I must know what happened concerning yon sphyghi. Otherwise, d'ye think I'd hae gone oot on a limb and guaranteed yer tortuous character, even though I carefully added, 'to the best of my knowledge'? No. Ye wrote thot zero when I saw ye do it, long before the fruit ripened."

"Right," Macduff said blandly, sipping champagne. "It was a simple problem in misdirection. I suppose there's no harm in telling you how

I did it. Consider the circumstances. You were going to maroon me on Xeria, side by side with that lobster.

"Obviously I had to cut him down to my size by discrediting him with the Xerians. Winning the pool was an unexpected secondary development. Merely a stroke of well-deserved good luck, aided by applied scientific technique."

"Ye mean that stuff ye wrote down on the paper Ess Pu found--the gibble-gabble about interferometers and ion-analyzers? So ye did find some way to count the seeds--och, I'm wrong there, am I?"

"Naturally." Macduff twirled his glass and preened himself slightly. "I wrote that paper for Ess Pu's eyes. I had to keep him so busy protecting his sphyghi and chasing me that he never had a spare moment to think."

"I still dinna ken," Ramsay confessed. "Even if ye'd known the richt answer in advance, how could ye foresee the pool would be based on sphyghi?"

"Oh, that was the simplest thing of all. Consider the odds! What else could it be, with the Aldebaran Lottery fresh in every mind and the whole ship reeking of contraband sphyghi? If no one else had suggested it I was prepared to bring it up myself and--what's this? Go away! Get out!"

He was addressing himself to the two comedians, who had worked their way around to Macduff's table. Captain Ramsay glanced up in time to see them commence a new act.

The laugh-getting technique of insult has never basically changed all through the ages, and Galactic expansion has merely broadened and deepened its variety. Derision has naturally expanded to include

species as well as races.

The comedians, chattering insanely, began a fairly deft imitation of two apes searching each other for fleas. There was an outburst of laughter, not joined by those customers who had sprung from simian stock.

"Tush!" Ramsay said irately, pushing back his chair. "Ye dom impudent--"

Macduff lifted a placating palm. "Tut, tut, Captain. Strive for the objective viewpoint. Merely a matter of semantics, after all." He chuckled tolerantly. "Rise above such insularity, as I do, and enjoy the skill of these mummers in the abstract art of impersonation. I was about to explain why I had to keep Ess Pu distracted. I feared he might notice how fast the sphyghi were ripening."

"Pah," Ramsay said, but relapsed into his chair as the comedians moved on and began a new skit. "Weel, continue."

"Misdirection," Macduff said cheerfully. "Have you ever had a more incompetent crew member than I?"

"No," Ramsay said, considering. "Never in my--"

"Quite so. I was tossed like spindrift from task to task until I finally reached Atmospheric Controls, which was exactly where I wanted to be. Crawling down ventilating pipes has certain advantages. For example, it was the work of a moment to empty a phial of two-four-fivetrichlorophenoxyacetic acid"--he rolled the syllables lushly--"trichlorophenoxyacetic acid" into Ess Pu's ventilator. The stuff must have got into everything, including the sphyghi."

"Trichloro--what? Ye mean ye gimmicked the sphyghi before the pool?"

"Certainly. I told you the pool was a later by-product. My goal at first was simply to get Ess Pu in trouble on Xeria to save my own valuable person. Luckily I had a fair supply of various hormones with me. This particular one, as the merest child should know, bypasses the need for cross-pollination. Through a law of biology the results will always be seedless fruit. Ask any horticulturist. It's done all the time."

"Seedless fruit--" Ramsay said blankly. "Cross-pollin--och, aye! Weel, I'll be dommed."

A modest disclaimer was no doubt on Macduff's lips, but his eye was caught by the two comedians and he paused, cigar lifted, regarding them. The shorter of the two was now strutting in a wide circle, gesturing like one who smokes a cigar with great self-importance. His companion whooped wildly and beat him over the head.

"Tell me this, brother!" he cried in a shrill falsetto. "Who was that penguin I seen you with last night?"

"That wasn't no penguin," the strutter giggled happily. "That was a Venusian!" Simultaneously he gestured, and a spotlight sprang like a tent over Macduff's shrinking head.

"What! What? How dare you!" screamed the outraged Macduff, recovering his voice at last amid ripples of laughter. "Libellous defamation of--of--I've never been so insulted in my life!" A repressed snort came from the Captain. The ruffled Macduff glared around furiously, rose to his full height and seized Ao's hand.

"Ignore them," Ramsay suggested in an unsteady voice. "After all, ye canna deny ye're Venusian by species, Macduff, even though ye insist ye were hatched in Glasga'--Bornn, I mean. Aye, ye're Scots by

birth and humanoid by classification, are ye na? And no more a penguin than I'm a monkey."

But Macduff was already marching toward the door. Ao trailed obediently after, casting back angelic looks at the Lesser Vegan male.

"Outrageous!" said Macduff.

"Come back, man," Ramsay called, suppressing a wild whoop. "Remember the abstract art of impairsonation. 'Tis a mere matter of semantics--"

His voice went unheard. Macduff's back was an indignant ramrod. Towing Ao, his bottle-shaped figure stiff with dignity, Terence Lao-T'se Macduff vanished irrevocably into the Lesser Vegan night, muttering low.

For Macduff, as should be evident by now to the meanest intellect,[6] was not all he claimed to be.

"Tush," said Captain Ramsay, his face split by a grin, "that I should ha'seen the day! Waiter! A whusky-and-soda--no more of this nosty champagne. I am celebrating a red-letter occasion, a phenomenon of nature. D'ye ken this is probably the first time in Macduff's life that the unprincipled scoundrel has taken his departure without leaving some puir swindled sucker behind?"

"D'ye--eh? What's that? What bill, ye daft loon? Pah, it was Macduff who insisted I be his guest tonight. Och, I--ah--eh-- "Dom!"

#### Notes

[1] An approximation. The actual name is unspellable.

[2] As a result of having sold them the Earth.

[3] The inhabitants of Ceres were long supposed to be invisible. Lately it has been discovered that Ceres has no inhabitants.

[4] With suction cups, of course.

[5] (This is marked as a footnote, but my source text lacks the actual footnote itself. So instead, I'll use this space to note that this phrase has since at least the 1910s been "corrupted" to "Lead on, Macduff" in popular memory. It is a quote from Shakespeare's Macbeth, V viii.)

[6] By which we mean the reader who skipped all the science, elementary as it was, in this chronicle.

# Three Blind Mice

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I must have dozed. I woke up slowly, hearing a deep hollow thunder that pulsed a few times and was gone as I opened stiff eyelids. Then I knew what I had heard. It was a jet plane, perhaps searching for me, now that it was daylight again. Its high-speed camera would be working, recording the landscape below, and as soon as the jet returned to base, the film would be developed and scanned. The wreck of my plane would be spotted--if it showed on the film. But had the jet passed over this narrow canyon between the peaks? I didn't know.

I tried to move. It wasn't easy. I felt cold and sluggish. The silence closed in around me. I got stiffly to my knees and then upright. My breathing was the only sound.

I shouted, just to break the lonely silence.

I started to walk around to get my circulation going. I didn't want to; I wanted to lie down and sleep. My mind kept drifting off into blackness. Once I found that I was standing still, and the cold had crept through me.

I began walking again, and remembering. I couldn't run, but I could walk, and I'd better, or else I'd lie down and die. What had happened after Venner was killed? The next Key Life was Barton's, wasn't it? Barton and the Three Blind Mice. I thought about Barton, and I kept on walking in a circle, getting a little warmer, and then time began spinning backward, until I was Barton in Conestoga, not quite two hundred years ago, and at the same time I was myself, watching Barton.

That was the time when the paranoids first began to band together.

Under the helicopter, disturbed by the hurricane downblast, the lake was lashed to white foam. The curving dark shape of a bass leaped and vanished. A sailboat tacked and made toward the farther shore. In Barton's mind there flamed for an instant a ravening madness of hunger and then an intensity or pure ecstasy, as his thought probed down into the depths of the waters and made contact with some form of life in which there was instinct, but no reason--only the raging avidity of life-lust that, after fifteen years, was so familiar to him now. There had been no need for that purely automatic mental probing. In these calm American waters one found no sharks, no crocodiles, no poisonous sea snakes. It was habit alone, the trained alertness that had helped to make David Barton expert in his field, one of the few vocations available to the minority of telepathic Baldies. And after six months in Africa, what he wanted most of all was not--contact--but something to calm his psychic tension. In the jungle a Baldy can find a communion with nature that out-Thoreau's Thoreau, but at a cost. Beneath that pagan spirit of the primeval beats the urgent pulse of strong instinct: self-preservation almost without reason. Only in the paintings of Rousseau that had survived the Blowup had Barton felt the same vivid, almost insane passion for life. Where men are weary of green wine, And sick of crimson seas--

Well, he was back now, not far from his grandfather's birthplace near Chicago, and he could rest for a while.

His hands moved over the complicated controls, sending the copter smoothly up, as though by that action he could escape what was inescapable. You lived, for the most part, on the earth, and if you happened to be a telepath, well, there were of course advantages as well as disadvantages. Nobody lynched Baldies any more, of course. Fairly secure, almost accepted, in their cautious self-effacement--

italicized by the wigs they invariably wore--they could find jobs and a pattern for living. Specialized jobs, naturally, which must never involve too much power or profit. Jobs in which you turned your specialized talent to the betterment of the social unit. Barton was a naturalist, a collector of big and little game. And that had been his salvation.

Years ago, he remembered, there had been a conference, his parents, and a few other Baldies, drawn together by the deep, sympathetic friendliness and understanding that always had welded telepaths. He could still vividly recall the troubled patterns of thought that had ebbed and flowed in the room, more clearly than the way their faces had looked. Danger, and a shadow, and a desire to help.

... Outlet for his energy... no scholar... misfit unless--

--find the right job--

He could not remember the words, only the absolute meanings, with their significant colorations and shadings of implication, those and the--the name-symbol by which the others thought of him. To them he was not Dave Barton. Their thought-references to him personally, while different to each mind, had always the kernel of individual meaning that belonged to him alone, of all the people in the world. The name that a candle flame might have, secret and unuttered. His alone.

And because of this, and because each Baldy must survive and adjust, for the ultimate good of the racial mutation, they had found the answer. It was all right for non-Baldies to be reasonably swashbuckling; everyone wore daggers and duelled nowadays. But the telepaths themselves lived on borrowed time. They existed only because of the good will they had created. That good will had to be maintained, and it could not be done by arousing antagonism. No

one could be jealous of a mild-mannered, studious semantic expert, but a d'Artagnan could be envied--and would be. An outlet, then, for the boy's curiously mixed inheritance, his blood from pioneering, trail-blazing ancestors mixed with the cautious Baldy strain.

So they had found the answer, and Barton did his pioneering in the jungles, matching his keen mind against the brute savagery of tiger and python. Had that solution not been reached, Barton might not have been alive now. For the non-Baldies were still wary, still intolerant.

Yet he was no extrovert; he could not be. Inevitably he grew tired of the ceaseless symphony of thought that rolled like a living tide even in the deserts and the seas. Erecting a mental barrier wasn't enough; behind that protective wall beat the torrents of thought, and they were sensed. Only in the upper air was there escape for a while.

The plane lifted, rocking a little in the wind. Beneath Barton the lake was dime-sized and dime-colored. Around its borders grew, more thickly than it had fifty years before, the Limberlost forests, a swampy wilderness where the small roving bands of malcontents migrated constantly, unable to adjust to communal life in the hundreds of thousands of villages that dotted America, and afraid to unite. They were antisocial, and probably would simply die out eventually.

The lake became a pinpoint and vanished. A freighter copter, with its string of gliders, whipped westward below, laden perhaps with cod from the Great Banks towns, or with wine grapes from the New England vineyards. Names had not changed much as the country changed. The heritage of language was too strong for that. But there were no towns named New York, or Chicago, or San Francisco; there was a psychological taboo there, the familiar fugue that took the form of never naming one of the new, small, semi-specializing villages after the cancerous areas of desolation once called New

Orleans or Denver. From American history, therefore world history, the names came--Modoc and Lafitte, Lincoln, Roxy, Potomac, Mowhasset, American Gun, and Conestoga. Lafitte, on the Gulf of Mexico, shipped the delicate-fleshed porgie and pompano to Lincoln and Roxy, in the agricultural belt; American Gun turned out farm equipment, and Conestoga, from which Barton had just come, was in mining land. It also had a temperate-zone zoo, one of the many that Barton serviced from Puget to Florida End.

He closed his eyes. Baldies by necessity were socially conscious, and when the world lay spread out maplike below, it was difficult not to visualize it speckled with the heads of colored pins; very many black ones, and a very few white ones. Non-Baldies and Baldies. There was something to be said for intelligence, after all. In the jungle, a monkey with a red flannel coat would be torn to pieces by its undressed colleagues.

The blue, empty wastes of air were all about Barton now; the torrents of world-thought had lessened to a faint, nearly imperceptible beat. He closed the cabin, turned on air and heat controls, and let the copter rise. He lay back in the cushioned seat, a distant alertness ready to galvanize his hands into action if the copter should go into one of its unpredictable tantrums. Meanwhile he rested, alone, in a complete silence and vacancy.

His mind was washed clean. Pure calm, a sort of Nirvana, soothed him. Far below the turbulent world sent vibrations jangling through subetheric levels, but few radiations reached this height, and those did not disturb Barton. His eyes shut, utterly relaxed, he looked like someone who had, for a while, forgotten to live.

It was the panacea for abnormally sensitive minds. At first glance, few took Barton for a Baldy; he wore his brown wig close-cropped, and his years in the jungle had made him almost unhealthily thin.

Baldies, naturally self-barred from competitive athletics except among themselves, were apt to grow soft, but Barton was not soft. Outguessing predators had kept him in good trim. Now he relaxed, high above the earth, as hundreds of other Baldies were resting their taxed minds in the blue calm of the upper air.

Once he opened his eyes and looked up through the transparent ceiling panel. The sky was quite dark, and a few stars were visible. He lay there for a while, simply watching. Baldies, he thought, will be the first to develop interplanetary travel. Out there are clean new worlds, and a new race needs a new world.

But it could wait. It had taken a long time for Barton to realize that his race, not himself, was important. Not until that knowledge came to a Baldy was he really mature. Until then, he was always a possible potential danger. Now, though, Barton was oriented, and had found, like most Baldies, a compromise between self and race. And it involved, chiefly, development of the social instinct and diplomacy.

Several hours had gone past quickly. Barton found a packet of food concentrate in a compartment, grimaced at the brown capsules, and stuffed them back in their place. No. While he was back in America, he wanted the luxuries of civilization. In Africa he had eaten enough concentrate to blast his taste buds. That was because certain game was psychically repugnant to him, after contact with the animal minds. He was not a vegetarian; he could rationalize most of the feeling away, but--for example--he could certainly never eat monkey.

But he could eat catfish, and anticipated the crisp flakiness of white, firm flesh between his teeth. This was good cat country. There was a restaurant in downtown Conestoga that Barton knew, and he headed the helicopter toward the airfield nearest to it, circling the village itself to avoid raising dust storms by his low altitude.

He felt refreshed, ready to take his place in the world again. There were, as far as he knew, no Baldies living in Conestoga, and it was with surprise--pleasant surprise--that he felt a thought probe into his mind. It held question.

It was a woman's thought, and she did not know him. That he could tell by the superficialities of the identity-queries. It was like the outspread fingers of a hand reaching out gently in search of another hand that would interlock with its grip. But the searcher's cognizance of Barton as a personality was lacking. No, she did not know him. She knew of him, probably through--Denham? Courtney? He seemed to recognize the personality-keys of Denham and Courtney sifted through her query.

He answered her question. Available. Here. A courteous, friendly greeting, implying--you are one of Us; a willing desire to help.

Her name, Sue Connaught, with its curious shadings of how Sue Connaught realized her own identity--an indescribable key thought that could never afterwards be mistaken. The mental essence of pure ego.

She was a biologist, she lived in Alamo, she was afraid--

Let me help.

f' (Vital urgency Must see you) -f Danger, eyes watching secretly

└ (Beasts around--Sue Connaught Danger--now?)

The complicated thought meshed and interlocked as he increased his pace.

C ("I" of all the world knowing-- Utterly alone)

[^ (Beasts--"I" am in zoo, waiting

Hurrying to you; my mind is with yours; you are one of Us, therefore never alone. Faster than words, the thoughts raced. Oral or written sentences slow the transmission of mental concepts. Adjectives and adverbs convey shades of meaning. But between telepaths complete ideas move with light-speed. In prehuman times simple meanings were completely transmitted by grunts. As language developed, gradations were possible. With telepathy, a whole universe can be created and--conveyed.

Even so, common denominators are necessary. The girl was dodging some vital issues, afraid to visualize it.

What? Let me help!

C (Even here, danger of Them Wariness) J Pretend utterly all is normal {(Use oral speech until~

Her mind closed. Puzzled, Barton automatically raised his own barrier. It is not, of course, ever possible to shut one's mind completely away from the persistent probing of another telepath. At best one can only blur the thought wave by superimposing others upon it, or by submerging the salient ideas deep down in the formlessness of nought. But they are resilient things, thoughts. Not even the trained minds of Baldies can keep them submerged very long--the very fact of concentrating to keep them down maintains their wavering shapes cloudily in the background of the mind.

So a barrier can be raised, of willful obscurity or deliberate confusion--reciting the multiplication tables is one evasion--but not for very long or very efficiently. Only the instinctive politeness which a Baldy learns with his alphabet makes the raising of a barrier the

equivalent of blanking. A barrier's efficiency is mostly in the mind of the other man, not one's own--if he be a proper telepath.

Barton, like most Baldies, was. He "looked" away immediately as Sue Connaught's thoughts veered from contact with him. But he was the more eager to meet her now and read in her face, if he could, what convention forbade him to read in her mind. The gates of the zoo lay open before him.

Barton stepped through them, noticing a small crowd, mostly out-villagers who had helicoptered over to see the new acquisitions he had brought.

But, despite barriers, he could, as always, sense a Baldy here, and he let his instinct guide him to where a girl, slim in slacks and white blouse, was standing by a railed inclosure, held there by some fascination. He sent his thought forward, and it was met by a sudden, desperate warning.

Barrier! Barrier!

He reacted instantly. He stepped up beside her, looking beyond the railing, into the enormous tank where a torpedo body moved lazily. He knew that Sue Connaught had looked into the shark's mind, and had seen something there that held a tremendous significance to her.

"So you don't like it," he said. There was no danger in speech; to a telepath, with barrier raised, it was more secret than thought.

"No," she said. "I suppose it takes conditioning."

"But you're a biologist."

"Rabbits and guinea pigs. Even those make me blush sometimes."

But--carnivores."

"Tackle a weasel sometime," he suggested. "It's pure insanity. Come on." He led her out of the crowd, toward the terrace where canopied tables were scattered. "Have a cocktail?"

"Thanks." She glanced back at the shark's tank. Barton nodded; it could be bad, if one wasn't used to it. But he was used to it.

"Shall we go somewhere else?" he asked, pausing in the act of drawing out a chair for her. "A zoo can be pretty uncomfortable if you aren't--"

"No. It's safer here. We've got to talk, and we can do it pretty freely in a place like this. None of Us would come here for pleasure." With her mind she "glanced" around at the encircling madness of beast-thoughts, then blurred the surface of her mind again as a protection and smiled at Barton appealingly.

They had met, as all Baldies do, upon a footing of instant semi-intimacy. Nontelepaths may take weeks of friendship to establish a knowledge of one another's character; Baldies do it automatically at first contact, often before they meet at all. Often, indeed, the knowledge formed in first mental meeting is more accurate than later impressions colored by the appearance and physical mannerisms of the telepaths. As non-Baldies, these two would have been Miss Connaught and Mr. Barton for awhile. But as telepaths they had automatically, unconsciously summed one another up while Barton was still in the air; they knew they were mutually pleasant in a contact of minds. They thought of one another instantly as Sue and Dave. No non-Baldy, eavesdropping on their meeting, would have believed they were not old friends; it would have been artificial had the two behaved otherwise than this, once their minds had accepted each other.

Sue said aloud, "I'll have a Martini. Do you mind if I talk? It helps." And she glanced around, physically this time, at the cages. "I don't see how you stand it, even with your training. I should think you could drive a Baldie perfectly gibbering just by shutting him up in a zoo overnight."

Barton grinned, and automatically his mind began sorting out the vibrations from all around him: the casual trivialities from the monkeys, broken by a pattern of hysteria as a capuchin caught the scent of jaguar; the primal, implacable vibrations from the panthers and lions, with their undertone of sheer, proud confidence; the gentle, almost funny radiations from the seals. Not that they could be called reasoning thoughts; the brains were those of animals, but basically the same colloid organism existed under fur and scales as existed under the auburn wig of Sue Connaught.

After a while, over Martinis, she asked, "Have you ever fought a duel?"

Barton instinctively glanced around. He touched the small dagger at his belt. "I'm a Baldy, Sue."

"So you haven't."

"Naturally not." He didn't trouble to explain; she knew the reason as well as he did. For Baldies could not risk capitalizing on their special ability except in very limited cases. A telepath can always win a duel. If David hadn't killed Goliath, eventually the Philistines would have mobbed the giant out of sheer jealousy. Had Goliath been smart, he would have walked with his knees bent.

Sue said, "That's all right. I've had to be very careful. This is so confidential I don't know who--" Her barrier was still up strongly.

"I've been in Africa for six months. Maybe I'm not up with current events." Both of them were feeling the inadequacy of words, and it made them impatient.

"Not current... future. Things are... help from... qualify--" She stopped and forced herself into the slower grammatical form of communication. "I've got to get help somewhere, and it's got to be one of Us. Not only that, but a very special kind of person. You qualify."

"How?"

"Because you're a naturalist," she said. "I've looked the field over, but you know what sort of work We usually get. Sedentary occupations. Semantics experts, medical and psychiatric internes, biologists like me, police assistants--that came closer, but I need a man who... who can get the jump on another Baldy."

Barton stared and frowned. "A duel?"

"I think so," she said. "I can't be sure yet. But it seems the only way. This must be completely secret, Dave, absolutely secret. If a word of it ever got out, it would be... very bad for Us."

He knew what she meant, and pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. That shadow always hung over every Baldy.

"What is it?"

She didn't answer directly. "You're a naturalist. That's fine. What I need is a man who can meet a telepath on slightly more than equal terms. No non-Baldy would do, even if I could talk about this to a non-Baldy. What I've got to get is a man with a fast-moving mind who's also trained his body to respond faster than instantly."

"Uh-huh."

"There weren't many," she said. "Even when minds move at the same speed, there's always a fractional difference in muscular response. And we're not too well trained. Games of competitive skill--"

"I've thought of that," Barton said. "More than once, too. Any game based on war is unsuitable for Us."

"Any game in which you face your opponent. I like golf, but I can't play tennis."

"Well," Barton told her, "I don't box or wrestle. Or play chess, for that matter. But skip-handball--have you seen that?"

She shook her head.

"The backboard's full of convolutions; you never know which way the ball would bounce. And the board's in sections that keep sliding erratically. You can control the force, but not the direction. That's one way. It's something new, and naturally it isn't advertised, but a friend of mine's got one at his place. A man named Denham."

"He told me about you."

"I thought so."

"Uh-huh. For fifteen years you've been catching everything from tigers to king cobras. That takes good timing, the way you do it. Any man who can outguess a king cobra--"

"Watch your barrier," Barton said sharply. "I caught something then. Is it that bad?"

She drew a shaky breath. "My control's lousy. Let's get out of here."

Barton led her across the zoo's main area. As they passed the shark's tank he sent a quick glance down, and met the girl's eyes worriedly.

"Like that, eh?"

She nodded. "Like that. But you can't put Them in cages."

Over catfish and Shasta white wine she told him--

You can't put Them in cages. Shrewd, dangerous, but very careful now. They were the middle group of the three telepathic assortments. The same mutation, but... but!

The hard radiations had been plain dynamite. When you implant a completely new function in the delicate human brain, you upset a beautiful and long-standing balance. So there had been three groups: one was a complete failure, thrust into the mental borderland of insanity, dementia praecox and paranoia. Another group, to which Sue Connaught and Barton belonged--the vast majority--were able to adjust to a nontelepathic world. They wore wigs.

But the middle group was paranoid--and sane.

Among these telepaths were found the maladjusted egotists, the ones who for a long time had refused to wear wigs, and who had bragged of their superiority. They had the cunning and the utter self-justification of the true paranoid type, and were basically antisocial. But they were not mad.

And you can't put Them in cages. For they were telepaths, and how can you cage the mind?

They finished with Brazilian chocolate cake, demi-tasse and Mississippi liqueur, made by the monks of Swanee monastery. Barton touched his cigarette tip to the igniter paper on the pack. He inhaled smoke.

"It's not a big conspiracy, then."

"These things start small. A few men--but you see the danger."

Barton nodded. "I see it, o.k. It's plenty bad medicine. A few paranoid-type Baldies, working out a crazy sabotage scheme-- Tell me a little more first, though. For instance, why me? And why you?"

To a nontelepath the question might have been obscure. Sue raised her brows and said, "You, because you've got the reflexes I spoke of and because I had the luck to find you before I got desperate enough to look for a substitute. As for me"--she hesitated--"that's the oddest part. No one could have stumbled onto them except by accident. Because telepathy, of course, isn't tight-beam. It's a broadcast. Any receptive mind can pick it up. The minute enough people band together to make a city, that's noticeable. And the minute Baldies get together and form any sort of organization, that's noticeable too. Which is why paranoids never made much trouble, except individually. Banding together would have meant running up a flag--one that could be seen for miles."

"And so?"

"So they've got this special means of communication. It's secret, absolutely unbreakable code. Only it isn't merely code. Then we could detect and trace down, even if we couldn't break it. This is telepathic communication on an entirely new band, one we can't even touch. I don't know how they do it. It might be partly mechanical, or it might not. Children have a higher perceptive level, but we can

catch their thoughts. This is mental ultraviolet. Do you realize the implications?"

Smoke jetted from Barton's nostrils. "Yeah. It wrecks the balance of power--completely. Up to now, decentralization has kept peace. Nobody dared band together or get too big for their boots. They could be detected. But these bichos are wearing invisible cloaks." His hand clenched. "It could become world-wide! The one form of organization we can't fight!"

"It's got to be fought," she said. "It's got to be smashed. And fast, before anyone suspects. If non-Baldies ever find out, there'll be a wave of anti-Baldism that could wipe Us out. If that should happen, people wouldn't stop to sort out the social and the antisocial groups. They'd say, 'We've been nursing a viper, and it's got fangs. Kill 'em all.'"

Outside the window a man on horseback clattered past, hoofbeats making an urgent rhythm in Barton's brain.

"How many are there?"

"I told you it's just beginning. Only a few more. But it can spread. I suppose the immediate difficulty is in their training neophytes in their special trick telepathy. That's why I think it must be physically self-induced. Gadgets can be detected. And mobility would be necessary; they'd never know when they had to get in touch with each other. You can't pack around a big gadget."

"You could camouflage it," Barton said. "Or it might be pretty small."

"It might," she said, "but there's this little girl--Melissa Carr. She tapped their wave without a gadget. She must be some mutant variant."

"Melissa Carr?" echoed Barton. "Where does she come in?"

"Oh, I haven't told you. She's my contact. I've been in touch with her off and on for a week or so, but it was only yesterday that she let slip, very casually, what she'd learned on that special thought band."

"She isn't one of them, then?"

"I'm sure not. It's very odd. Even the way she reached me first--" Sue had been dressing for a party, and the tentative fingering question had crept into her mind. "It was like Cinderella, somehow. I could feel the pleasure she took in the dress I was wearing, a Mozambique model, and the Karel bag. She strung along with me mentally all evening. And after that--" After that communication had been established.

But it had been days before Melissa spoke of the telepathic signals she had inadvertently tuned in on.

"She guessed what they meant, but she didn't seem much impressed by the danger. I mean, it didn't strike her that something ought to be done. There's some mystery about Melissa; sometimes I've even thought she might have been a member of the group once, and pulled out. Sometimes she won't answer my signals at all. But now that she's told me about this--Faxe--I think I've convinced her of the danger. Sam Faxe. He's one of the paranoids, and from what I've learned, he's trying to sabotage some experiments in Galileo."

"Why?"

"That's what I don't know. Apparently the paranoids are so familiar with their basic plan that they don't need even to think about it. Their thoughts deal with immediate action. And always on that special wave length we can't catch. Only Melissa, as far as I know, can get it,

and she must have been born receptive."

"Some are," Barton agreed. "Mutants certainly vary a lot, far more than nonmutants. As for this long-term scheme, you know the paranoid type. They figure Baldies were made to rule the world. They look on ordinary humans as a lower species. And if they're trying to sabotage experiments, that's significant. I wonder what sort of experiment this Galileo business is?"

"I don't know," Sue said. "Melissa's very shaky on technology."

"I can find out through Denham. He lives in Galileo."

"That's where I met him. But maybe you can get more out of Melissa than I can. It isn't wise to"—she hesitated, substituting a familiar word for the unimaginable mental terms—"telepath her too much, but it's necessary, of course. If you feel any probing, sheer off right away."

"Has there been any?"

"No. Not yet. But we must keep in the dark."

Sue hadn't asked Barton if he would help; she knew that he would. Preservation of the race had been implanted in every Baldy, though in the paranoid type it had been warped and distorted. Now Sue's mind reached out, searching, questioning, seeking the lock to fit her key. And almost immediately the answer came. It was like one hand drawing two others together, Sue mentally introducing Melissa Carr to Barton. He felt something fumble, shy and almost gauche, and then they—locked. He sent out friendliness and warm assurance. Instantly he was conscious of a strong femininity that amounted almost to sexual attraction. Half clear, half clouded, he sensed what Melissa Carr meant to herself: the intangible consciousness of living ego, different in each individual, and the softness of curling hair—

hair? Wig--and the softness of a mouth against fingers drawn gently across them. A demure withdrawal that had in it shades of color and scent, and then something that was the equivalent of a curtsy, purely mental, and with an oddly old-fashioned flavor. After that, he knew he could never mistake Melissa Carr's mind for that of another Baldy.

This is Dave Barton, Melissa.

Recognition and pleasure-shading. A question: trust? So much danger--

Utter trust, yes--strong affirmative.

f Many--(different)--messages coming strongly

Shadow of menace of Sam Faxe Urgency | A growing explosive stain in Galileo

Cannot speak--another symbol for speak--long (Possible personal danger

And all these gradations of meaning at once, three minds interlocking like a color wheel, focusing to the central white spot of revelation and truth. There were no barriers, as in oral conversation. Like light the thoughts intermeshed and wove in question, answer, and statement, and despite the concentration, all three had time for the more intimate shadings that took the place of tonal values. It was the capacity for such rapport that made round-table debates so popular among Baldies; the logical and aesthetic play of minds that could ultimately resolve into an ecstasy of complete common awareness. Physically there was no polygamy among Baldies, but mentally the social group had expanded, lending an additional depth and richness to their lives.

But this was merely a hint of complete rapport. Barton was searching

for clues in what Melissa told him. He was no technician either, so he was going at it from another angle; that of the naturalist, trained in probing protective coloration, skilled in unraveling the predator's tangled tracks.

How many?

Three.

No more?

Three--and images of Galileo and other towns, symbols of names and identities. A feeling of shadowy communion, links of hatred--

And suddenly, in her mind, he sensed something curiously, disturbingly familiar. He did not know what it was. But momentarily it broke the smooth flow of communication, while he searched.

It was nothing; he concentrated again. Three?

C Known name Sam Faxe Symbol -i Power-lust

[ Heavy lethargy

There were other evoked connotations, but he thought he would know Sam Faxe now.

The other symbols, resolving into names: Ed Vargan, mixed with a curious concept of size-difference; and Bertram Smith, where there was sensed a cruelty akin to that of the blood-drinking carnivores. Though with a difference; Barton had reached into the mind of a weasel when it was feasting, and the sheer flood of ecstasy had almost frightened him. Smith was intelligent, though he, like the others, had that singular quality of--of what?

Darkness. Distortion. Blindness.

Yes, Sue thought, they're blind. Blinded by their paranoia. They can't see this world at all--as it's meant to be.

And Melissa's visualization of the three: vicious small things running through the dark, teeth bared. She identified them, Barton realized, with--what?--with mice; she had a horror of mice, which to her were far more horrible than insects or snakes. Well, he could understand phobias; he himself was abnormally afraid of fire. Most Baldies were phobic in one degree or another, a penalty paid for increased mental sensitivity.

He thought: "I" must move fast. If they communicate, they may go into hiding. "I" must kill them at one stroke. Can they read your mind?

They do not know Melissa Carr exists. But if one is killed, they will be warned.

You must be kept safe. Where are you? Refusal, definite refusal.

It would be best to tell me, so--

No one can find me as long as I don't think my location. There are no directional finders for telepathy. The concept she expressed meant more than telepathy; it was the symbol for a whole race and its unity.

Can you locate Vargan and Smith?

Certainly; they spoke freely in their private wave length; Vargan is in Rye; Smith is in Huron.

How is it you can catch their wave length?

Puzzlement. A helpless mental shrug. Born to me?

Barton thought: When one of them dies, the others will be warned. Listen carefully. Be sure to relay their plans. They must not escape.

Melissa thought of the three small, gray, vicious things scuttling across the floor. Barton grinned tightly.

See how they run, he told her. See where they run to. His hand touched his dagger. It was not a carving knife, but it would do.

There was not much more. Melissa relayed some of the paranoid thoughts she had caught, and Barton's guess at the menace of the paranoids was confirmed. They were deadly, in the long run, to the whole mutant group. Individual deaths did not matter much, in this era of the duello, but to risk the good will of the entire race was mad-dog tactics. Nor did there seem to be any motive. Sheer malice? It was not logical, and paranoids are always logical, though their structure is founded on a false keystone. The single clue that would give the whole a meaning was, so far, lacking. Nor could Barton find it by turning to his training as a naturalist. Animals do not commit sabotage. Nor do birds foul their own nests.

After Melissa had left them, Sue showed her impatience. "I want to help," she said, orally now. "There must be some way."

"There isn't. You said yourself that this takes a very special skill. You're a biologist. You don't react instantly, the way I do, and if you were along, my attention would be diverted. I've got to concentrate."

"You'll kill them, then?"

"Certainly I'll kill them. Luckily there are only three, according to Melissa. She wasn't lying; I could tell that."

"Oh, she's honest," Sue agreed. "But she's certainly hiding

something."

Barton shrugged. "It doesn't matter. What this calls for is prompt action. I can't do much investigating. If I plant any thoughts or questions in non-Baldy minds, the paranoids will start wondering. I've got to eradicate those bichos before the infection spreads. There are plenty of paranoid Baldies who'd join a movement like that, if they were able to master the secret wave length."

"So what'll I do?"

"It doesn't matter," Barton said, "now. Your job's finished. It's my meat now."

They stood up together. Outside, on the village sidewalk, he left her, with a handclasp that held a deep significance. All around them the casual, evening life of the town was moving, brightly lighted and symbolic of the vast, intricate check-and-balance system that held civilization together. The civilization that tolerated Baldies, and, though perhaps a little grudgingly, gave them a chance to work out their own salvation. Both of them were thinking of the same thing: how easily that ordinary throng could be integrated into a blood-hungry mob. It had happened before, when Baldies were still new to the world, and the danger still smoldered.

So Barton went off alone, with the unspoken commission of his whole race commanding him to do what since birth he had been conditioned to do. The race was important; the individuals were not. His helicopter had already been serviced, and he took off for Galileo, on the Atlantic Seaboard, still thinking about what he had to do. He was so abstracted that only automatic radio signals kept him from colliding with other copters. But, finally, the lights of the technicians'town glowed on the horizon.

Like all the communities devoted to technology, Galileo was larger than most villages. Scientists were peaceful folk, and no tech-town had ever been dusted off. Niagara, with its immense source of power, held more people than Galileo, but the latter had a far larger area. Due to the danger of some of the experiments, the town sprawled out for miles, instead of being the tight, compact village that was the general American pattern.

Because of this there was surface-car transport, an unusual thing. Bartin guided himself to Denham's house--there were no apartments, of course, in a highly individualistic though interdependent culture--and by good luck found the man at home. Denham was a mild, round-faced Baldy whose wigs had year by year grown grayer until his present one was shot with white. He greeted Barton warmly, but orally, since there were people on the street, and Baldies were tactful about demonstrating their powers.

"Dave. I didn't know you were back. How was Africa?"

"Hot. I haven't had a game of skip-handball for six months. I think I'm getting soft."

"You don't look it," Denham said, with an envious glance. "Come on in. Drink?"

Over a highball they talked non-essentials, except that they didn't--talk. Barton was feeling his way; he didn't want to tell Denham too much, especially since Sam Faxe was here in Galileo, and he went all around the subject without finding out much. It proved more difficult than he had expected. Eventually they ended in the game room, stripped to shorts, facing a vertical wall, scooped into innumerable convolutions, divided into segments that jiggled erratically. There they played skip-handball. It was easy to tell in advance how hard Denham would swat the ball, but there was no earthly way of judging

the angle of reflection. The two bounced around a good deal, getting plenty of exercise, and carrying on a telepathic conversation as they played.

Denham indicated that his favorite game was still crap shooting. Or roulette, by preference. Either of them he could play with his non-Baldy friends, whereas bridge or poker--uh! Who'd play poker with a mind reader?

Games that depended on luck or pure muscle were o.k., Barton agreed, but there weren't many of the latter. Wrestling or boxing involved pre-planned thought. But many Olympic trials were possible: shot-putting, high-jumping, racing. In those you didn't face your opponent. Any war game, like chess, was impossible.

Well, Denham thought, your vocation's a sort of war game.

Game hunting? Barton let his mind skim over the field, settling on a tiger after a heavy feed, lethargic, and with the deep consciousness of power as in a silently humming dynamo. He tied that in, subtly, with a hunger, and with something, vague and unformed, that was similar to the symbol by which Melissa knew Sam Faxe. His thought then paralleled the identity of Faxe as one musical chord parallels its complement. If Denham knew Faxe at all, he'd probably respond.

And he did. A sense of elation mounted in Barton as he caught the stray fragment, filtering out nonessentials, squeezing it dry of the accumulated Denham-detritus: What remained was a fat, less competent interpreter who served as liaison man sometimes between technicians of different language-groups. Barton hastily changed to another subject so that Denham would not attach any importance to this particular mnemonic ideation.

After that, Barton was anxious to leave. He let Denham win the

game, and the novelty of this so delighted the winner that he accepted Barton's excuse of an appointment without obvious skepticism. A man just back in America, after six months of jungle life, would be looking for something more exciting than skip-handball. But it was swell of Barton to drop in--

Barton strolled along the streets, park-bordered, smooth-tiled, letting his receptive mind absorb the thoughts that boiled around him. Now that he knew what to look for, it was not difficult, though it took patience. Patchwork scraps of information came to him very occasionally. And Barton did something to which Baldies very seldom resorted, he put leading questions into the minds of non-Baldies.

This had to be done, for Barton could read only what lay above the threshold of conscious awareness. And it took real, straining effort to force even a brief stimulating impulse into a nonreceptive mind. The average man is not a telepath, and to communicate mentally with him is like trying to push a needle between closely-fitted tiles. He can, under special circumstances, receive thoughts, but he himself cannot recognize them as impulses from another mind.

Barton was sweating when he had finished. Yet he had managed to pick up considerable information. Moreover, he had done it so subtly that Faxe himself, if he tuned in, would certainly be unsuspecting. A good many people had thought of Faxe tonight, but they were ordinary thoughts--except to Barton, who fitted the jigsaw together. A little here and a little there. And finally he had the picture--an interpreter, altering a shade of meaning as a Tibetan talked to a Bengali, and as both of them turned to a Yankee physiochemist. It was the easier because technicians, immersed in their work, were apt to be insensitive to the finer gradations of human contact, and the result was that here in Galileo a gadget was being built that would eventually cause trouble.

Just how, not even Faxe knew, of course, but his smattering of technical knowledge was sufficient to enable him to smear up the works. A shade of meaning in one man's mind, a slightly different hue in another's, when both should have matched exactly--these, and other things, told Barton that Faxe was a racial traitor.

Moreover, he found out where Faxe lived.

Now, standing outside the man's bungalow, he tried to communicate with Melissa Carr. Almost immediately her thought touched his, in the ordinary radiation level.

Play it careful, he ordered. Use generalities. And again he was deeply conscious of her femininity, of the softness of curling hair and the smoothness of a curved, youthful cheek. Through the cool, fresh night air breathed something like a wisp of perfume.

Agreement.

Can you locate the others for me quickly? And exactly?

Yes. In--

Keep tuned in to... you know what.

Again agreement, and that delicately feminine demure-ness, soft and curiously attractive. She was a little afraid, Barton sensed, and he felt a strong impulse to protect her. A picture of Melissa Carr was beginning to form in his mind, though he knew that it was of necessity prejudiced. Mental concepts and visual ones may differ a great deal. But he thought that Melissa had a small, triangular face, fragile and with delicate features, and that that face was framed with glossy, jet-black curls. He seemed to see her features from inside, reversing the usual procedure in which an individual's face helps form the

concept of what is behind it.

How does she do it? He wondered at the lucky chance as he crossed the street. Out of all the people in the world, only she can tune in on the special wave length of--

Barrier!

He stood now on the porch, facing a closed panel. Through that grained plywood a doubt and a question fingered out, touched his mind, and recoiled. Instantly the man within the house erected a barrier of his own.

Very good. While the mind was thus walled off, Faxe could probably not utilize his super wave length to communicate with the other paranoids. Or... or could he?

Barton stepped aside to a circular window. He could see nothing through the one-way glass. With a wary look around, he lifted his foot and kicked the glass into splinters. He stepped through the gap cautiously, into a well-furnished room where a fat man stood against the wall, facing him. The masculinity of the decor told him that Faxe probably lived alone; that was natural for the true paranoid type, which required a wife's subjugation. Faxe would not have married a telepath, and no non-Baldy could have lived with him for long.

Twenty years ago Faxe would have been wigless, but this particular type had learned caution since then. The man's wig was of gleaming yellow that went oddly with his heavy, ruddy face.

And suddenly the barrier slipped from Faxe's mind; his brain lay fallow and blank, and Barton felt Melissa's urgent warning thrill through him. He's warning the others--

Barton ripped out the dagger from his belt and plunged forward.

Instantly Faxe's barrier tightened again, as quickly as his own weapon leaped ready to his fat hand. When dueling with another telepath, it is highly advisable to keep your mind guarded, so your intentions cannot be anticipated. As long as Faxe felt himself seriously menaced, he dared not lower his barrier.

Barton moved in, his eyes calculatingly alert, as he might watch the swaying hood of a cobra. He kept his thumb on the hilt of the dagger and held it at thigh-level. The fat man stepped forward from the wall, balancing on his toes, waiting.

It was, after all, too easy. Telepathy wasn't necessary to forestall the stroke of that clumsy arm. With surgical neatness Barton put his knife in the right place, and made certain that Faxe did not communicate with his colleagues before he died. Then, satisfied, he let himself out of the house by the front door and walked quietly toward the nearest surface-car door.

That was done. He sent his thought probing in search of Melissa. Somewhere, far away in the hidden dark, she heard and answered.

Did they receive Faxe's call?

No. No, you were too fast, and they didn't expect him to touch them.

Good. Vargan and Smith now, then.

Tonight?

Yes.

Good. I don't think you can reach me tomorrow.

Why not!

Evasion. Vargan--at Rye.

Listen. This is important. If there are only three of them, fine. But if they try to communicate with others, be sure to let me know!

Yes. That was all, but the personality of Melissa lingered with Barton as he drove his helicopter northwest through the night. He was not at all affected by the fact that he had committed murder. He did not regard the act as such; there was, undoubtedly, a touch of fanaticism in the way Baldies regarded betrayal from within. Nor was this ordinary betrayal. The means of communication Faxe and the others had discovered was the deadliest menace to the race that had ever existed--more serious than the lynchings a few decades after the Blowup.

Barton had fallen into a mental pattern that always was dominant when he hunted. Now his quarry was human, but far more predatory than any jungle carnivore. Animals killed for food. That was simple Darwinism, and a basic law of nature. But the three paranoids had violated another basic entirely: preservation of the species. They menaced it.

In a new culture there must be conflict, Barton thought, watching dim lights flicker past below, the innumerable torches of the towns that dotted America. And certainly the Baldies had a new culture. It was almost embryonic as yet, a mutation heading for an ultimate end that was so far inconceivable. But it was the first true forward step that mankind had made in a million years. Always before mutations had been very slight, or they had been failures. Now, with hard radiations providing the booster charge, a true mutation had opened a thousand possible doors. And before each door lay blind pitfalls.

For there are dominant and secondary, submerged characteristics. Hairlessness was secondary to Baldies, but there might be other,

submerged ones that would emerge, in the third or fourth generation. This extraordinary method of subtelepathic communication--was that natural? In Melissa's case it seemed to be so, though Faxe and the rest might have developed the trick themselves. If so, the latent potential lay, perhaps, in every Baldy. And that meant danger indeed. It was in the true meaning of the term a focus of infection. Healthy cells could be contaminated. The secret might be passed on, and Barton visualized a perfectly hidden, underground network of paranoids, communicating in utter secrecy, planning--anything. It wasn't a pleasant idea.

He wondered how many social-type Baldies could fight such a menace. Not many; they were not qualified for war. War, because of the atomic bombs, was impossible, but this was a new sort of battle. The thing that made the bombs successful through fear--propaganda--the necessity of centralization before any group could be organized--was inapplicable. There need be no unification, if paranoids could communicate instantly and secretly. Blind luck had stepped in through Melissa, but one could not depend on luck.

Melissa's thought touched him.

Vargan has signaled Smith; Smith is flying to Rye.

What do they know?

Vargan told Smith to come immediately. No more.

To Rye?

It must be a new rendezvous. He gave directions. She relayed them to Barton.

o.k. Keep listening.

Puzzled and a little worried, Barton advanced the copter's speed. He was swinging northward now, toward Lake Erie, by-passing Conestoga. It wouldn't take long to reach Rye. But--had Faxe got through, after all? A telepathic message takes only an instant. Perhaps Vargan had received the fat man's s.o.s. And if Faxe had passed on to his accomplices the knowledge that a Baldy had killed him, and why-- Barton shrugged. They would be waiting for him, anyhow. They would know Faxe was dead. If he had no more than called to them in formless appeal and made contact with their minds, they would know. No mistaking that--shapeless-ness--as life slips inexorably from the body. When they reached out for him now, they would encounter plain nothingness, a curious sort of hiatus in the ether, as if the void had not yet quite closed over the place where a man had been an hour ago. It was unmistakable; no telepath willingly reached out into that quivering blank. But it would impinge upon any receptive mind near it, and soundlessly through the Baldy population of the town the knowledge would spread. One of Us has died. Yes, Vargan and Smith knew by now. But they did not yet know, in all probability, how he had died. It might have been accident, it might have been organic. It might have been--murder. They would act upon the assumption that it was. They would be waiting.

The nearest Rye airfield to his destination was deserted, only the automatic landing lights flicking on as he dropped to earth. Melissa's directions had been clear. He walked half a mile up a road, turned into a narrow lane where moonlight made eerie patterns between flickering leaves, and stopped before an unlighted cottage. As he waited, a thought touched him.

Come in. That was Vargan, the size-difference realization a submerged matrix in his mind, a pattern under moving water. Come in. But Vargan did not know Barton; he was radiating blind, conscious only that a Baldy was waiting in the lane outside the cottage.

A light came on. The door opened. A small man, scarcely more than five feet tall, with an abnormally large head, stood on the threshold, a black silhouette.

No traps?

There was a trap, but it was merely the advantage of numbers. Barton felt that his question was answered. Vargan fell back as the taller man advanced, and then Barton was in the room, eyeing his opponent.

Vargan had a pinched, worried face, and protuberant eyes. His mouse-brown wig was untidy. He wore eye lenses that reflected the light with a reptilian glitter, and for a moment his gaze took stock of Barton. Then he smiled.

"All right," he said audibly. "Come in and sit down." The thought of contempt was there. Speaking audibly to another Baldy when caution was unnecessary was insultingly patronizing, but Barton was not surprised. Paranoid, he thought, and Vargan's mind responded: Which means super!

The kitchen valve opened and Bertram Smith came in, a handsome, blond giant, with pale-blue eyes and an expressionless face. Smith carried a tray with bottles, glasses, and ice. He nodded at Barton.

"Vargan wanted to talk to you," he said. "I see no reason, but--"

"What happened to Faxe?" Vargan asked. "Never mind. Have a drink first"

Poison?

Sincere denial. We are stronger than you--

Barton accepted a glass and sat down in an uncomfortable table chair; he did not want to be too relaxed. His mind was wary, though he knew the uselessness of putting up guards. Vargan hunched his dwarfish form into a relaxer and gulped the liquor. His eyes were steady.

"Now what about Faxe?"

"I killed him," Barton said.

"He was the weakest of us all--"

All?

Three of us--

Good. Only two left now.

Vargan grinned. "You're convinced you can kill us, and we're convinced we can kill you. And since our secret weapons are intangible--self-confidence that can't be measured arbitrarily--we can talk on equal ground. How did you know about our means of communication?"

He could not hide the thought of Melissa. The mind has too much free will at times.

Smith said, "We'll have to kill her too. And that other woman--Sue Connaught, that he was thinking of."

No point in keeping up useless concealment. Barton touched Melissa's mind. They know. Listen. If they use their secret wave length, tell me instantly.

"Immediately is pretty fast," Vargan said.

"Thoughts are fast."

"All right. You're underestimating us. Faxe was the newest of our band; he wasn't fast-minded, and he was a push-over for you. Our brains are highly trained and faster than yours." That was a guess; he couldn't know, really. Egotism influenced him.

"Do you think," Barton said, "that you can get away with whatever you're trying to do?"

"Yes," Smith said, in his mind a blazing, fanatical conviction that glared like a shining light. "We must."

"All right. What are you trying to do?"

"Preserve the race," Vargan said. "But actively, not passively. We non-Baldies"--He still used the term, though he wore a wig--"aren't willing to bow down before an inferior race, homo sapiens."

"The old quibble. Who says Baldies are homo superior? They simply have an additional sense."

"That's all that keeps man from being a beast. An additional sense. Intelligence. Now there's a new race. It's telepathic. Eventually the next race may have-prescience. I don't know. But I do know that Baldies are the future of the world. God wouldn't have given us our power if He hadn't intended us to use it."

This was merely dueling, but it was something more as well. Barton was intensely curious, for more than one reason. "You're trying to convince me?"

"Certainly. The more who join us, the faster we'll grow. If you say no,

we'll kill you." Only on these intangibles was there the possibility of mental secrecy. Semantics could never alter the divergence of absolute opinions.

"What's your plan?"

"Expansion," Vargan ruffled his untidy brown wig. "And complete secrecy, of course. The sabotage angle--we're just beginning that. Eventually it'll be a big thing. Right now we're concentrating on what we can do--"

"Sabotage--and what can you offer in exchange?"

A wave of tremendous self-confidence thrust out at Barton. "Ourselves. We are homo superior. When our race is free, no longer enslaved by mere humans, we can--go to the stars if we want!"

"Enslaved. I don't see it that way."

"You don't. You've been conditioned to accept the pap cowards feed you. It isn't logical. It isn't just or natural. When a new race appears, it's destined to rule."

Barton said, "Remember the lynchings in the old days?"

"Certainly," Vargan nodded. "Humans have one thing we haven't: numerical superiority. And they're organized. The trick is to destroy that organization. How is it maintained?"

"By communication."

"Which goes back to technology. The world's a smoothly running machine, with humanity in the driver's seat. If the machine cracks up--"

Barton laughed. "Are you that good?"

Again the fanatical self-belief flamed in Smith's mind. A hundred--a thousand mere humans--cannot equal one of us!

"Well," Vargan said more sanely, "ten men could still lynch a Baldy, provided they weren't disorganized and in social chaos. That, of course, is what we're after. Ultimate social chaos. We're aiming at a bust-up. Then we can take over--after humans go to pot."

"How long will that take? A million years?"

"Perhaps," Vargan said, "if we weren't telepaths, and if we didn't have the secret wave length. That, by the way, takes time to learn, but almost any Baldy can learn it. But we're careful; there'll be no traitors among us. How can there be?"

There couldn't. A thought of hesitancy, of betrayal, could be read. It would be a foolproof organization.

Vargan nodded. "You see? Thousands of Baldies, working secretly for a bust-up, sabotaging, killing where necessary--and always, always avoiding even a hint of suspicion."

"You've sense enough for that, anyway," Barton said. "Even that hint would be fatal."

"I know it." Anger. "Humans tolerate us, and we let them. We let them. It's time we took our rightful place."

"We're getting it anyway, slowly. After all, we're intruders in a non-Baldy world. Humans have come to accept us. Eventually we'll get their complete trust and tolerance." ;

"And--forever--live on tolerance, a helpless minority? Eating the

crumbs our lessers are willing to throw us--if we lick their boots?"

"How many Baldies are maladjusted?"

"Plenty."

"All right. They'd be maladjusted in Heaven. The vast majority adjust. I've got the job I want--"

"Have you? You never feel even a little irritated when people know you're a Baldy, and--look at you?"

"Nobody's ever completely happy. Certainly a Baldy world would be rather more pleasant, but that'll come. There are plenty of worlds that will be available eventually. Venus, for one."

"So we sit and wait for interplanetary travel," Vargan mocked. "And what then? There'll be slogans. Earth for humans. No Baldies on Venus. You're a fool. Has it never occurred to you that Baldies are the new race?" He looked at Barton. "I see it has. Every one of us has thought the same thing. But we've been conditioned to submerge the thought. Listen. What's the test of a dominant new race? It must be able to dominate. And we can; we've a power that no non-Baldy can ever hope to match. We're like gods pretending to be human because it'll please humans."

"We aren't gods."

"Compared to humans--we are gods. Do you feel pleased at the thought of rearing your children in fear, training them never to offend their inferiors, forcing them to wear--wigs?" Vargan's hand went up to his head, fingers clawed. "This is the stigma of our cowardice. The day when we can walk hairless in a hairless world--then we'll have come into our heritage. All right. Ask yourself--can you say that I'm wrong?"

"No," Barton said. "You may be right. But we're a small minority; the risk's too great. Since you speak of children, you can add a postscript about lynchings. That isn't pretty. Maybe you could get away with this, but you're certain you won't fail. And that's just crazy. You're refusing to admit arguments that might weaken your plan. If even a whisper of this ever got out, every Baldy in the world, wigless or not, would be destroyed. The--humans--could do nothing less, for their own protection. And I couldn't blame them. I admit you're logical--to some extent. And you're dangerous, because you've got the secret telepathic band. But you're paranoid, and that means you're blind. We are getting what we want, on the whole, and because a few paranoid Baldies are malcontent, you set yourselves up as saviors for the whole race. If your idea should spread--"

"That would mean fertile ground, wouldn't it?"

"There are other maladjusted Baldies," Barton admitted. "I might have been one myself, maybe, if I hadn't found my pattern for living." He wondered for a moment. His jungle work was fascinating, but what would it be like to return from it to a completely Baldy culture? A world in which he belonged, as no telepath could belong, really, in this day and age.

Barton turned from the mirage. And simultaneously Melissa's warning thought struck violently into his mind, faster than a shouted word could be; and with equal speed Barton reacted, spinning to his feet and heaving up his chair as a shield. He had not caught Vargan's command; it had been on the secret wave length, but Smith's thrown knife clattered against the plastic chair seat and bounced off against one of the walls.

Vargan will attack while Smith recovers his weapon. Melissa was afraid; she shrank from the idea of violence, and the emotions

surging unchecked in the room, but her thought struck unwaveringly into Barton's mind. He sprang toward the fallen dagger as Vargan ran at him. Then the two were back on the ordinary telepathic wave length, but with a difference.

One man Barton could have guarded against. Or two men acting together. But this had been prearranged. Smith was fighting independently, and so was Vargan. Two thought-patterns struck into Barton's mind. Vargan was concentrating on the duello, left right, feint, and feint again. Barton was skilled enough to be a match for his single opponent, but now Smith had picked up the fallen chair and was coming in with it. His mind was confused, too. Drive the chair forward low--no, high--no--

In a feint, there are two mental patterns; dominant and recessive. One has the ring of truth. But Vargan and Smith were attempting to act completely on impulse, purposely confusing their minds in order to confuse Barton. They were succeeding. And more than once they flashed up to the secret band, so Melissa's thought-warning was added to the confusion.

Smith had his dagger back now. A table went crashing over. Barton had taken it fatally for granted that his enemies would act together, and so a sharp point ripped his sleeve and brought blood from a deep cut. In the jungle, where emotion, tropism, instinct, are stronger than intelligence, Barton had been confused in much the same way, but then his own mental power had been the turning factor. Here his opponents were not mindless beasts; they were highly intelligent predators.

The heavy, choking smell of blood was nauseating in the back of his throat. Cat-footed, wary, Barton kept retreating, not daring to be pinned between his enemies. Abruptly Melissa warned: A rush! and both Smith and Vargan came at him, blades gleaming where they

were not crimson.

Heart--clavicle--up--stroke--feint--

Confused and chaotic, the furious thoughts caught him in a whirlwind. He spun to face Smith, knew his mistake, and ducked not quite in time. Vargan's dagger ripped his left biceps. And with that blow Barton knew that he had failed; he was no match for the two paranoids.

He ran for the chair, thinking of it as a shield, but at the last moment, before his mind could be read, he sent it hurtling toward the fluorescent. With a tinkle of glass the tube broke. In the dark, Barton dived for the door. They knew what he intended and anticipated him; they knew he would depend on impetus to carry him through. But they could not stop him. He got a knee hard on the point of his jaw, and, dazed, slashed right and left half-mindlessly. Perhaps that saved him.

He broke through, thinking of his copter. Escape and help now. He felt Vargan's thought: the short cut.

Thanks, he sent back mockingly.

The short cut saved time, and he was long-legged. As yet there were no plans. He did not try to think of any. Escape and help; details later. The paranoids came after him for a short distance.

No use; he'll make it. Get my copter.

Right. We'll trail him.

They went elsewhere. Barton felt their brief questions touching his mind, though, and concentrated on running. He could not easily escape the paranoids, now that they knew him. Nor would they again

lose touch with his mind.

The landing field was still vacant, except for his own helicopter. He got in and sent the plane southwest, a vague thought of Sue Connaught guiding him. Melissa could not help; he didn't even know where she was. But Sue was in Conestoga, and between the two of them--

Also, she had to be warned. He reached for her mind across the dark miles.

What's wrong?

He told her. Get a weapon. Protect yourself. I'm coming in.

Plan--

Don't try to think of any. They'll know.

And Melissa, frightened, the psychic scent of fear strong in her thought. How can I help?

Don't reveal where you are. If we fail, tell the truth to other Baldies. These paranoids must be destroyed.

Sue: Can I intercept their copter?

No. Don't try. They're following, but not overtaking.

A grotesque silver shape in the moonlight, the pursuing helicopter raced in Barton's track. He improvised a bandage for his wounded arm. After consideration, he wound many heavy strips of cloth around his left forearm. A shield, if--

He could not plan his tactics; that would be fatal. Telepaths could not

play chess or any war game, because they would automatically betray themselves. They could play skip-handball, but that had a variable factor, the movable backboard. If a random factor could be introduced--

Vargan's eager question touched him. Such as?

Barton shivered. He must, somehow, manage to act on impulse, without any preconceived plan. Otherwise he would inevitably fail.

He called Melissa. Are they using the secret band?

No.

If we fail, it's your job. Vargan and Smith must die. This is more important than merely killing three men. If other paranoids get the idea, if they, too, learn the secret wave length, this suicidal movement will grow. And non-Baldies will inevitably find out about it, sometime. That will mean the annihilation of every Baldy on earth. For the humans can't afford to take chances. If we fail to check the paranoids--it means the end of our whole race.

The lights of Conestoga glowed. No plan yet. Don't try to think of one.

There must be a way, Vargan urged. What?

Sue broke in. I'm coming up in my copter.

The zoo was below, dark now, except for the silvering moonlight. Another plane, gleaming bright, lifted into view to intercept them. Sue thought: I'll ram them-

Fool, Barton thought. Don't warn them! But it was a new idea, thrust suddenly into his own mind, and he reacted instantly. Mechanical controls are not instantaneous. By Vargan's sudden decision to drop

to a lower level, where a collision with Sue's plane would not be fatal, he had put himself too close to Barton. And Barton's hands stabbed at the controls.

Vargan read the thought as fast as it was conceived. But his copter could not respond with the speed of thought. The flying vanes meshed and crackled; with a scream of tortured alloys the two ships side-slipped. The automatic safety devices took over--the ones that were not smashed--but only low altitude saved Barton and his enemies from death.

They crashed down in the central zoo area, near the shark's tank. Vargan read the thought in Barton's mind and telepathed to Smith urgently: Kill him! Fast!

Barton scrambled free of the wreckage. He sensed Sue hovering above, ready to land, and told her: Turn your lights on--the spots. Top illumination. Wake the animals.

He dodged away from the two figures closing in on him. He ripped the bandage from his upper arm and let the smell of fresh blood scent the air. And--he yelled.

From Sue's copter beams of light glared down, flaring into cages, dazzling bright.

Kill him, Vargan thought. Quick!

The asthmatic cough of a lion sounded. Barton dodged by the tank and tossed his blood-stained bandage over the railing. There was a flurry of water slashed into foam as the great shark woke to life.

And, from cage and tank, from the beasts waked into a turmoil of light and sound and blood-smell--came the variable.

Sue had got her siren working, and its shattering blast bellowed through the night. Patterns of light blazed erratically here and there. Barton saw Smith pause and shake his head. Vargin, teeth bared, ran forward, but, he, too, was shaken.

Their thoughts were--confused now. For this wasn't chess any more. It was skip-handball, with a variable gone wild.

The beasts are not intelligent, in the true meaning of the word. They have instinct, tropism, a terrible passion that is primevally powerful. Even nontelepaths find the hunger-roar of a lion disturbing. To a Baldy--

What blasted up from the great tank was worst of all. It shook even Barton. The paranoid minds could not communicate, could scarcely think, against that beast-torrent of mental hunger and fury that poured through the night.

Nor could they--now--read Barton's mind. They were like men caught in the blazing rays of a searchlight. Telepathically, they were blinded.

But Barton, a trained naturalist, had better control. It wasn't pleasant even for him. Yet his familiarity with tiger and shark, wolf and lion, gave him some sort of protection against the predatory thoughts. He sensed Melissa's terrified, panic-stricken withdrawal, and knew that Sue was biting her lips and trying desperately to keep control. But for half a mile around that mental Niagara, telepathic communication was impossible except for a very special type of mind.

Barton had that type of mind.

Because he could read the thoughts of Vargin and Smith, and because they could not read his, the duel ended in his favor. He had to kill the pair before help came. The paranoids's secret had to be

hushed up forever.

And, with the sharp blade of his dagger, he finished his job. Smith died silently. From Vargan's waning mind came a desperate, passionate cry: You fool! To destroy your own race--

Then silence, as the copter's siren faded, and the spotlights blinked out. Only beast-cries, and the turmoil of water in the enormous tank.

"They'll hush it up," Barton said. "I've done that much already, since yesterday. Luckily we've got a few Baldies high up in the judicial. I didn't tell even them too much, but--they have the general idea. It'll be passed over as a personal quarrel. The duello's legal, anyway."

Afternoon sunlight glittered on the Ohio. The little sailboat heeled under a gust of wind, and Sue moved the tiller, in response to Barton's thought. The soft susurrus of water whispered under the keel.

"But I can't reach Melissa," he added.

Sue didn't answer. He looked at her.

"You've been communicating with her today. Why can't I?"

"She's... it's difficult," Sue said. "Why not forget it?"

"No."

"Later on--in a week or so--"

He remembered Melissa's demure, feminine gentleness, and her frightened withdrawal last night. "I want to be sure she's all right."

"No--" Sue said, and tried to conceal a thought. She almost

succeeded, but not quite. Something, a key, a pattern, showed in her mind.

"An altered matrix?" Barton looked at her. "How could she--"

"Dave," Sue said, "please don't touch her now. She wouldn't want it--"

But with the key at hand, and the locked door ready to open. Barton automatically sent his thought out, probing, questioning. And, very far away, something stirred in response.

Melissa?

Silently Sue watched the tiller. After a long time, Barton shivered. His face was strained; there were new lines around his mouth.

"Did you know?" he asked.

"Not till today," Sue said. For some reason neither of them wanted to use telepathy at the moment.

"The... the business at the zoo must have done it."

"It isn't permanent. It must be a cycle."

"So that's why she was able to tune in on the secret wave length," Barton said harshly. "This mutation--it runs very close to the line sometimes." He looked at his shaking hand. "Her mind--that was her mind!"

"It runs in cycles," Sue said quietly. "What I wonder now is--will she talk? Can her thoughts be picked up by--"

"There's no danger," Barton said. "I stayed in long enough to make

certain of that. Otherwise I--wouldn't have stayed in at all. In this state, she has no memory of what happens when she's--rational."

Sue moved her lips. "She doesn't know she's insane. She just senses something wrong. That's why she wouldn't tell us where she was. Oh--Dave! So many of us, so many mutants, gone off the track somewhere! It's a horrible price." He nodded slowly, his eyes grave. There was always a price, somehow. And yet, if paying it brought security to the mutants--

But it hadn't, really. For Barton saw clearly now that an era had finally ended in the life of the Baldy race. Till yesterday the path had seemed clear before them. But yesterday an evil had been unveiled in the very heart of their own race, and it was an evil which would menace the peace of the world until one race or the other was wiped wholly off the face of the earth. For what a few telepaths had stumbled upon already, others would discover in the future. Had, perhaps, already discovered. And must not be allowed to retain.

Thou, O son of man, I have set a watchman unto the house of Israel.

We must be on guard now, he thought. Always on guard. And he knew suddenly that his maturation had taken one long forward step in the past few hours. First he had been aimless, open to any possibility that knocked loudest at the doors of his mind. Then he had found the job he was suited for, and in its comfortable adjustment thought himself adult at last. Until yesterday--until today.

It was not enough to hunt animals. His work was laid out before him on a scale so vast he could not see it clearly yet, but its outlines were very clear. He could not do the job alone. It would take many others. It would take constant watchfulness from this hour on, over the whole world. Today, perhaps for the first time in nearly two thousand years, the Crusaders were born again.

Strange, he thought, that it had taken a madwoman to give them their first warning. So that not even the mad were useless in the progress of the race. Strange that the threefold divisions of the mutants had so closely interwoven in the conflict just passed. Mad, sane, sane-paranoid. And typical that even in deadly combat the three lines wove together interdependently....

He looked at Sue. Their minds reached out and touched, and in the deep, warm assurance of meeting was no room for doubt or regret. This, at least, was their heritage. And it was worth any price the future demanded of them--this knowledge of confident unity, through any darkness, across any miles. The fire on the hearth would not burn out until the last Baldy died.

# Ex Machina

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Gallegher, the Mad Scientist who plays by ear is loose! Worse--from Gallegher's viewpoint--a "small brown animal" he couldn't see kept him in a horrid state of sobriety by drinking all his liquor!

I got the idea out of a bottle labeled "Drink me," Gallegher said wanly. "I'm no technician, except when I'm drunk. I don't know the difference between an electron and an electrode, except that one's invisible. At least I do know, sometimes, but they get mixed up. My trouble is semantics."

"Your trouble is you're a lush," said the transparent robot, crossing its legs with a faint crash. Gallegher winced.

"Not at all. I get along fine when I'm drinking. It's only during my periods of sobriety that I get confused. I have a technological hangover. The aqueous humor in my eyeballs is coming out by osmosis. Does that make sense?"

"No," said the robot, whose name was Joe. "You're crying, that's all. Did you turn me on just to have an audience? I'm busy at the moment."

"Busy with what?"

"I'm analyzing philosophy, per se. Hideous as you humans are, you sometimes get bright ideas. The clear, intellectual logic of pure philosophy is a revelation to me."

Gallegher said something about a hard, gemlike flame. He still wept

sporadically, which reminded him of the bottle labeled "Drink me," which reminded him of the liquor-organ beside the couch. Gallegher stiffly moved his long body across the laboratory, detouring around three bulky objects which might have been the dynamos, Monstro and Bubbles, except for the fact that there were three of them. This realization flickered only dimly through Gallegher's mind. Since one of the dynamos was looking at him, he hurriedly averted his gaze, sank down on the couch, and manipulated several buttons. When no liquor flowed through the tube into his parched mouth, he removed the mouthpiece, blinked at it hopelessly, and ordered Joe to bring beer.

The glass was brimming as he raised it to his lips. But it was empty before he drank.

"That's very strange," Gallegher said. "I feel like Tantalus."

"Somebody's drinking your beer," Joe explained. "Now do leave me alone. I've an idea I'll be able to appreciate my baroque beauty even more after I've mastered the essentials of philosophy."

"No doubt," Gallegher said. "Come away from that mirror. Who's drinking my beer? A little green man?"

"A little brown animal," Joe explained cryptically, and turned to the mirror again, leaving Gallegher to glare at him hatefully. There were times when Mr. Galloway Gallegher yearned to bind Joe securely under a steady drip of hydrochloric. Instead, he tried another beer, with equal ill luck.

In a sudden fury, Gallegher rose and procured soda water. The little brown animal had even less taste for such fluids than Gallegher himself; at any rate, the water didn't mysteriously vanish. Less thirsty but more confused than ever, Gallegher circled the third dynamo with

the bright blue eyes and morosely examined the equipment littering his workbench. There were bottles filled with ambiguous liquids, obviously nonalcoholic, but the labels meant little or nothing. Gallegher's subconscious self, liberated by liquor last night, had marked them for easy reference. Since Gallegher Plus, though a top-flight technician, saw the world through thoroughly distorted lenses, the labels were not helpful. One said "Rabbits Only." Another inquired "Why not?" A third said "Christmas Night."

There was also a complicated affair of wheels, gears, tubes, sprockets and light tubes plugged into an electric outlet.

"Cogito, ergo sum," Joe murmured softly. "When there's no one around on the quad. No. Hm-m-m."

"What about this little brown animal?" Gallegher wanted to know. "Is it real or merely a figment?"

"What is reality?" Joe inquired, thus confusing the issue still further. "I haven't resolved that yet to my own satisfaction."

"Your satisfaction!" Gallegher said. "I wake up with a tenth-power hangover and you can't get a drink. You tell me fairy stories about little brown animals stealing my liquor. Then you quote moldy philosophical concepts at me. If I pick up that crowbar over there, you'll neither be nor think, in very short order."

Joe gave ground gracefully. "It's a small creature that moves remarkably fast. So fast it can't be seen."

"How come you see it?"

"I don't. I varish it," said Joe, who had more than the five senses normal to humans.

"Where is it now?"

"It went out a while ago."

"Well--" Gallegher sought inconclusively for words. "Something must have happened last night."

"Naturally," Joe agreed. "But you turned me off after the ugly man with the ears came in."

"I remember that. You were beating your plastic gums... what man?"

"The ugly one. You told your grandfather to take a walk, too, but you couldn't pry him loose from his bottle."

"Grandpa. Uh. Oh. Where's he?"

"Maybe he went back to Maine," Joe suggested. "He kept threatening to do that."

"He never leaves till he's drunk out the cellar," Gallegher said. He tuned in the audio system and called every room in the house. There was no response. Presently Gallegher got up and made a search. There was no trace of Grandpa.

He came back to the laboratory, trying to ignore the third dynamo with the big blue eyes, and hopelessly studied the workbench again. Joe, posturing before the mirror, said he thought he believed in the basic philosophy of intellectualism. Still, he added, since obviously Gallegher's intellect was in abeyance, it might pay to hook up the projector and find out what had happened last night.

This made sense. Some time before, realizing that Gallegher sober never remembered the adventures of Gallegher tight, he had installed a visio-audio gadget in the laboratory, cleverly adjusted to

turn itself on whenever circumstances warranted it. How the thing worked Gallegher wasn't quite sure anymore, except that it could run off miraculous blood-alcohol tests on its creator and start recording when the percentage was sufficiently high. At the moment the machine was shrouded in a blanket. Gallegher whipped this off, wheeled over a screen, and watched and listened to what had happened last night.

Joe stood in a corner, turned off, probably cogitating.

Grandpa, a wizened little man with a brown face like a bad-tempered nutcracker, sat on a stool cuddling a bottle. Gallegher was removing the liquor-organ mouthpiece from between his lips, having just taken on enough of a load to start the recorder working.

A slim, middle-aged man with large ears and an eager expression jittered on the edge of his relaxer, watching Gallegher.

"Claptrap," Grandpa said in a squeaky voice. "When I was a kid we went out and killed grizzlies with our hands. None of these new-fangled ideas--"

"Grandpa," Gallegher said, "shut up. You're not that old. And you're a liar anyway."

"Reminds me of the time I was out in the woods and a grizzly came at me. I didn't have a gun. Well, I'll tell you. I just reached down his mouth--"

"Your bottle's empty," Gallegher said cleverly, and there was a pause while Grandpa, startled, investigated. It wasn't.

"You were highly recommended," said the eager man. "I do hope you can help me. My partner and I are about at the end of our rope."

Gallegher looked at him dazedly. "You have a partner? Who's he? For that matter, who are you?"

Dead silence fell while the eager man fought with his bafflement. Grandpa lowered his bottle and said: "It wasn't empty, but it is now. Where's another?"

The eager man blinked. "Mr. Gallegher," he said faintly. "I don't understand. We've been discussing--"

Gallegher said, "I know. I'm sorry. It's just that I'm no good on technical problems unless I'm... ah... stimulated. Then I'm a genius. But I'm awfully absent-minded. I'm sure I can solve your problem, but the fact is I've forgotten what it is. I suggest you start from the beginning. Who are you and have you given me any money yet?"

"I'm Jonas Harding," the eager man said. "I've got fifty thousand credits in my pocket, but we haven't come to any terms yet."

"Then give me the dough and we'll come to terms," Gallegher said with ill-concealed greed. "I need money."

"You certainly do," Grandpa put in, searching for a bottle. "You're so overdrawn at the bank that they lock the doors when they see you coming. I want a drink."

"Try the organ," Gallegher suggested. "Now, Mr. Harding--"

"I want a bottle. I don't trust that dohinkus of yours."

Harding, for all his eagerness, could not quite conceal a growing skepticism. "As for the credits," he said, "I think perhaps we'd better talk a little first. You were very highly recommended, but perhaps this is one of your off days."

"Not at all. Still--"

"Why should I give you the money before we come to terms?" Harding pointed out. "Especially since you've forgotten who I am and what I wanted."

Gallegher sighed and gave up. "All right. Tell me what you are and who you want. I mean--"

"I'll go back home," Grandpa threatened. "Where's a bottle?"

Harding said desperately, "Look, Mr. Gallegher, there's a limit. I come in here and that robot of yours insults me. Your grandfather insists I have a drink with him. I'm nearly poisoned--"

"I was weaned on corn likker," Grandpa muttered. "Young whippersnappers can't take it."

"Then let's get down to business," Gallegher said brightly. "I'm beginning to feel good. I'll just relax here on the couch and you can tell me everything." He relaxed and sucked idly at the organ's mouthpiece, which trickled a gin buck. Grandpa cursed.

"Now," Gallegher said, "the whole thing, from the beginning."

Harding gave a little sigh. "Well--I'm half partner in Adrenals, Incorporated. We run a service. A luxury service, keyed to this day and age. As I told you--"

"I've forgotten it all," Gallegher murmured. "You should have made a carbon copy. What is it you do? I've got a mad picture of you building tiny prefabricated houses on top of kidneys, but I know I must be wrong."

"You are," Harding said shortly. "Here's your carbon copy. We're in

the adrenal-rousing business. Today man lives a quiet, safe life--"

"Ha!" Gallegher interjected bitterly.

--what with safety controls and devices, medical advances, and the general structure of social living. Now the adrenal glands serve a vital functional purpose, necessary to the health of the normal man." Harding had apparently launched into a familiar sales talk. "Ages ago we lived in caves, and when a sabertooth burst out of the jungle, our adrenals, or suprarenals, went into instant action, flooding our systems with adrenalin. There was an immediate explosion of action, either toward fight or flight, and such periodic flooding of the blood stream gave tone to the whole system. Not to mention the psychological advantages. Man is a competitive animal. He's losing that instinct, but it can be roused by artificial stimulation of the adrenals."

"A drink?" Grandpa said hopefully, though he understood practically nothing of Harding's explanation.

Harding's face became shrewder. He leaned forward confidentially.

"Glamour," he said. "That's the answer. We offer adventure. Safe, thrilling, dramatic, exciting, glamorous adventure to the jaded modern man or woman. Not the vicarious, unsatisfactory excitement of television; the real article. Adrenals, Incorporated, will give you adventure plus, and at the same time improve your health physically and mentally. You must have seen our ads: 'Are you in a rut? Are you jaded? Take a Hunt--and return refreshed, happy, and healthy, ready to lick the world!'"

"A Hunt?"

"That's our most popular service," Harding said, relapsing into more

businesslike tones. "It's not new, really. A long time ago travel bureaus were advertising thrilling tiger hunts in Mexico--"

"Ain't no tigers in Mexico," Grandpa said. "I been there. I warn you, if you don't find me a bottle, I'm going right back to Maine."

But Gallegher was concentrating on the problem. "I don't see why you need me, then. I can't supply tigers for you."

"The Mexican tiger was really a member of the cat family. Puma, I think. We've got special reservations all over the world--expensive to set up and maintain--and there we have our Hunts, with every detail carefully planned in advance. The danger must be minimized--in fact, eliminated. But there must be an illusion of danger or there's no thrill for the customer. We've tried conditioning animals so they'll stop short of hurting anyone, but... ah... that isn't too successful. We lost several customers, I'm sorry to say. This is an enormous investment, and we've got to recoup. But we've found we can't use tigers, or, in fact, any of the large carnivora. It simply isn't safe. But there must be that illusion of danger! The trouble is, we're degenerating into a trap-shooting club. And there's no personal danger involved in trap-shooting."

Grandpa said: "Want some fun, eh? Come on up to Maine with me and I'll show you some real hunting. We still got bear back in the mountains."

Gallegher said: "I'm beginning to see. But that personal angle-- I wonder! What is the definition of danger, anyhow?"

"Danger's when something's trying to git you," Grandpa pointed out.

"The unknown--the strange--is dangerous too, simply because we don't understand it. That's why ghost stories have always been

popular. A roar in the dark is more frightening than a tiger in the daylight."

Harding nodded. "I see your point. But there's another factor. The game mustn't be made too easy. It's a cinch to outwit a rabbit. And, naturally, we have to supply our customers with the most modern weapons."

"Why?"

"Safety precautions. The trouble is, with those weapons and scanners and scent-analyzers, any fool can track down and kill an animal. There's no thrill involved unless the animal's a man-eating tiger, and that's a little too thrilling for our underwriters!"

"So what do you want?"

"I'm not sure," Harding said slowly. "A new animal, perhaps. One that fulfills the requirements of Adrenals, Incorporated. But I'm not sure what the answer is, or I wouldn't be asking you."

Gallegher said: "You don't make new animals out of thin air."

"Where do you get them?"

"I wonder. Other planets? Other time-sectors? Other probability-worlds? I got hold of some funny animals once--Lybbblas--by tuning in on a future time-era on Mars, but they wouldn't have filled the bill."

"Other planets, then?"

Gallegher got up and strolled to his workbench. He began to piece together stray cogs and tubes. "I'm getting a thought. The latent factors inherent in the human brain-- My latent factors are rousing to life. Let me see. Perhaps--"

Under his hands a gadget grew. Gallagher remained preoccupied. Presently he cursed, tossed the device aside, and settled back to the liquor-organ. Grandpa had already tried it, but choked on his first sip of a gin buck. He threatened to go back home and take Harding with him and show him some real hunting.

Gallegher pushed the old gentleman off the couch. "Now look, Mr. Harding," he said. "I'll have this for you tomorrow. I've got some thinking to do--"

"Drinking, you mean," Harding said, taking out a bundle of credits. "I've heard a lot about you, Mr. Gallegher. You never work except under pressure. You've got to have a deadline, or you won't do a thing. Well--do you see this? Fifty thousand credits." He glanced at his wrist watch. "I'm giving you one hour. If you don't solve my problem by then, the deal's off."

Gallegher started up from the couch as though he had been bitten. "That's ridiculous. An hour isn't time enough--"

Harding said obdurately: "I'm a methodical man. I know enough about you to realize that you're not. I can find other specialists and technicians, you know. One hour! Or I go out that door and take these fifty thousand credits with me!"

Gallegher eyed the money greedily. He took a quick drink, cursed quietly, and went back to his gadget. This time he kept working on it.

After a while a light shot up from the worktable and hit Gallegher in the eye. He staggered back, yelping.

"Are you all right?" Harding asked, jumping up.

"Sure," Gallegher growled, cutting a switch. "I think I'm getting it. That

light... ouch. I've sunburned my eyeballs." He blinked back tears. Then he went over to the liquor-organ.

After a hearty swig, he nodded at Harding. "I'm getting on the trail of what you want. I don't know how long it will take, though." He winced. "Grandpa. Did you change the setting on this thing?"

"I dunno. I pushed some buttons."

"I thought so. This isn't a gin buck. Wheeooo!"

"Got a wallop, has it?" Grandpa said, getting interested and coming over to try the liquor-organ again.

"Not at all," Gallegher said, walking on his knees toward the audio-sonic recorder. "What's this? A spy, huh? We know how to deal with spies in this house, you dirty traitor." So saying, he rose to his feet, seized a blanket, and threw it over the projector.

At that point the screen, naturally enough, was blank.

"I cleverly outwit myself every time," Gallegher remarked, rising to switch off the projector. "I go to the trouble of building that recorder and then blindfold it just when matters get interesting. I know less than I did before, because there are more unknown factors now."

"Men can know the nature of things," Joe murmured.

"An important concept," Gallegher admitted. "The Greeks found it out quite a while ago, though. Pretty soon, if you keep on thinking hard, you'll come up with the bright discovery that two and two are four."

"Be quiet, you ugly man," Joe said. "I'm getting into abstractions now. Answer the door and leave me alone."

"The door? Why? The bell isn't singing."

"It will," Joe pointed out. "There it goes."

"Visitors at this time of the morning," Gallegher sighed. "Maybe it's Grandpa, though." He pushed a button, studied the doorplate screen, and failed to recognize the lantern-jawed, bushy-browed face. "All right," he said. "Come in. Follow the guide-line." Then he turned to the liquor-organ thirstily before remembering his current Tantalus proclivities.

The lantern-jawed man came into the room. Gallegher said: "Hurry up. I'm being followed by a little brown animal that drinks all my liquor. I've several other troubles, too, but the little brown animal's the worst. If I don't get a drink, I'll die. So tell me what you want and leave me alone to work out my problems. I don't owe you money, do I?"

"That depends," said the newcomer, with a strong Scots accent. "My name is Murdoch Mackenzie, and I assume you're Mr. Gallegher. You look untrustworthy. Where is my partner and the fifty thousand credits he had with him?"

Gallegher pondered. "Your partner, eh? I wonder if you mean Jonas Harding?"

"That's the lad. My partner in Adrenals, Incorporated."

"I haven't seen him--"

With his usual felicity, Joe remarked, "The ugly man with the big ears. How hideous he was."

"Vurra true," Mackenzie nodded. "I note you're using the past tense, or rather that great clanking machine of yours is. Have you perhaps

murdered my partner and disposed of his body with one of your scientific gadgets?"

"Now look--" Gallegher said. "What's the idea? Have I got the mark of Cain on my forehead or something? Why should you jump to a conclusion like that? You're crazy."

Mackenzie rubbed his long jaw and studied Gallegher from under his bushy gray brows. "It would be no great loss, I know," he admitted. "Jonas is little help in the business. Too methodical. But he had fifty thousand credits on his person when he came here last night. There is also the question of the body. The insurance is perfectly enormous. Between ourselves, Mr. Gallegher, I would not hold it against you if you had murdered my unfortunate partner and pocketed the fifty thousand. In fact, I would be willing to consider letting you escape with... say... ten thousand, provided you gave me the rest. But not unless you provided me with legal evidence of Jonas's death, so my underwriters would be satisfied."

"Logic," Joe said admiringly. "Beautiful logic. It's amazing that such logic should come from such an opaque horror."

"I would look far more horrible, my friend, if I had a transparent skin like you," Mackenzie said, "if the anatomy charts are accurate. But we were discussing the matter of my partner's body."

Gallegher said wildly: "This is fantastic. You're probably laying yourself open to compounding a felony or something."

"Then you admit the charge."

"Of course not! You're entirely too sure of yourself, Mr. Mackenzie. I'll bet you killed Harding yourself and you're trying to frame me for it. How do you know he's dead?"

"Now that calls for some explanation, I admit," Mackenzie said. "Jonas was a methodical man. Vurra. I have never known him to miss an appointment for any reason whatsoever. He had appointments last night, and more this morning. One with me. Moreover, he had fifty thousand credits on him when he came here to see you last night."

"How do you know he got here?"

"I brought him, in my aircab. I let him out at your door. I saw him go in."

"Well, you didn't see him go out, but he did," Gallegher said.

Mackenzie, quite unruffled, went on checking points on his bony fingers.

"This morning I checked your record, Mr. Gallegher, and it is not a good one. Unstable, to say the least. You have been mixed up in some shady deals, and you have been accused of crimes in the past. Nothing was ever proved, but you're a sly one, I suspect. The police would agree."

"They can't prove a thing. Harding's probably home in bed."

"He is not. Fifty thousand credits is a lot of money. My partner's insurance amounts to much more than that. The business will be tied up sadly if Jonas remains vanished, and there will be litigation. Litigation costs money."

"I didn't kill your partner!" Gallegher cried.

"Ah," Mackenzie feruled. "Still, if I can prove that you did, it will come to the same thing, and be reasonably profitable for me. You see your position, Mr. Gallegher. Why not admit it, tell me what you did with

the body, and escape with five thousand credits."

"You said ten thousand a while ago."

"You're daft," Mackenzie said firmly. "I said nothing of the sort. At least, you canna prove that I did."

Gallegher said: "Well, suppose we have a drink and talk it over." A new idea had struck him.

"An excellent suggestion."

Gallegher found two glasses and manipulated the liquor-organ. He offered one drink to Mackenzie, but the man shook his head and reached for the other glass. "Poison, perhaps," he said cryptically. "You have an untrustworthy face."

Gallegher ignored that. He was hoping that with two drinks available, the mysterious little brown animal would show its limitations. He tried to gulp the whisky fast, but only a tantalizing drop burned on his tongue. The glass was empty. He lowered it and stared at Mackenzie.

"A cheap trick," Mackenzie said, putting his own glass down on the workbench. "I did not ask for your whisky, you know. How did you make it disappear like that?"

Furious with disappointment, Gallegher snarled: "I'm a wizard. I've sold my soul to the devil. For two cents I'd make you disappear, too."

Mackenzie shrugged. "I am not worried. If you could, you'd have done it before this. As for wizardry, I am far from skeptical, after seeing that monster squatting over there." He indicated the third dynamo that wasn't a dynamo.

"What? You mean you see it, too?"

"I see more than you think, Mr. Gallegher," Mackenzie said darkly. "In fact, I am going to the police now."

"Wait a minute. You can't gain anything by that--"

"I can gain nothing by talking to you. Since you remain obdurate, I will try the police. If they can prove that Jonas is dead, I will at least collect his insurance."

Gallegher said: "Now wait a minute. Your partner did come here. He wanted me to solve a problem for him."

"Ah. And you solved it?"

"N-no. At least--"

"Then I can get no profit from you," Mackenzie said firmly, and turned to the door. "You will hear from me vurra soon."

He departed. Gallegher sank down miserably on the couch and brooded. Presently he lifted his eyes to stare at the third dynamo.

It was not, then, a hallucination, as he had first suspected. Nor was it a dynamo. It was a squat, shapeless object like a truncated pyramid that had begun to melt down, and two large blue eyes were watching him. Eyes, or agates, or painted metal. He couldn't be sure. It was about three feet high and three feet in diameter at the base.

"Joe," Gallegher said, "why didn't you tell me about that thing?"

"I thought you saw it," Joe explained.

"I did, but--what is it?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Where could it have come from?"

"Your subconscious alone knows what you were up to last night," Joe said. "Perhaps Grandpa and Jonas Harding know, but they're not around, apparently."

Gallegher went to the televue and put in a call to Maine. "Grandpa may have gone back home. It isn't likely he'd have taken Harding with him, but we can't miss any bets. I'll check on that. One thing, my eyes have stopped watering. What was that gadget I made last night?" He passed to the workbench and studied the cryptic assemblage. "I wonder why I put a shoehorn in that circuit?"

"If you'd keep a supply of materials available here, Gallegher Plus wouldn't have to depend on makeshifts," Joe said severely.

"Uh. I could get drunk and let my subconscious take over again... no, I can't. Joe, I can't drink anymore! I'm bound hand and foot to the water wagon!"

"I wonder if Dalton had the right idea after all?"

Gallegher snarled: "Do you have to extrude your eyes that way? I need help!"

"You won't get it from me," Joe said. "The problem's extremely simple, if you'd put your mind to it."

"Simple, is it? Then suppose you tell me the answer!"

"I want to be sure of a certain philosophical concept first."

"Take all the time you want. When I'm rotting in jail, you can spend

your leisure hours pondering abstracts. Get me a beer! No, never mind. I couldn't drink it anyway. What does this little brown animal look like?"

"Oh, use your head," Joe said.

Gallegher growled; "I could use it for an anchor, the way it feels. You know all the answers. Why not tell me instead of babbling?"

"Men can know the nature of things," Joe said. "Today is the logical development of yesterday. Obviously you've solved the problem Adrenals, Incorporated, gave you."

"What? Oh. I see. Harding wanted a new animal or something."

"Well?"

"I've got two of 'em," Gallegher said. "That little brown invisible dipsomaniac and that blue-eyed critter sitting on the floor. Oh-ho! Where did I pick them up? Another dimension?"

"How should I know? You've got 'em."

"I'll say I have," Gallegher agreed. "Maybe I made a machine that scooped them off another world--and maybe Grandpa and Harding are on that world now! A sort of exchange of prisoners. I don't know. Harding wanted non-dangerous beasts elusive enough to give hunters a thrill--but where's the element of danger?" He gulped. "Conceivably the pure alienage of the critters provides that illusion. Anyway, I'm shivering."

"Flooding of the blood stream with adrenalin gives tone to the whole system," Joe said smugly.

"So I captured or got hold of those beasts somehow, apparently, to

solve Harding's problem... mm-m." Gallegher went to stand in front of the shapeless blue-eyed creature. "Hey, you," he said.

There was no response. The mild blue eyes continued to regard nothing. Gallegher poked a finger tentatively at one of them.

Nothing at all happened. The eye was immovable and hard as glass. Gallegher tried the thing's bluish, sleek skin. It felt like metal. Repressing his mild panic, he tried to lift the beast from the floor, but failed completely. It was either enormously heavy or it had sucking-disks on its bottom.

"Eyes," Gallegher said. "No other sensory organs, apparently. That isn't what Harding wanted."

"I think it clever of the turtle," Joe suggested.

"Turtle? Oh. Like the armadillo. That's right. It's a problem, isn't it? How can you kill or capture a... a beast like this? Its exoderm feels plenty hard, it's immovable--that's it, Joe. Quarry doesn't have to depend on flight or fight. The turtle doesn't. And a barracuda could go nuts trying to eat a turtle. This would be perfect quarry for the lazy intellectual who wants a thrill. But what about adrenalin?"

Joe said nothing. Gallegher pondered, and presently seized upon some reagents and apparatus. He tried a diamond drill. He tried acids. He tried every way he could think of to rouse the blue-eyed beast. After an hour his furious curses were interrupted by a remark from the robot.

"Well, what about adrenalin?" Joe inquired ironically.

"Shut up!" Gallegher yelled. "That thing just sits there looking at me! Adren... what?"

"Anger as well as fear stimulates the suprarenals, you know. I suppose any human would become infuriated by continued passive resistance."

"That's right," said the sweating Gallegher, giving the creature a final kick. He turned to the couch. "Increase the nuisance quotient enough and you can substitute anger for fear. But what about that little brown animal? I'm not mad at it."

"Have a drink," Joe suggested.

"All right, I am mad at the kleptomaniacal so-and-so! You said it moved so fast I can't see it. How can I catch it?"

"There are undoubtedly methods."

"It's as elusive as the other critter is invulnerable. Could I immobilize it by getting it drunk?"

"Metabolism."

"Burns up its fuel too fast to get drunk? Probably. But it must need a lot of food."

"Have you looked in the kitchen lately?" Joe asked.

Visions of a depleted larder filling his mind, Gallegher rose. He paused beside the blue-eyed object.

"This one hasn't got any metabolism to speak of. But it has to eat, I suppose. Still, eat what? Air? It's possible."

The doorbell sang. Gallegher moaned, "What now?" and admitted the guest. A man with a ruddy face and a belligerent expression came in, told Gallegher he was under tentative arrest, and called in

the rest of his crew, who immediately began searching the house.

"Mackenzie sent you, I suppose?" Gallegher said.

"That's right. My name's Johnson. Department of Violence, Unproved. Do you want to call counsel?"

"Yes," said Gallegher, jumping at the opportunity. He used the visor to get an attorney he knew, and began outlining his troubles. But the lawyer interrupted him.

"Sorry. I'm not taking any jobs on spec. You know my rates."

"Who said anything about spec?"

"Your last check bounced yesterday. It's cash on the line this time, or no deal."

"I... Now wait! I've just finished a commissioned job that's paying off big. I can have the money for you--"

"When I see the color of your credits, I'll be your lawyer," the unsympathetic voice said, and the screen blanked. The detective, Johnson, tapped Gallegher on the shoulder.

"So you're overdrawn at the bank, eh? Needed money?"

"That's no secret. Besides, I'm not broke now, exactly. I finished a--"

"A job. Yeah, I heard that, too. So you're suddenly rich. How much did this job pay you? It wouldn't be fifty thousand credits, would it?"

Gallegher drew a deep breath. "I'm not saying a word," he said, and retreated to the couch, trying to ignore the Department men who were searching the lab. He needed a lawyer. He needed one bad.

But he couldn't get one without money. Suppose he saw Mackenzie--

The visor put him in touch with the man. Mackenzie seemed cheerful.

"Hello," he said, "see, the police have arrived."

Gallegher said, "Listen, that job your partner gave me--I've solved your problem. I've got what you want."

"Jonas's body, you mean?" Mackenzie seemed pleased.

"No! The animals you wanted! The perfect quarry!"

"Oh. Well. Why didn't you say so sooner?"

"Get over here and call off the police!" Gallegher insisted. "I tell you, I've got your ideal Hunt animals for you!"

"I dinna ken if I can call off the bloodhounds," Mackenzie said, "but I'll be over directly. I will not pay vurra much, you understand?"

"Bah!" Gallegher snarled, and broke the connection. The visor buzzed at him. He touched the receiver, and a woman's face came in.

She said: "Mr. Gallegher, with reference to your call of inquiry regarding your grandfather, we report that investigation shows that he has not returned to our Maine sector. That is all."

She vanished. Johnson said: "What's this? Your grandfather? Where's he at?"

"I ate him," Gallegher said, twitching. "Why don't you leave me alone?"

Johnson made a note. "Your grandfather. I'll just check up a bit. Incidentally, what's that thing over there?" He pointed to the blue-eyed beast.

"I've been studying a curious case of degenerative osteomyelitis affecting a baroque cephalopod!"

"Oh, I see. Thanks. Fred, see about this guy's grandfather. What are you gaping at?"

Fred said: "That screen. It's set up for projection."

Johnson moved to the audio-sonic recorder. "Better impound it. Probably not important, but--" He touched a switch. The screen turned blank, but Gallegher's voice said: "We know how to deal with spies in this house, you dirty traitor."

Johnson moved the switch again. He glanced at Gallegher, his ruddy face impassive, and in silence began to rewind the wire tape. Gallegher said: "Joe, get me a dull knife. I want to cut my throat, and I don't want to make it too easy for myself. I'm getting used to doing things the hard way."

But Joe, pondering philosophy, refused to answer.

Johnson began to run off the recording. He took out a picture and compared it with what showed on the screen.

"That's Harding, all right," he said. "Thanks for keeping this for us, Mr. Gallegher."

"Don't mention it," Gallegher said. "I'll even show the hangman how to tie the knot around my neck."

"Ha-ha. Taking notes, Fred? Right."

The reel unrolled relentlessly. But, Gallegher tried to make himself believe, there was nothing really incriminating recorded.

He was disillusioned after the screen went blank, at the point when he had thrown a blanket over the recorder last night. Johnson held up his hand for silence. The screen still showed nothing, but after a moment or two voices were clearly audible.

"You have thirty-seven minutes to go, Mr. Gallegher."

"Just stay where you are. I'll have this in a minute. Besides, I want to get my hands on your fifty thousand credits."

"But--"

"Relax. I'm getting it. In a very short time your worries will be over."

"Did I say that?" Gallegher thought wildly. "What a fool I am! Why didn't I turn off the radio when I covered up the lens?"

Grandpa's voice said: "Trying to kill me by inches, eh, you young whippersnapper!"

"All the old so-and-so wanted was another bottle," Gallegher moaned to himself. "But try to make those flatfeet believe that! Still--" He brightened. "Maybe I can find out what really happened to Grandpa and Harding. If I shot them off to another world, there might be some clue--"

"Watch closely now," Gallegher's voice said from last night. "I'll explain as I proceed. Oh-oh. Wait a minute. I'm going to patent this later, so I don't want any spies. I can trust you two not to talk, but that recorder's still turned on to audio. Tomorrow, if I played it back, I'd be saying to myself, 'Gallegher, you talk too much. There's only one way

to keep a secret safe.'Off it goes!"

Someone screamed. The shriek was cut off midway. The projector stopped humming. There was utter silence.

The door opened to admit Murdoch Mackenzie. He was rubbing his hands.

"I came right down," he said briskly. "So you've solved our problem, eh, Mr. Gallagher? Perhaps we can do business then. After all, there's no real evidence that you killed Jonas--and I'll be willing to drop the charges, if you've got what Adrenals, Incorporated, wants."

"Pass me those handcuffs, Fred." Johnson requested.

Gallegher protested, "You can't do this to me!"

"A fallacious theorem," Joe said, "which, I note, is now being disproved by the empirical method. How illogical all you ugly people are."

The social trend always lags behind the technological one. And while technology tended, in these days, toward simplification, the social pattern was immensely complicated, since it was partly an outgrowth of historical precedent and partly a result of the scientific advance of the era. Take jurisprudence. Cockburn and Blackwood and a score of others had established certain general and specific rules--say, regarding patents--but those rules could be made thoroughly impractical by a single gadget. The Integrators could solve problems no human brain could manage, so, as a governor, it was necessary to build various controls into those semimechanical colloids. Moreover, an electronic duplicator could infringe not only on patents but on property rights, and attorneys prepared voluminous briefs on such questions as whether "rarity rights" are real property, whether a

gadget made on a duplicator is a "representation" or a copy, and whether mass-duplication of chinchillas is unfair competition to a chinchilla breeder who depended on old-fashioned biological principles. All of which added up to the fact that the world, slightly punch-drunk with technology, was trying desperately to walk a straight line. Eventually the confusion would settle down.

It hadn't settled down yet.

So legal machinery was a construction far more complicated than an Integrator. Precedent warred with abstract theory as lawyer warred with lawyer. It was all perfectly clear to the technicians, but they were much too impractical to be consulted; they were apt to remark wickedly, "So my gadget unstabilizes property rights? Well--why have property rights, then?"

And you can't do that!

Not to a world that had found security, of a sort, for thousands of years in rigid precedents of social intercourse. The ancient dyke of formal culture was beginning to leak in innumerable spots, and, had you noticed, you might have seen hundreds of thousands of frantic, small figures rushing from danger-spot to danger-spot, valorously plugging the leaks with their fingers, arms, or heads. Some day it would be discovered that there was no encroaching ocean beyond that dyke, but that day hadn't yet come.

In a way, that was lucky for Gallegher. Public officials were chary about sticking their necks out. A simple suit for false arrest might lead to fantastic ramifications and big trouble. The hard-headed Murdoch Mackenzie took advantage of this situation to 'vise his own personal attorney and toss a monkey wrench in the legal wheels. The attorney spoke to Johnson.

There was no corpse. The audio-taping recording was not sufficient. Moreover, there were vital questions involving habeas corpus and search warrants. Johnson called Headquarters Jurisprudence and the argument raged over the heads of Gallegher and the imperturbable Mackenzie. It ended with Johnson leaving, with his crew--and the increasing recording--and threatening to return as soon as a judge could issue the appropriate writs and papers. Meanwhile, he said, there would be officers on guard outside the house. With a malignant glare for Mackenzie, he stamped out.

"And now to business," said Mackenzie, rubbing his hands. "Between ourselves"--he leaned forward confidentially--"I'm just as glad to get rid of that partner of mine. Whether or not you killed him, I hope he stays vanished. Now I can run the business my way, for a change."

"It's all right about that," Gallegher said, "but what about me? I'll be in custody again as soon as Johnson can wangle it."

"But not convicted," Mackenzie pointed out. "A clever lawyer can fix you up. There was a similar case in which the defendant got off with a defense of non esse--his attorney went into metaphysics and proved that the murdered man had never existed. Quite specious, but so far the murderer's gone free."

Gallegher said: "I've searched the house, and Johnson's men did, too. There's simply no trace of Jonas Harding or my grandfather. And I'll tell you frankly, Mr. Mackenzie, I haven't the slightest idea what happened to them."

Mackenzie gestured airily. "We must be methodical. You mentioned you had solved a certain problem for Adrenals, Incorporated. Now, I'll admit, that interested me."

Silently Gallegher pointed to the blue-eyed dynamo. Mackenzie studied the object thoughtfully.

"Well?" he said.

"That's it. The perfect quarry."

Mackenzie walked over to the thing, rapped its hide, and looked deeply into the mild azure eyes. "How fast can it run?" he asked shrewdly.

Gallegher said: "It doesn't have to run. You see, it's invulnerable."

"Ha. Hum. Perhaps if you'd explain a wee bit more--"

But Mackenzie did not seem pleased with the explanation. "No," he said, "I don't see it. There would be no thrill to hunting a critter like that. You forget our customers demand excitement--adrenal stimulation."

"They'll get it. Anger has the same effect as rage--" Gallegher went into detail.

But Mackenzie shook his head. "Both fear and anger give you excess energy you've got to use up. You can't, against a passive quarry. You'll just cause neuroses. We try to get rid of neuroses, not create them."

Gallegher, growing desperate, suddenly remembered the little brown beast and began to discuss that. Once, Mackenzie interrupted with a demand to see the creature. Gallegher slid around that one fast.

"Ha," Mackenzie said finally. "It isna canny. How can you hunt something that's invisible?"

"Oh--ultraviolet. Scent-analyzers. It's a test for ingenuity--"

"Our customers are not ingenious. They don't want to be. They want a change and a vacation from routine, hard work--or easy work, as the case may be--they want a rest. They don't want to beat their brains working out methods to catch a thing that moves faster than a pixy, nor do they want to chase a critter that's out of sight before it even gets there. You are a vurra clever man, Mr. Gallegher, but it begins to look as though Jonas's insurance is my best bet after all."

"Now wait--"

Mackenzie pursed his lips. "I'll admit the beasties may--I say may--have some possibilities. But what good is quarry that can't be caught? Perhaps if you'd work out a way to capture these other-worldly animals of yours, we might do business. At present, I willna buy a pig in a poke."

"I'll find a way," Gallegher promised wildly. "But I can't do it in jail."

"Ah. I am a little irritated with you, Mr. Gallegher. You tricked me into believing you had solved our problem. Which you havena done--yet. Consider the thought of jail. Your adrenalin may stimulate your brain into working out a way to trap these animals of yours. Though, even so, I can make no rash promises--"

Murdoch Mackenzie grinned at Gallegher and went out, closing the door softly behind him. Gallegher began to dine off his finger nails.

"Men can know the nature of things," Joe said, with an air of solid conviction.

At that point matters were complicated even further by the appearance, on the television screen, of a gray-haired man who announced that one of Gallegher's checks had just bounced. Three

hundred and fifty credits, the man said, and how about it?

Gallegher looked dazedly at the identification card on the screen. "You're with United Cultures? What's that?"

The gray-haired man said silkily, "Biological and medical supplies and laboratories, Mr. Gallegher."

"What did I order from you?"

"We have a receipt for six hundred pounds of Vitaplasm, first grade. We made delivery within an hour."

"And when--"

The gray-haired man went into more detail. Finally Gallegher made a few lying promises and turned from the blanking screen. He looked wildly around the lab.

"Six hundred pounds of artificial protoplasm," he murmured. "Ordered by Gallegher Plus. He's got delusions of economic grandeur."

"It was delivered," Joe said. "You signed the receipt, the night Grandpa and Jonas Harding disappeared."

"But what could I do with the stuff? It's used for plastic surgery and for humano-prosthesis. Artificial limbs and stuff. It's cultured cellular tissue, this Vitaplasm. Did I use it to make some animals? That's biologically impossible. I think. How could I have molded Vitaplasm into a little brown animal that's invisible? What about the brain and the neural structure? Joe, six hundred pounds of Vitaplasm has simply disappeared. Where has it gone?" But Joe was silent.

Hours later Gallegher was furiously busy. "The trick is," he explained

to Joe, "to find out all I can about those critters. Then maybe I can tell where they came from and how I got 'em. Then perhaps I can discover where Grandpa and Harding went. Then--"

"Why not sit down and think about it?"

"That's the difference between us. You've got no instinct of self-preservation. You could sit down and think while a chain reaction took place in your toes and worked up, but not me. I'm too young to die. I keep thinking of Reading Gaol. I need a drink. If I could only get high, my demon subconscious could work out the whole problem for me. Is that little brown animal around?"

"No," Joe said.

"Then maybe I can steal a drink." Gallegher exploded, after an abortive attempt that ended in utter failure: "Nobody can move that fast."

"Accelerated metabolism. It must have smelled alcohol. Or perhaps it has additional senses. Even I can scarcely varish it."

"If I mixed kerosene with the whisky, maybe the dipsomaniacal little monster wouldn't like it. Still, neither would I. Ah, well. Back to the mill," Gallegher said, as he tried reagent after reagent on the blue-eyed dynamo, without any effect at all.

"Men can know the nature of things." Joe said irritatingly.

"Shut up. I wonder if I could electroplate this creature? That would immobilize it, all right. But it's immobilized already. How does it eat?"

"Logically, I'd say osmosis."

"Very likely. Osmosis of what?"

Joe clicked irritably. "There are dozens of ways you could solve your problem. Instrumentalism. Determinism. Vitalism. Work from a posteriori to a priori. It's perfectly obvious to me that you've solved the problem Adrenals, Incorporated, set you."

"I have?"

"Certainly."

"How?"

"Very simple. Men can know the nature of things."

"Will you stop repeating that out-moded basic and try to be useful? You're wrong, anyway. Men can know the nature of things by experiment and reason combined!"

Joe said: "Ridiculous. Philosophical incompetence. If you can't prove your point by logic, you've failed. Anybody who has to depend on experiment is beneath contempt."

"Why should I sit here arguing philosophical concepts with a robot?" Gallegher demanded of no one in particular. "How would you like me to demonstrate the fact that ideation is dependent on your having a radioatomic brain that isn't scattered all over the floor?"

"Kill me, then," Joe said. "It's your loss and the world's. Earth will be a poorer place when I die. But coercion means nothing to me. I have no instinct of self-preservation."

"Now look," Gallegher said, trying a new tack, "if you know the answer, why not tell me? Demonstrate that wonderful logic of yours. Convince me without having to depend on experiment. Use pure reason."

"Why should I want to convince you? I'm convinced. And I'm so beautiful and perfect that I can achieve no higher glory than to admire me."

"Narcissus," Gallegher snarled. "You're a combination of Narcissus and Nietzsche's Superman."

"Men can know the nature of things," Joe said.

The next development was a subpoena for the transparent robot. The legal machinery was beginning to move, an immensely complicated gadget that worked on a logic as apparently twisted as Joe's own. Gallegher himself, it seemed, was temporarily inviolate, through some odd interpretation of jurisprudence. But the State's principle was that the sum of the parts was equal to the whole. Joe was classified as one of the parts, the total of which equaled Gallegher. Thus the robot found itself in court, listening to a polemic with impassive scorn.

Gallegher, flanked by Murdoch Mackenzie and a corps of attorneys, was with Joe. This was an informal hearing. Gallegher didn't pay much attention; he was concentrating on finding a way to put the bite on the recalcitrant robot, who knew all the answers but wouldn't talk. He had been studying the philosophers, with an eye toward meeting Joe on his own ground, but so far had succeeded only in acquiring a headache and an almost unendurable longing for a drink. Even out of his laboratory, though, he remained Tantalus. The invisible little brown animal followed him around and stole his liquor.

One of Mackenzie's lawyers jumped up. "I object," he said. There was a brief wrangle as to whether Joe should be classified as a witness or as Exhibit a. If the latter, the subpoena had been falsely served. The Justice pondered.

"As I see it," he declared, "the question is one of determinism versus voluntarism. If this... ah... robot has free will--"

"Ha!" Gallegher said, and was shushed by an attorney. He subsided rebelliously.

--then it, or he, is a witness. But, on the other hand, there is the possibility that the robot, in acts of apparent choice, is the mechanical expression of heredity and past environment. For heredity read... ah... initial mechanical basics."

"Whether or not the robot is a rational being, Mr. Justice, is beside the point," the prosecutor put in.

"I do not agree. Law is based on res--"

Joe said: "Mr. Justice, may I speak?"

"Your ability to do so rather automatically gives you permission," the Justice said, studying the robot in a baffled way. "Go ahead."

Joe had seemingly found the connection between law, logic, and philosophy. He said happily: "I've figured it all out. A thinking robot is a rational being. I am a thinking robot--therefore I am a rational being."

"What a fool," Gallegher groaned, longing for the sane logics of electronics and chemistry. "The old Socratic syllogism. Even I could point out the flaw in that?"

"Quiet," Mackenzie whispered. "All the lawyers really depend on is tying up the case in such knots nobody can figure it out. Your robot is perhaps not such a fool as you think."

An argument started as to whether thinking robots really were

rational beings. Gallegher brooded. He couldn't see the

"Then," the prosecutor said triumphantly, "I wish to bring a charge of assault and battery against Mr. Gallegher. Since this robot has been tentatively classed as a rational being, any activity causing him, or it, to lose consciousness or the power of mobility is contra bonos mores, and may be classed as mayhem."

Mackenzie's attorneys were ruffled. Gallegher said: "What does that mean?"

A lawyer whispered: "They can hold you, and hold that robot as a witness." He stood up. "Mr. Justice. Our statements were in reply to purely theoretical questions."

The prosecutor said: "But the robot's statement answered a non-theoretical question."

"The robot was not on oath."

"Easily remedied," said the prosecutor, while Gallegher saw his last hopes slipping rapidly away. He thought hard, while matters proceeded.

"Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help you God?"

Gallegher leaped to his feet. "Mr. Justice, I object."

"Indeed. To what?"

"To the validity of that oath."

Mackenzie said: "Ah-ha!"

The Justice was thoughtful. "Will you please elucidate, Mr. Gallegher? Why should the oath not be administered to this robot?"

"Such an oath is applicable to man only."

"And?"

"It presupposes the existence of the soul. At least it implies theism, a personal religion. Can a robot take an oath?"

The Justice eyed Joe. "It's a point, certainly. Ah... Joe. Do you believe in a personal deity?"

"I do."

point, really. Nor did it become clear until, from the maze of contradictions, there emerged the tentative decision that Joe was a rational being. This seemed to please the prosecutor immensely.

"Mr. Justice," he announced, "we have learned that Mr. Galloway Gallegher two nights ago inactivated the robot before us now. Is this not true, Mr. Gallegher?"

But Mackenzie's hand kept Gallegher in his seat. One of the defending attorneys rose to meet the question.

"We admit nothing," he said. "However, if you wish to pose a theoretical question, we will answer it."

The query was posed theoretically.

"Then the theoretical answer is 'yes,' Mr. Prosecutor. A robot of this type can be turned on and off at will."

"Can the robot turn itself off?"

"Yes."

"But this did not occur? Mr. Gallegher inactivated the robot at the time Mr. Jonas Harding was with him in his laboratory two nights ago?"

"Theoretically, that is true. There was a temporary inactivation."

"Then," said the prosecutor, "we wish to question the robot, who has been classed as a rational being."

"The decision was tentative," the defense objected.

"Accepted. Mr. Justice--"

"All right," said the Justice, who was still staring at Joe, "you may ask your questions."

"Ah... ah--" The prosecutor, facing the robot, hesitated.

"Call me Joe," Joe said.

"Thank you. Ah... is this true? Did Mr. Gallegher inactivate you at the time and place stated?"

"Yes."

The prosecutor beamed. "Then we can proceed."

"Wait a minute," Murdoch Mackenzie said, rising. "May I ask a question, Mr. Justice?"

"Go ahead."

Mackenzie stared at the robot. "Well, now. Will you tell me, please,

what this personal deity of yours is like?"

"Certainly," Joe said. "Just like me."

After a while it degenerated into a theological argument. Gallegher left the attorneys debating the apparently vital point of how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, and went home temporarily scot-free, with Joe. Until such points as the robot's religious basics were settled, nothing could be done. All the way, in the aircab, Mackenzie insisted on pointing out the merits of Calvinism to Joe.

At the door Mackenzie made a mild threat. "I did not intend to give you so much rope, you understand. But you will work all the harder with the threat of prison hanging over your head. I don't know how long I can keep you a free man. If you can work out an answer quickly--"

"What sort of answer?"

"I am easily satisfied. Jonas's body, now--"

"Bah!" Gallegher said, and went into his laboratory and sat down morosely. He siphoned himself a drink before he remembered the little brown animal. Then he lay back, staring from the blue-eyed dynamo to Joe and back again.

Finally he said: "There's an old Chinese idea that the man who first stops arguing and starts swinging with his fists admits his intellectual defeat."

Joe said: "Naturally. Reason is sufficient; if you need experiment to prove your point, you're a lousy philosopher and logician."

Gallegher fell back on casuistry. "First step, animal. Fist-swinging. Second step, human. Pure logic. But what about the third step?"

"What third step?"

"Men can know the nature of things--but you're not a man. Your personal deity isn't an anthropomorphic one. Three steps: animal, man, and what we'll call for convenience, superman--though man doesn't necessarily enter into it. We've always attributed godlike traits to the theoretical superbeing. Suppose, just for the sake of having a label, we call this third-stage entity Joe."

"Why not?" Joe said.

"Then the two basic concepts of logic don't apply. Men can know the nature of things by pure reason, and also by experiment and reason. But such second-stage concepts are as elementary to Joe as Plato's ideas were to Aristotle." Gallagher crossed his fingers behind his back. "The question is, then, what's the third-stage operation for Joe?"

"Godlike?" the robot said.

"You've got special senses, you know. You can varish, whatever that is. Do you need ordinary logical methods? Suppose--"

"Yes," Joe said, "I can varish, all right. I can skren, too. Hm-m-m."

Gallagher abruptly rose from the couch. "What a fool I am. 'Drink me'. That's the answer. Joe, shut up. Go off in a corner and varish."

"I'm skrenning," Joe said.

"Then skren. I've finally got an idea. When I woke up yesterday, I was thinking about a bottle labeled 'Drink me'. When Alice took a drink, she changed size, didn't she? Where's that reference book? I wish I knew more about technology. Vasoconstrictor... hemostatic... here it

is--demonstrates the metabolic regulation mechanisms of the vegetative nervous system. Metabolism. I wonder now--"

Gallegher rushed to the workbench and examined the bottles. "Vitalism. Life is the basic reality, of which everything else is a form or manifestation. Now. I had a problem to solve for Adrenals, Incorporated. Jonas Harding and Grandpa were here. Harding gave me an hour to fill the bill. The problem... a dangerous and harmless animal. Paradox. That isn't it. Harding's clients wanted thrills and safety at the same time. I've got no lab animals on tap at the moment.... Joe!"

"Well?"

"Watch," Gallegher said. He poured a drink and watched the liquid vanish before he tasted it. "Now. What happened?"

"The little brown animal drank it."

"Is that little brown animal, by any chance--Grandpa?"

"That's right," Joe said.

Gallegher blistered the robot's transparent hide with sulphurous oaths. "Why didn't you tell me? You--"

"I answered your question," the robot said smugly. "Grandpa's brown, isn't he? And he's an animal."

"But--little! I thought it was a critter about as big as a rabbit."

"The only standard of comparison is the majority of the species. That's the yardstick. Compared to the average height of humans, Grandpa is little. A little brown animal."

"So it's Grandpa, is it?" Gallegher said, returning to the workbench. "And he's simply speeded up. Accelerated metabolism. Adrenalin. Hm-m-m. Now I know what to look for, maybe--"

He fell to. But it was sundown before Gallegher emptied a small vial into a glass, siphoned whisky into it, and watched the mixture disappear.

A flickering began. Something flashed from corner to corner of the room. Gradually it became visible as a streaking brownness that resolved itself, finally, into Grandpa. He stood before Gallegher, jittering like mad as the last traces of the accelerative formula wore off.

"Hello, Grandpa," Gallegher said placatingly.

Grandpa's nutcracker face wore an expression of malevolent fury. For the first time in his life, the old gentleman was drunk. Gallegher stared in utter amazement.

"I'm going back to Maine," Grandpa cried, and fell over backwards.

"Never seen such a lot of slow pokes in my life," Grandpa said, devouring a steak. "My, I'm hungry. Next time I let you stick a needle in me I'll know better. How many months have I been like this?"

"Two days," Gallegher said, carefully mixing up a formula. "It was a metabolic accelerator, Grandpa. You just lived faster, that's all."

"All! Bah. Couldn't eat nothing. Food was solid as a rock. Only thing I could get down my gullet was liquor."

"Oh?"

"Hard chewing. Even with my store teeth. Even whisky tasted hotter.

As for a steak like this, I couldn't've managed it."

"You were living faster." Gallegher glanced at the robot, who was still quietly skrenning in a corner. "Let me see. The antithesis of an accelerator is a decelerator-- Grandpa, where's Jonas Harding?"

"In there," Grandpa said, pointing to the blue-eyed dynamo and thus confirming Gallegher's suspicion.

"Vitaplasm. So that was it. That's why I had a lot of Vitaplasm sent over a couple of nights ago. Hm-m-m." Gallegher examined the sleek, impermeable surface of the apparent dynamo. After a while he tried a hypodermic syringe. He couldn't penetrate the hard shell.

Instead, using a new mixture he had concocted from the bottles on his workbench, he dripped a drop of the liquid on the substance. Presently it softened. At that spot Gallegher made an injection, and was delighted to see a color-change spread out from the locus till the entire mass was pallid and plastic.

"Vitaplasm," he exulted. "Ordinary artificial protoplasm cells, that's all. No wonder it looked hard. I'd given it a decelerative treatment. An approach to molecular stasis. Anything metabolizing that slowly would seem hard as iron." He wadded up great bunches of the surrogate and dumped it into a convenient vat. Something began to form around the blue eyes--the shape of a cranium, broad shoulders, a torso--

Freed from the disguising mass of Vitaplasm, Jonas Harding was revealed crouching on the floor, silent as a statue.

His heart wasn't beating. He didn't breathe. The decelerator held him in an unbreakable grip of passivity.

Not quite unbreakable. Gallegher, about to apply the hypodermic,

paused and looked from Joe to Grandpa. "Now why did I do that?" he demanded.

Then he answered his own question.

"The time limit. Harding gave me an hour to solve his problem. Time's relative--especially when your metabolism is slowed down. I must have given Harding a shot of the decelerator so he wouldn't realize how much time had passed. Let's see." Gallegher applied a drop to Harding's impermeable skin and watched the spot soften and change hue. "Uh-huh. With Harding frozen like that, I could take weeks to work on the problem, and when he woke up, he'd figure only a short time had passed. But why did I use the Vitaplasm on him?"

Grandpa downed a beer. "When you're drunk, you're apt to do anything," he contended, reaching for another steak.

"True, true. But Gallegher Plus is logical. A strange, eerie kind of logic, but logic nevertheless. Let me see. I shot the decelerator into Harding, and then--there he was. Rigid and stiff. I couldn't leave him kicking around the lab, could I? If anybody came in they'd think I had a corpse on my hands!"

"You mean he ain't dead?" Grandpa demanded.

"Of course not. Merely decelerated. I know! I camouflaged Harding's body. I sent out for Vitaplasm, molded the stuff around his body, and then applied the decelerator to the Vitaplasm. It works on living cellular substance--slows it down. And slowed down to that extent, it's impermeable and immovable!"

"You're crazy," Grandpa said.

"I'm short-sighted," Gallegher admitted. "At least, Gallegher Plus is. Imagine leaving Harding's eyes visible, so I'd be reminded the guy was under that pile when I woke up from my binge! What did I construct that recorder for, anyhow? The logic Gallegher Plus uses is far more fantastic than Joe's."

"Don't bother me," Joe said. "I'm still skrenning."

Gallegher put the hypodermic needle into the soft spot on Harding's arm. He injected the accelerator, and within a moment or two Jonas Harding stirred, blinked his blue eyes, and got up from the floor. "Ouch!" he said, rubbing his arm. "Did you stick me with something?"

"An accident," Gallegher said, watching the man warily. "Uh... this problem of yours--"

Harding found a chair and sat down, yawning. "Solved it?"

"You gave me an hour."

"Oh. Yes, of course." Harding looked at his watch. "It's stopped. Well, what about it?"

"Just how long a time do you think has lapsed since you came into this laboratory?"

"Half an hour?" Harding hazarded.

"Two months," Grandpa snapped.

"You're both right," Gallegher said. "I'd have another answer, but I'd be right, too."

Harding obviously thought that Gallegher was still drunk. He stayed

doggedly on the subject.

"What about that specialized animal we need? You still have half an hour--"

"I don't need it," Gallegher said, a great white light dawning in his mind. "I've got your answer for you. But it isn't quite what you think it is." He relaxed on the couch and considered the liquor-organ. Now that he could drink again, he found he preferred to prolong the anticipation.

"I came upon no wine so wonderful as thirst," he remarked.

"Claptrap," Grandpa said.

Gallegher said: "The clients of Adrenals, Incorporated, want to hunt animals. They want a thrill, so they need dangerous animals. They have to be safe, so they can't have dangerous animals. It seems paradoxical, but it isn't. The answer doesn't lie in the animal. It's in the hunter."

Harding blinked. "Come again?"

"Tigers. Ferocious man-eating tigers. Lions. Jaguars. Water buffalo. The most vicious, carnivorous animals you can get. That's part of the answer."

"Listen--" Harding said. "Maybe you've got the wrong idea. The tigers aren't our customers. We don't supply clients to the animals, it's the other way round."

"I must make a few more tests," Gallegher said, "but the basic principle's right here in my hand. An accelerator. A latent metabolic accelerator with a strong concentration of adrenalin as the catalyst. Like this--" He sketched a vivid verbal picture.

Armed with a rifle the client wandered through the artificial jungle, seeking quarry. He had already paid his fee to Adrenals, Incorporated., and got his intravenous shot of the latent accelerator. That substance permeated his blood stream, doing nothing as yet, waiting for the catalyst.

The tiger launched itself from the underbrush. It shot toward the client like catapulted murder, fangs bared. As the claws neared the man's back, the suprarenals shot adrenalin into the blood stream in strong concentration.

That was the catalyst. The latent accelerative factor became active.

The client speeded up--tremendously.

He stepped away from the body of the tiger, apparently frozen in midair, and did what seemed best to him before the effect of the accelerator wore off. When it did, he returned to normal--and by that time he could be in the supply station of Adrenals, Incorporated, getting another intravenous shot--unless he'd decided to bag his tiger the easy way.

It was as simple as that.

"Ten thousand credits," Gallegher said, happily counting them. "The balance due as soon as I work out the catalytic angle. Which is a cinch. Any fourth-rate chemist could do it. What intrigues me is the forthcoming interview between Harding and Murdoch Mackenzie. When they compare the time element, it's going to be funny."

"I want a drink," Grandpa said. "Where's a bottle?"

"Even in court, I think I could prove I only took an hour or less to solve the problem. It was Harding's hour, of course, but time is relative.

Entropy--metabolism--what a legal battle that would be! Still, it won't happen. I know the formula for the accelerator and Harding doesn't. He'll pay the other forty thousand--and Mackenzie won't have any kicks. After all, I'm giving Adrenals, Incorporated, the success factor they needed."

"Well, I'm still going back to Maine," Grandpa contended. "Least you can do is give me a bottle."

"Go out and buy one," Gallegher said, tossing the old gentleman several credits. "Buy several. I often wonder what the vintners buy--"

"Eh?"

"--one-half so precious as the stuff they sell. No, I'm not tight. But I'm going to be." Gallegher clutched the liquor-organ's mouth-piece in a loving grip and began to play alcoholic arpeggios on the keyboard. Grandpa, with a parting sneer at such new-fangled contraptions, took his departure.

Silence fell over the laboratory. Bubbles and Monstro, the two dynamos, sat quiescent. Neither of them had bright blue eyes. Gallegher experimented with cocktails and felt a warm, pleasant glow seep through his soul.

Joe came out of his corner and stood before the mirror, admiring his gears.

"Finished skrenning?" Gallegher asked sardonically.

"Yes."

"Rational being, forsooth. You and your philosophy. Well, my fine robot, it turned out I didn't need your help after all. Pose away."

"How ungrateful you are," Joe said, "after I've given you the benefit of my superlogic."

"Your... what? You've slipped a gear. What superlogic?"

"The third-stage, of course. What we were talking about a while back. That's why I was skrenning. I hope you didn't think all your problems were solved by your feeble brain, in that opaque cranium of yours."

Gallegher sat up. "What are you talking about? Third-stage logic? You didn't--"

"I don't think I can describe it to you. It's more abstruse than the noumenon of Kant, which can't be perceived except by thought. You've got to be able to skren to understand it, but--well, it's the third stage. It's... let's see... demonstrating the nature of things by making things happen by themselves."

"Experiment?"

"No. By skrenning, I reduce all things from the material plane to the realm of pure thought, and figure out the logical concepts and solutions."

"But... wait. Things have been happening! I figured out about Grandpa and Harding and worked out the accelerator--"

"You think you did," Joe said. "I simply skrenned. Which is a purely super-intellectual process. After I'd done that, things couldn't help happening. But I hope you don't think they happened by themselves!"

Gallegher said: "What's skrenning?"

"You'll never know."

"But... you're contending you're the First Cause... no, it's voluntarism... third-stage logic? No--" Gallegher fell back on the couch, staring. "Who do you think you are? Deus ex machina?"

Joe glanced down at the conglomeration of gears in his torso.

"What else?" he asked smugly.

# What Hath Me?

Published in Planet Stories, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring [February] 1946). My source text for this story was in an awful shape, riddled with misspellings and not even clearly separating the paragraphs, so apologies in advance for any mistakes I made. One obvious question might be, "Where's chapter III, then?" Well, you tell me... the source text had no chapter III, so either chapter II should be split in two, or chapter IV was misnumbered (of course, chapter IV by itself is almost as long as all the others together, so maybe it too should be split into a hypothetical chapter V and oh god my head is spinning).

The thousand tiny eyes raced past him, glittering with alien ecstasy, shining brighter, ever brighter as they fed. He felt the lifeblood being sucked out of him--deeper stabbed the gelid cold--louder roared the throbbing in his ears... then the voice came, "The heart of the Watcher. Crush the heart."

The man running through the forest gloom breathed in hot, panting gusts, pain tearing at his chest. Underfoot the crawling, pale network of tree-trunks lay flat upon the ground, and more than once he tripped over a slippery bole and crashed down, but he was up again instantly.

He had no breath to scream. He sobbed as he ran, his burning eyes trying to pierce the shadows. Whispers rustled down from above. When the leaf-ceiling parted, a blaze of terribly bright stars flamed in the jet sky. It was cold and dark, and the man knew that he was not on Earth.

They were following him, even here.

A squat yellow figure, huge-eyed, inhuman, loomed in his path--one of the swamp people of Southern Venus. The man swung a wild blow at the thing, and his fist found nothing. It had vanished. But beyond it

rose a single-legged giant, a Martian, bellowing the great, gusty laughter of the Redland Tribes. The man dodged, stumbled, and smashed down heavily. He heard paddling footsteps and tried, with horrible intensity of purpose, to rise. He could not.

The Martian crept toward him--but it was no longer a Martian. An Earthman, with the face of some obscene devil, came forward with a sidling, slow motion. Horns sprouted from the low forehead. The teeth were fangs. As the creature came nearer, it raised its hands--twisted, gnarled talons--and slid them about the man's throat.

Through the forest thundered the deep, booming clangor of a brass gong. The sound shattered the phantom as a hammer shatters glass. Instantly the man was alone.

Making hoarse, animal sounds in his throat, he staggered upright and lurched in the direction from which the sound came. But he was too weak. Presently he fell, and this time he did not rise. His arms moved a little and then were still. He slept, lines of tortured weariness twisting the haggard face.

Very faintly, from infinite distances, he heard a voice... two voices.

Inhuman. Alien--and yet with a warmth of vital urgency that stirred something deep within him.

"He has passed our testing."

Then a stronger, more powerful voice--answering.

"Others have passed our testing--but the Aesir slew them."

"There is no other way. In this man I sensed something--a little different. He am hate--he has hated."

"He will need more than hatred--" the deeper voice said. "Even with us to aid him. And there is little time. Strip his memories from him now, so that he may not be weakened by them--"

"May the gods fight with him."

"But he fights the gods. The only gods men know in these evil days--"

The man awakened.

Triphammers beat ringingly inside his skull. He opened his eyes and closed them quickly against the sullen red glow that beat down from above. He lay motionless, gathering his strength.

What had happened?

He didn't know. The jolting impact of that realization struck him violently. He felt a brief panic of disorientation. Where--?

Derek Stuart, he thought. At least it isn't complete amnesia. I know who I am. But not where I am.

This time when he opened his eyes they stayed open. Overhead a broad-leafed tree arched. Through its branches he could see a dark, starry sky, the glowing, ringed disc of Saturn very far away, and a deeply scarlet glow.

Not Earth, then. A Saturnian moon? No, Saturn didn't eclipse most of the sky. Perhaps the asteroid belt.

He moved his head a little, and saw the red moon.

Aesir!

The message rippled along his nerves into his brain. Stuart reacted

instantly.

His hard, strong body writhed, whipped over, and then he was in a half-crouch, one hand flashing to his belt while his eyes searched the empty silence of the forest around him. There was no sound, no movement.

Sweat stood on Stuart's forehead, and he brushed it away impatiently. His deeply-tanned face set into harsh lines of curiously hopeless desperation.

There was no blaster gun at his belt; that didn't matter. Guns couldn't help him now--on Asgard.

The red moon had told him the answer. Only one world in the System had a red moon, and men didn't go to that artificial asteroid willingly. They went, yes--but only to be doomed and damned. From Venus to Callisto spacemen spoke of Asgard in hushed voices--Asgard where the Aesir lived and ruled the worlds of Man.

No spaceships left Asgard, except the sleek black cruisers manned by the priests of Aesir. No man had ever returned from Asgard.

Stuart grinned mirthlessly. He'd learned a lesson, though he'd never profit by it now. Always before he'd been confident of his ability to outdrink anyone of his own weight and size. And certainly that slight, tired-eyed man at the Singing Star, in New Boston, should have passed out long before Stuart--under normal circumstances.

So the circumstances hadn't been quite normal. It was a frame. A beautiful, airtight frame, because he'd never come back to squawk. Nobody came back from Asgard.

He shivered a little and looked up warily. There were legends, of course. The Watchers who patrolled the asteroid ceaselessly--

robots, men said. They served the Aesir. As, in a way, all men served the Aesir.

No sound. No movement. Only the sullen crimson light beating down ominously from that dark sky.

Stuart took stock of his clothing. Regular leatheroid spaceman's rig, they'd left him that, anyway. Whoever they were. He couldn't remember anything that had happened after the fifth drink with the tired-eyed man. There was a very faint recollection of running somewhere--seeing unpleasant things--and hearing two oddly unreal voices. But the memories slipped away and vanished as he tried to focus on them.

The hell with it. He was on Asgard. And that meant--something rather more unpleasant than death, if the legends were to be believed. A very suitable climax to an unorthodox life, in this era when obedience and law enforcement were the rigid rule.

Stuart picked up a heavy branch that might serve as a club. Then, shrugging, he turned westward, striking at random through the forest. No use waiting here till the Watchers came. At least--he could fight, as he had always fought as far back as he could remember.

There wasn't much room for fighters any more. Not under the Aesir rule. There were nations and kings and presidents, of course, but they were puppet figures, never daring to disobey any edicts that came from the mystery-shrouded asteroid hanging off the orbit of Mars, the tiny, artificial world that had ruled the System for a thousand years.

The Aesir. The inhuman, cryptic beings who--if legend were true--once had been human. Stuart scowled, trying to remember.

An--an entropic accelerator, that was it. A device, a method that speeded up evolution tremendously. That had been the start of the tyranny. A machine that could accelerate a man's evolution by a million years. Some had used that method. Those were the ones who had become the Aesir, creatures so far advanced in the evolutionary scale that they were no longer remotely human. Much was lost in the mists of the past. But Stuart could recall that much--the knowledge that the Aesir had once been human, that they were human no longer, and that for a thousand years they had ruled the System, very terribly, from their forbidden asteroid that they named Asgard--home of the legendary Norse gods.

Maybe the tired-eyed man had been an Aesir priest, collecting victims.

Certainly no others would have dared to land a ship on Asgard. Stuart swung on, searching the empty skies, and now a queer, unreasoning excitement began to grow within him. At least, before he died, he'd learn what the Aesir were like. It probably couldn't be pleasant knowledge, but there'd be some satisfaction in it. And there'd be even more satisfaction if he thought he had a chance of smashing a hard fist into the face of one of the Aesir priests--or even Hell, why not? He had nothing to lose now. From the moment he had touched Asgard soil, he was damned anyway. But of one thing Stuart was certain; he wouldn't be led like a helpless sheep to the throat-cutting. He wouldn't die without fighting against them.

The forest thinned before him. There was a flicker of swift motion far ahead.

Stuart froze, his grip tightening on the cudgel, his eyes searching.

Between the columnar trees, bright amid the purple shadows, a glitter of sparkling nebulae swept. A web of light, Stuart thought--so

dazzling his eyes ached as he stared at the--the thing.

Bodiless, intangible, the shifting net of stars poised, high above his head. Hundreds of twinkling, glittering pinpoints flickered there, so swiftly it seemed as though an arabesque spider-web of light cc'caved in the still, dark air--web of the Norns!

Each flickering star-fleck--watched. Each one was an eye. And as the thing poised, a horrible, half-human hesitancy in its stillness, a deep, humming note sounded, from its starry heart.

Star-points shook and quivered to the sound. Again it came--deeper, more menacing.

Questioning!

Was this one of the--Watchers? Was this one of them?

Abruptly its hesitancy vanished; it swept down upon Stuart. Instinctively he swung his cudgel in a smashing blow that sent him reeling forward--for there was no resistance. The star-creature was as intangible as air.

And yet it was not. The dazzling web of light enfolded him like a blazing cloak. Instantly a cold, trembling horror crawled along his skin. Bodiless the thing might be--but it was dangerous, infinitely so!

Pressure, shifting, quicksand pressure, was all about him. That stealthy cold crept into his flesh and bones, frigid icicles jabbing into his brain. Gasping with shock, Stuart struck out. He had dropped the club. Now he stooped and groped for it, but he could see nothing except a glittering veil of diamonds that raced like a mad torrent everywhere.

The humming rose again--ominously triumphant.

Cursing, Stuart staggered forward. The star-cloak stayed. He tried to grip it somewhere, to wrench it free, but he could not. The thousands of tiny eyes raced past him, glittering with alien ecstasy, shining brighter and ever brighter as they fed.

He felt the life being sucked out of him.... Deeper stabbed the gelid cold... louder roared that throbbing tone in his ears.

He heard his voice gasping furious, hopeless oaths. His eyes ached with the strain of staring at that blinding glitter. Then--

The heart of the Watcher. Crush the heart!

The words crashed like deep thunder in his brain. Had someone spoken them--? No... for, with the command, had come a message as well. As though a thought had spoken within his mind, a telepathic warning from--where?

His eyes strained at the dazzle. Now he saw that there was a brighter core that did not shift and change when the rest of the star-cloud wove its dreadful net. A spot of light that--

He reached out... the nucleus darted away... he lurched forward, on legs half-frozen, and felt a stone turn under his foot. As he crashed down, his hand closed and tightened on something warm and living that pulsed frantically against his palm.

The humming rose to a shrill scream... frightened... warning.

Stuart tightened his grip. He lay motionless, his eyes closed. But all around him he could feel the icy tendrils of the star-thing lashing at him, drinking his human warmth, probing with avid fingers at his brain.

He felt that warm--core--writhe and try to slip between his fingers. He squeezed....

The scream burst out, an inhuman agony in its raw-edged keening.

It stopped.

In Stuart's hand was--nothing.

He opened his eyes. The dazzling glitter of star-points had vanished. Only the forest, with its purple shadows, lay empty and silent around him.

Stuart got up slowly, swallowed dry-throated. The creatures of the Aesir were not invulnerable, then. Not to one who knew their weaknesses.

How had he known?

What voice had spoken in his brain? There had been an odd, impossible familiarity to that--that mental voice, now that he remembered it. Somewhere he had heard it, sensed it before.

That gap in his memory--

He tried to bridge it, but he could not. There was only a quickening of the desire to go on westward. He felt suddenly certain that he would find the Aesir in that direction.

He took a hesitant step--and another. And with each step, a queer, unmotivated confidence poured into him. As though some barrier in his mind had broken down, letting some strange flood of proud defiance rush in.

It was impossible. It was dangerous. But--certainly--no more

dangerous than supinely waiting here on Asgard till another Watcher came to destroy him. There were worse things than the starry Watchers here, if legends were to be trusted.

He went on, the curious tide of defiance rising higher and ever higher in his blood. It was a strangely intoxicating sense of--of pure, crazy self-confidence such as no man should rightfully have felt on this haunted asteroid.

He wondered--but the drunkenness was such that he did not wonder much. He did not question.

He thought: To hell with the Aesir! The forest ended. At his feet a road began, leading off into the purple horizons of the flat plain before him. At the end of that road was a thrusting pillar of light that rose like a tower toward the dark sky. There were the Aesir....

||

Every spaceman has an automatic sense of orientation. In ancient days, when clipper ships sailed the seas of Earth, the Yankee skippers knew the decks beneath their feet, and they knew the stars. Southern Cross or Pole Star told them in what latitudes they sailed. In unknown waters, they still had their familiar keels and the familiar stars.

So it is with the spacemen who drift from Pluto to Mercury Darkside, trusting to metal hulls that shut in the air and shut out the vast abysses of interplanetary space. When they work outship, a glance at the sky will tell a trained man where he is--and only tough, trained men survive the dangerous commerce of space. On Mercury the blazing solar corona flames above the horizon; on clouded Venus the green star of Earth shines sometimes. On Io, Callisto, Ganymede, a

man can orient himself by the gigantic mother planet--Saturn or Jupiter--and in the Asteroid Belt, there is always the strange procession of little worlds like lanterns, some half-shadowed, others brightly reflecting the Sun's glare. Anywhere in the System the sky is friendly.

Except on Asgard. Jupiter was too far and too small; Mars was scarcely visible; the Asteroid Belt not much thicker than the Milky Way. The unfamiliar magnitudes of the planets told Stuart, very surely, that he was on unknown territory. He was without the sure, safe anchor that spacemen depend upon, and that lack told him how utterly he stood alone now.

But the unreasoning confidence did not flag. If anything, it mounted stronger within him as he hurried along the road, his rangy legs eating up the miles with easy speed. The sooner he reached his goal, the better he'd like it. Nor did he wish to encounter any more of the Aesir's guardians--his business was with the Aesir!

The tower of light grew taller as he went on. Now he saw that it was a cluster of buildings, massed cylinders of varying flights, each one gigantic in diameter as well as height, and all shining with that shadowless radiance that apparently came from the stone--or metal--itself.

The road led directly to the base of the tallest tower.

It ran between shining pillars--a gate--as threshold--and was lost in silvery mists. No bars were needed to keep visitors out of this fortress!

Briefly a cool wind of doubt blew upon Stuart. He hesitated, wishing he had at least his blaster gun. But he was unarmed; he had even left the club back in the test.

He glanced around.

The red moon was sinking. A heavier darkness was creeping over the land. Very far away he thought he saw the shifting flicker of dancing lights--a Watcher?

He hurried onward.

Cyclopean, the tower loomed above him, like a shining rod poised to strike.

His gaze could not pierce the mists beyond he portal.

He stepped forward--between the twin pillars. He walked on blindly into the mists.

Twenty steps he took--and paused, as something dark and shapeless swam into view before him. A pit--at his feet.

In the dimness he could not see its bottom, but a narrow bridge crossed the gulf, a little to his left. Stuart crossed the bridge.

Solidity was again under his feet.

With shocking suddenness, a great, brazen bellow of laughter roared out. Harsh mockery sharpened it. And it was echoed. All around Stuart laughter boomed, flared--and was answered. The walls gave it back, gods echoed it. The bellowing laughter [...] Stuart.

The mists drifted away--were sucked down into the pit. They vanished. As though they fled from that evil laughter.

Stuart stood in a chamber that must have occupied the entire base of that enormous tower. Behind him the abyss gaped. Before him a shifting veil of light hid whatever lay behind it. But all around, between

monstrous pillars, were set thrones, ebon thrones fifty feet tall.

On the thrones sat giants!

Titan figures, armored in glittering mail, ringed Stuart, and instantly his mind fled back to half-forgotten folk-lore.... Asgard, Jotunheim, the lands of the giants and the gods. Thor and Odin, sly Loki and Baldur--they were all here, he thought, bearded colossi roaring their black laughter into the shaking air of the hall.

Watching him from their height-- Then he looked up, and the giants were dwarfed.

The chamber was roofless. At least he could see no roof. The pillars climbed up and up tremendously all around the walls that were hung with vast stretches of tapestry, till they dwindled to a pinpoint far above. The sheer magnitude of the tower made Stuart's mind rock dizzily.

Still the laughter roared out. But now it died....

Thundered through the hall a voice... deep... resonant... the voice of the Aesir.

"A human, brother!"

"Aye! A human--and a mad one, to come here."

"To enter the hall of the Aesir."

A red-bearded colossus bent down, his glacial blue eyes staring at Stuart.

"Shall I crush him?"

Stuart sprang back as an immense hand swooped down like a falling tree upon him. Instinctively his hand flashed to his belt, and suddenly the red-beard was shouting laughter that the others echoed. "He has courage."

"Let him live."

"Aye. Let him live. He may amuse us for a while...."

"And then?"

"Then the pit--with the others."

The others? Stuart slanted a glance downward. The silver mists had dissipated now, and he could see that the abyss was not bottomless. Its floor was fifty feet below the surface on which he stood, and a dozen figures were visible beneath. They stood motionless--like statues. A burly, leather-clad Earthman who might have been whisked from some Plutonian mine; a slim, scantily clad Earthgirl, her hair powdered blue, her costume the shining sequin-suit of a tavern entertainer. A stocky, hunch-shouldered Venusian with his slate-gray skin; a Martian girl, seven feet tall, with limbs and features of curious delicacy, her hair piled high atop that narrow skull. Another Earthman--a thin, pale, clerklike fellow. A white-skinned, handsome Callistan native, looking like Apollo, and, like all Callistans, harboring the cold savagery of a demon behind that smooth mask.

A dozen of them--drawn from all parts of the System. Stuart remembered that this was the time of the periodic tithing--which meant nothing less than a sacrifice. Once each month a few men and women would vanish--not many--and the black ships of the Aesir priests sped back to Asgard with their captives.

Not one looked up. Frozen motionless as stone, they stood there in

the pit--waiting.

Again the laughter crashed out. The redbear was watching Stuart.

"His courage flags," the great voice boomed. "Speak the truth, Earthman. Have you courage to face the gods?"

Stuart stubbornly refused to answer. He had an odd, reasonless impression that this was part of some deep game, that behind the mocking-by-play lay a more serious purpose.

"He has courage now," a giant said. "But did he always have courage? Has there never been a time in his life when courage failed him? Answer, Earthman!"

Stuart was listening to another voice, a quiet, infinitely distant voice within his brain that whispered: Do not answer them!

"Let him pass our testing," the redbear commanded. "If he fails, there is an end. If he does not fail--he goes into the pit to walk the Long Orbit."

The giant leaned forward.

"Will you match skill--and courage--with us, Earthling?"

Still Stuart did not answer. More than ever now he sensed the violent, hidden undercurrents surging beneath the surface of this byplay. More than he knew swung in the balance here.

He nodded.

"He has courage," a giant repeated. "But did he always have courage?"

"We shall see...." the redbeard said. The air shimmered before Stuart. Through its shaking his senses played him false. He knew quite well who he was and where he stood, in what deadly peril--but in that shimmer which bewildered the eyes and the mind he was a boy again, seeing a certain hillside he had not seen except through his boyhood's eyes. And he saw a black horse standing above him on the slope, pawing the ground and looking at him with red eyes.

And an old, old terror came flooding over him that he had not remembered for a quarter of a century. A boy's acute and sudden terror....

Who had opened the doors of his mind and laid this secret bare? He himself had long forgotten--and who upon this alien world could look back through space and time to remind him of that long-ago day when the vicious black horse had thrown an inexperienced boy rider and planted a seed of terror in his mind which he had been years outgrowing? But the fear was long gone now, long gone.... Was it?

Then whence had come this monstrous black stallion that pawed the floor of the hall, glaring down red-eyed at him and showing teeth like fangs? No horse, but a monster in the shape of a horse, a monster ten feet high at the shoulder, wearing the shape of his boyhood nightmare that woke in Stuart even now the old, unreasoning horror....

It was stamping down upon him, shaking its bridled head, snorting, lifting its lip above the impossible teeth. He saw the reins hanging loose, he saw the saddle and the swinging stirrups. He knew that the only safety in this hall for him was paradoxically upon the nightmare's back, where the hoofs and fangs could not reach him. But the terror and revulsion which the boy had buried long ago came welling up from founts deep-buried in the man's subconscious mind....

Now it was rushing him, head like a snake's outthrust, hissing like a snake, reins flying like Medusa-locks as it stretched to seize him. For one instant he stood there paralyzed. He had faced dangers on many worlds to which this nightmare was nothing, but he had never since boyhood felt the paralysis of horror that gripped him now. It was a child's horror, resurrected from the caves of sleep to ruin him....

With a superhuman effort he broke that frozen fear, snatching for the flying reins, whirling as the monstrous thing swept past against his thighs, and it was a smooth, pouring cold of many alien muscles working powerfully together in a way no mammal knows. He looked down.

He was riding a monstrous snake that twisted its head to look at him in the moment he realized what had happened. Its great diamond-shaped head towered high and came looping down toward him, wide-mouthed, tongue like a flame flickering....

It laid its cold, smooth cheek against his with a hideous caressing motion, sliding around his neck, sliding down his arm and side, laying a loop of cold, scaly strength around him and pressing, pressing....

His hands closed around the thickness of its throat, futilely--and the throat melted in his grasp and was hairy with a hairiness no mammal ever knew. The motion of the body he bestrode changed again and was incredibly springy and light.

He rode a monstrous spider. His hands were sunk wrist-deep in loathsome coarse hair, and his eyes stared into great cold faceted eyes that mirrored his own face a thousandfold. He saw his own distorted features looking back at him in countless miniatures, but behind the faces, in the great eyes of the spider, he saw no

consciousness regarding him. The cold multiple eyes were not aware of Derek Stuart. Behind the shield of its terrible face the spider shut away its own arachnid thoughts and the memories of the red fields of Mars that were its home. With dreadful, impersonal aloofness its mandibles gaped forward toward its prey.

Loathing ran in waves of weakness through Stuart's whole body, but he shut his eyes and blindly struck out at the nearer of those great mirroring eyes, feeling wetness shatter against his fist as--as--

As the horror shifted and vanished, while rippling waves of green light darkened all about him. Now they coagulated, drew together into a meadow, cool with Earthly grass, bordered by familiar trees far away. Primroses gleamed here and there. Above him was the blue sky and the warm bright sun that shone only upon the hills of Earth.

But what he felt was horror.

Twenty feet from him was a rank, rounded patch of weeds. His gaze was drawn inexorably to that spot. And it was from there that the crawling dread reached out to him.

Faintly he heard laughter... of the gods... of the Aesir. The Aesir?

Who--what were they? How had he, Derek Stuart, ever heard of them except as a name whispered in fear as the spaceships streaked through the clouds above that Dakota farmstead....

Derek Stuart... a boy of eleven....

But--but--that was wrong, somehow. He wasn't a child any more. He had matured, become a spaceman.

Dreams. The dreams of an eleven-year old.

Yet the hollow, dreadful laughter throbbed somewhere, in the vaults of the blue overhead, in the solidity of the very ground beneath him.

This had happened before. It had happened to a boy in South Dakota—a boy who had not known what lay concealed in that verdant clump of weeds.

But now, somehow—and very strangely—Stuart knew what he would find there.

He was afraid. Horribly, sickeningly afraid. Cold nausea crawled up his spine and the calves of his legs. He wanted to turn and run to the farmhouse half a mile away. He almost turned, and then paused as the distant laughter grew louder.

They wanted him to run. They were trying to scare him—and, once the defenses of his courage had broken, he would be lost. Stuart knew that with an icy certainty.

Somewhere, very far away, he sensed a man standing in a cyclopean hall—a man in ragged spaceman's garb, hard-faced, thin-lipped, angry-eyed. A familiar figure. The man was urging him on—telling him to go on toward that clump of weeds.

Derek Stuart obeyed the voiceless command. His throat dry, his heart pumping, he forced himself across the meadow till he stood at his goal and looked down at the bloody, twisted corpse of the tramp who had been knifed by another hobo, twenty years before, on that Dakota farm. The old nausea of shocked horror took him by the throat and strangled him.

He fought it down. This time he didn't run screaming back to the farmhouse....

And suddenly the laughter of the gods was stilled. Derek Stuart, a

man once more in mind, stood again in the tower of the Aesir. The thrones between the monstrous pillars were vacant.

The Aesir were gone.

Stuart let out his breath in a long sigh.

He had no illusions about the vanishment of the Aesir; he knew he had not conquered those mighty beings. It would take more than human powers to do that. But at least he had a respite. All but the most stolid spacemen develop hypertension, and there seems to be a curious mathematical rule about that; it increases according to the distance from the Sun. Which may be explained by the fact that environmental differences also increase as the outer planets are reached--and alien environments breed alien creatures. A great many men have gone insane on Pluto....

This was not Pluto; it was nearer Sunward than Jupiter, but the utter alienage that brooded over Asgard was almost palpable. Even the solidity under Stuart's feet, the very stones of the planetoid, were artificially created, by a science a million years beyond that of his own time. And the Aesir--

Unexpectedly his deep chest shook with laughter. The inexplicable self-confidence that had first come to him in the Asgard forests had not waned; it seemed to have grown even stronger since his meeting with the Aesir giants. Now he stared around the colossal hall, his eyes straining toward the spot of light far above where those incredible columns converged. His own insignificance by comparison did not trouble him.

Whether or not he could have the slightest hope of winning this game--at least he was giving his enemies a run for their money!

A sound from the pit roused him.

there, walked warily toward the edge.

The dozen motionless figures were still there, fifty feet below, and among them was one he had not noticed before--an Earthgirl, he thought, with curling dark hair framing a white face as she tilted up her chin and stared at him.

At this distance he could make out few details; she wore a close-fitting green suit which left slender arms and legs bare.

"Earthman--" she said, in a clear, carrying voice. "Earthman! Quick! The Aesir will be back--go now! Leave their temple before they--"

"Don't waste your breath," Stuart said. "This is Asgard." Whoever the girl was, she should know the impossibility of leaving the taboo world. "If I can find a rope--"

She said quickly, "You won't find one. Not here, in the temple."

"How can I get you out of there? And the others?"

"You're mad," the girl said. "What good would it do...." She shook her head. "Better to die at once."

Stuart narrowed his eyes at the dozen frozen figures. "I don't think so. Fourteen of us can put up a better fight than one. If your friends wake up--"

The girl said, "On your left, between the pillars, there's a tapestry showing Perseus and the Gorgon. Touch the helm of Perseus and the hand of Andromeda. Then go carefully--there may be traps."

"What is it?"

"It will lead you down here. You can free us. If you hurry--oh, but it's hopeless! The Aesir--"

"Damn the Aesir," Stuart snarled. "Wake up the others!" He whirled and ran toward the distant wall, where he could see the Perseus tapestry, brown and gold, a huge curtain between two columns. If the Aesir saw, they made no move....

Stuart's lips twisted in a bitter smile. The crazy confidence had not left him, but he was conscious of a reassuring warmth; at least he was no longer completely alone. That would help. Between the worlds, and on the desolate planets that swing along the edge of the System, loneliness is the lurking terror, more horrible than the most exotic monster ever spawned by the radioactive Plutonian earth. He touched the tapestry twice; it swept away from him, and a staircase was visible, leading down through stone or metal--he could not tell which. Stuart fought back the impulse that urged him to race down those curving spiral steps. The girl had spoken of traps.

He went warily, testing each tread before he put his weight upon it. Though he did not think that the snares of the Aesir would be so simple.

At the bottom, he emerged into a vaulted chamber, tiny by comparison with the one he had left. It was oval, domed ceiling and walls and floor shining with a milky radiance--except at one spot.

There he saw a door--transparent. Through it he looked into the pit. He was on a level with the floor of that shaft now; he could see the dozen figures still standing motionless in a huddled group, and a few feet beyond the glassy pane was the Earthgirl. She was looking directly at him, but her dark eyes had a blind seeking, as though the door was opaque from her side.

Stuart paused, his hand on the complicated mechanism that, he guessed, would open the portal. His hard, dark face was impassive, but he was conscious of an unfamiliar stirring deep within him. From above, he had not seen the girl's beauty.

He saw it now.

She couldn't be an Earthgirl--entirely.

She must be one of those disturbingly lovely interplanetary halfbreeds. Earth-blood she had, of course, and predominantly, but there was something more, the pure essence of beauty that blazed through her like a flame kindled in a lamp of crystal. In all his wanderings between the worlds, Stuart had never seen a girl as breathtakingly lovely as this one.

His hand moved on the controls : the door slid silently open. The girl's eyes brightened. She gave a little gasp and ran toward him. Without question she sought refuge in his arms, and for a moment Stuart held her--not unwillingly. He thrust her away gently.

"The others."

She said, "It's useless. The paralysis--"

Stuart scowled and stepped across the threshold into the pit. Uneasiness crawled along his spine as he did so. The Aesir might be watching from above, or--or--

There was nothing. Only dead silence, and the uneven breathing of the girl as she stood in the doorway watching. Stuart stopped before the leather-clad Earthman and tested a burly arm. The man stood frozen, his flesh cold and hard as stone, his eyes staring glassily. He was not even breathing.

So with the others. Stuart grimaced and shrugged. He turned back toward the girl, and felt a pulse of relief as he stepped into the shining chamber. He might be no safer here, but at least he wasn't so conscious of inhuman eyes that might be watching from above. Not that solid stone might be any barrier to the Aesir's probing gaze....

The girl touched the mechanism; the door slid silently shut. "It's no use," she said. "The paralysis holds all the others. Only I could battle it--a little. And that was because--"

"Save it," Stuart said. He turned toward the door by which he had entered, but an urgent hand gripped his wrist.

"Let me talk," the quiet voice said. "We're as safe here as anywhere. And there may be a way--now that I can think clearly again."

"A way out? A safe way?"

There was a haunted look in her dark eyes. "I don't know. I've lived here for a long time. The others--" she pointed toward the door of the pit. "The sacrifices were brought to Asgard only yesterday. But I've been here many moons. The Aesir kept me alive for a bit, to amuse them. Then they tired, and I was thrown in with the others. But I learned a little. I--I--no one can dwell here in the Aesir stronghold without--changing a little. That's why the paralysis didn't hold me as long as it holds the others."

"Can we save them?"

"I don't know," she said, with a small, helpless shrug. "I don't even know if we can save ourselves. It's been so long since I was brought to Asgard that I--I scarcely remember my life before that. But I have learned a little of the Aesir, and that may help us now."

Stuart watched her. She tried to smile, but not successfully.

She said, "I'm Kari. The rest--I've forgotten. You're--"

"Derek Stuart."

"Tell me what happened."

"We haven't time," Stuart said impatiently, but Kari shook her head.

"We'll need weapons, and I must know--first--if you can use them. Tell me!"

Well, she was right. She had knowledge that Stuart needed. So he told her, very briefly, what he remembered.

She stared at him. "Voices--in your mind?"

"Something like that. I don't know--"

"No. No. Or--wait--" He tried to focus his thoughts upon a far, faint calling that came from infinite distances. His name. An urgent summons--

It faded and was gone.

"There's nothing," Stuart said finally, and Kari moved her shoulders uneasily.

"No help there, then."

"Tell me one thing. What's the Aesir's power? Hypnotism?"

"No," Kari said, "or not entirely. They can make thoughts into real things. They are--what the race of man will evolve into in a million

years. And they have changed, into beings utterly alien to humans."

"They looked human--giants, though."

"They can assume any shape," Kari told him. "Their real form is unimaginable. Being of pure energy... mental force... matrixes of electronic power. They were striking at you through your mind."

Stuart said, "I wondered why they didn't set some of their Watchers on me."

"I don't know why they didn't," Kari frowned. "Instead, they hammered at your weaknesses--old fears that hung on to you for years. Experiences that frightened you in the past. They sent your mind back into that past--but you were too strong for them."

"Too strong--?"

"Then. They have other powers, Stuart--incredible powers. You can't fight them alone. And you must fight them. In a thousand years no one has dared--"

Stuart remembered something. "Two dared--once."

Stuart nodded. "I know. I know the legends, anyway. About John Starr and Lorna."

"The great rebels who first defied the Aesir when the tyranny began. But they may have been only legendary figures. Even if they were real--they failed."

"Yes, they failed. And they're a thousand years dead. But it shows something--to me at least. Man wasn't meant to be a slave to these monsters. Rebellion--"

Kari watched him. Stuart's eyes were shadowed.

"John Starr and Lorna," he whispered. "I wonder what their world was like, a thousand years ago? We've got all the worlds now, all the planets of the System from Jupiter to the smallest asteroid. But we don't rule them, as men owned their own Earth in those days. We're slaves to the Aesir."

"The Aesir are--are gods."

"John Starr didn't think so," Stuart said. "Neither do I. And at worst I can always die, as he did. Listen, Kari." He gripped her arms. "Think. You've lived here for a while. Is there any weapon against those devils?"

She met his gaze steadily. "Yes," she said. "But--"

"What is it? Where?"

Abruptly Kari's face changed. She pressed herself against Stuart, avoiding his lips, simply seeking--he knew--warmth and companionship. She was crying softly.

"So long--" Kari whispered, her arms tight around him. "I've been here so long--with the gods. And I'm so lonely, Derek Stuart. So lonely for green fields and fires and the blue sky. I wish--"

"You'll see Earth again," Stuart promised. At that Kari pulled away. Her strange half-breed loveliness was never more real than then, with tears sparkling on her dark lashes, and her mouth trembling.

She said, a catch in her voice, "I'll show you the weapon, Stuart." She turned toward the wall. Her hand moved in a quick gesture. A panel opened there in the glowing surface.

Kari reached in, and when she withdrew her arm, it was as though she held a torrent of blood that poured down from her grip. It was a cloak, Stuart saw, made of some material so fine that it rippled like water. Its crimson violence was bizarre against the cool green of Kari's garment.

"This cloak--" she said. "You must wear it if we face the Aesir."

Stuart grimaced. "What good is a piece of cloth? A blaster gun's what I want."

"A blaster wouldn't help," Kari said. "This is more than a piece of cloth, Stuart. It is half alive--made so by the sciences of the Aesir. Wear it! It will protect you." She swung the great, scarlet billows about Stuart's shoulders. Her fingers fumbled with the clasp at his throat. And then--

She lies!

The desperate urgency of the thought roared through Stuart's mind. He knew that soundless voice, so sharp now with violent intensity. His hands came up to rip the cloak from him--

He was too late. Kari sprang back, wide-eyed, as the fastenings of the cloak tightened like a noose about Stuart's neck. He felt a stinging shock that ran like white fire along his spine and up into his brain. One instant of blazing disorientation, a hopeless, despairing cry in his mind--a double cry, as of two telepathetic voices--and then, his muscles too weak to hold him, he crashed down upon the floor.

It was not paralysis. He was simply drained of all strength. There was pressure about his throat, cold flames along his spine and in his brain, and he could feel the texture of the cloak wrapped about him, striking through his spaceman's garb--tingling, sentient, half-alive!

He whispered an oath. Kari's face had not changed. He read something strangely like pity in her dark eyes.

From the gap in the wall whence she had drawn the cloak came a figure, cloaked in black, a jet cowl hiding its head and face completely. It was taller than the girl by a foot. It shuffled forward with an odd, rocking gait, and paused near her.

Stuart whispered, "I--should have remembered. The--the Aesir can change their shapes. Those giants I saw weren't real. And neither are you--not even human!"

Kari shook her head. "I am real," she said slowly. "He is not." She gestured toward the black-cloaked figure. "But we are all of the Aesir. And, as we thought, you were sent by the Protectors. Now your power is gone, and you must walk the Long Orbit with the other captives."

The cowed creature came forward. It bent, but Stuart could see nothing in the shadow of the hood. A fold of cloth writhed out and touched Stuart's forehead.

Darkness wrapped him like the shroud of the scarlet cloak.

## **IV**

For a long time he had only his thoughts for company. They were not pleasant. He felt alone, as he had never felt so utterly lonely and deserted before anywhere in the System. Now he realized that ever since his landing on Asgard, he had had companionship of a sort--that the twin voices murmuring in his brain had been more real than he had realized. A living warmth, a sense of--of presence--had been with him then.

But it was gone now. Its absence left a black void within him. He stood alone.

And Kari.... If he saw her again when his hands were free, he would kill her. He knew that. But--but her shining smile lightened the darkness that engulfed him now. He had never seen loveliness like Kari's, and he had known so many women, so many, too many.... A man who has fought his way Sunward and back again by way of Pluto's chasmed midnight is not so easily misled by the smile of a pretty woman.

Kari was no ordinary woman--God knew she was not! Perhaps not even human, perhaps not even real at all. It might be that very touch of alienage that had stamped her shining image upon his memory, but he could not put the image aside now. He saw her clearly in the darkness of his captivity and the deeper dark of his loneliness, now that the voices were stilled. Lovely, exotic, with the eyes full of longing and terror--what lies they told!--and that lovely, that dazzling smile.

Bitterness made a wry taste in his mouth. Either she was one of the Aesir, or she served them. Served them well. A knife in the heart was the only answer he had for her, and he meant to give her that edged answer if he lived. But she was so very lovely....

Slowly the veil of darkness lifted. He saw a face he had seen before--the harsh, seamed features of the burly Earthman in the pit. And beyond him, the slim Martian girl. All motionless, standing like statues beside him... beside him! For Stuart was one of them now. He was in the pit, with the other captives.

Sensation came back slowly. With it came a tingling, a warm vibration along his spine... about his throat... inside his brain. He could not move, but at the corner of his range of vision flamed a crimson-ness--the cloak. He still wore it.

He wondered if the other captives could see him, if their minds were as active as his in their congealed bodies. Or whether the chill of deathlike silence held their brains along with their frozen limbs.

A slow, volcanic fury began to glow within him. Kari--traitor and murderess! Was she Aesir? Was she Earth-born? And that black-cloaked, cowed creature... which was not real. Another projector of the Aesir, as the giants had been?

You were sent by the Protectors. Memory of Kari's phrase came back to Stuart now. And with it, as though he had somehow unbarred a locked gate, opened it a mere crack, came a--a whispering.

Not audible. Faint, faraway, like the shadow of a wind rustling ghosts of autumn leaves, the murmur rose and fell... calling him.

The scarlet cloak moved... writhed... flowed more closely about him. Fainter grew the voices.

Stuart strained after them. His soul sprang up... reaching toward those friendly, utterly inhuman whispers that came from nowhere.

A dull lethargy numbed him. The cloak drew tighter....

He ignored it. Deep in the citadel of his mind, he made himself receptive, all his being focused on that--that strange calling from beyond.

And, suddenly, there were words.... "Derek Stuart. Can you hear us? Answer."

His stiff lips could not speak, but his thoughts formed an answer. And, rising and falling as though the frequency of that incredible telepathy pulsed and changed continually, the message came:

"We have lost. You have lost too, Stuart. But we will stay with you--we must stay now--and perhaps your death will be easier because of that...."

"Who are you?" he thought, oddly awed by the personality he sensed behind that voice that was really two voices.

"There is little time." The--sound?--faded into a thin whisper, then grew stronger. "The cloak makes it hard for us to communicate with you. And now we can give you none of our power at all. It is a monstrous thing--a blasphemy such as only the Aesir would create. Half-alive, it makes an artificial synapse between the individual and outside mental contacts. We cannot help you--"

"Who are you?"

"We are the Protectors. Listen now, Stuart, for soon you must walk the Long Orbit with the others. We removed some of your memories, so the Aesir could not read your mind and have time to prepare themselves--we hoped we might destroy them this time. But--we have failed again. Now--we give you your memories back." Like a slowly rising tide, Stuart's past began to return. He did not question how this was done; he was too busy lifting the veil that had darkened his mind since--since that night at the Singing Star in New Boston. A few drinks with the tired-eyed man, and then darkness.

But the curtain was lifting now. He remembered....

He remembered a tiny, underground room, with armed men--not many of them--staring at him. A voice that said, "You must either join us or die. We dare run no risks. For hundreds of years a tiny band of us has survived, only because the Aesir did not know we existed."

"Rebels?" he had asked.

"Sworn to destroy the Aesir," the man told him, and an answering glow burned briefly in the eyes of the others.

Stuart laughed.

"You have courage," the man said. "You'll need it. I know why you laugh. But we don't fight alone. Have you ever heard of the Protectors?"

"Never."

"Few have. They aren't human, any more than the Aesir are. But they are not evil. They're humanity's champions. They have sworn to destroy the Aesir, as we have--and so we serve them."

"Who are they, then? What are they?"

"No man knows," the other said quietly. "Who--and where--they are is a secret they keep to themselves. But we hear their messages. And once in a lifetime, not oftener, they tell us where we may find some man they have winnowed the planets to discover. In our lifetime, Stuart, you are the man."

He gaped at them. "Why? I--"

"To be a weapon for the Protectors--a champion for mankind. The Protectors are so far beyond humanity they cannot fight our battles in their own forms. They need a--a vessel into which they can pour their power. Or--call it a sword to wield against the Aesir. They have searched the worlds over for a long while now, and you--" The man hesitated, looking narrowly at Stuart. "You are the only vessel they found. You have a great destiny, Derek Stuart."

He had scowled at them. "All right, suppose I have. What do they

offer?"

The man shook his head. "Death--if you're lucky. No man before you has ever won a battle for the Protectors. You know that--the Aesir still rule! Every chance is against you. In a thousand years no man has won the gamble. But this is greater than you or us, Derek Stuart. Do you think you have any choice?"

Stuart stared the other man in the eyes. "There's no chance?"

The leader smiled. All mankind's indomitable hope was in the smile.

"Would the Protectors have spent all their efforts, and ours, to find you if there were no hope? They have mighty and terrible powers. With the right man for their vessel, they could be stronger than the Aesir. No man could stand alone against the Aesir. The Protectors could not stand alone. But together--sword and hand and brain welded into one--yes, Stuart, there's a chance!"

"Then why have the others failed?"

"No one has yet been quite strong enough. Only once in forty years--fifty--is a man born who might, with luck, have the courage and the strength. Look at us here--do you think we would not offer ourselves gladly? Instead, the Protectors guided us to you. If you are willing to let them establish contact with your mind, enter it, possess it--there's a chance the Aesir can be destroyed. There's a chance that man's slavery may be ended!" His voice shook with that mighty hope.

Stuart glanced around at the ardent, fanatical faces, and something in him took a slow fire from the fire in theirs. A deep and vital purpose, as old as humanity--how many times before in Earth's history had men of Earth gathered in hidden rooms and sworn vows against tyranny and oppression? How many times before had

Earthmen dedicated themselves and their son's sons, if need be, to the old, old dream that though men may die, mankind must in the end be free? Here in this crowded room the torch of freedom still burned, despite the hell of slavery under which the worlds toiled now. He hesitated.

"It won't be easy, Stuart," the man warned. "A sword-blade must be hammered on the anvil, heated in flame, before it's tempered. The Protectors will test you--so that your mind may be toughened to resist the attacks of the Aesir later. You will suffer...."

He had suffered. Those agonizing, nightmare dreams in the forest, the phantoms that had tortured him--other trials he did not want to remember. But there had been no flaw in the blade. In the end--the Protectors had been satisfied, and had entered his mind--maintaining the contact that still held, though thinly now.

And the voices he heard still whispering within him were the voices of his mentors....

"We took your memories from you. So that the Aesir could not read too much in your mind, and be forewarned. Now that does not matter, and you will be stronger with your memory restored. But when you let the girl clasp the cloak about you--that was failure."

"If I could move," Stuart thought. "If I could rip it off--"

"It is part of you. We do not know how it can be removed. And while you wear it, we cannot give you our power."

Stuart said bitterly. "If you'd given me that power in the first place--"

"We did. How do you think you survived the first testing by the Aesir? And it is dangerous. We must gauge it carefully, so that we do not transmit too much of our mental energy to you. You are merely

human--if we let you draw on a tenth of our power, that would burn you out like a melting wire under a strong current."

"So--what now?"

"We have lost again. You have lost, and we are sorry. All we can do is give you an easy death. We possess you now, mentally; if we should withdraw from your brain, you would die instantly. We will do that whenever you ask. For the Aesir will kill you anyhow now, and not pleasantly."

"I'm not committing suicide. As long as I live, I can still fight."

"We also. This has happened before. We have chosen and possessed other champions, and they have failed. We withdrew from their minds before the Aesir... killed... so that we could survive to try again. To wage another battle. Some day we will win. Some day we shall destroy the Aesir. But we dare not cling to our broken swords, lest we too be broken."

"So when the going gets tough you step out!"

Stuart sensed pity in the strange twin voice. "We must. We fight for the race of man. And the greatest gift we can give you now is quick death."

"I don't want it," Stuart thought furiously. "I'm going to keep on fighting! Maybe that's why you've always failed before--you were too ready to give up. So I'll die if you step out of my mind? Well--it's a lousy bargain!"

There was no anger, only a stronger overtone of pity in the still voice.

"What is it you want, Stuart?"

"Nothing from you! Just let me go on living. I'll do my own fighting. There'll be time enough to take a powder when the axe falls. I'm asking you simply this--keep me alive until I've had another crack at the Aesir!"

A pause. "It is dangerous. Dangerous for us. But--"

"Well?"

"We will take the risk. But understand--we must leave you if the peril grows too great. And will--inevitably."

"Thanks," Stuart said, and meant it. "One thing. What about Kari? Who is she?"

"A hundred years ago she was human. Then she was brought here, and the Aesir possessed her--as we possess you. She has grown less human in that time, as the alien grows stronger within her. She has only faint memories of her former life now, and they will vanish soon. Contact with the Aesir is like an infection--she will grow more and more like them. Perhaps, eventually, become one of them."

Stuart grimaced. "If the Aesir should withdraw from her--"

"She would die, yes. Her own life-force has been sapped too far. You and she are kept alive only as long as the bond of possession holds."

Nice, Stuart thought. If the Aesir were destroyed, Kari would die with him. And if he faced doom, he too would die, as the Protectors withdrew to avoid sharing his fate.

Hell--what did he care whether Kari lived or died? It was only the glamor of half-alienage that had drawn him to the girl. A dagger in her throat-- Besides, he was certainly facing doom now.

"All I can do--" he said--and stopped abruptly. He was speaking aloud. Patiently the twin voice in his brain waited for him to continue.

Slowly he flexed his arms. He tilted back his head, staring up at the rim of the pit fifty feet above him. He could see the titan pillars rising toward the roof of that mighty tower, incredibly far above. But there was no sign of life.

"I can move," he said. "I--"

Struck by a new thought, he gripped the folds of the cloak. It was nauseously warm and vibrant. It seemed to move under his hands. He jerked at it, and felt a twinge of agonizing pain along his spine and about his throat, while a white-hot lance stabbed into his skull.

"If I could get rid of this--you could help me?"

"We could give you our power, to use against the Aesir. But we do not know how to remove the cloak."

"I don't either," Stuart growled, and paused as a movement caught his eye. The muscular Earthman near him was stirring. He turned slowly. Beyond him the Martian girl swayed her feathery-crested head and lifted supple, slender arms. And the others--all about Stuart they were wakening to motion.

But no life showed in their dull eyes. No understanding. Only a blind, empty withdrawal.

They turned, trooped toward the wall of the pit... toward an arched opening that was gaping suddenly.

"The Long Orbit," said the voice in Stuart's mind.

"What's that?"

"Death. As the Aesir feed. They feed on the life-force of living organisms."

"Is that the only way out?"

"The only way open to you. Yes."

Stuart went slowly after the others.

They had crossed the threshold now, and were pacing along a tunnel, lit with cold blue brilliance, that curved very gradually toward the left. Behind him a panel closed.

The cloak swayed like a great bloodstain behind him, moving in a motion not entirely caused by Stuart's movements. He tried again to unfasten it, but the clasp at his throat only drew tighter. And the tingling sensation increased along his spine.

An artificial synapse... blocking his nerve-ends so that he could not draw upon the Protectors' power....

At his left was an alcove in the tunnel wall. It was filled with coagulated light... bright with glaring flames... flame-hot. Within that white curtain stirred swift movement, like the leaping of fires. Above the recess a symbol was embossed in the stone. The sign of Mercury.

"Mercury," said the voice in Stuart's mind. "The Servant of the Sun. The Swift Messenger. Mercury, that drinks the Sun's fires and blazes like a star in the sky's abyss. First in the Long Orbit--Mercury."

The crowd of prisoners, dull-eyed, swayed to and fro, a ripple of excitement rustling through them. Abruptly the Martian girl darted

forward. Was engulfed in the milky flames.

Stood there, while curdled opalescence veiled her. On her face sheer horror, as,

"The Aesir feed," the voice whispered. "They drink the cup of her life... to its last dregs."

The captives were moving again. Silently Stuart followed them along the tunnel. Now another recess showed in the wall.

Blue... blue, this time, as hazy seas of enchantment... misted with fog, with slow shifting movement within it....

"The sign of Venus," said the voice. "The Clouded World. Planet of life and womb of creation. Ruler of mists and seas--Venus!"

The Earthman was drawn into the alcove. Stood there, while azure seas washed higher and higher about him. Through that glassy veil his face glared, stiff with alien fear....

The sacrifices went on.

There was no alcove, no symbol for Earth. The Aesir had forgotten the world that had been their place of birth.

"Mars! Red star of madness! Ruler of man's passion, lord of the bloody seas! Where scarlet sands run through Time's hourglass--Mars, third in the Long Orbit!"

The crimson glow of a dusty ruby... the face of a Venusian, strained, twisted in agony... the hunger of the Aesir....

"The Little Worlds! The Great Belt that girdles the Inner System! The Broken Planet--"

Tiny goblin lights, dancing and flickering, blue and sapphire and dull orange, wine-red and dawn-yellow--

The hunger of the Aesir.

"Jupiter! Titan! Colossus of the Spaceroads! Jupiter, whose mighty hands seize the ships of man and drag them to his boiling heart! The Great One-fifth in the Long Orbit!"

The hunger of the Aesir.

"Ringed Saturn, light-crowned! Guardian of the outer skies! Saturn--"  
Uranus... Neptune....

Pluto.

The hunger of the Aesir....

Beyond Pluto, dark worlds Stuart had not known. Until finally he was alone.

The last of his companions had been drawn into one of the vampire alcoves of the Long Orbit.

He went on.

There was another recess in the wall at his left. It was filled with night. Jet blackness, cold and horrible, brimmed it.

Something like an invisible current dragged him forward, though he fought with all his strength to resist. Instinctively he sent out a desperate call to the Protectors.

"We cannot aid you. We must leave you... you will die instantly."

"Wait! Don't--don't give up yet! Give me your power--"

"We cannot. While you wear the cloak."

The edge of blackness touched Stuart with a frigid impact. He felt something, avid with horrible hunger, strain forward from of the alcove, reaching for him. The cloak billowed out

Sweat stood out on Stuart's face. For, suddenly, he had seen the way. It might mean death, it would certainly mean frightful agony--but he could go down fighting. If the cloak could not be removed in any other way--perhaps it could be ripped off!

He gripped the half-living fabric at its bottom, brought his arm behind him--and tore the horror from him!

Stark, abysmal nerve-shock poured like a current of fire up his spine and into his brain. It was like tearing off his own skin. Sick, blind, gasping dry-throated sobs, Stuart stumbled away from the black alcove, tearing at the cloak. It tried to cling to him--

He ripped it away--hurled it from him. And as it fell--it screamed!

But he was free.

For an instant sheer weakness overwhelmed him. Then into him poured a racing, jubilant torrent of strength, of mighty, intoxicating power that seemed to heal his wounds and revivify him instantly.

Into him surged the power of the Protectors!

From the alcove a finger of darkness tendrilled out. He was borne away from it... along the passage. Dimly, through drifting mists, he sensed that he was moving up a ramp... through a wall that seemed to grow intangible as he approached it... up and up....

He was in the hall of the Aesir.

Above him the cyclopean pillars towered, dwarfing the thrones set between them. Before him hung the shifting wall of light.

He was carried toward it--through it. He stood on a black dais. Facing him was the cloaked, cowed figure he had last seen with Kari.

And beside the Aesir stood Kari!

The creature lifted its arm... a red flame spouted toward Stuart. Sudden, mocking laughter spilled from his lips. He no longer fought alone. The tremendous power of the Protectors blazed within him, power and energy and force that could smash suns.

In midair the fiery lance failed and died. The Aesir drew back a step, drawing its cloak about it as if in surprise. And Kari--Kari shrank back, too, and something strangely like hope flashed for a moment across her dazzling, her more than mortal loveliness. Hope? But she was of the Aesir now. And if they failed, she died. Then why--

The Aesir's cloak flickered, and a second gush of fiery light fountained toward Stuart.

Up surged the tide of power in him again. Blind and dazed with his own tremendous energy, Stuart felt a curve like a dim shield flung up to meet that lance. The Aesir's fire struck--and flashed into blazing fragments on the Protector's shield. Each droplet sang intolerable music as it faded and winked out. And behind the Aesir, more dazzling than any immortal fire had been, Stuart saw Kari's sudden, shining smile....

She would die if the Aesir failed. She must know she would die. But

the brilliance of her smile struck him as the Aesir's spear of fire could never strike. He knew, then. He understood....

The Aesir's cloak whirled like a storm-cloud, in dark, deep billows. The Aesir itself grew taller for a moment, as if it drew itself up to a godlike height.

And then it did for Derek Stuart what no Aesir had ever done for a mortal man before. No Aesir had ever needed to. It cast off the hampering cloak and stood stripped for battle with this primitive man-ling whose forebears immemorially long ago had been the Aesir's forebears. There was in that stripping something almost of kinship--an acknowledgment that here at last in the hall of the Aesir stood an equal, sprung of equal stock....

Naked in its terrible power, the Aesir stood up to face the man.

Not human. Not ever human, except in the mysterious basics which these people of a thousand millenniums in the future had chosen to retain. The flesh they had cast off, and the flesh the Aesir stood up in to face his forebear was pure, blazing, blinding energy. Twice as tall as a man it stood, shining with supernal brilliance, terrible and magnificent.

The great hall rang soundlessly with the power of the Protectors.

And then from above a streak of light came flashing, and another, and another. And were engulfed in the one Aesir who stood shining before its adversary, growing ever brighter and more terrible. The rest of the Aesir, coming to the aid of their fellow, forming a single entity to crush the champion of mankind.

Stuart braced himself for the incredible torrent of energy that would come blasting through him from the Protectors. And in a split

second--it came! Mind and body reeled beneath the impact of that power as force flared through him and struck out at the tower of lightning which was the Aesir. But the force which was trying his human body to its utmost was not force enough to touch that blinding column. Energy lashed out from it, struck him a reeling blow-- Stuart dropped to his knees, the hall swimming in fire around him.

But what he saw was not the terrible, blazing image of his adversary, but Kari's face beyond. His falling meant her life--but when she saw him go down the brilliance dimmed upon her features. The hope he had seen there went out like a candle-flame and she was once more only a vessel of human flesh which the Aesir had possessed and degraded.

In his despair and his dizziness he cried soundlessly, "Help me, Protectors Give me your power!"

The still double-voice said, "You could not hold it. You would be burned out utterly."

"I'll hold it long enough!" he promised desperately. "One second of power--only that! Enough to smash the Aesir. Then death--but not till then!"

There was one instant when time stopped. That cataclysmic horror that had risen a thousand years ago and raged through the worlds like a holocaust stood blazing before Stuart's eyes. It stooped toward him, poised for the hammer blow that would smash him to nothing--

Then a power like the drive of galaxies through space thundered into Stuart's mind.

He had not expected this. Nothing in human experience could have taught him to expect it. For the Protectors were not human. No more

human than the Aesir themselves. And the unleashed energy that roared soundlessly through Stuart rocked his very soul on its foundations. He could not stir. He could not think. He could only stay upon his knees facing the Aesir-thing as galactic power thundered through him and wielded him like a sword against man's enemies.

Higher and higher rose the crashing tides of contest. The citadel shook ponderously upon the rocks of the god-made little world. Perhaps that world itself staggered in space as the titans battled together on its rocking surface.

Faster spun the core of radiant light which was the Aesir. Faster raced the tides of power through Stuart's blasted body, seeming to rip his very flesh apart and blaze in his brain like hammers of cosmic fire.

Terribly, terribly he yearned for surcease, for the end of this unthinkable destruction that was tearing his brain and body apart. And he knew he could end it in a moment, if he chose to let go....

Grimly he clung to the power that was destroying him. Second by second, counting each moment an eternity, he clung to consciousness. The crashing lances of the Protectors drove on upon the armor of the Aesir, and the cyclopean pillars of the great hall reeled upon their foundations, and the very air blazed into liquid fire around him.

He never knew what final blow of cosmic violence ended that battle. But suddenly, without warning, the vast column of the Aesir pulsed with violent brilliance and the whole hall rang with a cry too shrill and terrible for ears or the very mind to hear, except as a thrilling of despair.

The tower rocked. All the bright tapestries billowed and flowed

against the walls. And the radiant thing that was the Aesir--

Went out like a blown flame. Stuart saw it darken in the quickness of a heartbeat from blinding brightness to an angry, sullen scarlet, and then to the color of embers, and then to darkness.

There was nothing there at all.

And Stuart's brain dimmed with it, One last glimpse he had of the shining smile on Kari's face, triumph and delight, in the instant before the cloudiness of oblivion blotted her features out.

He was not dead. Somewhere, far away, his body lay prone upon the cold pavement of the Aesir's hall, a hall terribly empty now of life. But Stuart himself hung in empty space, somewhere between life and death.

The thought of the Protectors touched him gently, almost caressingly.

"You are a mighty man, Derek Stuart. Your name shall not be forgotten while mankind lives."

With infinite effort he roused his mind. "Kari--" he said.

There was silence for a moment --a warm silence. But the voices, speaking as one, said gently, "Have you forgotten? When the Aesir died, Kari died too. And you, Derek Stuart--you can never go back to your body now. You remember that?"

Sudden rebellion shook Stuart's bodiless brain. "Get out of my mind!" he raged at the double voice. "What do you know about human beings? I've won for mankind--but what did I win for myself? Nothing--nothing! And Kari-- Get out of my mind and let me die! What do you know about love?"

Amazingly, laughter pulsed softly. "Love?" said the double voice. "Love? You have not guessed who we are?" Stuart's bewildered mind framed only a voiceless question.

"We know humanity," the twin voices said. "We were human once, a thousand years ago. Very human, Derek Stuart. And we remembered love."

He half guessed the answer. "You are--"

"There was a man and a woman once," the voices told him gently. "Mankind still remembers their legend--John Starr and Lorna, who defied the Aesir."

"John Starr and Lorna!"

"We fought the Aesir in the days when we and they were human. We worked with them on the entropy device that made them what they are now--and made us--ourselves. When we saw what they planned with their power, we fought.... But they were five, and strong because they were ruthless. We had to flee."

The voices that spoke as one voice were distant, remembering.

"They grew in power on their Asgard world, changing as the millenniums swept over them, as entropy accelerated for them. And we changed, too, in our own place, in our different way. We are not human now. But we are not monsters, as the Aesir were. We have known failure and bitterness and defeat many times, Derek Stuart. But we remember humanity. And as for love--"

Stuart said bitterly:

"You know your love. You have it forever. But Kari... Kari is dead."

The voices were very gentle. "You have sacrificed more than we. You gave up your love and your bodies. We--"

Silence again. Then the woman, serene and gentle-voiced, "There is a way, John. But not an easy one--for us." Stuart thought, "But Kari is dead."

The woman said, "Her body is empty of the Aesir life-force. And yours is burned out by the power we poured through it, so that no human could live in it again unless--unless one more than human upheld you."

"Lorna--"

"We must part for awhile, John. We have been one for a long while. Now we must be two again, for the sake of these two. Until the change...."

"What change?" asked Stuart eagerly.

"As we changed, so would you, if our lives upheld yours. Entropy would move for you as it moved for the Aesir and for us. And that, too, I think, is good. Mankind will need a leader. And we can help--John and I--more surely if we taste again of humanity. After awhile--after millenniums--the circle will close and John and I will be free to merge again. And you and Kari, too."

Stuart thought, "But Kari--will it be Kari?" "It will be," the gentle voice said. "Cleansed of the evil of the Aesir, supported by my own strength, as you by John's. You will be yourselves again, with the worlds before you, and afterward--a dwelling among the stars, with us."

The man's voice said, "Lorna, Lorna--"

"You know we must, beloved," the softer voice said. "We have asked too much of them to offer nothing in repayment. And it will not be goodbye."

There was darkness and silence.

Stuart was dimly aware of cyclopean heights rising above him. Painfully he stirred. He was clothed in his own body again, and the battle-blasted hall of the dead Aesir towered high into the dimness above him.

He turned his head.

Beside him on the dais a girl, lying crumpled in the shower of her hair, stirred and sighed.